

Wings I never saw

Wings I never saw

Grace Mweenge

To my Mom

Your memories are my life's only solace.
Your life was a blessing. I will forever love you.

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Profits of this book are going to albino projects in Lundazi Zambia.

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Inspired

Grace Mweenge took me to “areas” in Africa I have never heard about. For me it started in 2005, arriving in Blantyre Malawi. I was overwhelmed by the kindness of the Malawians. I went there with a group of managers and students and stayed in hotels. I saw the poverty of the Malawians and back home I cried for almost a week. Promotions on TV about cat food triggered me and I saw my fellow Africans suffering in mind. I remember the consul of The Netherlands, Margriet Sacranie in that time, said to me: “3 of this group of 30 will come back to Malawi and one of them are you”. I looked at her and didn’t know what to say. In 2008 I launched with some colleagues the foundation Transport4transport and started with distributing bicycle ambulances in Malawi. I don’t know how and why, but I got more and more involved in the African culture and got in touch with several Africans from different countries. Suddenly, coincidence’s don’t exist, I got in touch with a lady from Lundazi, Zambia. Not far from the border of Malawi. She told me about the brutalities against people with albinism. I was very interested and had in mind to have Grace in our team to get involved in the stories and suffering of the albinos. So starting with basics as a proper phone and allowances, we started very simple and got step by step involved in the life’s of albinos in the rural areas of Zambia. Grace is very dedicated and determined. Humble and full of humour. She travels hours and hours for the good cause. Here in Europe we don’t have any clue how difficult it can be in Africa. But at the opposite there is faith, the appreciation of what you have and being thankful. We in Europe are taking a lot for granted, it’s time to be aware that we need to care for someone else. I am thankful that Grace is sharing her story to us. Let’s help her to realise her dreams to help the albinos. I am inspired.

Berend van der Weide

How God connects people

I met Grace Mweenge through volunteer work for the Dutch foundation transport4transport in July 2017 and remember being asked to write an article for the website of T4T about her work in Zambia. I was just taken back down memory lane because of what she was doing in Zambia. The stories she told me about ritual killings of people living with albinism. This was all being done through the phone as I was in Malawi at that time and then I was asked to travel to Zambia in August the same year which is the year when we met for the very first time.



Carron in The Netherlands with Berend, chairman of T4T.

I travelled from Harare to Lusaka overnight and I was in Lusaka around 9 o'clock in the morning. Being me I thought: "oh well, I will just catch a bus to Lundazi as soon as I board of". I bought an MTN Line¹, called Grace and told her that I was in Lusaka and wanted to know where I could get the bus to where she stayed.

¹ Data bundle for phone in Zambia

She told me I could only travel the following day, because the buses to Lundazi had already taken off at 5 o'clock in the morning. I found a place to stay for the night and boarded the bus around 04:45 in the early morning of the next day. I was in the bus longer than I had anticipated! In fact the journey from Lusaka to Lundazi was twice the one I had the previous night!

This made me appreciate her work more as she is travelling on the route every other time to get lotions for the beneficiaries in Lundazi. I arrived in Lundazi just before 17:00 hour, completely exhausted from sitting and sleeping in the bus. I had a very warm welcome, a good meal had been prepared and I remember the first thing we did, was taking pictures! It was as if we'd been friends for years!

After a few days of rest, I went with Grace into the field and I was touched by the people I met and the stories about the people with albinism I heard. I cried when I met Dora and her brothers in Mwase as they narrated how they are in constant fear for their lives.



What touched me the most, was when the elder brother told me that people shout at us sometimes saying: "we are money!" This was when interest and passion in writing and learning videography grew, I felt I needed to do something about the issue. What touched me the most was how far Grace had to travel to meet these families and they were not short

drives. They are long on bumpy dirt roads. This can only be done by someone who truly loves and knows what she is doing it for. The work she is doing in Lundazi requires someone who is passionate and has a big heart.

I was in Zambia for almost 2 months staying with Grace, we travelled to Lusaka a couple of times and I slept all the way. Grace took pictures of me sleeping, because I could not stand the long drives with the heat, but she has gotten used to it. We have become more than just workmates² and I am so excited that she is realising her dream and I am right here cheering her on! God is connecting people! Sometimes it takes thousands of kilometres around the world.



Carron Tambala during the long bus drive.

² Fieldofficers of T4T and Butterfly Foundation Zambia

1 The first years of my life

Born in April 1987, the second born in the family of 4 and being the only female meant growing up so fast those days, as I had to help Mom do some errands. My father was a polygamist³ my Mom being a second wife. We are ten children of the same father, different mothers. Back then my father was a manager at a certain company. I don't know what happened back then for him to stop working because I was so little. It was after the incident that he divorced my Mom and found ourselves living with grandparents. When my grandpa who by then was working for the mine retired, we had to leave the city and settle at his home village in Lundazi district the Eastern part of Zambiaⁱ. As kids new environment wasn't difficult to adapt as we still felt like we just went for a holiday and will soon return to our usual town life, but that wasn't the case. A year passed and there was no sign of us returning back to the city, now things started changing bit by bit, the looks, the food, the environment and people to mingle with, were now becoming a normal thing to me.

I remember we were 6 grandchildren living with grandparents then. Mom decided to start up a business which made it difficult for her to be at the village with us, because it involved a lot of time at the market and this made her to relocate to a place near the "Boma" as we call it. Now being at my grandparents' house without Mom and Dad, was something that was difficult for me to adapt, as I did not know what to do whenever I needed a parental love. This was a situation where if your parents send some goodies to your grandma that means you will be cared for a lot. By then Mom was still trying, struggling. Business can be a hot cake in the area, so she was not sending my grandma some groceries.

³ The term "polygamy" refers generally to a man or a woman with multiple spouses. There are also more specific terms. "Marriage to more than one spouse at a time" is known as "polygyny" when multiple wives "share a husband," or "polyandry, in which co-husbands share a wife."

Two years down the line, I was seven years old and was envious of my friends, who were going to school. So I started troubling my grandparents that I wanted to start school as well. My grandma didn't hesitate to take me to school, but when we got there, they looked at my age and said I was too little to start school. I kept going to school without a uniform and I could just enter the class where my elder brother was in everyday, until one day I was added in a register and was asked to come with a uniform and books. I was excited about it and that was in 1993.

Few months after I started school. Mom came back to the village because the business was not doing well and now she had to look for school fees and other necessities for my elder brother and me. Life was no longer easy for my Mom, looking after 3 children and living with her parents at her age. As for me, school was now something I was excited about, so everything was now okay.

I didn't mind what I was eating, the mat where I was sleeping on and the clothes I was wearing, it all became normal to me but I could see Mom wondering of what to do next.

In 1995 Mom got married again and a month later her elder brother who was a soldier then living in the copper belt⁴ province of Zambia, came to visit at the village and had asked my Mom if he could take me to be living with him because he didn't have a child then.

⁴Traditionally, the term Copperbelt includes the mining regions of Zambia's Copperbelt Province (notably the towns of Ndola, Kitwe, Chingola, Luanshya, and Mufulira in particular) and the Congo's Haut-Katanga and Lualaba provinces (notably Lubumbashi, Kolwezi, and Likasi). In some contexts the term may exclude the Congo entirely. Zambia's Copperbelt became a province soon after independence in 1964, when it was named "Western province". President Kenneth Kaunda changed the name to its present-day "Copperbelt province" in 1969. From the time of the Bantu expansion, both the Congo's Katanga and Zambia's Copperbelt regions have been called "Ilamba" or "Lambaland", after the Lamba people. Both provinces are rich in mineral wealth.

My Mom was hesitating, but my grandparents insisted that I went with him. My mom was hesitating because she thought that I was going to meet my other family members from my dad's first wife. It was during that moment that we heard that my father died in a road accident. 2 weeks later my mother agreed for me to go with my uncle.

2 Uncle Lottie

June 1995 my uncle and I left Lundazi district to Ndola where he was a soldier. A journey that took us 3 days back then, transport was a challenge as we had few buses coming from Lundazi.

When we got to Ndola, my aunt was excited that she had someone to be living with aside her husband. All was going well until the day I asked my aunt when I was to start school, it was like I had put salt on a wound, she shouted at me like I had no right to go to school. While I thought for a moment that maybe she was just not in a good mood, so I waited for my uncle to knock off, so that I could ask him of the same. That evening I remember just after I had finished eating, I asked my uncle when I was going to start school again. His response was that when he gets paid, he will buy a school uniform and books, then he can take me to a new school in Ndola targagani barracks.

Month-end come so fast and I was anxious to go to a new school, but my uncle never said a word until after 3 months when we received a distant relative, who asked my uncle why I was not in school. That's when he even gave me money to give to my aunt, who later bought a school uniform for me. The relative's name was July, after a good chat with my uncle July decided to leave and when he was leaving, he called me aside and asked how I was copying living with my uncle and aunty. Before I could answer him my aunt who was just standing by the door side and called me to try in the uniform she bought for me. July left then when I got inside the house my aunt looked upset and handed to me the uniform.

I tried it on and gosh it was a size for a 11 years old girl and I was just 9 years old.

Before I could even say it's big, she just said: "if you don't like the uniform just be home", so I just said thank you, I like it. I remember it was a blue dress and sneakers I was looking like an orphan. I was not in a proper uniform, but that was not even my problem. 3 days later my uncle decided to take me to that new school I was excited that I woke up very early to do all the

house chores because it's one reason I thought my uncle took me with him. I say so, because ever since I had arrived, my aunt stopped doing house chores. All she could do is tell me what to do. When we got to school the headteacher asked my uncle why I was not in a proper uniform all he said was: "I will do that on month-end." My uncle left and I was taken to my class, the first word my class teacher said was: "you should have a proper uniform not that one!" I just nodded. My first day at a new school was okay, but when I returned home, that's where the problem was.

My aunt just cooked food for her and her husband, me only to be told that I would eat after washing dishes and cleaning the house, which I did and that's when she told me to cook my own food. This made me to start losing concentration at school, because I had to wake up very early to do house chores and then going to school and when I knocked off, I had to do the chores again before she could tell me what to eat. This became a routine for me and many of our neighbours noticed it and started asking me if at all I had parents. I remember one faithful day, that I was rushing to school, that I forgot to two plates which were in a sink and when I came back she broke one on the back of my head. Fortunately enough, I did not get a scratch. When my uncle came back, she reported to him that I broke a plate and that is how I received the first beating of my life. I was rescued by our neighbour. My uncle later told me that if I happen to break any rule or tell my neighbours anything concerning him, I will be going to bed without eating. I started living a life of fear and I had no option, because there was nothing I could do about it, because my Mom was far away in Lundazi, way back no mobile phones and landlines were owned by people who had enough money, I mean it was expensive by that time. I did not even know how to trace my other family from my dad's first wife, because I was young.

Waking up 5 o'clock every day to fetch water, a certain woman noticed that I was always fetching water alone, so she asked me about my parents and when I told her my story she showed me her house and said: "each time you are in trouble come home!"

Months later we closed school and I was hoping that when I would be home, life will be different. No more waking up very early. But no, my aunt could come over to the kitchen to wake me up so I would started fetching water. At the end of it all I got used to it.

3 The hunger strike

In 1996 hunger strike was in the whole Zambia and that was in a period, I had wished I never came to live with my uncle. It happened that even his salary was affected. We had no food at all and it was during this period that my aunt discovered that her husband had a girlfriend out of the barracks.⁵ This caused disaster at home, because my aunt could only shout at me for no reason. She was always furious, she could barely talk to me or even find something for me to eat. I remember being feed on roasted maize for a week at my age. I was thinking of going back to my mother but to no avail. My aunt decided to leave the house, leaving me alone to wait for my uncle, who never came back that day.

I waited for a week but he was not showing up. My neighbour later told me to be staying with them, because I was alone with no food. After 2 weeks I decided to follow my aunt out of the barracks where her sisters were staying and it was her who gave me the address to where my uncle was. I went to where my uncle was staying and behold there he was with his girlfriend. When he saw me, he was shocked and asked me who might have given me his address. I answered that his wife did. Then he started telling me that hunger was everywhere but he was still trying to find a way to bring food at home. I remember him giving me money to buy food for the night and he promised to come home the following day, which he did not.

I had no choice than to go back to my neighbour which was so embarrassing for me because I could hear them say to each other that her relatives abandoned me because of hunger. Few months of me living with my neighbour there was relief food being distributed across the country and they were giving meal-meal⁶, maize and beans per household with a valid ID card.

⁵ a building or group of buildings used to house soldiers.

⁶ The traditional recipe uses two ingredients – water and mealie meal, a very finely pounded corn meal. The mealie meal is cooked in boiling water and stirred non-stop over an open flame until it achieves the right thickness and

While I was too young to have an ID card and I did not want us to miss this opportunity so I rushed to tell my aunt about it, who later came and collected the relief food and got back home. So we started living the two of us. A week later my uncle came back too, but not in good terms with my aunt.

This affected me a lot academically, because I stopped going to school at some point. I was still the one doing all the house chores and this made me think that there's no place like home and by home I mean where you have your own parents. Two months down the line, my uncle's girlfriend came home during the day to tell him that she was pregnant and hell broke loose. My aunt was on her, they fought and my uncle was in favour of the girlfriend, since the wife didn't have a child with him.

My aunt was beaten so terribly that she had a lot of cuts in her face. She later went to the hospital and police to report. She was given a bed at the hospital and I was the one to be by her side as she denied me of going to tell her relatives about the incident. My uncle never showed up so I was the one to go home bring food and also be by her side until she was done with the treatment. She was in the hospital for two days. After the hospital discharge, she decided to tell her family what had happened and I remember her sisters coming home very upset. All was settled and my uncle apologized. We started living like we were used to for a month and then my uncle came with the news that he was being transferred to a different town. From Copperbelt we were now, going to central province in Kabwe. In Chindwin barracks⁷ to be specific.

texture similar to mashed potatoes.

⁷ Chindwin Barracks is a military facility in Zambia. Chindwin Barracks is situated nearby to Road Traffic and Safety Agency (RTSA), and close to Urban Bliss.

4 Chindwin barracks

It happened that my uncle had to go to Kabwe before us. We remained to pack our belongings and also wait for transport, which took a month before we finally joined my uncle. A new town and new neighbours. My aunt started acting very well. She could help me do the chores sometimes and this made me feel alive again. I didn't know that all this was because she knew that my mom's younger sister was also married to a soldier and that we were in the same town but different barracks. A week later my mother's sister visited us and I was super excited to see her, she even came with some clothes she bought for me, oh how I miss her. May her soul rest in peace. That was how I felt relieved from all the burden I was facing as a kid. She later told my uncle that she was taking me to her place and promised to bring me back. My aunt was against the idea but my uncle agreed to it.

