



# REFUGEE FROM HOME

*Six years later, the Smith family recall their*

*harrowing journey out of Mugabe's Zimbabwe*

BY W. PATE MCMICHAEL • PHOTOS BY ANGELINA BELLEBUONO

## PART 1

The helicopters descended from the blue sky and fell below a range of green African hills that stretched out across the horizon like the knuckles of a clenched fist. Behind the hills a torrent of clean water roared down-grade into Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. Ahead lie kilometer after kilometer of farmland, segmented into flush and dormant fields like a quilt.

David Smith, 37, stood patiently inside the dairy, rubbing his dark, graying beard and looking out at the whirling, approaching dust of President Robert Mugabe's motorcade. The government, hungry for new markets, often sent dignitaries out here to showcase one of its most sophisticated corporate farms, to parade Zimbabwe's fertility and plenty. People called her the bread-basket of Africa.

It was the dry season, and the farm that David managed would soon harvest 2,000 acres of wheat. It would become bread. And the bread would feed the people of Zimbabwe. But the bureaucracy in Harare refused to accept it. A late rain had weakened the crop a grade below the government's imperfect standard. David had tried to reason with the bureaucrats, but to no avail. He needed to use this opportunity to raise the issue with Mugabe, who had just stepped out of his car.

Mugabe might understand. He had earned seven academic degrees, several during his ten-year stint as a political prisoner. He

A black man of average height approached the dairy wearing a dark tailored suit. He radiated greatness. His face looked chiseled out of stone ruins, then dipped in ebony. The broad spectacles that he wore only magnified the hard vacancy of his dark eyes. He spoke with an educated eloquence that, while not deep in pitch, betrayed absolutely no doubt.

"Hello, Mr. Mugabe," David said. White palm to black palm, the two men shook hands for the first time.

An intense two hours followed. They toured the entire operation, much to Mugabe's satisfaction. The farm employed hundreds of local

had won a fourteen-year civil war against a government and class of white farmers like David, who served as a young intelligence officer in that war, identifying positions to ambush pockets of rebels like the bands Mugabe led from neighboring Mozambique.

The war had ended sixteen years ago, in 1980. Mugabe had since reconciled the country, a miraculous feat that made him an international hero, by gripping the reins of power and holding on tight. He tolerated no opposition, but he allowed the white farmers to grow the economy. He did not try to steal their land. Instead, using the leverage of his position as the head of a small developing nation, he opened up markets abroad and brokered deals that benefited the farmers and the country. Sixteen years later, David's former enemy might understand.

Shona\* and migrant Malawians. David managed them. He spoke both languages, and he took pride in his square dealings with his employees. During his tenure, the farm had become profitable. It appeared on the London Stock Exchange, but more importantly, it fed a lot of hungry people.

David's wife, Lilly, served the dignitaries refreshments in the dairy after the tour. She demanded little more than they please sign her guestbook before leaving. Charmed, each one obliged.

Like David, Lilly was born in what was then called the British colony of Rhodesia. They met in Harare on a blind date during the civil war. They were both teenagers. She wrote him long love letters while he served. In three years, he completed tours of duty all over the country. In a strange way, the war was the time of his life. Merchants

\* "Shona" is a term used to describe a diverse array of indigenous ethnic groups in Zimbabwe.

treated the soldiers like kings. They could stay in any of the high-end resorts for next to nothing. The bartenders sold them beer for pennies. The fighting was intermittent, but the fuel of youth made them fearless, and David and his men routinely walked into dangerous bush villages hunting insurgents.

The white farmers thought of themselves as the bad boys of Africa— those who had dared to defy Mother Britain by declaring independence in 1965, who were surviving harsh international economic sanctions through old-fashioned hard work, who continued to fight a violent Chinese and Russian-backed communist insurgency.

However, the bravado eventually faded. The sanctions and spiraling costs of war destroyed the economy. The insurgency continued to grow with communist support. Morale plummeted, and in 1980, Rhodesia surrendered. Mugabe took over, renaming the country after the ancient stone ruins of Zimbabwe.

Walking toward the motorcade, David cornered Mugabe and explained the problem with the wheat. The ruler listened intently, stoic as an ancient philosopher but with genuine concern. He always seemed to have his finger on the pulse of the issues. Today was no exception. He understood completely. He calmly looked David in the eye and said the situation would be

resolved, immediately.

Rising above the pasture, stirring a massive wake in the grass, the helicopters climbed back over the green hills and disappeared. The next morning Mugabe announced that the government would accept the wheat.

## PART 2

Weeks later, David received a warning from two black members of the farm's board of directors. They said the government would soon pass a law forbidding the absentee ownership of large tracts of land. Such farms would be confiscated and redistributed to local Shona. The two men, who had deep ties to the Mugabe regime, said the law would be enforced.

Thirty kilometers away, David owned 4,000 acres he had purchased from his father in the early '80s. He called that farm home, though his brother had been running it for the nine years that David worked for the corporate farm. David was born and raised on that land. His entire family— father, mother, brother, and sister— lived within calling distance. It was not much of a dilemma. If he didn't quit his job and return home, he would lose his farm. He quit.

Over 50 years had passed since David's father arrived in Rhodesia.

He arrived by mistake. He boarded a ship in Scotland bound for New Zealand in hopes of escaping the post-World War II depression. After passing through the Suez Canal, he became so seasick that he abandoned ship at a port in South Africa. Alongside his brother and a childhood friend, David's father opted to settle in Rhodesia, where he had several contacts. One black steel trunk contained all his possessions.

In time, he purchased a farm. Like the British pioneers who settled the colony at the turn of twentieth century, he braved the elements of nature, hedged great financial risks, and reinvested all his wealth into the dirt of his adopted country. He viewed himself as a settler, not an expatriate. He became something of a farming wizard. His stewardship grew so renowned that Queen Elizabeth II awarded him a medal for his innovations in cattle breeding and overall contribution to agricultural development in Rhodesia.

So David returned to the homestead. His 80 permanent workers lived in shanties on the land, and he employed an additional 300 people seasonally. The farm produced potatoes, paprika, soybean, wheat, and ten-foot-tall sunflowers. He owned dairy and slaughter cattle. Each season he took out aggressive loans to plant his fields, paying them off only after the harvest. Season after season the

fields turned a profit, and David, like his father, put the money back into the land. He owned no offshore accounts. He continued to view himself as a settler, not an expatriate. After all, he had been born in this country.

Moving back home was something of a blessing in disguise. Lilly could manage her beloved, five-acre garden, and the greenery that surrounded their ranch-style home formed a sanctuary of beauty— an oasis of perfumes and color. She cultivated flowering plants and native trees with spherical, lavender blooms.

Their two adolescent children, Jaclynn and Duncan, were now even closer to their beloved cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. They were now old enough to enjoy the freedom of the farm's vastness. They could ride motorbikes across the fields, between the chickens and goats, over that beloved track near the silage, through the intermittent canopies of trees. And most importantly, the Smith families could socialize and eat meals in David's father's house more frequently.

Lilly's parents lived 30 kilometers away in Harare. Her father also moved to Rhodesia because of the post-World War II depression. Her mother stayed in Sicily, Italy with Lilly's older siblings. After four years of toiling, Lilly's father established himself and called for the family.

The Smiths often visited Lilly's parents in the city, but the farm was their favorite place to be. There, the Smiths found a treasure hidden within a large rock outcropping. Many decades earlier, perhaps many centuries earlier, the nomadic Kalahari bushman tribe had passed through this land. And there on the rocks, where the family loved to picnic on sunny afternoons, the bushmen painted stories of their hunting and gathering lifestyle. The strange, red pigment remained intact despite season after season of rain and wind.

## PART 3

In February 2000, Mugabe held a referendum that would have given him license to take white farms and redistribute them to those he viewed as "natives" without compensation. In what the newspapers called a "shock defeat," the referendum failed.

Over the years, people like David had looked past the repression, the corruption, and the strange disappearance of Mugabe's rivals. They had no choice but to accept that low African standard of government: Stability over freedom. They always wanted to believe that the regime's omnipotent slogan— "Forward to the Final Victory"— didn't mean pushing the several hundred thousand whites out of

Zimbabwe. It didn't mean destroying the country in the name of revenge and naïve idealism. For a long time, it had not meant that.

Suddenly civil society unraveled. The hidden despotism of Mugabe's twenty-year rule quickly became apparent and real. The economy floundered; inflation and unemployment grew; public services collapsed; and Mugabe entangled the country in a neighboring civil war. Aid that kept pouring in from Western charities ended up in open-air black markets in Harare, where the government desperately sold donated clothing and foodstuffs to the rich.

The lack of food, in a nation of farms, exacerbated the growing AIDS epidemic. David saw it firsthand. The virus had been a problem for years, but now that people could not sustain healthy immune systems with food, employees missed work several times a week to attend funerals. Corpses were filling up the cemetery that David donated to his workers. For him, the gravity of it all finally set in during a nighttime loading of chickens. The workers and their wives all came out to help. David saw in their moonlit silhouettes a frailty he had never noticed day to day. The situation became so dire that he hired armed guards to protect his property. The locals were stealing brass fixtures off irrigation spigots and melting them down to make coffin handles.



David Smith, front left, offers President Robert Mugabe and his entourage a tour of the corporate wheat farm he managed in Zimbabwe. David quit his job to move back to his family farm when Mugabe's government passed a law forbidding absentee ownership of land. His family moved into this sprawling ranch house.



The Smith children, Jaclynn and Duncan, enjoyed the freedom of the family farm's vastness. They lived close to their extended family and raised puppies, goats, and chickens on the farm. This is a view of the Smith's farm from their front porch in Zimbabwe.





**Inside their new home in Buckhead, Ga., the Smiths display photographs and artifacts of their former life on their family farm in Zimbabwe.**

Then one day a band of urban youths squatted on a neighbor's farm several kilometers from David's. They simply showed up in a five-ton truck and would not leave. David and Lilly heard about it on a radio the farmers used to communicate with each other. Similar reports came in from around the country. In a pathetic attempt to justify the illegal seizures of private property, the Mugabe regime called the squatters "war veterans."

The irony of it was not lost on the white farmers. This was not the tribal chief coming to take back the land he signed over 100 years ago. Most of the people on those trucks had not even been born when the civil war ended. They were urban youths, attired in baggy clothes and addicted to alcohol and marijuana. The white farmers referred to them as "rent a crowd," because that's exactly what the government had done.

Initially, no one panicked. This

was just another test. The white farmers had been through worse—war, drought, and sanctions. Like the dry season, this would pass.

But then Jaclynn's best friend's father was killed in April 2000. The war veterans, aided by local police, took him away from his farm—in broad daylight, in handcuffs, in his own truck. He was briefly tortured and shot twice with a shotgun.

They arrived on David's farm two months later. A five-ton truck with two half sides appeared in the fields, carrying a "rent a crowd." Thankfully, they were not armed. They settled away from the house in shanties. The spokesman for the group informed David that he could no longer farm his fields.

In a strange, inconvenient way, it was more of a relief than anything. Anticipating a terrible injustice often mitigates the shock of it actually occurring. David's brother's farm, which adjoined the property, had already been "invaded," as every-

one referred to it. David's 16-year-old niece was at home alone when it happened, and the black servants hid her in the attic before walking into the yard and taking a beating by the "war veterans."

After that, the Smiths finally devised a plan to escape. First David and Lilly's parents left, moving back to Scotland and Sicily to let their family make difficult decisions without the added responsibility of their wellbeing. David and his brother hoped to leave together and establish a family farm in the United States.

It took most of 2001 to set their plan in motion, but David finally approached community leaders and told them that he was going out of business. Under laws put in place during white rule, he felt obligated to compensate his workers, even though he could not farm. One of the "war veterans" oversaw the negotiations.

The meetings were anything but

formal, and it took a week or more to settle. Every few days they would meet around a mango tree in the front yard. These sessions lasted hours. They consisted of the war veterans and David's workers making all sorts of nonsensical speeches and foolish accusations. They loved to show off and pass along veiled threats of violence.

What hurt David most was watching his workers succumb to the mob mentality. They claimed he was abandoning them. Then, in the next breath, they made accusations of exploitation. David knew it was untrue. He knew he treated his workers better than most, but it bothered him.

Their demands were simply unreasonable, and David stood his ground. He would not give away everything he owned, even if he already lost the land. So day after frustrating day, he stormed back into the house, where all the family belongings were packed in a corner, and tried to quietly slam a door. Lilly consoled him as best she could. In the end, he walked away with his original offer: Four months severance pay for his employees and the right to stay on the land indefinitely. His employees didn't seem to realize that they really didn't need the right to stay on the land, because the Smiths were leaving and never coming back.

The sad day came when they pulled out of their driveway forever. But that memory's not as vivid as one of the last nights, the night David's fields became an inferno of giant flames and iridescent shadows. The smoke drifted invisibly through the cracks of the door. In all directions, thousands of acres burned relentlessly in the dry season. They had been torched out of spite and bitterness.

For a week they stayed in Lilly's parents' abandoned house in Harare, preparing to leave. They

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purchased plane tickets and shipped their goods. But David needed American dollars. The Zimbabwe currency was virtually worthless at home, much less abroad. The only money exchange in Harare operated underground, because it was now a crime to trade the stagflated Zimbabwe dollar.

A friend of a friend put David in touch with a liaison who worked for two powerful businessmen. David scheduled an appointment, but the liaison kept delaying the exchange. David grew distraught. He could not

turn back now if he wanted to. He had abandoned his sense of wellbeing by leaving the farm. He had set in motion a chain of events that he could not control. It was leave now or never.

He feared the operation might be a sting. He saw himself wasting away in a grimy prison with no legal recourse or due process. He stayed calm by remembering all the others who had gotten out of the country this way. Still, he was a prominent man, from a prominent family, the kind of person the government

**Jaclynn, David, Lilly, and Duncan pose for a photograph outside their new home in Buckhead. Both children now attend Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville.**



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might arrest to set an example. Or worse. The whole thing could be a con. The liaison might hold him at gunpoint and take his money.

The time was finally set. Lunchtime. Downtown Harare. In broad daylight, David walked into a country club carrying a heavy duffle bag. He had never been here before. It was posh, ritzy, first-class—an oasis inside a ruined country. The entrance led into a public bar, where people were having drinks. The liaison spotted David and walked him into a side office. David put the bag on a table and dumped an extensive amount of Zimbabwe dollars on the table. The money was counted meticulously. It felt terribly underhanded. It felt totally dishonest. It made David angry.

For the first time in his life, he was betraying his own country. He had been forced to betray it to save his children's future and possibly his own life. He walked out with barely enough U.S. dollars to put inside a small billfold. The exchange rate was 300 to one.

A few days later, in December 2001, the Smiths left Zimbabwe forever. The airport terminal where they said their goodbyes to family and friends had recently been renovated to accommodate all the tourists the Mugabe regime was expecting.

## EPILOGUE

Today the Smiths live in a quiet Buckhead subdivision, where a beautiful garden lines the walkway to their modest two-story home. It sits on less than two acres of land. David and Lilly can often be found tending to that small, enchanting plot. In only five years, they have made a home in Morgan County, Ga.

It certainly wasn't painless. The first years away from the farm were rough on the children. They didn't understand why they had been uprooted from the life they had in Africa, where they had everything—friends, family, and servants. In America they've learned to sacrifice and do without.

Jaclynn and Duncan, now college students, once lived with their parents in a farmhouse on Everett Williams' dairy farm. Williams sponsored the family's immigration, and David entered the U.S. on an employment visa. Under the federal government's terms, David remained with his employer until his green card was approved. It was honest, backbreaking work, and it wore David out, but he completed his obligation and remains forever grateful. He hopes to someday be rewarded with full citizenship for himself and his family after they become eligible to apply in 2010. "The flip side of our adversity was opportunity," says David.

Today David is employed as a controller with an auction and retail company. He will never return to his farm, and therefore, never again call himself a farmer. The situation in Zimbabwe has gone from bad to worse. There is extreme poverty and starvation as a result of the land invasions designed to help the poor. The country is now a pauper in a continent of poverty. Mugabe's hold on power is tighter than ever. David worries about his sister, who refuses to leave. They all miss the family. David's brother could not find work in America, so he fled to Australia, leaving a close-knit family on four continents.

David and Lilly now live for the lives of Jaclynn and Duncan, who both attend Georgia College and State University and receive the HOPE scholarship. Mom and dad have two goals: to one day retire and to be good grandparents. In a quiet, proud, and defeated way, they still view themselves as Zimbabweans. The inside of their home is decorated with artifacts of their former life on the farm. They don't ever want their children to forget that raw, beautiful world their ancestors made and lost, that green paradise so far away and forever gone. ■

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