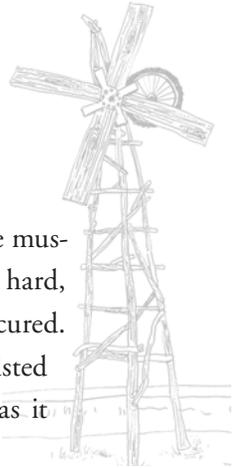


**THE BOY  
WHO HARNESSSED  
THE WIND**

## PROLOGUE

**T**HE PREPARATION WAS COMPLETE, so I waited. The muscles in my arms still burned from having worked so hard, but now I was finished. The machinery was bolted and secured. The tower was steady and unmoving under the weight of twisted steel and plastic. Looking at it now, it appeared exactly as it was—something out of a dream.



News of the machine had spread to the villages, and people were starting to arrive. The traders spotted it from their stalls and packed up their things. The truckers left their vehicles along the roads. Everyone walked into the valley, and now gathered in its shadow. I recognized these faces. Some of these people had mocked me for months, and still they whispered, even laughed. More of them were coming. It was time.

Balancing the small reed and wires in my left hand, I used the other to pull myself onto the tower's first rung. The soft wood groaned under my weight, and the compound fell silent. I continued to climb, slowly and assuredly, until I was facing the machine's crude frame. Its plastic arms were burned and blackened, its metal bones bolted and welded into place. I paused and studied the flecks of rust and paint, how they appeared against the fields and mountains beyond. Each piece told its own tale of discovery, of being lost and found in a time of hardship and fear. Finally together now, we were all being reborn.

Two wires dangled from the heart of the machine and gently danced in the breeze. I knotted their frayed ends together with the wires that sprouted off the reed, just as I'd always pictured. Down below, the crowd cackled like a gang of birds.

"Quiet down," someone said. "Let's see how crazy this boy really is."

A sudden gust muffled the voices below, then picked up into a steady wind. It took hold of my T-shirt and whistled through the tower rungs. Reaching over, I removed a bent piece of wire that locked the machine's spinning wheel in place. Once released, the wheel and arms began to turn. They spun slowly at first, then faster and faster, until the force of their motion rocked the tower. My knees buckled, but I held on.

*Don't let me down.*

I gripped the reed and wires and waited for the miracle. Finally it came, at first a tiny light that flickered from my palm, then a surging magnificent glow. The crowd gasped and shuddered. The children pushed for a better look.

"It's true!" someone said.

"Yes," said another. "The boy has done it."

## CHAPTER ONE

**B**EFORE I DISCOVERED THE miracles of science, magic ruled the world.

Magic and its many mysteries were a presence that hovered about constantly, giving me my earliest memory as a boy—the time my father saved me from certain death and became the hero he is today.

I was six years old, playing in the road, when a group of herd boys approached, singing and dancing. This was in Masitala village near the city of Kasungu, where my family lived on a farm. The herd boys worked for a nearby farmer who kept many cows. They explained how they'd been tending their herd that morning and discovered a giant sack in the road. When they opened it up, they found it filled with bubble gum. Can you imagine such a treasure? I can't tell you how much I loved bubble gum.

"Should we give some to this boy?" one asked.

I didn't move or breathe. There were dead leaves in my hair.

"*Eh*, why not?" said another. "Just look at him."

One of the boys reached into the bag and pulled out a handful of gumballs, one for every color, and dropped them into my hands. I stuffed them all in my mouth. As the boys left, I felt the sweet juice roll down my chin and soak my shirt.

The following day, I was playing under the mango tree when a trader



on a bicycle stopped to chat with my father. He said that while on his way to the market the previous morning, he'd dropped one of his bags. By the time he'd realized what had happened and circled back, someone had taken it. The bag was filled with bubble gum, he said. Some fellow traders had told him about the herd boys passing out gum in the villages, and this made him very angry. For two days he'd been riding his bicycle throughout the district looking for the boys. He then issued a chilling threat.

"I've gone to see the *sing'anga*, and whoever ate that gum will soon be sorry."

The *sing'anga* was the witch doctor.

I'd swallowed the gum long before. Now the sweet, lingering memory of it soured into poison on my tongue. I began to sweat; my heart was beating fast. Without anyone seeing, I ran into the blue gum grove behind my house, leaned against a tree, and tried to make myself clean. I spit and hocked, shoved my finger into my throat, anything to rid my body of the curse. I came up dry. A bit of saliva colored the leaves at my feet, so I covered them with dirt.

But then, as if a dark cloud had passed over the sun, I felt the great eye of the wizard watching me through the trees. I'd eaten his juju and now his darkness owned me. That night, the witches would come for me in my bed. They'd take me aboard their planes and force me to fight, leaving me for dead along the magic battlefields. And as my soul drifted alone and forsaken above the clouds, my body would be cold by morning. A fear of death swept over me like a fever.

I began crying so hard I couldn't move my legs. The tears ran hot down my face, and as they did, the smell of poison filled my nose. It was everywhere inside me. I fled the forest as fast as possible, trying to get away from the giant magic eye. I ran all the way home to where my father sat against the house, plucking a pile of maize. I wanted to throw my body under his, so he could protect me from the devil.

"It was me," I said, the tears drowning my words. "I ate the stolen gum. I don't want to die, Papa. Don't let them take me!"

My father looked at me for a second, then shook his head.

"It was you, *eh?*" he said, then kind of smiled.

Didn't he realize I was done for?

"Well," he said, and rose from the chair. His knees popped whenever he stood. My father was a big man. "Don't worry. I'll find this trader and explain. I'm sure we can work out something."



*Me as a young boy standing with my father in Masitala village. To me, he was the biggest and strongest man in the world.*

That afternoon, my father walked eight kilometers to a place called Masaka where the trader lived. He told the man what had happened, about the herd boys coming by and giving me the stolen gum. Then without question, my father paid the man for his entire bag, which amounted to a full week's pay.

That evening after supper, my life having been saved, I asked my father about the curse, and if he'd truly believed I was finished. He straightened his face and became very serious.

"Oh yes, we were just in time," he said, then started laughing in that way that made me so happy, his big chest heaving and causing the wooden chair to squeal. "*William, who knows what was in store for you?*"

MY FATHER WAS STRONG and feared no magic, but he knew all the stories. On nights when there was no moon, we'd light a lamp and gather in our living room. My sisters and I would sit at my father's feet, and he'd

explain the ways of the world, how magic had been with us from the beginning. In a land of poor farmers, there were too many troubles for God and man alone. To compensate for this imbalance, he said, magic existed as a third and powerful force. Magic wasn't something you could see, like a tree, or a woman carrying water. Instead, it was a force invisible and strong like the wind, or a spider's web spun across the trail. Magic existed in story, and one of our favorites was of Chief Mwase and the Battle of Kasungu.

In the early nineteenth century, and even today, the Chewa people were the rulers of the central plains. We'd fled there many generations before from the highlands of southern Congo during a time of great war and sickness, and settled where the soil was reddish black and fertile as the days were long.

During this time, just northwest of our village, a ferocious black rhino began wreaking terror across the land. He was bigger than a three-ton lorry, with horns the length of my father's arms and points as sharp as daggers. Back then, the villagers and animals shared the same watering hole, and the rhino would submerge himself in the shallows and wait. Those visiting the spring were mostly women and young girls like my mother and sisters. As they dipped their pails into the water, the rhino would attack, stabbing and stomping them with its mighty hooves, until there was nothing left but bloody rags. Over a period of months, the feared black rhino had killed over a hundred people.

One afternoon, a young girl from the royal Chewa family was stomped to death at the spring. When the chief heard about this, he became very angry and decided to act. He gathered his elders and warriors to make a plan.

"This thing is a real menace," the chief said. "How can we get rid of it?"

There were many ideas, but none seemed to impress the chief. Finally one of his assistants stood up.

"I know this man in Lilongwe," he said. "He's not a chief, but he owns one of the *azungu's* guns, and he's very good at magic. I'm certain his magical calculations are strong enough to defeat this black rhino."

This man was Mwase Chiphaudzu, whose magic was so superior he

was renowned across the kingdom. Mwase was a magic hunter. His very name meant “killer grass” because he was able to disguise himself as a cluster of reeds in the fields, allowing him to ambush his prey. The chief’s people traveled a hundred kilometers to Lilongwe and summoned Mwase, who agreed to assist his brothers in Kasungu.

One morning, Mwase arrived at the watering hole well before the sun. He stood in the tall grass near the shores and sprinkled magic water over his body and rifle. Both of them vanished, becoming only music in the breeze. Minutes later, the black rhino thundered over the hill and made his way toward the spring. As he plunged his heavy body into the shallows, Mwase crept behind him and put a bullet into his skull. The rhino crumpled dead.

The celebrations began immediately. For three days, villagers from across the district feasted on the meat of the terrible beast that had taken so many lives. During the height of the festivities, the chief took Mwase to the top of the highest hill and looked down where the Chewa ruled. This hill was Mwala wa Nyenje, meaning “The Rock of the Edible Flies,” named after the cliffs at its summit and the fat delicious flies that lived in its trees.

Standing atop the Rock of the Edible Flies, the chief pointed down to a giant swath of green earth and turned to Mwase.

“Because you killed that horrible and most feared beast, I have a prize for you,” he said. “I hereby grant you power over this side of the mountain and all that’s visible from its peak. Go get your people and make this your home. This is now your rule.”

So Mwase returned to Lilongwe and got his family, and before long, he’d established a thriving empire. His farmland produced abundant maize and vegetables that fed the entire region. His people were strong, and his warriors were powerful and feared.

But around this time, a great chaos erupted in the Zulu kingdom of South Africa. The army of the Zulu king, Shaka, began a bloody campaign to conquer the land surrounding his kingdom, and this path of terror and destruction caused millions to flee. One such group was the Ngoni.

The Ngoni people marched north for many months and finally stopped in Chewa territory, where the soil was moist and fertile. But because they were constantly on the move, hunger visited them often. When this happened, they would travel farther north and ask for help from Chief Mwase, who always assisted them with maize and goats. One day, after accepting another of Mwase's handouts, the Ngoni chiefs sat down and said, "How can we always have this kind of food?"

Someone replied, "Eliminate the Chewa."

The Ngoni were led by Chief Nawambe, whose plan was to capture the Rock of the Edible Flies and all the land visible from its peak. However, the Ngoni did not know how magical Chief Mwase was.

One morning, the Ngoni came up the mountain dressed in animal skins, holding massive shields in one hand and spears in the other. But of course, Chief Mwase's warriors had spotted them from miles away. By the time the Ngoni reached the hill, the Chewa warriors had disguised themselves as green grass and slayed the intruders with knives and spears. The last man to die was Chief Nawambe. For this reason, the mountain was changed from the Rock of the Edible Flies to Nguru ya Nawambe, which means simply "The Deadly Defeat of Nawambe." This same hill now casts a long shadow over the city of Kasungu, just near my village.

THESE STORIES HAD BEEN passed down from generation to generation, with my father having learned them from my grandpa. My father's father was so old he couldn't remember when he was born. His skin was so dry and wrinkled, his feet looked like they were chiseled from stone. His overcoat and trousers seemed older than he was, the way they were patched and hung on his body like the bark of an ancient tree. He rolled fat cigars from maize husks and field tobacco, and his eyes were red from *kachaso*, a maize liquor so strong it left weaker men blind.

Grandpa visited us once or twice a month. Whenever he emerged from the edge of the trees in his long coat and hat, a trail of smoke rising from his lips, it was as if the forest itself had taken legs and walked.

The stories Grandpa told were from a different time and place. When he was young—before the government maize and tobacco estates arrived and cleared most of our trees—the forests were so dense a traveler could lose his sense of time and direction in them. Here the invisible world hovered closer to the ground, mixing with the darkness in the groves. The forest was home to many wild beasts, such as antelope, elephant, and wildebeest, as well as hyenas, lions, and leopards, adding even more to the danger.

When Grandpa was a boy, his grandmother was attacked by a lion. She was working in her fields at the forest's edge, scaring away some monkeys, when a female lion came upon her. Villagers heard her cries and quickly sounded the drum—not the fast, rhythmic beat for dances or ceremonies, but something slow and serious. They call this emergency beat the *musadabwe*, meaning, “Don't ask questions, just come!” It's like dialing 911, but instead of police, you're calling other villagers.

By the time Grandpa and others arrived with their spears and bows and arrows, it was too late. They saw the lion—its body the size of a cow—drag his grandmother into the thorny trees, then toss her body into the bush like a mouse. It then turned and faced its challengers, let out a terrible roar, and disappeared with its kill. The poor woman's body was never recovered.

Grandpa says that once a lion gets a taste for human blood, it won't stop until it's eaten an entire village. So the next morning someone notified the British authorities, who still controlled our country. They sent soldiers into the forest and shot the lion. Its body was then displayed in the village square for all to see.

Not long after, Grandpa was hunting alone in the forest and came upon a man who'd been bitten by a cobra. The snake had been hiding in the trees and struck the man's head as he passed. His skin quickly turned gray, and minutes later, he was dead. Grandpa alerted the nearest village, who arrived with their witch doctor. The wizard placed one foot atop the dead man's chest and tossed some medicines into the forest. Seconds later, the moist ground came alive as hundreds of cobra slithered out from the shad-



*Grandpa displaying his handmade bow and arrow, once used to kill lions and wildebeest. People say Grandpa was the greatest hunter in the district.*

ows and gathered around the corpse, hypnotized by the spell.

The wizard crouched on the dead man's chest and drank a cup of magic porridge, which flowed through his feet and into the lifeless body. The dead man's fingers began to move, then his hands.

"Let me up," he said, then stood and faced the army of serpents.

Together, they checked the fangs of every cobra in attendance, searching for the one that had killed the man. Usually, the wizard would quickly cut off the head of the guilty snake, but this time, the dead man took pity and allowed the cobra to live. For his services, the wizard was paid three British pounds. My grandpa saw this with his own eyes.

When my father was a young man, he often went hunting with his father. Even then, the forest was so dangerous that hunters observed a sacred ritual before their outings. Hunts were usually initiated by one man, the *mwini chisokole*, or owner of the hunt, who called together all the willing men from the surrounding villages. The owner decided where and when the hunt would take place, and in the event of a kill, he'd receive the choicest portion of the meat, usually the hindquarter. Grandpa was often this person.

On the night before the hunt, the leader wasn't allowed to sleep with his wife, not even in the same room. The purpose was to keep the man's focus and attention as sharp as possible, and to guarantee a solid night's rest. Losing focus made you careless in the forest, and worst of all, left you open to bewitching. That night, sleeping alone at a neighbor's house, or in a separate hut with his sons, the leader would boil a pot of red maize

mixed with certain roots and medicines, which he'd distribute the following morning to each hunter in the party. This was part of the magic, because everyone believed this protected them from danger.

Before setting out, the hunters also instructed their wives to stay indoors until the hunt was over, preferably lying in bed and sleeping. They thought this would cause the animals to sleep as well, allowing the hunters to sneak up on them with ease.

WALKING THROUGH THE FOREST as a boy, I didn't worry so much about cobras or lions, since most of them had vanished. But other dangers were waiting in the forests that remained, and along the quiet, empty fields where the ghosts of trees seemed to whisper their sadness. Walking there alone, one of my greatest fears was the Gule Wamkulu.

The Gule Wamkulu were a secret gang of dancers. They performed at the chief's request at funerals and initiation ceremonies, when many Chewa boys become men. The Gule Wamkulu were said to be the spirits of our dead ancestors, resurrected from the afterworld and sent to roam the earth. No longer human, they shared the skin of animals, and their faces resembled the beasts of hell—twisted devil birds and demons howling in fright.

When the Gule Wamkulu performed, you dared to watch only from a distance. Often they appeared from the bush walking on stilts, towering above the crowd and screaming in different tongues. Once, I even saw one of them climb a blue gum pole while upside down, like a spider. And when they danced, one thousand men seemed to inhabit their bodies, each moving in the opposite direction.

When the Gule Wamkulu weren't performing, they traveled the forests and marshes looking for young boys to take back to the graveyards. What happened to you there, I never wanted to know. It was bad luck to even speak about the Gule Wamkulu. And God help you if you were ever caught doubting them, saying, "Look at their hands, they have five fingers like me. These guys are not real." Doing this would surely get you be-

witched, and since the Gule Wamkulu answered only to the chief, there'd be no one to defend you. When they appeared in the village, every woman and child dropped what they were doing and ran.

Once when I was very young, a magic dancer appeared in our courtyard, strutting like a cock and hissing like a snake. His head was wrapped in a flour sack with a black hole for a mouth and a long trunk for a nose. My mother and father were in the fields, so my sisters and I ran for the trees, only to watch this passing ghost steal one of our chickens.

(Donkeys are the only creatures not afraid of Gule Wamkulu. If the donkey sees one of these dancers, it will chase them into the bush and kick them with its mighty legs. Don't ask me why, but the donkey is very brave.)

I tried to be courageous like my friend the donkey whenever I walked through the forest. But witches and wizards never reveal their identity, so you never know where their traps lie waiting. In these places where they practice, their potent magic takes on many shapes. Men with bald heads, twenty feet tall, are said to appear on the roads outside of Ntchisi, a few at first, then dozens all around. Ghost trucks drive the same roads at night, coming on fast with their bright lights flashing and engines revving loud. But as the lights pass by, no truck is attached. No tire marks are left on the road, and if you're driving a car, your engine will die until morning.

Magic hyenas wander the villages at night, snatching several goats at once in their razor jaws and delivering them to the doorsteps of wizards. Magic lions are sent to kill delinquent debtors, and snakes the size of tractors can lie in wait for you in your fields.

But the dangers for children are even greater. As I mentioned, these wizards command great armies of children to do their witchcraft, and each night they prowl the villages for fresh recruits. They tempt them with delicious meats, saying it's the only way to heaven. Once the children devour the tasty morsels, it's revealed as human flesh. By then it's too late, for once the wizard's evil is inside your body, it controls you forever.

In addition to casting spells for curses and revenge, the witches often battle one another. This leads to great confusion in the kingdom of the

devil, and this strife leaves many dead and injured, which is why children make the perfect soldiers.

The children pile aboard witch planes that prowl the skies at night, capable of traveling to Zambia and London in a single minute. Witch planes can be anything: a wooden basin, a clay pot, a simple hat. Flying about on magic duty, the children are sent to homes of rival wizards to test their powers. If the child is killed in the process, the wizard can determine the weapon of his enemy and develop something stronger. Other nights, the children visit camps of other witches for competition. Here, mystical soccer matches are played on mysterious fields in places I've never heard of, where the cursed children use human heads as balls and compete for great cups of flesh.

AFTER ESCAPING THE BUBBLEGUM vendor, I became terribly afraid of being captured, and I tried to think of ways to protect myself. I knew witches and wizards were allergic to money because the presence of cash is like a rival evil. Any contact with money will snap their spell and revert them back to human form—usually naked. For this reason, people often plaster their walls and bed mats with kwacha notes to protect themselves during the night. If they're suddenly awoken by a naked man trying to escape, their suspicions are correct.

Another way of protecting yourself is to pray your soul clean each night at the foot of your bed, and I'd done that, too. Homes of the prayerful are concealed from witch planes that fly overhead. It's like passing through a cloud.

"Papa, please, some kwacha notes for my walls," I begged my father one afternoon. "I can't sleep at night."

My father knew a lot about witchcraft, but he had no place for magic in his own life. To me, this made him seem even stronger. My parents had raised us to be churchgoing Presbyterians who believed God was the best protection. Once you opened your heart to magic, we were taught, you never knew what else you might let inside. We respected the power of juju, even feared it, but my family always trusted our faith would prevail.

My father was mending a fence around the garden and stopped what he was doing. "Let me tell you a story," he said. "In 1979 when I was trading, I was riding in the back of a pickup going to Lilongwe to sell dried fish in the market. Several others were with me. The truck suddenly lost control, pitching us all into the air. When we landed, we saw it rolling straight for us. I said at that moment, 'I'm dying now. This is my time.' But just before the truck rolled over my body and crushed me like an ant, it skidded to a stop. I could reach out and touch it. Several people were dead in the grass, but I didn't have a scratch."

He turned to face me, making his point.

"After that happened, how can I believe in wizards and charms? A magic man would have tried these things and died. I was saved by the power of God. Respect the wizards, my son, but always remember, with God on your side, they have no power."

I trusted my father, but wondered how his explanation accounted for Rambo and Chuck Norris, who came to the trading center that summer and created a lot of controversy. These men were appearing in films shown in the local theater, which was really just a thatch hut with wooden benches, a small television, and a VCR. For this reason, everyone called it the video show. At night, wonderful and mysterious things began happening in this place, but since I was forbidden to be out after dark, I missed them all. Instead, I relied on the stories I heard from my mates who lived close by and whose parents weren't so strict. These boys, such as Peter Kamanga, would find me the next day when I arrived.

"Last night I watched the best of all movies," Peter said. "Rambo jumped from the top of the mountain and was still firing his gun when he landed. Everyone in front of him died and the entire mountain exploded." He clutched a phantom machine gun and sent a burst of deadly rounds into the maize mill.

"Oh," I said, "when will they ever show these films during the day? I never see anything."

The exploits of Rambo and Delta Force became confusing to some, who'd never imagined men escaping entire armies, while still managing

to kill so many people. The night *Terminator* came to the video show was simply shocking. When Peter found me the next morning, he was still in a state.

“William, last night I watched a movie that I still don’t understand,” he said. “This man was shot left, right, and center, yet he still managed to live. His enemies blew off his arms and legs, even his head, yet his eyes were still alive. I’m telling you, this man must be the greatest wizard who ever lived.”

It sounded fantastic. “Do you think these *azungu* from America have such magic?” I asked. “I don’t believe it.”

“This is what I saw. I’m telling you it’s true.”

Although it would be several years before I finally saw one of these films in the video show, they started to influence many of the games we played back home. One of them was played with toy guns we made from a *mpoloni* bush.

It was called USA versus Vietnam.

To make these guns, we removed the core from the *mpoloni*’s stem, much like disassembling a ballpoint pen, and used it as both a ramrod and trigger. After removing the core, we chewed up bits of maize pith and shoved them down the barrel, followed by paper spitballs to create a seal. When the ramrod was forced down behind, it created enough pressure to spray an opponent with a shower of slimy gunk.

I was captain of one team, while my cousin Geoffrey was captain of the other. Along with some other cousins and neighbors, we split into teams of five, then hunted one another in the maize rows and across the dirt courtyard that separated our house from Geoffrey’s.

“You go left, I’ll go right!” I instructed my comrades one such afternoon, then scrambled on knees and elbows through the red dirt. We were never clean.

I spotted a bit of Geoffrey’s trouser from around the corner of the house, so I snuck around the opposite way without spooking the chickens. Once I was clear, I bolted around the corner. It was an easy ambush.

“*Tonga!*”

I jammed the ramrod down the barrel and released a shower of white saliva and mush, spraying my cousin square in the face.

He fell to the ground, holding his heart.

*“Eh, mayo ine! I’m dead.”*

Usually, whichever team won first got to be America the following round, since America always defeated Vietnam in the video show.

WE WERE A SOLID gang of three: myself, Geoffrey, and our friend Gilbert, whose father was the chief of our whole Wimbe district. Everyone called Gilbert’s father Chief Wimbe, even though his real name was Albert Mofat.

When we got bored with playing USA versus Vietnam, Geoffrey and I went to find Gilbert. Going over to Gilbert’s house always guaranteed a show, as the chief’s work was never done. As usual, we found a line of truck drivers, market women, farmers, and traders waiting outside under the blue gum trees to share their concerns and grievances. Each held a chicken under one arm, or a small bit of cash in hand as a gift for their great leader. During these personal encounters with the chief, people addressed him as *“Charo,”* the ruler of all the land.

*“Odi, odi,”* said a farmer at the doorstep, meaning *hello, can I come in?*

The chief’s messenger and bodyguard, Mister Ngwata, stood at the door in his short pants and army boots, dressed as a policeman. It was Mister Ngwata’s job to protect the chief and filter all of his visitors. He also handled all the chickens.

*“Come, come,”* he said.

The chief sat on the sofa, dressed in a crisp shirt and nice trousers. Chiefs usually dressed like businesspeople, never in feathers and hides. That’s in the movies. Chief Wimbe also loved his cat, which was black and white but had no name. In Malawi, only dogs are given names, I don’t know why. The cat was always in the chief’s lap, purring softly as the *charo* stroked its neck.

*“Charo, Charo,”* the farmer said, bending to one knee and gently clapping his hands as a sign of respect. *“We have an issue that requires*

your intervention. The land you granted me fifteen years ago is being encroached upon by my brother's son. I need you to help so there's no bloodshed."

"Very well," the chief replied. "Let me think about this and carry out some research. Come back on Sunday and I'll have an answer."

"Oh, *zikomo kwambiri, Charo*. Thank you, with respect."

We waited until the farmer left and approached Mister Ngwata.

"We're here to see Gilbert," we said as we passed through the door.

"Hmmpf."

Gilbert was in his room with a tape deck singing to Billy Kaunda, who'd just been voted Malawi's best musician of the year. For a boy, Gilbert had a beautiful singing voice and would later record two albums in Blantyre. My voice sounded like one of the guinea fowl that screeched in our trees as it pooped, but I never let that stop me.

"Gilbert, bo?"

"Bo!"

"Sharp?"

"Sharp!"

This was our slang, strictly observed at every meeting. The word *bo* was short for *bonjour*, started by some chaps learning French in secondary school and wanting to show off. I don't know where "sharp" came from, but it was like saying, "Are you cool?" If you were feeling really good, you could even go a bit further:

"Sure?"

"Sure!"

"Fit?"

"Fit!"

"*Ehbb.*"

"Let's go to trading," I said, meaning the trading center. "I hear the drunkards were spilling out of Ofesi last night."

This was the Ofesi Boozing Centre, a forbidden and therefore fascinating place. Ofesi sat on the outskirts of the trading center, one of the last shops before the road opened toward Chamama town. Loud, thump-

ing music always played inside the dark doorway, even at noon. It was where men with screwed-up eyes would appear in the doorframe, smoking cigarettes, then toss out empty cardboard cartons of booze to join the mountain of others in the dirt. Whereas most people saw garbage in those cartons, we saw treasure and possibility.

Although Geoffrey, Gilbert, and I grew up in this small place in Africa, we did many of the same things children do all over the world, only with slightly different materials. And talking with friends I've met from America and Europe, I now know this is true. Children everywhere have similar ways of entertaining themselves. If you look at it this way, the world isn't so big.

For us, we loved trucks. It didn't matter what kind of trucks: four-ton lorries that rumbled past from the estates kicking up dust, or the half-ton pickups that traveled back and forth to Kasungu town, just an hour's drive away, with passengers squeezed in back like a pen full of chickens. We loved all trucks, and each week, we'd compete to see who could build the biggest and strongest one. While my friends from America could find miniature trucks already assembled in their shopping malls, we had to build ours from wire and empty cartons of booze. Even still, they were just as beautiful.

The cartons discarded by the drunkards at Ofesi once held Chibuku Shake Shake, a kind of beer made from fermented maize that is popular in Malawi. It's sour tasting and contains bits of maize that settle at the bottom, requiring you to shake it up before enjoying, hence the name. Believe it or not, it's actually nutritious. I'm not a drinker myself, but I've been told it takes several cartons of Shake Shake to get a person drunk, so of course, people in Ofesi drink as many as possible before tossing them into the road.

After washing out the booze, these cartons were ideal for making the chassis of a toy truck. We used beer bottle caps for wheels, which also doubled as counters at school ("Three Coca-Cola plus ten Carlsberg equals thirteen").

We picked mangoes from the neighbor's trees and traded them for lengths of wire, which we used to make axles and attach the bottle cap

wheels. We later discovered that plastic cooking oil caps worked much better as wheels, enabling the trucks to last much longer. We even took our fathers' razor blades and cut designs into the plastic to give each vehicle its own signature treading. That way, when you saw a tire track in the dirt, you knew instantly if it belonged to the great fleets of Kamkwamba Toyota, for instance, or Gilbert Company LTD.

Soon we were building our own monster wagons, called *chigirigiri*, that resembled something like a go-cart in America. The frames were thick tree branches forked at one end, where a person could sit at the junction. We then dug up large, round tuber roots called *kaumbu* and carved them into wheels, using blue gum poles as axles. All the loose parts were then lashed together with vine and tree bark.

Taking a rope, one person pulled the car while the driver steered with his feet. With two cars side by side, we held monster derbies down the dirt road.

"Let's race."

"For sure."

"Last one to reach Iponga's will go blind!"

"GO!"

Iponga Barber Shop was the first of its kind in the Wimbe trading center, and where I got all my haircuts. When my father brought me there each month, Mister Iponga would drape me in a tattered sheet and say, "What will it be?" Pictures of men with many different styles hung from the wall—styles such as the Tyson, after the famous American boxer, in addition to the English Cut, the Nigeria, and the Buddha, which was totally bald. I usually went for the Office Cut, which was close all over without any frills. I think it was the cheapest, too.

Of course, the problem with getting haircuts in the trading center was the frequent power outages that plagued the country. These could easily happen while Iponga held his electric clippers to your head.

"Oops, lost the power. Come back in a few hours."

"But . . ."

The best idea was to bring a hat, or else go at night, so you could slip home

under the cover of darkness and return the next morning to have it fixed.

If we had some pocket change from our parents, we stopped by Mister Banda's shop for a cold bottle of Fanta or a handful of Dandy sweets, which Banda kept in a glass jar below the shelves of Drews liver salts and Con Jex cough tabs, Top Society Luxury lotions, Easy Black hair dye, long ribbons of Blue Band margarine, bars of Lifebuoy soap, and packets of Cowbell powdered milk.

Or if we were hungry, we pooled our money and headed to the *kan-yenya* stand, which was really just a giant vat of boiling grease over a fire, next to the boozing center. There we bought delicious pieces of fried goat and chips for just a few kwacha. The man working the vat grunted, "How much?" and you answered, "Five kwacha." He sawed off a good chunk from a carcass hanging on the gallows, causing the swarm of black flies to circle once, then land again. He dropped the meat into the oil, added a few more sticks to his fire to get a raging boil, then threw in a handful of sliced potatoes. When everything was finished, he tossed them onto the counter, along with a small pile of salt for dipping.

"Your mother is a good cooker," said Gilbert. "But she's never made anything as good as this."

"For sure."

But most of the time we had no money, so we spent our afternoons in hunger and dreams. On our way home we played a certain game with the *mphangala* bush. Its bright red flowers made the perfect crayons for children, but its stems could also tell your fortune. One person uprooted the stem, then tried to split it down the middle by pulling it apart. If you did this without breaking the stem in half, you'd have meat for dinner waiting for you at home.

"*Eh* man, you're lucky. Let me come over!"

But if you broke the stem, that was a different story.

"Oh, sorry, friend, your mother's at a funeral. You'll find only water at home! HA! HA!"

Evenings in the village, just after the sun disappeared over the blue gums, were my favorite time of day. This was when my father and Uncle

John—Geoffrey’s father—finished work in the maize and tobacco fields and returned home for supper. My mother and older sister Annie would be busy in the kitchen preparing the food, sending out all the delicious smells riding on the breeze. All my cousins would gather in the courtyard between my house and Geoffrey’s house to kick the soccer ball—made from plastic shopping bags we called *jumbos*, which we then bound in twine. And as the light faded, perhaps a farmer from the next village would stop by.

“Mister Kamkwamba, I have something from my garden,” he’d say, opening a bundle of papers to reveal some nice tomato plants. They’d negotiate a price and my father would plant them behind the house.

During the rainy season when the mangoes were ripe, we filled our pails with fruit from the neighbor’s trees and soaked them in water while we ate our supper. Afterward, we passed the fruits around, biting into the juicy meat and letting the sweet syrup run down our fingers. If there wasn’t any moonlight to continue playing, my father gathered all the children inside our living room, lit a kerosene lamp, and told us folktales.

“Sit down and hush up,” he said. “Have I told the one about the Leopard and the Lion?”

“Tell it again, Papa!”

“Okay, well . . . one day long long ago, two girls were walking from Kasungu to Wimbe when they became too tired to continue.”

We sat on the floor, hugging our knees against our chests and hanging on every word. My father knew many stories, and the Leopard and the Lion was one of my favorites. It went like this:

Rather than taking a nap in the dirt, the two young girls looked for a clean, quiet place to sleep. After some time, they came across the house of an old man. After making their request, the old man said, “Of course you can stay here. Come on in.”

That night when the girls were fast asleep, the old man snuck out the door and walked into the dark forest. There he found his two best friends, the Leopard and the Lion.

“My friends, I have some tasty food for you. Just follow me.”

“Why thanks, old man,” the Leopard said. “We’re coming straightaway.”

The old man led his two friends through the forest and back to his house. The Leopard and the Lion were so excited for their meal they even started singing a happy tune. But as they were approaching, the two girls happened to wake up. They felt refreshed after their nap and decided to continue on their journey. Not seeing the old man, they left a kind note thanking him for the bed.

Finally, the old man arrived at the house with the Leopard and the Lion.

“Wait here and I’ll go and get them,” he said.

The old man saw the bed was empty. Where did they go? he wondered. He looked for the girls but couldn’t find them. Finally, he discovered the note and knew they were gone. Outside, the Leopard and the Lion were growing impatient.

“Hey, where’s our food?” said the Leopard. “Can’t you see we’re salivating out here?”

The old man called out, “Hold on, they’re here someplace. Let me find them.”

The old man knew if the Leopard and the Lion discovered that the girls had gone, they would surely eat him for supper instead. The old man kept a giant gourd in the corner of his house for drinking water. Seeing no other option, he jumped inside and hid.

Finally, after waiting so long, the Lion said, “That’s it. We’re going in!”

They broke open the door and found the house empty. No girls, no old man, no supper.

“Hey, the old man must’ve tricked us,” said the Leopard. “He’s even left himself.”

Just then, the Leopard spotted a bit of the old man’s shirt hanging out from the gourd. He motioned to the Lion, and together they tugged and tugged until the old man came flying out.

“Please no, I can explain,” cried the old man. But the Leopard and the Lion had no patience for stories and quickly ate him.

My father clapped his hands together, signaling the end of the story. Then he looked around to all of us children.

“When planning misfortune for your friends,” he said, “be careful because it will come back to haunt you. You must always wish others well.”

“Tell another, Papa!” we shouted.

“Hmm, okay . . . what about the Snake and the Guinea Fowl?”

“For sure!”

Sometimes my father would forget the stories halfway and make them up as he went along. These tales would spiral on for an hour, with characters and motives ever changing. But through his own kind of magic, the stories would always end the same. My father was a born storyteller, largely because his own life had been like one fantastic tale.