



THE PHONE CALL

On the day Pa Lang heard about the tragic fate of his wife and children, he was sitting comfortably in his daughter's luxurious Silver Spring apartment, watching *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on a big screen TV. He had been in America for more than a month, visiting me and my wife, Anna. I was graduating from pharmacy school that spring, and we had invited him and his wife, Mama Ewei, to come for the graduation ceremony. Pa Lang accepted, but Mama Ewei declined. Not only was she afraid of flying, but she also could not fathom why she and her husband would want to leave their children behind to travel to America for such a long visit.

From the first moment Pa Lang had stepped off the United Airlines flight from Brussels on May 5, 2001, he wore a broad smile like never before seen on his face. As he happily hugged Anna at the Dulles International Airport, he thanked her for making him come to see

America before he died. Even in his wildest dreams, he never thought he would ever fly on a plane, let alone travel to America. Such dreams only came true for a privileged few in his Mabeta New Layout community in Limbe, Cameroon. Now, he was one of those few, and he was filled with the joy of seeing his daughters Anna and Anastasia Lang, and his granddaughter Weizei Manga, whom he hadn't seen since they all left Cameroon for America some six years earlier. He was also overjoyed to see his two grandchildren, four-year-old Ebang, and his namesake Lang, age two, for the first time.

As we drove home with him from the airport, he marveled at the landscape and could not help but notice the stark disparity between the multiple lane roads and the narrow, unpaved pothole-ridden roads he had been navigating all his life. The experience seemed so surreal that he referred to America as “heaven” here on Earth, much to the amusement of his daughters.

But the person Pa Lang missed the most while he was in America was Mama Ewei. It was the first time in their married life of over thirty years that they had been separated for such a long time. That separation, he later learned, would turn out to be permanent.

Pa Lang's afternoons at my home were usually quiet, but on that Wednesday in June, the phone virtually rang off the hook. The first call he received was from Anna. She called from work to make sure that he was doing okay. Pa Lang reassured her that he was fine and added that he never felt better in his sixty-something years of living in Cameroon.

Half an hour later, the phone rang again, and Pa Lang spent two minutes trying to put off a female telemarketer. He expressed his discontent as he hung up, wondering why this woman thought she could sell something to him over the phone. In Cameroon, he would not buy anything if he did not know what it was or what it looked like. He looked at the clock directly above the entertainment unit and realized that *The Oprah Winfrey Show* was almost over. Between the ringing phone and all the TV commercials, Pa Lang wondered why it was so difficult to watch a one-hour program without so many interruptions.

An hour later, the phone rang yet again. It seemed as if everyone had conspired to choose that particular day, of all days, to call him. He looked at the caller ID, but didn't recognize the number. He let the phone ring a little longer, hoping that the voicemail would pick up the call. It did at the fifth ring. As the caller started to speak, he recognized the voice as his nephew's and hurriedly picked up the handset.

"Hello, hello, this is Pa Lang," he said, hoping that his nephew had not hung up.

"Hello. Pa Lang, this is Philip Chu calling from Limbe, Cameroon. Can I speak to Anna or to her husband please?"

"They have both gone to work. Philip, how is everybody at home doing?" Pa Lang asked.

There was no response from the other end.

"Philip, are you there? Philip...Philip!" Pa Lang called, almost yelling in frustration.

Again, there was dead silence at the other end. Pa Lang was convinced that he either lost the connection, or

Philip hung up. This did not call for any undue suspicion, given that he had always had network connection problems with calls to and from his home in Mabeta New Layout. Sometimes, he heard the party at the other end, but they never heard him, even when he shouted at the top of his voice. Other times, the caller would complain of very poor reception and would have to move to an elevated area. But Pa Lang could still hear Philip's labored breathing. Thinking that Philip was trying to go up the hill behind his house, he waited. A few minutes later, he asked again, "Philip, are you there?"

"Pa Lang, I'm still here," Philip replied. "There's been an accident in Limbe in which your entire family is involved. Please tell Anna or her husband to call me." He heard a click, and the line went dead. Pa Lang slowly hung up the phone and wondered what sort of accident Philip was alluding to and where his family was going to or coming from to be involved in an accident. His thoughts continued to wander over Philip's disconcerting message as he paced back and forth, bewildered, in the tiny living room. Then the phone rang again. Thinking that it was his nephew again, he hurriedly picked it up. But instead of Philip, it was Gustave Efotte calling from Lanham, Maryland. Gustave and Pa Lang went back a long way. They were not only neighbors in Mabeta New Layout, but when Gustave was a student in Baptist Centenary Elementary School in New Town, Victoria, Pa Lang was his scout master. Gustave was calling because he had heard about the incident in Limbe and wanted to condole with the family.

"Pa Lang," Gustave called out.

Pa Lang was relieved to hear Gustave's voice. He had been itching to talk to someone he knew about the phone that had been ringing off the hook and especially about Philip's troubling message.

"How are you doing?" Gustave pried. He must have been hoping that Pa Lang had heard the news.

"I am doing fine," Pa Lang answered, "but the phone won't stop ringing today."

From Pa Lang's reply, Gustave must have known that he had not heard the news or else he would not be doing fine.

"Can I talk to Anna's husband?" Gustave asked.

It was the same question Philip had asked. At this point, Pa Lang had begun to get very worried.

"He went to work. Gustave, my nephew Philip just called and told me that my family had been involved in an accident. Have you heard any news from Limbe?"

I imagine Gustave must have debated within himself whether or not to tell Pa Lang the terrible news or wait until he could talk to me. I know he was concerned with Pa Lang's reaction upon hearing about his family with no one by his side to hold his hand or shoulders, or to provide any emotional or physical support. But news about accidental or disaster deaths generally is public. This meant that if he did not deliver the news, someone else would sooner or later. Although it did not matter who broke the tragic news to Pa Lang, it mattered how they told him the news. Against his better judgment, and unable to keep news of that magnitude from Pa Lang, his neighbor and mentor, he decided to tell him.

"Are you sitting down?" Gustave asked.

Wondering why Gustave would answer a question with another question, Pa Lang lied. "Yes, I am," he said. He had known Gustave too many years and they had numerous phone conversations, but this was not his style. Often, they started with a small talk about family and transitioned to the huge differences between life in Cameroon and in America. This unusual twist in their phone conversation did not bode well with him. But he said nothing, and Gustave continued talking.

"Can you recite the eighth scout law?" Gustave asked.

"The eighth scout law." Pa Lang repeated to himself. He could recite it even in his sleep. No scout ever forgot this law. To Pa Lang, it always spelled an ill omen.

"A scout smiles and whistles under all circumstances," he said.

"That's right," Gustave confirmed.

A sudden premonition swept over Pa Lang, and he braced himself for the worst.

"I just received a phone call from my family in Mabeta New Layout. I was informed that for two days, Limbe experienced a heavy downpour of rain that resulted in unprecedented floods and landslides. Your entire house was completely buried by a landslide."

"What?" Pa Lang asked.

"I will be over there with you in half an hour," Gustave said.

"Gustave, wait a minute. What about my wife?"

There was a long pause on the other end of the line.

"I am sorry, Pa, but she too was buried by the landslide."

Pa Lang's voice began to tremble as he asked, "And my children?"

Gustave's answer came slowly. "My mum said none of the seven children survived."

"Oh my god, all of them," Pa Lang said in a whisper, more to himself than to Gustave. The handset dropped out of his shaking hands to the floor. Like a scout, he tried to smile and whistle, but the room spun and his legs wobbled under him. He slumped on the couch and slipped into unconsciousness.

Note: News of escalating war in the South West and North West regions of Cameroon for over five years that has resulted to the killing and internal displacement of many people is distressing. For me, Cameroon is not *just* my birth place. It is my identity. I worry about the people's bleak future.