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Ugandan Triptych

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I am ignorant of the dances of
Foreigners
And how they dress
I do not know.
Their games
I cannot play,
I only know the dances of our
People.'
-Okot p'Bitek[1]

I.

'You're going where?' The voice belongs to Mr. Hoskins, HR Director, Mercedes Benz, UK in London. 'I'm going to Gulu.' His eyebrows shoot up into triangles. I continue, rushing out garbled words. 'That's in northern Uganda. My fiancé completed his postgraduate degree at Reading University and he's already there starting a job with a European NGO. I plan to join him. Here's my notice, effective today.' The proffered envelope trembles in my hands. 'My last day will be May 31st.'

Resting his elbows on shiny mahogany, Mr. Hoskins cups his chin in his massive hands. I look at the black hairs on the middle digits of most of his fingers. He says nothing, looking straight at me. In his eyes, I read the words: Do you have any idea what you're throwing away? You are a management trainee at Mercedes Benz. One of only ten 'Chosen Ones' this year! You're already assisting the corporate planning manager. Foolish, stupid woman – you're throwing this away to follow some African into the jungle. Goodness, Gulu, where the hell is that? – his puzzled, pitying eyes conclude.

Instead, understated as only the British can be, he says, 'Yes, hmm, of course we'll be ever so sad to lose you. I have to say you are one of the brightest in this lot. But it sounds like you've made up your mind. Of course, we accept your resignation. But may I just add it wasn't entirely fair to take up a place on the graduate training scheme, knowing that there was a strong chance you might leave.'

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[1] Okot P'Bitek, 'Song of Lawino,' *Song of Lawino; & Song of Ocol*, (London: Heinemann. 1984), p. 42.

Spot on! I had put in the time for my parents. My father pronounced, when confronted with my ideas and after the initial ranting and raving was over: 'You have our blessings – under one condition – that you work professionally in Europe for a while. If, after one year, you are still convinced, then by all means, head into the African bush.' Always dutiful, I took up the training position, knowing I'd chuck it in exactly 12 months down the road.

'Goodbye, Mr. Hoskins. You will receive my final report in about a week.' Smile fixed, I make my shaky way down the lushly carpeted hall. Mr. Hoskins' patronizing words: 'All the best to you, for your future,' following me.

So this is what it feels like, burning your bridges.

Jumbe, the reason for my 'chucking it in,' had already traveled ahead to Uganda to start his job. Kissing him goodbye, I had noticed worried unease in his eyes. Maybe he wondered whether I'd balk at the last minute. Little did he know I'd follow him to another planet! He had blasted my life into a whole new configuration as soon as I followed him up the five flights of stairs to his freezing attic garret on a tiny cobbled street not far from the Strasbourg cathedral in the old city. We had watched a movie and later we stood in the snowy night eating steaming spicy Merguez[2] sausages, when he simply said, 'Let's go home.' His room was tiny – a mattress on the floor, a rickety table, and one chair. It was cold, our breath steamed in the frigid air. He offered me madeleine cakes and juice. Peter Tosh started wailing from his little cassette player. The spiral heater glowed ineffectually in the semi darkness. We didn't speak but just undressed, pulling off one layer of clothing after another. Goosebumps rose to the surface. I remember looking out of the attic window at the snowy roofs. We stopped at underwear. He stood before me in fire engine red tiny boxers, all six feet something of him, all long legs and arms and beautifully muscled, toned abs that rippled as he moved towards me.

From the first time we met, washing dishes at the university refectory, we 'got each other.' Maybe it was the degree of mis-fitting we each felt. He, a Ugandan refugee, at an American college in Strasbourg and me, German, who had grown up in Asia, with no real experience of living in Europe. We knew what it felt like being outsiders and we laughed at the very same things. It wasn't hard work being with him.

The next weeks are a whirlwind of farewells and far too quickly I find myself alone and afraid at London's Gatwick airport, the smoke of the last goodbye party still lingering in my clothes, looking for flight QU 456 to Entebbe.

Africa begins at the Uganda Airlines check in counter as plump women, generous backsides wrapped in multihued, Martin Escher-like African fabrics, haggle with airline staff. 'Eh, you expect me to leave the toys for my children? Are you mad? No, I don't have no 100 quid to pay for excess luggage,' they challenge, hips outstretched and curved scarlet talons fingering their pyramid-like hairstyles, oversized cartons cluttered all around them. 'You must let me go. Next time I'll pack less. I promise. You know how long I don't see my children?' The airline staff smile weakly and finally burst out laughing aware of the futility of extracting money from these women. Slapping of palms and clicking of tongues resolve the situation.

I maneuver my own enormous suitcases with false ease. The contents of my bags had already caused raised eyebrows at security: pressure cooker, water filter, mosquito netting, water purification tablets, cheese, sausages, chocolates, shampoos, spices, books, medicines, bandages, music, stereo, boxes of Tampax and variously sized torches. These were the props for my new

[2] *Merguez* are North African spicy ground lamb or beef sausages.

life. As naïve as I was, I knew that life in provincial Uganda in 1983 wasn't going to be easy and these things were intended to cushion the rough. The country was still emerging from the horror of Idi Amin's butchery and the liberation war that ousted him in 1979. Much of the country was still unstable and crime was rife.

Looking around to see who else would be mad enough to travel to Uganda, I chide my eyes for continuously seeking out the few other white faces which, in a few years, I'd be able to label with absolute accuracy: aid worker, missionary, trailing spouse (as I was about to become), long-suffering diplomatic types or the mercenary European businessman in Africa. But now I feel for the first time the emotion Jumbe always talked about, the loneliness of being the only black face in a sea of white. The further realization that I am the only white woman traveling to Uganda on this flight awakens more unease.

'Passengers for flight QU 456 to Entebbe please board now from gate 22.' Light-headed, I trundle alongside everyone else, our motley group easily identified by unreal amounts of hand luggage. The dilapidated plane smells of sweat and beer and the recently applied air freshener only adds another sickly layer on to the already nauseating range of smells. Exposed wires lurk from under the grimy seats and overhead compartments. Only writing doggedly in my journal, keeps the nascent panic at bay.

My seatmate is an older, potbellied Ugandan man. I had met the type – 'businessman' – a word that covers everything from thug to smuggler to murderer. He wears the businessman's uniform, tan Kaunda suit tailored from cheap polyester, too tight, straining all the buttons over his beer belly and shiny patent leather loafers. His fat fingers are pinched by a couple of too large and shiny gold rings. This get up is usually completed with a crocodile skin designer briefcase. He orders whisky as soon as the plane reaches cruising altitude. When I'm not scribbling in my journal I look at the inky black outside the window. I don't want to give him an *in* for a conversation.

Undeterred by my unfriendliness, he questions: 'What are you going to do in Uganda?' Oh, God, do I have to go through all that again? He holds my gaze, refusing to take silent preoccupation for an answer. Oh all right, I play my prerecorded message, 'I am going to join my fiancé in Gulu.' Before I could finish my sentence, he interrupts, 'Gulu, why in the world Gulu? Those people up north are savages, murderers. They are not human beings. You mean your husband-to-be is a northerner?'

'No, he's from the south. We're just going to live in Gulu. He has work there.' Why am I even engaging with this guy?

'Well that's a little better, but not much. Eh, you are brave! Here's my card, in case you need help in that wilderness,' his bejeweled fingers hand over his card and his garlicky boozy odor wafts over me. Turning away, I pretend to doze until the steward wakes me for greasy chicken and bread. Gagging, I wave him away and the next thing I know the cabin lights are on and we are landing.

The plane glides over Lake Victoria for what seems a very long time. The brooding grey light reflecting between clouds and steely waves sets an ominous tone. Thick impenetrable green vegetation lines the shore. As we descend ever closer to the lake surface, I make out graceful crested cranes in the shallows, as if posing, on one leg, just like the one that forms the centerpiece of the Ugandan flag. Flimsy canoes float like matchsticks on the water. As the sun rises, the brooding grey turns incandescent pink. This is the right decision. This was the adventure I wanted. My eyes follow the ripples radiating from the canoes into the vastness of this inland sea.

The plane almost skims the surface of the water and just as I am sure we will crash into the lake, the tarmac of the airstrip finally appears under the wings. Banana plantations and red soil rush by as the plane shudders to a halt.

We bump along the potholed lane that leads from the runway to the squat 1960s style airport terminal. Its walls are pockmarked from shells and bullets and the windows appear shattered from the many recent wars. Rusting airplane carcasses dot the apron. No other viable planes park at this airport. In a scene reminiscent of *Sleeping Beauty*, soldiers and airport officials arise from the stupor of sleep and large female officers draped across the immigration, health, and customs desks rub their eyes, stretch, yawn and shout, 'Line up. Open your bags. Prepare your documents.' Unlike *Sleeping Beauty* it is not a prince who awakens them but our flight, the one and only weekly flight from Europe, which makes every official salivate at the thought of his anticipated cut. The soldier manning customs smiles and says, 'You know, I smoke Benson and Hedges.'

'Really? That's a good brand. I smoke it too,' I reply.

No longer friendly, he bellows, 'Stand aside and open everything every little bag and zip. I want to check everything!' What the hell is going on? My heart beats too fast and sweat pricks under my arms.

My potbellied neighbor from the plane whispers, 'Don't you see the guy wants some of your cigarettes? Give him a pack and you'll be fine.'

I wait for the soldier to look up from rummaging in my belongings. As he does with angry eyes, I hear myself saying as if I had been doing this all my life, 'Listen you must take some cigarettes, take them, they are for you.' He grabs them sullenly. But they do the trick of greasing my progress through the formalities and in no time I am propelled into the arrivals hall. Though I hadn't expected anyone to meet me, a friendly known face would have been just the thing to dispel the lost and forlorn feeling that settles over me. How was I going to get to Gulu? There seemed to be no such thing as a transfer desk. I ask the first person in uniform about a plane north. 'You're in luck. Today is Monday. There should be a plane to Gulu. Hah, timing that one is difficult. Go upstairs and wait. Sooner or later they will announce something,' he answers and ambles on.

Sweating, I lug my boulder-heavy suitcases up the narrow stairwell. Dusty stuffed African animals greet me from their stage at the center of the departure lounge. Zebra, elephant, and antelope glass eyes mock and pity me. It is as deserted upstairs as everywhere else. There is no sign of any other passengers. The indicator board obviously ceased functioning years ago as it still shows flights to destinations such as Frankfurt, Rome, and London, though all major airlines stopped their flights a decade earlier.

Officials shepherding a group of passengers burst into the hall shouting, 'Flight to Gulu leaving in twenty minutes, boarding now.' I can't believe it; my new life will begin in under two hours. In response to some primeval herd instinct, I run with the other passengers, who are all sprinting towards the little twin-engine Fokker. Later I find out that too often the flight is overbooked and only the fittest end up getting seats.

My fellow passengers are now an even odder group: a couple of religious types: Catholic Sisters and Fathers, an assortment of soldiers complete with machine guns and hand grenades strapped to their belts and a gaggle of ordinary Ugandans, carrying huge bags containing shoes, handbags, plastic bowls, cartons of flour and Blue Band margarine.

As the plane takes off, we glide over that vast expanse of water once again. We bank sharply and fly due north, the country below drying visibly. Rapids glint in the sun, far below. The pilot announces that we are crossing the Nile at Karuma Falls.

Gulu appears below in the shape of a cross. Two tarmac roads intersecting in a cluster of concrete buildings form the tiny center. The periphery is a large expanse of scattered mushroom-shaped huts. These appear flung randomly from the sky, as if from a celestial palm. The airstrip is an angry red scar gouged out of the green flesh of the surrounding grassland. A group of people huddle around a tin arrivals terminal which is little more than a shed. They look forlorn in the vastness of the surrounding plains. Scanning the people through the small foggy window, I look for my tall man. And there he is, towering over everyone else, jumping up and down and waving a white handkerchief, exuberant, joyful as only he can be.

His smile is legendary. It lights up any room he enters and soon anyone in his vicinity ends up smiling too. People are usually attracted to the light that radiates from him. I don't know how he does it. He teases, cajoles, and humors. Soon enough even the most cantankerous human beings give in and eventually they melt and he holds them in the cup of his hands. This is how he holds me too and this is what has brought me halfway around the world.

I look at him through the window. It's him! My heart leaps into my throat. No one here cares to warn, 'Please stay seated until the plane comes to a complete standstill.' Like everyone else, I push and shove towards the exit. Bounding down the stairs, even the heavy luggage straps cutting into my shoulders don't dampen my pace. I run and leap into his arms. He whispers, almost in awe, 'You came. Night after night, I thought, what if she doesn't? What if she listens to those people telling her she's mad, lost her head. I thought you'd be scared. I love you, welcome to Gulu.'

The relief of being able to hand myself over to someone who would show me how to live 'this' washes over me, my legs almost buckling, I stay in his embrace for a long time. The reality of being in a small provincial town in a remote part of a war torn African country doesn't intrude yet as later I rest my head on his shoulder and it bobs up and down to the rhythm of the Land Rover dancing over the corrugations on the red and dusty roads. Right now it doesn't matter what comes next. Not yet.

II.

She walks away from me, a frail, shrunken white haired woman leaning heavily on Thomas. She doesn't turn back and so doesn't see the tears streaming down my face. I know she was looking for them earlier but they wouldn't come then because I just wanted to get this, the final goodbye over with. I had hugged her, almost crushing the skin and bones she bad become, and then I had pushed her away.

How totally in character, to the last moment! It would be Thomas, the most handsome man in Trento, who would drive us to the airport at Verona at the crack of dawn. All weekend the catechists' parents had paid homage at Ida's court. They came bearing fruits and vegetables, olive oil and wine, things they said would bring back Ida's strength. They all wanted to take *Suore,* Ida's best friend, to the airport. But she chose Thomas, the *carabinieri*. They came in an archetypal mold, the young Italian men she always adored, tall, slim but muscular, blue or green blazing eyes, profile like in the Roman mosaics, high forehead, curved hook noses and great manes of brown curly hair. In the 30 years our lives had coincided and collided there had always

been these male bit players in her entourage of adoring admirers. At times they were priests or brothers, sometimes lay people that crossed her path.

In another lifetime, back in Gulu, in the early days of the 1980s, it was Father Joseph at the Seminary, he of the amazing mango trees, who was the object of her affections. She would shout, 'Anja let's go eat mangoes at Father Joseph's.' Off we'd go in my rickety ancient Land Rover and before entering the seminary we'd pass the mango trees and rip off the huge pink cheeked, sap dripping, bursting mangoes, seemingly just waiting for us. '*Ciao* Ida!' he would shout while beckoning us in to the building. Later we would suck on those mangoes not caring about the sweet juice dripping down our chins and on to her nun's habit. In the late afternoon light with the heat waning a little and the dust hanging still in the air, she would laugh and tease and flirt with Father Joseph and all the Brothers hanging on to her every word. Later responding to my teasing, she said, 'Anja, I see God in these handsome men.'

We had known each other for three decades and now in 2010, on the long plane ride back to Atlanta (where I now lived) from Verona (where she had been sent to retire and die) images kept popping up of Sr. Ida as the beautiful 35-year-old Catholic nun she was when I first met her in 1983. Weeks before I actually met her, I had already heard of the legendary Verona sister who had lined the streets with the people of Gulu, to welcome the advancing liberating Tanzanian forces that had finally driven the dictator Idi Amin out of Uganda. The Tanzanian soldiers had been surprised to see a white nun waving flower garlands and singing and dancing with the rest of the crowd, chanting in perfect Swahili: '*Karibuni, asante sana*… for driving out the evil dictator.' One tank stopped and the soldier, perhaps a devout Catholic educated by nuns of Ida's order, invited Ida to climb on to the tank and ride into town with them. Apparently she didn't hesitate and bounded on to the tank where she garlanded the three soldiers with her flowers and sitting on top of that tank as if on a carnival float, she sang and waved her Ugandan flags all the way to the center of town. Although I didn't witness this, I heard this story so many times from those who had, that this has become the defining vision I have of Ida to this day.

Our first actual meeting at Sacred Heart Secondary School wasn't auspicious. Having arrived in Gulu only a couple of weeks earlier, 23 years old, young and in love, I had to find something to keep busy. So I ended up teaching English to girls who were in most cases older than me, at the local Catholic boarding school. To say I had trouble keeping order in the classroom was the understatement of the century. It was pandemonium and one afternoon Ida stomped in, veil fluttering and crucifix bouncing on her chest. 'But where is your teacher? You are supposed to let Sr. Marietta know if you have no teacher.' Suddenly she sees me trying to look as inconspicuous as a young white woman could in a sea of tall black schoolgirls wearing bright pink uniforms. 'And who are you?' I stuttered my name and that I was their English teacher. She laughed out loud and left the room muttering; '*Va bene, va bene*... no one told me about you. *Mama mia*... what have we come to! Children teaching children now.'

At the end of the day, she was waiting for me in the courtyard, the centerpiece of which was a terrible white stucco statue of Jesus with a bright crimson bleeding heart. 'You are not going to be a teacher; you know that, don't you?' I nodded, as I had come to the same conclusion. 'Tell me, what are you doing in this Godforsaken corner of the world?'

And so, that long and glorious friendship began. At first we swam together in the murky tepid pool full of frog eggs at the mission hospital that also belonged to her order, the Comboni Fathers and Sisters of Verona. It was a ritual. Every afternoon, I'd pick her up. We swam and then there was teatime in the little room that was hers at the convent. The large mission station was

well supplied with Italian coffee, pasta, olive oil and cookies, all thanks to the largesse of Italian benefactors who chartered planes in Italy to send these vital ingredients to the north of Uganda for the survival of the nuns, fathers, and brothers who ran a network of missions in the region. Somehow in the mad scramble for African souls, the Catholics had been 'given' the north of Uganda. Here they provided health services, education, and religious instruction. Sr. Ida would sneak me into the warehouse and load my arms with pasta, olive oil, tinned tomatoes, *biscotti*, coffee and *caramelli*. These were like manna from heaven as there was very little to buy in the shops in town. They had been looted of all their goods in various waves of political instability. The only edible things were sold at the local markets and those were earthen colored heaps of beans, nuts, and roots that had made me cry when Jumbe first took me there on the back of his motorcycle to ostensibly do our weekly shopping. I had looked around and started sobbing because I was convinced we would starve. Ida fed my body and my soul. With her inputs both edible and not, I learned to concoct something out of nothing. She had books, music, art and, most importantly, opinions on things that mattered to me. Her room was a sanctuary of things European; we read novels, watched old films and listened to music. She filled in background information and sanded the jagged edges of my incomprehension at how things malfunctioned in this small East African provincial town in a country just emerging from a decade of bloody turbulence.

She stayed at my side all 36 horrific hours of Kalema's birth at that same mission hospital. As I slipped in and out of consciousness, I heard her shouting; 'My God, I have never had a child and will never have one but I know if I was pushing as hard as Anja is pushing, the child would have travelled like a bullet to Lira (the next town twenty miles away). Do something, look at her suffering.' The midwives responded, '*Suore*, we are trying, we want to break the water but there is none.' Frowning, they said almost accusingly, 'Anja what happened, didn't you feel the water break? Why didn't you come to the hospital like we told you to do?' I tried to think back but everything was blurry and Ida interjected. 'Oh my goodness I knew it, I knew it... it broke in the swimming pool. I told this crazy girl she can't swim so close to the due date. But no, Germanic that she is, she has to swim every day like a robot... now look at the mess!' At this stage, Rosemary, the young Ugandan doctor overseeing the ordeal, who also happened to be my neighbor, arrived, carrying two dusty medical tomes, which she proceeded to leaf through. Ida stood in front of her, hands on her hips, until finally Rosemary looked up. 'Rosemary, put those books away, surely you know what to do, right?' Her tone was very much, *you better know what you're doing*. Rosemary continued chewing her lips, fingering her braids with one hand and leafing through the books with the other. I liked Rosemary and we had fun sharing a simple bungalow. She lived with Alan, a young English water engineer on one side and Jumbe and me in the other. Alan and Jumbe worked on the same rural development project. We were like Rorschach images: they, black woman white man and we, the inverse. With the next stab of all-encompassing pain, I moaned, rolled my eyes, and turned to face the wall. I was actually so beyond caring about what was happening. I just wanted it to end. Hugging me, Ida whispered, 'I will get the Cortis, this is too difficult for Rosemary.' The Cortis were the big guns, the Italian surgeon couple that had founded the hospital twenty years earlier. 'Pierro and Lucille, they will know what to do!'

Even Ida's usual subtle racism didn't rile me. Usually, that led to fights between us because her view of Africans, though framed in empathy, was at root paternalistic and condescending. Whenever we flew to Kampala on the little propeller planes which plied that

route, her peering into the cockpit, her sharp intake of breath, the instinctive fingering of her crucifix followed by a whispered Hail Mary if there was a dark face at the controls, would make me livid. 'So Ida, why then are you educating all these hundreds of girls, to be what?' Though at this moment, I was happy to go with her assumption of white superiority as I just wanted this baby out and if she thought a white European could get this done faster, then that was fine. A short while later Dr. Corti walked in barking, 'Why no X ray? We'll take one immediately.' His wife, Lucille, followed shortly after, shouting, 'Why weren't we called earlier? This baby is presenting OCCIPITO-POSTERIOR and it is in distress, now we must do an emergency C-section immediately.' The flurry of activity made me feel better. Ida and Jumbe ran alongside my gurney as I was being wheeled at top speed to the OR and soon after there was the merciful release and utter bliss of an epidural. A screen on my midriff hid the gory bits and I felt and heard nothing except the clinking of surgical instruments, Italian and English instructions to the nurses and then finally a thin wailing. Lucille exclaimed, 'Look at this baby! He wanted to come into the world looking outward and upward, not looking down! A poet he will be.' They handed Kalema to me. I was still taking him in, in his shriveled red blotchiness, when Ida wrested him from me. Cradling him, she murmured, '*que bello que bello - guarda* … what a miracle, a gift from God.' She started wrapping him but soon stopped to question; 'But Anja really, this blanket your grandmother sent from Germany, is it from the war? Was it left by a Russian soldier in Berlin? But why is it is so hard and scratchy? This prince must be wrapped in the softest of cloths. I am going to look through the old clothes donations and find something soft and beautiful, maybe sent by those rich American congregations, to wrap him. These Germans really, so hard so harsh.' And with that she whisked my baby away to present him to Jumbe. I heard her and Jumbe laughing and giggling while admiring 'the princeling,' as she called him.

Conversations leap off the images in our photo albums, which I sit leafing through on a daily basis after arriving back from Verona. They tell the story of those chaotic and emotional days of having my first baby in the quintessential 'middle of nowhere,' where, for starters, there was neither running water nor electricity. Here were the photos of us washing diapers in a big plastic basin, and then drying them under the mango tree. Kalema having his first bath in that same bucket on the sun splashed verandah and photos of Jumbe telling stories to a fretful Kalema late at night in the glow of kerosene lamps. The pictures show happy faces but there were also plenty of tears – mine. Somehow we managed it, Jumbe, Ida, Kalema and I, and she became his godmother and now he was 26 and she 70, and dying.

When Ida's breast cancer metastasized and returned with a vengeance, I decided that I needed to see her one more time, though we had already done the goodbye thing three years earlier when she had first been given a terminal diagnosis. Who knows how she did it? Probably by sheer force of will, because she had dismissed the chemotherapy and most of the rest of the drugs, taking them haphazardly saying things like, 'Anja, Dr. Enzio says I must take four of these pills…why so many?… I take only two.' Yet the cancer retreated and the same doctors asked her to spend time with the patients in their cancer ward in Verona because apparently they felt she had gone into remission through sheer willpower. But this time it sounded like there would be no way out as her systems were slowly shutting down and the cancer had spread everywhere.

Like so many Catholic orders, the Verona sisters or Comboni sisters, as they had recently been renamed, had aged. The Italian nuns were slowly dying out and young African nuns were replacing them. The large beautiful convents in Verona were no longer needed. They had been converted to assisted living and end-of-life care for the aging and ill Sisters. The Combonis are a

missionary order, working in the most remote and difficult places in Africa, and the nuns are the practical and resourceful people who try and often succeed in plugging the holes of enormous need. Of course, when the sisters become ill and frail, there is no use for them in the field and then they are shipped back to the 'Homes for Convalescing Sisters' in Verona, though everyone knows that very few – actually none – ever get well enough to go back into the field.

I knew she wouldn't last long, not in that holding pen of death in Verona, the beautiful convent that was clinically named 'Comboni Convalescent Home.' I spent three days there with Ida, who had coerced the Mother Superior into giving me one of the guest rooms reserved for visiting family. These rooms stood empty, beds made up, towels folded invitingly, lying ready, and single yellow roses from the convent gardens, drooping in jam jars on the night tables. Family ties were hard to maintain as visits home were only allowed once every four years. Every morning I woke to the sound of matins and I loved staying in bed, lulled by the chanting, until I heard shuffling along the corridor, which meant they were heading for breakfast. Even though old and frail, the Sisters, some of which I had known in Uganda, insisted on boiling my egg, making my espresso and searching the meager kitchen shelves for something special they could offer me just as they had done when we first met. Back then they saw me as an unfortunate waif who had ended up at the ends of the earth on an impulse on a whim. They liked Jumbe fine even though, God forbid, he was not Catholic. He charmed them as he did everyone, but they still felt it was crazy for me to have come to this remote part of Africa just for love and they never hesitated to tell me so.

Ida and these sisters knew no other way of being than serving. But here in these terminal convents there were no others to serve. Each of these sisters became a horrible mirror to the others, reflecting to each other the various ravages their bodies were succumbing to.

During those days, Ida allowed me to bear witness to her very human questioning. 'Anja was it worth it? What do I have to show for 30 years of service to God, to Africa, to Uganda?' She brushed away my assurances of the lives she had touched and changed forever, the girls whom she had taught at Sacred Heart and who had achieved great things. 'You don't understand how much it took out of me, always alone and alone now. Where is my family? I lost them. So different for you, you moved from place to place but always with the people who mattered most at your side. Jumbe, the girls, and Kalema were always there. You upped and moved your whole life intact, and simply plopped it down at another location.'

In Atlanta, the tremulous call from Mother Superior came too soon. 'Ida passed yesterday in the night …. the funeral is tomorrow. We promised to call you.' Soon after, a call from Thomas, who said that she didn't suffer, she went peacefully and that he would place a big bunch of the most colorful flowers he could find in Verona on her grave for me and that the whole catechism community from Trento was hiring a bus to drive to Verona for the funeral. 'You don't believe it Anja, we are 100 persons!' he shouts. I laugh out loud because here was the family, wherever she was, one formed bigger and better than any biological family she could have had.

It was early evening in Atlanta and though this news was expected, it unmoored me. Who would now understand and love the very same things about Africa that I did and who would have gathered those impressions at the same time and in the same places? Who else could understand the precise context that formed Jumbe and how that explains the way his worldview collides against mine? Who would now interpret Jumbe and me to each other; he, the Ugandan full of the joy of life, expansive, living in the pleasure of every moment and caught up in the big tableau of

life, and me, the German, cerebral, introspective, spare and obsessing about life's important minutiae? Who else would remind me to trust God, and tell me to stop trying to be God myself?

As these thoughts run through my mind, I find myself opening the pantry, where I mechanically start pulling out the sticky rice for risotto, the tomato paste, the olive oil, the white wine. I chop the leeks and the garlic and sauté them lightly, adding the rice, I start sprinkling the white wine and chicken stock. Damn, forgot to take out the garlic like she had always told me; 'No Italian leaves the garlic to cook, it is only meant to aromatize the oil.' She would be proud of me. I am patient and don't turn up the heat so that the liquid absorbs faster. 'Anja you have to let all the flavors marry. It takes time.' Finally the wine is absorbed and I add the shrimps and the cream, leaving it all to simmer just a little while longer. 'Only, now Anja, the parsley and the parmesan, that is the crown, warm the plates and serve with wine from Trento - Alto Adige, *Traminer Aromatico,* not the cheap German ones you like to buy, so sweet and useless.' I set the table, as if guests were expected, placing heavy earthenware plates with Zulu designs, which we had bought together in Zimbabwe, on burnt orange and brown woven straw mats. I lay out the real silverware that's all tarnished from lack of use and the long-stemmed hand blown wine glasses from *Ngwenya Glass* in Swaziland. She hated a hastily, badly set table. I call Zinzi to eat. 'What's for dinner?' she shouts. 'Sr. Ida's Risotto.' We begin eating and I jump up. Crunching up the paper serviettes, I replace them with the heavy white damask napkins she had given me. I can hear her admonishing. 'Paper serviettes! How horrible! How cheap and nasty.' I explain to Zinzi who looks at me like I'm crazy and asks who is coming for dinner. 'No one is coming. It's just us but Sr. Ida is watching and it has to be just right tonight.'

III.

Imperceptibly, Faith started joining our card evenings. Joining is the wrong word. She sat immobile, looking out of Joel's sitting room, the yellow light of the kerosene pressure lamp outlining her body against the mosquito gauze in the window. Night after night she neither acknowledged nor greeted us.

Paint peeled off the mold stained walls of Joel's ramshackle bungalow. To get to it, we wove through a grove of massive mango trees. On card evenings, the light of our torches wobbling through the gloom of the trees and conversations about Land Rovers getting stuck on the road to Sudan, other volunteers, corrupt local officials and the ever disapproving Italian nuns at the mission, announced our arrival.

It was almost Christmas, the hottest time in Gulu. By early evening, any breeze would have died down and the heat sat tightly on the garden where Joel had hooked up his stereo and a lamp to the battery of his pick up. As usual, canvas chairs ringed a rickety table made from packing crates. The Eagles or Eric Clapton played softly on the stereo.

Joel greeted us bare-chested, wearing only an orange and grey striped *Kikoye*[3] cloth wrapped low around his hips. He'd smile and push his fingers through long golden hair. I caught myself looking for the little beads of sweat caught in the matted hair on his chest. I wasn't the only one to be affected by this golden apparition. Jeannette, the young Irish nurse from Lacor Mission Hospital, always inhaled sharply when Joel welcomed her with a kiss.

[3] A striped cotton cloth originating from the East African coast and traditionally worn by men wound low around the hips.

Later, as we got excited about Canasta or Whist, Joel would jump up to berate someone for cheating and the *Kikoye* might drop off, revealing crinkled red shorts. I got a queasy feeling in my stomach when he sat opposite me in those little shorts with so obviously nothing on underneath.

'It's your turn,' would make me jump and I'd play the wrong card, often destroying the game. It took a while for Faith's presence to register. Joel made no reference to her other than, 'This is Faith.' She was there, just like the chairs, the stereo and the yellow pool of light around the lamp. She never spoke but sat back in her chair with an empty look on her face. A true Acholi[4], she was blue black, tall and powerfully built. Her dresses were tailored from the synthetic Chinese material that piled in high bales at every marketplace. The polyester always sprouted lurid flowers blooming on either a turquoise or magenta background. The local tailors only ever sewed one style: A line with an elasticized high waist. After a few days the underarms were saturated with the acidic smell of sweat on polyester that no amount of washing could dislodge. Within a few weeks the seams around the armholes tore and gaped as this complicated juncture was almost too tightly cut.

Faith's hair was partitioned into tiny square parcels. Shiny black nylon thread twisted these bunches into curly loops. Though she wasn't fat, her stomach protruded slightly, indicating that she had carried at least one baby. Her breasts, though straining against the shiny polyester, which clearly outlined her nipples, already had the slight sag of having breastfed.

Nothing set Faith apart from the hundreds of other young Acholi women in Gulu. Was it her ordinariness that appealed? As Faith became a permanent fixture to our evenings and once she took on proprietary domestic functions such as serving cold glasses of passion juice, Jeannette, a young Irish nurse, became more and more distracted in her card playing. She never made secret her plans for Joel. One evening she could not contain herself any longer and she asked in a tight voice; 'Faith, what work do you do?' Faith answered without expression. 'I work at the Acholi Inn Bar.'Jeannette turned to Joel and asked triumphantly, 'So, where did you guys meet?' Joel answered while dealing the cards, 'Where do you think? At the Acholi Inn Bar.' Jeannette looked over at me. She may as well have said out loud, 'Wouldn't you know it, a bar maid, probably a prostitute? Classic story, the poor guy is clearly lonely. What choice did he have?' I tried to make my eyes say, 'Well he did have a choice. You practically threw yourself at his feet.'

One day, Joel positioned a chair next to his, and patting the sagging striped canvas, he beckoned Faith to join us. She rose from her stiff backed kitchen chair and entered our golden circle. She still never joined the game nor did she speak. Impassively, she allowed Joel's hands to rove over her shoulders while he played cards.

Eventually, Faith moved in. Joel said, 'She gives me such peace. We can't communicate much. Her English is less than basic as is my Acholi. So we don't have to talk. She asks nothing of me. She wants nothing. It is so comforting to have another body in my house just lying breathing next to me on the bed.' I curiously asked, 'Oh come on, you mean to tell me she isn't hoping that you will take her to London when your contract is up in a couple of months?'Joel changed the subject; 'At first it didn't matter to me that she was probably sleeping with other guys she meets at the bar.' She didn't even hide it, saying things like, 'Tonight I can't come

[4] The Acholi are the dominant ethnic group in the north of Uganda. They are of Nilotic origin and are thought to have migrated from the Bahr el Gazal region of South Sudan around 1.000 CE.

because I'm going to spend the night with Ojok, the District Commissioner's driver.' Joel continued, 'But slowly it got to me and so that's why I pick her up on my bike at midnight when the bar closes and bring her home with me. I want her for myself now. I have never had a relationship like this one, ever. The best way to explain it is to say that she's essential on a visceral level like breathing. I won't lie. Much of our relationship is grounded in the physical, but when I am with her, I don't know where her body begins or ends or where mine is in the amorphous and fluid sculptures that we create. Nothing is angular, abutting, encroaching, everything is fluent, giving and non-resistant.'

The day of Joel's departure drew nearer. We placed bets on whether or not he would take Faith to England. I often saw her on the back of his bike, arms wrapped tightly around his waist, hands disappearing inside his floppy singlet and her head nestling in the curve of his neck as she accompanied him to remote villages where he ran appropriate technology workshops for the district's farmers.

The secretary at the office informed us, 'He's ordered a single ticket for the flight down to Kampala next Monday, just for himself.' He refused offers of farewell parties; 'I just want to spend time with Faith. Thank you, all the same.'

The long rains had begun and Monday dawned foggy and cool. I drove the Land Rover slowly through the mango grove, still dripping from the previous night's downpour. Joel's house looked abandoned already, the curtains drawn and the interior unlit. I turned off the engine. The door opened and out strode Joel with his two suitcases. He threw them on the pick up and ran back inside. The door didn't quite shut. I saw them locked in a tight embrace. With brute force he unwound Faith's arms and, pushing her aside, he stumbled towards the car, tears streaming down his face. Faith, inside the house, regained her balance and took two tentative steps and stopped just outside the door. Her face, impassive as ever, betrayed no emotion. She stood, arms crossed at her chest, looking at us unwaveringly. Joel leaned trembling against me. He hissed; 'Go, goddamn it! Drive! What are you waiting for?' I abruptly asked, 'Joel, why don't you take her with you, man?' He replied, 'Drive, damn you. This is none of your business.'

Joel sobbed through the mango grove. In the rearview mirror, I watched Faith growing smaller. Joel blew his nose and said to no one in particular; 'I just can't take her, can't you see? How would she ever live in London? OK, she might learn the language but she'd never successfully learn the ways of life over there. She would be so lonely. What's her life been so far? She grew up in a village where she attended a couple of years of primary school. Then she moved to her uncle's home where he fed her in exchange for working round the clock for him. She had a baby, which she left with her mother in the village. Then she started working at the bar. How do you think she would fit into London?'

I said naively; 'She'd learn and experience new things. You'd be surprised.' Joel replied, 'No, she would break in the process, the racism, the weather, the condescension of my friends and family. No way, I can't do that to her. You don't get it; I'm not taking her because doing so would ruin both our lives. Here we are equal, however you want to judge our relationship, the fact remains we complete each other. We each have what the other wants and we give it to each other without external pressures. I love how spare our relationship is. There is no bullshit. I love how relationships in this setting are reduced to an exchange of goods, you make me feel good and I make you feel good, end of story and for however long that works its great. There is no happy forever in this narrative. Good is relative to the taker and there is no judgment around that. In

London that balance would shift as she would be instantly dependent. That fact alone would predestine our relationship to failure. I would be responsible for her in ways that no adult should be for another. Here in Gulu she could leave me at any moment and she would be fine just as she was when I first met her. In London, she would not be able to walk away. The shame of returning to Gulu – of having the world know that her *muzungu*[5] packed her up and returned her to sender, would be impossible to bear. I can just imagine how it would begin. Bit by bit and then ever more strongly I would judge her through my friends' eyes. Everything would be different. If I were going to stay part of the humanitarian circus, gallivanting from country to country, then I'd take her. But these two years here have taught me that this is bullshit. Nothing we do here is going to have any lasting impact. You know, I got much more out of this than the people I was meant to have helped. So, I taught them to sow seeds in a way that makes for higher yields. But my seeds require high tech inputs and regular water. As soon as the project closes up shop in Gulu, that won't be guaranteed. So I want out. I'm going to take up my management training at British Telecom. There is no place for Faith in my life.' He started sobbing again. 'I just have to get on that fucking plane. I'll be fine once I get to Kampala.'

The Ugandan Airlines Fokker roared overhead. As we arrived at the aerodrome, the little staircase was being towed to the plane and passengers began disembarking. Hugging Joel, I whispered, 'Take care of yourself. Be in touch, be happy. We'll miss those Canasta games.'

The lone stewardess shouted, 'Hurry, hurry there's a storm coming! We don't want to be stuck here. The plane is needed by the President this afternoon. Run, we need to be leaving. Pick up your suitcases and place them in the baggage hold yourselves. I'm alone today.' Joel bounded towards the plane. He only briefly turned around to wave and he was gone. The plane hurled itself over the lumpy red laterite runway and lifted off heavily into the gloomy sky just as the first fat raindrops fell and wind disheveled the fronds of the tall date palms that dotted the plains around the airfield.

I drove home, jumping with every clap of thunder. Turning a corner, I came upon Faith under her black umbrella slowly walking towards town. I stopped beside her. 'Where are you going? Do you need a lift?' She nodded. Shaking out her umbrella, she pulled herself up into the cab.

'Where do you want to go?'

'I go to start work at the bar, at Acholi Inn.'

Methodically she unlocked the padlocks on the grills and slid them aside, waking the bar from its early morning slumber. There was no reaction to my, 'See you around.'

[5] A semi derogatory Swahili word for a Caucasian person widely used all over East Africa.