

Lucky

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We've been left behind. It's another morning, so we're in the school garden looking for lunch. The maize is still too young, too dark a green, but what can we do? It's not easy reaching for the long bulbs with yellowy wisps like white people's hair; the leaves cut our arms and legs with their razor-sharp fuzz because they don't want us to steal their cobs. But that doesn't stop us; the ache of emptiness keeps us going. Those who pick more will eat more, so we work as fast as we can. All around me, boys scabble around, making the dry leaves on the ground crackle as loud as roosters. Or does it seem so loud because the rest of the school is silent?

Eh, but hunger can make you do things! Three days ago Ociti and Bosco clambered over the fence and ate like twenty hard green mangoes from the old orchard that is now more like a forest. Rumour says the owners went into exile long ago, England or somewhere. But how we laughed at those two when they spent the whole night running back and forth from the pit latrine! Laughing to cover our jealousy 'coz at least they had felt full, content, for a few hours. Envious 'coz they were brave enough to venture out of school, what with all the stories of the Lakwena rebels roaming around, and worse, the new government soldiers who still behaved like the rebels they had been for —was it six years?

This is why school has closed, and why eleven of us are stuck here; we can't go back to our homes in the north: Gulu District, West Nile. There's nowhere to pass because of the fighting. Everyone else lucky enough to leave or have relatives in the south has left. My Auntie Joyce is in Kampala somewhere, but I don't know where exactly and I don't have her phone number or anything. I tried calling my father, back home in Aboke, to ask, but his number was off, and the Headmaster —'Big Head' since his competes with a hippo's— shrugged as he took the office phone from my hands. That was it: I was staying. And yet he, whose job it is to take care of the school, took off with the rest and left us! He didn't even turn his hippo head to look back at us as the school bus rumbled out of the gate, packed full of teachers and students like onions in a sack.

Only Mr. Komakech, the mouthy maths teacher, has stayed behind with us. Even the workers have left, can you imagine? Koma, as we call him because he never stops talking, said he wanted to 'enjoy the war properly' and laughed, but it seems he's stuck here too. He can talk us to death,

but for some reason, my eyes can't stop following how his large lips chew around the words like they are tasty.

Don't ask me what the war is all about: the new government army of former rebels was now fighting rebels who had been the old government army. So what's the difference? They've switched places like we did back home when we were seven, eight, those days: Ugandans versus Tanzanians and the rule was that the Tanzanians had to win because they had saved us from Idi Amin. Oh, but it was wild running through the compounds, scattering the cackling chicken, dogs barking with excitement and joining us as we scrambled through the shambas, wind whistling over and under our shouts: *Pow-pow! Got you! Die!* Shooting each other dead with stick guns, screaming, falling, then getting up, brushing off the dust and dried leaves, and changing sides. I was really good at falling in slow motion, arms and legs flailing, body jerking in the dust, like the soldiers on Bob's father's TV, which he allowed us to watch from the outside, peering in through their windows.

And here I am fighting with maize cobs, against a sun hammering my forehead. Thank God for no barber visits; at least my bushy hair is a sun shield. After picking four cobs, I turn to Ociti: "How many have you got?"

"Five."

"That's enough for now, let's go."

Koma has ordered us all to stay in one dorm, "to keep each other company," he says. "Birds of a feather do what?" And he cocked his head to one side like he too was a bird: tall, dark and smooth. The way he talks, you'd think we've remained behind for fun like it's a holiday at school because we like it so much. Shya! Big Head also called it a 'free term', since we aren't paying fees like he's done us a favour. As if we're stupid. Here we are, no assembly, no teachers except one, no cooks or cleaners, no sports, nothing. Free term? How about 'prison'? Ask me what prison is like and I'll tell you: whole hours, days, stretching out like an endless line of ants, filled with nothing but the same routine chores, and then sitting around staring emptily at the same few pimply faces, listening to our stomachs growl, our thoughts roaming the carefree past or a fantastic future, circling, circling to avoid the wide, flat, dry now.

To make it worse, Koma does his best to cheat us out of our 'free term'. First, he makes us get up early. "Up, up, you don't have all day!" But of course, we do. "Early to bed, early to what?" It's so

annoying to be shaken awake by his bright booming voice and big smile as he pokes his head into our room. But also, something inside wakes up, feels good to be smiled upon by him.

“Good morning, teacher” we mutter as we drag ourselves out of bed.

Well, we sleep early because power has gone, and so what else can we do in the dark but listen to our bellies growl? Only Koma has a torch, and we use it sparingly to save the batteries. But surely we could start the morning’s chores at seven, even eight, not six? After fetching water, scrubbing saucepans, floors, the toilets and bathrooms, collecting food, cooking and eating, Koma makes us sit in class straight after lunch. Not even a ka-hour of rest, how unfair is that?

“Hard work does what?”

Koma seems to look at me more than the others, so I answer louder than the rest. “Pays, teacher.” It’s as if we are having a private conversation about something else.

But pays, how? Everyone else at home is free and safe, but for us? Is it not bad enough that we’re stuck here ‘in the path of bullets’, as Big Head so kindly put it, do we also have to be punished with class? Just because Koma loves maths —for him its meat to chew on, does he have to force it on us? For me, it’s dry bone. Moreover, we’re all in different classes, so it’s confusing when he opens different pages of *Longman’s Mathematics for East Africa*, and tries to teach us all different things at the same time.

Me, I’m not afraid of Koma; I put up my hand on our first day and asked, “Why are we in class?” I almost added ‘wasting time.’

“You boy, can’t you see how lucky you are to have this extra time to revise, moreover with me?” He spread out his arms as if to show off his muscles: “All the others are at home sleeping! No pain, no what?”

Lucky? Sure, like, if we lied to ourselves enough, we’d believe it; it would become true. Teachers! They have this thing of thinking we’re foolish enough to believe what they say. Like how, in Civics class last term, the teacher droned on about how the police protect us. Really? Even a child of five knows better; he just needs to listen to the news once. We all just kept quiet and waited for the bell to ring.

Me, I can escape teachers' lame lies by going back to old Okiror's war stories. He's a mzee made of nothing but wrinkled skin and bones, who sits under the huge mango tree outside St. Mark's the whole day, back in Aboke, holding an ancient gun like a baby. He repeats stories of his glory days to us kids who hang around; adults don't have the patience. I was mesmerized as much by the stories as by how his saliva spattered from his rubbery lips as he talked.

As Ociti and I walk from the garden, our cobs held close to our bodies, I wonder what story Koma will feed us now: that the army is fighting for us —or is it the rebels? My empty belly tells me they're tending to their tummies, just like we're doing now. I can almost taste the salty chewiness we will soon enjoy; I chew my inner cheeks and swallow saliva. It helps, believe me.

Just then, on our way to the kitchen, just as we pass by the dorms, there's a bang like thunder and I bite my tongue. We fall to the ground, my mouth stinging, eyes shut tight against —what? Has the sky cracked? Silence, as though the world is taking in a deep breath. And then all the birds in the world scream and fling themselves into the sky.

“Run!”

Ociti scrambles up and takes off ahead. Koma had said that if anything happened —not that it would, he added— we should all run to the nearest building. The birds' shrieks are silenced by sharp sounds: TA-TA-TATATA-TA-TATATATA. Like that. On and on, from all around.

Somehow we reach and fall onto the dorm door, the others too, one after another, as Ociti fights with the handle. It opens; we pile in and scramble under the bunk beds. I trip on the doorstep, fall on my hands and knees into the room and crawl like a desperate lizard under the nearest bunk bed. Koma is already there, imagine, pulling in his long legs, trying to squeeze into a corner. I wish I could laugh: a whole teacher squashed under a bed! Tim also presses in: hot flesh, shoes, shorts, dirt, sweat. Bosco tries to join us.

“Go to the other one,” Koma hisses.

The poor boy has to crawl out into the open and scuttle to the next bed. We lie as still as we can, trying to quiet our panting, listening to the sharp eruptions as if they're telling us something. The bursting noise is nothing like Mzee Okiror's war stories, and I thought I knew guns. Right next to my face, the iron legs of the bunk bed are strong and straight like prison bars, but how can they

protect us? I'm glad to be so close to Koma, I won't lie: his long bent limbs and warm breath are more reassuring than hard metal.

Strange, but as we hide like cockroaches, as my heart hits my chest, I feel something close to relief: *this* was what we have been waiting for all along. Finally, it has come. Everything else has been a game of using up time: cleaning, doing maths, learning how to cook, dodging bathing, ransacking the garden, what not, and then *the thing* happens, and you realise it has always been there, crouching at the back of your mind like a rat. No, it has been following me around like a pesky dog, along with every thought, and I tried to slap it away, to ignore it, but now it has stood its ground and bared its teeth.

"We won't die," Koma whispers.

What a stupid, stupid thing to say. Typical. Now, all of a sudden, because he's a teacher, he's become a prophet? Now that he has called death out loud, won't it come? We lie there as though stuck to the floor, listening for more. Have the shots stopped? My stomach growls.

"Don't move," Koma hisses. "Better safe than what?"

Like I was about to do what, tour the school? One more word and I'll stamp my elbow into his calf, which is right up next to my crooked arm. His skin is dry, ashy. A strange feeling rises in me: I want to do like my mother would: rub his hard skin with Vaseline until it shines. Or maybe spit on my palm and use that. I push it away instead.

He shifts, but there is nowhere to go, and I smell him: sweet, like an over-ripe mango. We lie there: cramped, aching, painfully alert, listening to our breathing match for the longest twenty minutes of my whole life.

I shut my eyes and force escape to Mzee's stories. Ask me the name of any gun: Beretta 92, AK-47, AKM, AK-74, Type 56; what hadn't I learnt from Mzee Okiror? The deacons had tried to chase him away from outside St. Mark's, but he was a fixture like the monster marabou storks that we screamed and threw stones at. They would squawk and swop up and away, but hover in trees nearby and soon return, landing like clumsy helicopters. Mzee Okiror would aim his rifle at one of them, his eyes so wrinkled they seemed shut, gun trembling in gnarled hands. We waited, holding onto each other.

“Aaaah! They’re just birds —me, I kill people!” and he stretched open his mouth with silent laughter, exposing rosy gaps, saliva dribbling, as he beat his skinny thigh.

Every single time we waited breathlessly for the shot, and every time, somehow, he fooled us, and we stamped our feet, annoyed. “You mzee! We shall report you.”

Old Okiror made up for this by letting us watch as he opened his gun lovingly and polished it, rub, rub, rubbing each section with a dark oily cloth, holding it delicately close like an injured child. It seemed alive to me, like the metal breathed, even as it could stop breath. I remained by Mzee’s side for hours in the idle holiday afternoons, long after the other boys had got bored and run off. Mzee had stories! It seems he had fought in every army: one day he would say he was with the African Rifles of World War II, fighting for the British in Burma, wherever that was; then next the colonial army had to ‘pacify’ the Karamajong—he said the word in English, explaining, “you know them; they never want to be ruled by anybody, let alone whites.” That’s when he came back with lots of cows and got his first wife. Then the next time he said he took part in the attack on the Buganda King’s Palace in Kampala in 1966; then later he volunteered with the SPLA in Sudan in the 1980s and even later trained the UNLA to fight the NRA. When I told my mother, breathless, counting the armies on my fingers, she chewed her teeth. “What a bunch of lies! That mzee was in Amin’s army and survived it with nothing, not even his teeth. Do you think he has a brain left?”

But he had; I knew this ‘coz he knew the names of many many guns, and he drew them for me at the back of my exercise book even though his fingers couldn’t really bend properly. His fingers were as stiff and as hard as metal and were the same grey-black colour as if the gun itself had seeped into his fingers. Eh, but when my mother saw the pictures, the way she tore out the pages, spoiling my exercise book! Chewing her teeth jicily, she tore them into tiny little pieces, opened her palms and let pieces flutter to the ground, her eyes hard on me.

“You want to be like him, proud of having done nothing but fight other people’s wars? You want to end up like him, with nothing but stories? Rubbish!”

I couldn’t answer her back, of course. But wasn’t she the one who always said respect the elderly? And at least *he* had been all around the world and back, so why couldn’t he tell all those stories, why not?

What *is* that? A rustling, a rush like wind, louder, louder. Rain? Sounds like the steady clomp of a herd of cattle pushed to a jog fill everywhere; closer, louder, a stampede —of what? Wild animals? But from where? There's no forest nearby—

I can't stop myself, I have to see. I crawl out from under the bed. Koma grabs my foot, but his warm hand is slippery with sweat, and I twist out of it, creep up to the window, and slowly pull myself up to my knees.

“Get down, you!” Koma hisses, for once talking sense.

But the thunder calls me: I inch my head up, up, until my eyes are just above the window ledge, my fingers grasp it tight. A tremendous mass of blackness moves hugely across my eyes: Men jog forward as one, black all over: oily shiny chests and arms, black shorts, glowing arms swinging, coming from behind the classroom block, moving across the compound, towards our dorm windows and then onwards, disappearing round the building.

“Whaaaaat?” My voice a scratch.

Ociti's face comes up beside me.

“You stupid boys, I said get down!”

I cannot take my eyes off the ... this gigantic swarm of black bees, no, more like a monstrous shiny-black centipede with a hundred legs. The men stare straight ahead, all of them. Light seems to bounce off their shiny chests, making them hazy like a thought you can't quite grasp.

After a long thudding instant, they are gone. And that's when I know; spirits, of course. Ociti and I slip down from the window, slump to the floor, and stare at each other blankly.

The thunder recedes, becomes an echo of itself, far off rustling, a reverberation, and then, incredibly, nothing. It's as if the spirits have sucked up all sound and left us in stillness like the first day ever. From above us streams a simple, astonishing afternoon light. Have I ever noticed it?

Snuffling, small heaves, some boy under the other bunk is crying. Tim. I can't even laugh at him. The room grows smaller, as the smell of urine and fright and sweat and light too bright to hide in expands and throbs, and all of us boys, and Koma too, hate to be so close and want to be closer.

An old memory rises of the biggest thing I had ever seen when I was four: a yellow monster as big as a house, with one giant, iron-grey chain wheel. Oh, how it roared, and how its huge rolling foot flattened everything it passed over, and how we kids cried because the devil itself had come to destroy our village! The caterpillar had come to Aboke to bring us a tarmac road. When we got used to it, how we ran around it, screaming and laughing! And how we were beaten for playing near it. And oh, when it rolled away weeks later, leaving a wide black sticky road as if leading to heaven, how empty a silence it left.

“Lakwena rebels.” Ociti’s voice is high and slippery.

So that’s them? The powerful, magical, spirit-possessed army? So the rumours are real? Who doesn’t know the stories: the barren witch-priest with one breast, the red fire that flies out of her eyes, the bullets that bounce off them, the stones they turn into grenades, the magic oil that shields them, the rivers they walk over, all that?

“They look like how?” Bosco squeaks as he pokes his head out.

“Shut up, boys!” Koma’s voice no longer booms; part of the upside-down world.

“Black, black ... black,” I whisper too, rubbing my eyes. I turn to Ociti. “You saw?” Already, I’m beginning to doubt my own eyes and ears.

He nods, says nothing. Then I notice water, or something, trickling from Ociti’s splayed out legs. I push him, but he is glued to the growing puddle. I shift away and we watch the pee crawl slowly towards the door, glistening with sunlight.

Finally, birds start calling, questioning. Koma creeps out from under the bed, and unwraps his long body, straightens, stretches, raises his arms high, as if he too is working some magic: becoming himself again: a teacher, a man. I watch from below, wanting to believe in him. With breath and doubt and whispering, we start rising too.

“Sssh. First wait. Fortune favours the what? ... No, not that one.” Koma’s low, soft voice is oddly reassuring.

He shakes out his long slightly-bowed legs and I want to wrap myself around them. As the birds continue, so sweet and normal, he walks towards the door, upright, chest open like a hero, opens it, takes that step that tripped me, out into the brilliant light, and into a loud clap, and a shriek

from somewhere. The heavy thump and clumsy shape of his fall will repeat itself behind my closed eyes for years. I can see him clearly through the open door, in light that has no shame, writhing on the ground like Auntie Joyce when a pastor from Nigeria came to St. Mark's and shouted angrily at her swollen legs and feet, and she fell to the floor and squirmed like a fat but overwhelmed maggot. Blood spurts out of his mouth, a faulty tap, and he goes still. I wait for him to get up, dazed and sluggish like Auntie Joyce did.

I press my head hard into the cold floor and feel my thighs and shorts soaked in warm wetness. I close my eyes but nothing stops.

Heavy footsteps. Kiswahili back and forth, and a shoving and dragging of something heavy across the ground. The thud of boots is on the veranda, and door after dorm door is flung open. Ours, already open, is pushed, hits the wall, swings back and is held. Why did we bother to hide?

“Get out!” As sharp as that shot. “Are you deaf?”

Ociti is the first to crawl out, slowly, staying as close as he can to the floor.

“All of you! Outside.”

We do, like grovelling dogs.

“Kneel there. Hands high. My God, you stink!”

We shuffle as close as possible 'till our bodies touch; a mess of tears, pee, sniffing. We are kneeling before Koma.

“These are school boys, just,” one camouflage-covered figure says to another.

Their boots are caked with mud. I can't dare look up, not even to peek at their guns.

“Where are the others? ... I'm asking, are there others around here?”

We shake our heads.

“What's wrong with you; can't you talk?” One of them, short and thick, nudges Bosco, at the end of our wretched row, with his boot. “How come only you are here?”

“They left us,” Bosco squeaks and then begins to cry for real. I peek sideways at him. He can’t bring down his hands to wipe the streaks of tears and phlegm from his face. “Boys don’t what?” Koma should say.

“Stop it, you stupid boy! Useless!” The soldier laughs.

The two stride away, holding the straps of their guns firmly like handbags. Mzee Okiror’s gravelly voice reminds me helpfully: AK-74.

The sun stares at us, unrelenting like we’re guilty. My knees become stabs of pain, my arms too, but I dare not shift. Sweat stings my eyes, but when I close them, I feel dizzy.

Soldiers come up in small groups of two or three until they are about fifteen gathered the other side of Koma, who looks like he fell down dead drunk in red puddles. Here come the flies with a cheerful buzzing. One of the soldiers takes a black box out of his pocket and shouts into it. A kind of radio he can talk into? Old Okorir hadn’t talked about that. After listening, nodding, barking back, he beckons the rest. “We meet at the market,” Captain says. They nod, gather themselves, fling us leftover looks and stride off.

The short one who first talked to us turns and comes back. “Your teacher?” He points at Koma with his gun. We nod. He shrugs. “Find a way to bury him. You boys are lucky you didn’t follow him out. Listen; don’t even think of leaving this compound. Don’t move, move around, you hear? The Lakwenas are nearby if you don’t know, and they have no mercy. No mercy at all. They eat boys like you.” He shakes his gun at us and then jogs off to catch up with the rest.

Again, like the Lakwenas, the soldiers are here, and then they are not, like magic. Then why are we kneeling here, and why is Koma lying over there? The front of his shirt has turned maroon. He is not flicking off the flies that play on his face. Those lips are open, slack.

Eventually, as always, the birds start their chirping and singing again. When the sun forgives us a little, and an evening breeze starts to chill our clammy shirts and shorts, Bosco moves, and we follow him, shuffling back into our room, and creeping back under the bunks. The now shadowy smothering space is damp and familiar, and our warm smelly bodies, a comfort.

I close my eyes and see those flies on Koma’s face, his eyes and mouth. What would he say? He makes no sense most of the time, but that doesn’t mean flies should just sit on his face. His warm body should be here, filling up all this space. He calls me, I swear, and I have no choice, just like

when I rose to the window, no choice but to believe that old Okiror would shoot: I crawl out from under the bunk again. Trembling like I have malaria, I tug a blanket off a bed, move forward on all fours, open the door, go down that dreaded step and out across the grass, my knees stinging all the way. The sun is weak now. I reach Koma, and the flies rise in unison. I wave them away with the blanket and they buzz angrily. For some reason, I want to touch his legs, and I pull them as straight as I can. They are as heavy as I imagined; they are still warm, his arms too. He doesn't say anything as I lay the blanket over him. I should go back inside, leave him alone, but I shuffle around him, my knees sinking into the soft wet ground as I tuck in the blanket edges under him, while the flies hover above.