

2005

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### Recommended Citation

Habila, Helon, My Uncle Ezekiel, *Kunapipi*, 27(1), 2005.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol27/iss1/11>

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### Abstract

My uncle Ezekiel's body was discovered in a ditch early on Christmas morning, three years ago. Beside him was an empty bottle of cheap whisky, I still remember the red and green label on the bottle, with the inscription: Christian Brothers. Because of the empty bottle, and because of his drinking history, people assumed he had drunk himself to death – but actually, it was the cold that killed him.

HELON HABILA

## My Uncle Ezekiel

My uncle Ezekiel's body was discovered in a ditch early on Christmas morning, three years ago. Beside him was an empty bottle of cheap whisky, I still remember the red and green label on the bottle, with the inscription: Christian Brothers. Because of the empty bottle, and because of his drinking history, people assumed he had drunk himself to death — but actually, it was the cold that killed him.

The harmattan blows from November, sometimes earlier, reaching its peak in late December and early January, to peter out in March when the warm and humid winds begin to blow from the south, harbingers of the rainy season. The harmattan originates in the hot Sahara desert — it is called Hamsin in Arabic — and for some reason it turns chilly as it moves south of the Sahara. It moves in surges, peaking and subsiding, circling, as if reconnoitring, before swooping down on houses, trees, towns, countries, covering everything before it in fine white desert dust, sucking the moisture out of anything that is moist, and all the while screaming shrilly as it plays itself against power lines, roof awnings and tree branches — but its most punishing aspect is the cold.

Uncle Ezekiel stood no chance against it.

'Ezekiel, Ezekiel, what have you done to yourself now?' mama wailed when the news was brought to her by the old woman who had discovered the body on her way to Church. Uncle Ezekiel was the eternal child to his sisters — there were five of them. My mother was the only one living in the village, the other four lived in the state capital. The duty of taking the news to my four aunties fell on me. But first we took my uncle's frozen body to the mortuary at the General Hospital, mama also made arrangements for a coffin with Jonah the carpenter; after all these flurries of activity and decisions. I left her in the living room, hunched forward in her seat, the tears trickling down her face, my three kid brothers seated beside her, solemn and sobbing, as if trying to out-mourn her. Soon the Christmas service would be over, and the mourners would start trickling in from the church, those who knew him and those who didn't, the men would bravely force back their tears, the women would scream and roll in the dust and scream themselves hoarse — it was the tradition. There were no tears on my face. It was as if the light, stiff body I had touched and lifted out of the pick-up truck at the mortuary belonged to a total stranger, someone related to my mother, but not to me. Yet I had more right to mourn him, to out-scream and outfall them all. I knew him better than they did. I knew his secret pain, his anguish and frustrations. I knew him when he was young and good looking, when he had been so full of promise. I understood him more than his sisters. He was my friend, and for a while, my role model.

It was a two-hour trip by car to Jos, where my four aunties lived. I sat in the back of the old station wagon, jammed tight against other passengers, lost in thought. I watched the trees and shrubs through the window as they sped past — the harmattan had covered them in layers of dust. The grasses were sapless and pale yellow, the trees all spiky branches and coarse bark, unsightly; it was hard to imagine that a couple of months ago they were in leaf, some even in flower, the grass below them thick and luxuriant, insects and animals scurrying in and out of the bushes. Why did they suddenly give up their grip on their leaves with the first gust of harmattan, I wondered idly, as if this degradation, this death, was something they had secretly aspired to, something more compelling than life. For some reason it came to me suddenly that my uncle was exactly my age, twenty-five, the first time I saw him. Because my father was a schoolteacher, and his postings were mostly to small, out of the way villages, I discovered my mother's sisters, and her only brother, one at a time.

\* \* \*

We had just moved to Gombe, a sleepy roadside town in the savannah, slightly bigger than the last town where we had spent five years. Uncle Ezekiel was on his way back to the university after the mid-season vacation and he had stopped to see us and to show mama his new car, a Volkswagen Beetle. It was the 1970s, the golden decade of Nigeria's history, before the rocketing inflations of the '80s and '90s, and cars were so cheap that even students like my uncle could afford to buy one from their bursary. The civil war was over, oil had just been discovered, and according to the Head of State, money was not the problem but ways to spend it: massive state bursaries to university students was one of the ways.

Uncle Ezekiel came one quiet afternoon, and was there a slight stagger to his steps as he entered our living room? When mama saw him in the doorway she jumped up and shouted, 'Last born! Where are you from?'

'From the village,' he said, raising his hand over his head and motioning vaguely with it, as if pointing in the direction of the village. This was a gesture I came to associate with him, as if he had invented it.

'I am on my way back to school. Everyone was fine at home, they send their greetings ...' his voice trailed off when he saw me. I was seated in a chair far from the door. A huge grin split his face. 'Who is this? Is that Lamana?' He came and stood before my chair, shaking my hand like a grown up.

'Last time I saw you, you were like this, crying and shitting ... how old are you now?'

'Ten,' I said. This close I could smell the whisky and cigarettes on him. I was shocked that mama's brother smoked and drank; their father was a famous preacher. But she did not seem the least bit disturbed by it, or perhaps she was so happy to see him she did not notice. She gave him food and they chatted as he ate. He called her 'Sister' at the start of every sentence. I found that fascinating

— everything was fascinating about my uncle: the vague, absent minded way he failed to finish his sentences, waving his hands as if to pluck out of the air the elusive words; and the way his face would totally collapse when he laughed, so that it stopped being a face anymore, just one huge lump of laughter. He had a dimple on his right cheek. They talked about their parents — my grandparents.

‘Sister, I have one confession to make,’ he said to mama, his face dissolving.

‘What is it?’ mama said, imitating his smile.

‘Mama gave me a rooster to bring to you ... I tied its legs and put it in the car boot ... but it must have somehow undone the knot with its beak ... you know how smart these village roosters are, very smart ... then I stopped to buy something ... by now I had forgotten all about the rooster. When I opened the boot to get my wallet from my bag it flew out. Prrr! and took to the bush,’ he flapped his hands in demonstration. ‘Prrr!’ he repeated over and over, laughing. Mama shook her head but laughed with him nonetheless. Even I could see that Uncle was lying, the chicken was most probably roasted and was right now digesting in his stomach — but all she did was shake her head and wag a finger at him and say, ‘You, you are impossible’.

And finally it was time to view the car. It was parked by the roadside, under a sycamore tree: a metallic-grey Volkswagen. He opened the driver’s door proudly and told me to enter, all the while explaining to mama how Hitler had had his engineers specially design the car during the Second World War.

‘It can’t overturn, just like the beetle.’ He moved back and pointed at the car top. ‘See the shape? Like the beetle. And it doesn’t use water ....’ Mama bent down and peered inside, running her hand over the leather of the seats. Half of the backseat was covered by huge books, my uncle’s law books. After the viewing he was finally ready to go, he sat behind the wheel and said to my mother, ‘In a year’s time I will have my law degree ... then no one can touch you. Lamana,’ he said to me, ‘anybody tells you any nonsense just let me know when I come back. Make a long list, I’ll sue them ... you hear ...’ he said bursting into laughter. He started the car and drove off, waving with one hand through the window.

I felt sad to see him go, there was something bigger than life, almost magical, about my uncle. Though he was short and slight of build, he filled a room the moment he stepped into it, and no one I knew could tell stories like him.

That night at dinner mama told my father of Uncle Ezekiel’s visit. I detected the pride in her voice when she mentioned the car. She said he was the first person in her family to own a car, and to go to university. My father did not say anything. He snorted when she related the joke about my uncle’s offer to sue anyone we did not like. My father never thought much of Uncle Ezekiel even then — perhaps he had already sensed the rot in the core, the way cats are said to detect a dying man long before the event, and decided to keep my uncle at arms length.

Mama and her sisters were seated shoulder to shoulder on a straw mat, their backs rested against the wall: they had always been like that, right from childhood, incredibly loyal to each other, shoulder to shoulder, a solid phalanx against anything the world threw at them. They faced the rest of the mourners stoically; every once in a while some housewife would come and kneel before them, murmuring words of condolence, shaking their hands in turn, starting with my Aunty Ramatu, the eldest. I call her Posh Aunty. She had a flask of water beside her from which she occasionally sipped, daintily. Her husband had recently been promoted from a Secondary School principal to a State Commissioner, and to celebrate he had taken his family, my aunty and her four sons, to London for a week and, when they returned my aunty had suddenly transformed into Posh Aunty who wouldn't drink from the same common pot in the kitchen anymore because she was scared of typhus. Her food, also for health reasons, had to be prepared separately. As soon as she arrived this morning, with my other aunties in her chauffer driven Peugeot 504, she had started throwing money around: a goat was bought, a sack of rice, a gallon of cooking oil, soft drinks — all so that the mourners wouldn't lose strength as they poured out their grief. The next hand to be shaken was mama's. She was the practical one of the sisters; she had taken care of the grave diggers, and the coffin makers, and the mortuary bills, once in a while she went to the kitchen to have a word with the cooking gang. Next was Aunty Maria, or Timid Aunty, I call her that because her loud and domineering policeman husband had so intimidated her that she couldn't look anyone in the eyes when speaking to them, not even her own children. Now she had an apologetic smile on her face as a mourner shook her hand, the tears rolled down her care worn cheeks; she kept nodding, almost genuflecting, at the woman shaking her hand. She seemed to be crouching more than sitting, as if poised to fly off if anyone shouted, 'Boo!' Her eldest son, Haruna, was in the same class as me at the university. And finally there was Aunty Jummai, or Pretty Aunty, the youngest of the sisters. She had actually won a beauty contest twenty years ago when she was at the Women Teachers' College — she was still beautiful; but that was not the only reason why she was our favourite aunt: it was her kindness, how she was always willing to listen, to intercede when our parents wouldn't understand.

The mourning was being held at my grandparents' house, Uncle Ezekiel's house actually, because as the only male child of his parents, he had inherited the house after their death. They had died four years ago, within months of each other, grandpa first, then grandma. It was a huge, desolate looking house, with tumble-down roofs and empty, cavernous halls and living rooms. Uncle Ezekiel had sold every stick of furniture in the house, including the bed he slept on. I found it hard to believe that this was the same house I had spent Christmas holidays in long ago with my cousins and other strings of relatives who always seemed to be present in the big house.

The mourners were seated in the huge compound under trees and roof awnings, the men on one side, the women on the other side. The women were closer to the kitchen where huge pots of goat meat and rice were cooking. People kept pouring in, the women would come in chatting and laughing, then as soon as they saw the mourners they'd break into loud wails, throwing their scarves into the air, hitting their heads against trees until they were held and led to sit on the mats next to my aunties.

We, the young men, were seated far away from the rest of the mourners, under a nim tree, chatting desultorily; once in a while one of us would get up, yawn and then go outside to sneak a cigarette. From where I sat, my back against the tree, I could see another group of mourners, seated by themselves — in the centre was Black Ladi, my uncle's ex-wife, flanked by her two daughters. My aunties call her, amongst themselves, Blacky, in reference to her character. Even from this far I could see the stubborn set of her mouth, the defensive frown on her face: her two teenage daughters, Anita and Hansatu, were mirror images of her, the dark skin, the pointy ears, the quick flickering eyes that kept swivelling round like radars detecting trouble. The two girls' only saving grace was my uncle's unmistakable weak chin. Close to these three, but slightly removed from them, was Sarah, my uncle's other daughter. She had surfaced, suddenly, in the family circles six years ago from God-knows-where. She was a product of one of my uncle's numerous peccadilloes when he was in the university.

I remember the first time I saw Sarah, I had just been admitted to read law at the university, on the way there I decided to stop at my uncle's house in Bauchi. I thought he'd be happy to know that I was going to read law, after all he had inspired my decision to apply for law. I had not seen him for years, but through mama I knew that things were not going so well for Uncle Ezekiel. He had failed his law exams, and so was not called to the bar — but he was able get a job as a registrar in a magistrate court in Bauchi. He then got married to some schoolteacher whom, according to family lore, he had met in a bar room. It was all down hill from there. A year after marriage he totalled his car in a drunk-driving accident, barely escaping with his life, and was left with a long scar on his left jaw; then he was suspended from work the following year, ostensibly because he failed to turn up at the office for a whole month — but really because the people at the office were tired of his coming to the office drunk, and of having to wash his vomit off the table. Each calamity pushed him deeper into drinking, and the fact that he now had two daughters to care for did not ease matters.

He lived in a low-cost government housing project for civil servants, somewhere in the town centre. His house was number J2, and parked right in front of the door was the mangled remains of his metallic-grey Volkswagen Beetle. Voices raised in argument greeted me as I raised my hand to knock on the door, I put down my bag, wondering if I would not do better to turn and walk away, but I took a deep breath and knocked. There was a pause in the exchange; the door

was thrown open by my uncle. He looked like a caged bird looking for a way out — his face broke into a smile when he saw me.

‘Lamana! Come in, come in,’ he said, taking my hand, drawing me into the living room. His wife, Black Ladi, was standing in the centre of the room, her hands on her wide hips, a thunderous frown on her coal-black face. It was my second time of seeing her; the first time had been at their wedding years ago. Now she glared at my uncle and hissed, then without a word at me swept out of the room. I put down my bag and looked round the living room: the centre table had one leg broken, the seats were old and tattered armchairs, they looked as if some demented kid had gone at them with an axe. An old black-and-white Sony TV stood on a metal frame in an angle. For the first time I noticed that there was another person in the room: a plump, dazed-looking girl in a print dress, seated in one of the broken armchairs by the window. She couldn’t be more than thirteen years old. She looked as if she had just arrived from a journey, a battered looking bag with a red cloth peeping out of the top where the broken zipper wouldn’t close.

‘Your cousin, Sarah, she just came an hour ago,’ Uncle Ezekiel said in introduction, waving vaguely in the girl’s direction. He weaved back and forth on his feet as he spoke, he looked exhausted, as if on the verge of collapse, the hair on his head had turned white, and through his unbuttoned shirt I could see the ribs showing in his chest.

‘My cousin?’ I asked, turning to the girl. I had never seen her before, and I certainly had no idea he had a grown up daughter like this. ‘I don’t understand.’

His eyes turned fearfully to the curtained doorway into which Blacky had just disappeared, and then he turned to me, shaking his head in warning. He took my hand, ‘Come, we will go out. I will explain to you on the way ...’ his words were cut short by Blacky’s reappearance. ‘No way,’ she shouted, ‘you are not stepping out of this house today. You must do all the explaining right here. Me too, I don’t understand, explain to me. Who is she?’ She grabbed him by the shirtfront as she spoke, jerking him back and forth.

‘Stop this embarrassment ...’ he began weakly.

‘Embarrassment? So you think I am embarrassing you in front of your bastard daughter, is that so? Well, I have not started yet.’ She went to the girl. ‘And you, if you think you have come to your father’s house to enjoy, you are making a big mistake. Look at him carefully,’ she points at Uncle Ezekiel, ‘this useless man has been out of job for a whole year. He is a useless drunk. He is unemployable. I am the one who feeds him and his children. So better tell your mother, whoever she is, that if she thinks she has sent you here to live and send back money to her, she has made a mistake.’

I looked at Sarah. She was staring woodenly at the carpet before her, twisting and untwisting the edge of her skirt, each word thrown at her made her cringe deeper into her seat, as if she hoped the dirty redwood would turn to quicksand and swallow her. I felt sorry for her, and angry at my uncle’s wife, now I

understood why my mother and her sisters called her 'Blacky'. But most of my disgust was for my uncle. How could someone be so spineless? How could someone with so much promise lose it all like this? All he could do as his wife ranted and shook him by the shirtfront was to mutter, 'Stop this embarrassment ... stop this nonsense immediately ... you are making me angry.' He slurred his words, shaking his head helplessly at me. I turned away.

'In fact, this has made up my mind. I have had enough. I am moving out with my children. So, Madam Sarah, or whatever you call yourself, I hope you have the strength to lift a drunken man to bed each night, and to wash the vomit off him,' Blacky said. And she was true to her word; as soon as her two kids came back from school she bundled them into a taxi and left the house. We watched in silence, my uncle's feeble attempts to stop her were brushed aside angrily. Sarah sat and stared into the carpet, not moving an inch. She lived with her newly discovered father for a week, then my grandmother came and took her away to the village.

That night, my uncle went and got roaring drunk. 'To cool my temper,' he explained to me. It was that night that I asked him in exasperation, 'Uncle, why don't you give this up? Must you drink? See how you've lost everything because of drink.'

He looked at me, his bleary eyes amused, and shook his head. 'You won't understand ... it makes life bearable ... my life is too complicated....'

\* \* \*

I was not to see Uncle Ezekiel again till three years later — by this time I was not a kid anymore, I was twenty-two and had begun to discover what my uncle meant when he said, 'My life is too complicated.' I had been in and out of love, I had just lost my father, I had also tasted the sense of false hope alcohol can give in dire moments. This was the late 1980s, the whole country was in turmoil, the bright sheen that had covered the 1970s had gradually dulled to a dirty brown patina, yet another military adventurer had seized power, and when the students poured out into the streets to protest, the police had opened fire on them, killing some, maiming some. Armoured tanks patrolled the campuses as if they were war zones, when the tensions continued the schools were closed and we were told to go home 'until further notice'. Since I was not in a mood to go home, I decided to visit my Uncle Ezekiel.

He met me at the door, he had one hand hitching up his trousers at the waist. He had grown rake-thin since the last time I saw him. There was a hungry, trapped look in his eyes whenever he was sober, his manner was distracted, his speech incoherent, his hands shook; ironically, he was only himself after he had had something to drink. The living room was even worse than I remembered from my last visit: the black-and-white TV was gone; the dirty threadbare rug that had made a brave show of covering the floor was also gone. Sheets of paper

on which half-realised attempts at a formal letter had been started and abandoned covered the three-legged centre table.

‘You came at the right time,’ he said to me, waving at the papers, ‘I am writing a letter to the Ministry of Justice ... they are wicked bastards ... you must see the letter they sent me last week, terminating my appointment.’ He pushed aside the top papers and fished out the letter, which he handed to me. ‘Here, read it. This is illegal ... they can’t do this ... I am a lawyer, I know my rights ... but first I will give them a chance to take me back. Here, take the pen. I will dictate, you write, my hand is a bit shaky....’

I sighed. I wanted to tell him that I was tired and hungry, that what I wanted was a little rest, that if he could open his eyes he would see that he really had no chance with his petition, that people were losing their jobs in droves everyday — hundreds of sober graduates walked the streets unemployed, that the country had changed drastically since the last time he was sober. But I didn’t have the heart to say all this when I saw how excited he was, how his hands shook as he handed me the pen, how his words fell thickly over themselves and the saliva flew out of his mouth as he spoke.

He dictated, I wrote. The letter, which began peremptorily with lots of reference to legal facts and precedents, gradually simmered into a pathetic plea for a second chance. He was like a trickster who had depended all his life on his wits, who had now suddenly discovered that his bag of tricks was really and truly empty.

The following morning we took the letter to the Ministry of Justice. Uncle Ezekiel was dressed in his best suit, which was too big for him now; he had to borrow my belt to hold his trousers up. He was full of hope, but his face soon fell as we got out of the taxi and saw a long line of people with similar petitions as ours before the Director General’s office. We bravely joined the queue and moved an inch at a time, by midday I could sense Uncle Ezekiel growing restlessness — his hands kept going up to scratch his head, his eyes darted about, several times he broke the queue for a cigarette.

At 1 p.m. he said to me, ‘We have to eat now — I will go first, you stay in the queue, when I return I will take over.’

He ‘borrowed’ fifty naira from me and left. Of course I did not see him again till late in the night when he returned home drunk. I had waited in the line and when our turn came and he was not back I had headed back for home, only to discover that I did not have the key. I broke the lock and entered. I stayed up to give him a piece of my mind, but when he eventually came back he was too drunk, and I too sleepy, to have a talk. I left early the next day.

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He did not go out without a fight — he did rage at the dying of the light, he actually managed to stop drinking for a whole year, but that was many years after the letter-writing day. In the interim, he left Bauchi and moved to the

village after he was evicted from his flat in the wake of the termination of his appointment. He lived with my grandparents, turning their final years into a veritable hell with his habit: he pilfered grandma's jewellery, and foodstuff, and livestock, anything at all that he could turn into cash, to keep himself in booze. By now my family had also moved to the village after my father's death, and I often ran into him in bar rooms.

'Here comes your uncle,' my friends would say and often there was no getting rid of him till I had bought him a drink. Thankfully he was never choosy, 'Just anything to keep me going,' he'd say, laughing, for even then he had not lost his laughter, and there were those, mostly women, who were impressed by his faded charms, his funny anecdotes about his university days, about his classmates who were now big-shots in government. On many occasions I had to carry him home when I found him slumped in some doorway, or asleep on some bar room floor.

He quit drinking when my grandparents died (they died within weeks of each other). After the burial mama and her sisters called a family meeting and, through a judicious mixture of threats and promises and tears and appeals to his ego, they got Uncle to promise to stop drinking. And he actually did. The sisters were ecstatic — in no time they were able to get him a job with the Local Government Library (the L.G. administrator turned out to be his former school mate), my mother began to hatch a plan to get him married. But, in a funny way, I think that one year of abstinence was Uncle Ezekiel's most unhappy year. Perhaps, now that he was sober, he suddenly looked around and saw how much ground he had lost, and how impossible it was to recapture it. He did not laugh like he used to, he went about with a haunted, apprehensive look in his eyes, as if he was waiting for the day when everything would fall apart again. I guess he felt, in a way, that it was his fate to be destroyed by alcohol; it was his tragic flaw, the trigger to his doom. That might have been why he turned to the church, as a desperate attempt to seek divine intervention — but he was not there for long.

'I find the sermons too tedious,' he told me, 'the preachers are too self-righteous. What do they know about life?' I loved it when he talked like that; it showed that he still had some spark left inside him.

From comments and gossips overheard during the two days of mourning, I am now able to piece together the events of Uncle Ezekiel's final day, the events that led to his relapse, and death. It seems that early on Christmas Eve he ran into an old classmate, Mr. Lamang, who had just returned from America after an absence of five years. Friends had gathered at Lamang's house, and an impromptu party had taken off. While everyone around him drank beer and spirits, Uncle Ezekiel had stuck to soda, but as the evening turned into night, and the spirit level rose higher, and the young women began to arrive, and stories of old escapades were relived, Uncle had given in to temptation and had asked for a shot of gin.

'Just one,' he assured his friends who wondered if it was wise to go back after being dry for so long. And from there, of course, he ran out of control. He left his

friends around midnight, thoroughly drunk, his pocket full of money, a bottle of gin under his arm.

Outside, in hotels and bar rooms, the parties were just starting; he went from party to party, buying people drink, downing drinks. He could not be controlled; it was as if some ravenous monster inside him was driving him on. Around three in the morning he made for home, the bottle of Christian Brothers under his arm, but of course he never made it, his legs gave out under him and by first light he was dead.

‘Because it keeps me alive,’ he once told me when I asked him why he wouldn’t quit drinking. I believe he meant that literally, because often when the police and the soldiers were shooting people on the streets, he was cosy in some bar room, drunk — or post-lucid as he liked to call it — out of harm’s way. But now that which had kept him alive had turned round and killed him.

We buried him after the customary two days of mourning. What I will never forget is the image of mama and her sisters, clad in black before the open grave, their heads bowed in shame, the pastor had refused to come and say a graveside sermon because Uncle Ezekiel ‘did not die in the Lord’. At least they had the consolation of knowing that this would be the last humiliation they’d have to endure because of him. I watched as the coffin was lowered into the gaping red earth, I wouldn’t have been surprised if the lid had opened to reveal Uncle smiling and saying it was all a joke — he was, after all, the trickster. I wanted to tell mama and her sisters that they really had nothing to be ashamed of, he had lived his life in the open, and his intemperance never really hurt anyone more than himself. I pictured him being received in heaven by angels; well, not the Christian heaven as we know it, but some milder, kinder suburb of it, where the reigning deity, Bacchus, would welcome Uncle with a glass of stiff gin.