

Coach Lenox Chombo
A Story from Malawi, Africa
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Coach is lying outside of his house on a straw mat. We casually chat about the good times we spent together. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a little boy kicking a ball of plastic bags. I ask Coach, who is the little boy? He said this is my son Hobson. The little boy comes over and sits in my lap. He is not afraid of strangers, like so many children here. I look him over very carefully and say, Coach, he has hair looks like mine. Coach agrees and says, we men always laughed at your hair, but secretly wished we had hair like yours. Hobson was conceived during the time you and I traveled together and I served as your interpreter. You are my brother and we love each other like brothers. That is why Hobson has hair likes you. Coach is very sick and I see that he is tiring and wishes to rest. I know that I must talk with him about going to the hospital. When I bring the up the subject of the hospital, he said if he goes to a hospital, he wants to go the hospital in Malonde, a private facility. I urge him to consider Zomba General Hospital. He reluctantly agrees. Tomorrow, I will send a bicycle taxi to take him to Songani Depot. Bambo and I will escort him by mini bus to the hospital. Although we arrive at Zomba General very early, there is already a long line waiting to see the one administrator talking to each patient. Bambo

and I agree that we will take turns waiting on line. The line moves very slowly. Bambo and Coach sit and talk. I am already tired from standing in line. When it is time for Bambo and me to change places, the people in the front on the line tell me to bring Coach to the front. I know that these people have been waiting a long time. I am impressed with their kindness and it is obvious to everyone that Coach is very sick.

Coach lies on a table; the man who examines him is not a health care professional. He pushes on Coach's side and Coach cries out in pain. The man says that Coach should be admitted right away to the hospital. I see that we are waiting and I recognize that this is my sign to give the man some kwachas to admit Coach to the hospital. I shake the man's hand and a 500mk bill slips unnoticed from my hand to his hand. There is a nurse instructing us on the bed that is to be Coach's. We are given two sheets and I make the bed. Coach says that he is cold and would like a blanket, juice and yogurt. Bambo and I leave to make the purchases. We return, I wrap the colorful blanket over Coach, feed him a little yogurt and give him juice. He is resting and we decide to leave and return the next day.

Morning hours, Saturday. I learn that Coach has been checked out of the hospital and taken to Malonde Hospital. There is confusion as to who checked Coach out of the hospital, perhaps it is his wife. We have many things to do and it is decided that we will visit Coach on Sunday.

Sunday, I plan to attend morning worship at the local Church. As I am dressing, I hear wailing voices from three different places. Someone comes into my house and tells me that Coach is dead. Bambo said that we must go to the hospital and get the body. There is a man with a mini bus, but he has no money to buy petrol. If we buy the petrol, he will drive the men to the hospital to retrieve the body. The cost for petrol is 2,500mk, hospital expenses 1,580mk and 200mk for a burial rug. When we arrive at St. Luke's hospital, I see Coach's wife crying. Sitting near her is Coach's aunt, Willex's mother and two other women. After waiting for a long period, a woman calculates how much is owed the hospital for Coach's care. I pay the bill.

She takes us to the mortuary, opens a locked door and I see Coach's body wrapped in the blanket that I purchased for him. The body is resting on a cement slab. The burial rug is placed on the floor and Coach's body is lowered on the rug. We lift the body and place it in the mini bus. As we leave the hospital, the lights on the mini bus are blinking. People riding bicycles stop as a sign of respect. When we turn into the road leading to Milonde Village, women start crying. Hamsack, Coach's first cousin is crying, he is a strong man and for some reason I am puzzled that such a strong man is crying. I do my best to hold back and my tears. When I fail; I turn my head so that no one sees me crying.

The mini bus stops at Coach's house and the body is carried inside. We carefully take off our rubber gloves and deposit them in the toilet. I provide the men with soap and we vigorously wash our hands.

Coach died at approximately 10:30 morning hours. His wife gave birth to a son before midnight on the same day of his death. She is in the hospital will not be able to attend the funeral.

On Monday, the day of the funeral, early in the morning I hear the wailing of a woman from our village. Shortly, the same wail comes from several neighboring villages. The wailing continues for about an hour. Later in the day, groups of women congregate near Coach's former home, but not in the direct vicinity of the house. The men congregate directly in front of his house. I am asked by Willex's father, an Imam, to take pictures of the funeral. Coach's futbol players are wearing their red jerseys in memory of Coach. Only men are allowed to go the burial ground. Several Imams speak and the body is lowered in the ground. It is both a touching and painful ceremony for me.

The following day I sit outside my house and notice Hobson. He is kicking his ball made of plastic bags. He is relentless, kicking the ball with such skill. After a few minutes, he comes over and without saying a word, sits in my lap. Within a few minutes he falls asleep.

Willex comes over to greet me and I ask him, “Who will take care of Hobson?” He is puzzled by my question and says, “He is a member of this village, we will take care of him.”

I am satisfied with the answer, but I know I will never forget Coach.