

# **All Things Remaining Equal**

*By Binyavanga Wainaina*

Milka sits in the boot of the Toyota Land cruiser next to the coolers, spread out on cushions, mouth sticky with dried watermelon; sweat, thick and salty dripping into her eyes, her book lies face down next to her. Her body, suddenly jagged and long, has not yet figured out new ways to arrange itself, two new bumps under her pink t-shirt have become a perpetual reminder that everything has changed. It is too bumpy to read her book. She will play *cominatcha*, her favourite thing to do on her new computer: she always puts on some *Kleptomaniacs* on Windows Media Player. They rap, loud, in her earphones, and she watches the *cominatcha* visualisation on her screen.

She has learnt over the past few roadtrip months, to play *cominatcha* with landscapes, rather than with digital galaxies on her computer. She faces the back window, and blurs her eyes, and dust and road and trees rush to hit her, and whiz past her.

They are driving through Pokot district: brown loose dry earth, stones, rocks, and skeletons of trees that Gordon had told her will spring to lush and useless life when it rains.

*Prosopis juliflora*.

They were introduced, he said to the occupants of the car, as a donor-funded NGO project—by Food Aid Organisation. Some life-saving plant, he said, a plant that could grow anywhere, and provide fuel for when the world's oil reserves started to run dry.

It spread, thorny and impassable, and turned out to be poisonous for cattle—no international market seemed interested in it for their fuel tanks.

“Fucking dictators, aid organisations. They say they care. Bullshit. Doing anything they want is all the fuckers care about. This plant is why the Pokot are starving. We are going to sue.”

She had a nightmare last night: soft squealing shapes of fear, a dripping tap,

lips of a fridge slap open solemnly, and a solid slippery sound rises. It ripples under her feet, and she slips and slides on it, now it is a gelatinous mouth-organ of laughter. Soft corkscrews of fear and pleasure coil in her stomach, and hard rural faces nudge at her ankles, with cold noses and warm welcoming breaths. They are laughing, like phlegm and donkeys.

Like the village: a traditional Gikuyu accordion, and squirming, squealing, dying night-insects in her ancestral home in Nyeri.

Like poverty and the smell of boiling sweet potatoes. She wants to stop leaping up in fear, wants to let go. And she does, and slides into the sound, which strums and rolls over her body, then the ripples of laughter and Gikuyu accordion whorl thickly into her breathing, and she jerks awake, choking.

Mum is pregnant. With Gordon's baby.

Mum sits at the front, with Gordon. Her face is moist, dripping, but she looks soft these days, smug, her stomach stretched taut and hard. Three months to go.

A girl. This is what Milka wants. With long curly doll hair and skin like milky coffee, pink full lips, green eyes.

Gordon is teaching her physics, now that she is in a British system school, in an advanced class, her physics and maths honed, but naked of context, coming as she did, from a strict Kenyan boarding school, X-ellents Academy, where failure was unacceptable, and frills frowned upon, and physics was numbers, never anything else: numbers and exams.

She has always easily topped her class, and is anxious to do the same in this strange new school, where learning is friendly, and classes chaotic. For the first few weeks she sat in class, watching people laugh rudely at their teachers and waiting for something to fall, or explode.

All other things remaining equal, he said: *Ceteris Paribus*.

She struggled to understand this, but now she has made it a swing. If the poles of the swing are not there, the swing will flop to the ground. Something has to stay still. Control things.

Since Gordon married mum a year ago, things seem consistent somehow: routines, possibilities, money, school fees.

The flowers outside the car are making her nauseous. At first the bright pink and white flowers of the desert rose, a plant shaped like a tiny baobab tree, were fun to watch, but now she is tired of them, they go on and on, saying hey hey we have flowers in this dry place too, and she is tired of listening. In this dusty, stony place, they seem clean, as if people washed them in the morning, in anticipation of visitors.

The desert rose has the false cheer of the plastic flowers and the framed print photograph of 'Dubai! Shopping City in the Sun' on their former living room wall. Dubai at night seemed a wondrous place—strings and swishes and eyes of light. Dubai at Night was like Mum in perfume and makeup, going for a date in the far-off, so-near, shiny city, Nairobi, which, from far enough, could be like Dubai at night.

Milka and her mother have lived in almost every part of Nairobi: for a year, they lived in an aspirational semi-detached house in South B when mum had a perm and business suit job at Barclays bank; then they moved to a strange giant concrete house in Githurai, which they shared with a fat woman, who had a carefully eventoned face with shiny eyebrows shaped like sulking slivers of quartered moon, and a fondness for Cinzano Bianco.

The woman kicked them out one day, left all their things outside the metal gate, screaming: Malaya, Malaya, prostitute, prostitute, at her mother, her eyebrows unmoved by her anger.

They have lived in a servants quarter in one of the gated rich houses of Lavington, where mum worked as a maid for some expatriate people from Sweden who worked training people in HIV awareness. They smiled a lot.

They have lived in a slum, Kibera, just after mum lost her job at Joska (Josphat Kamau) Investments, where she was a receptionist.

Before Gordon arrived, they lived in a one-room house near Second Avenue, Eastleigh, only a few metres away from the open markets, and book exchange stalls. Milka loved Eastleigh.

Now they are back in Lavington, in the main house.

Gordon walked into their one-room home late one night, a year ago, with

mum.

Milka had spent the day in some anxiety. Mum wasn't home in the morning, or when she had come back from school. As the sun set, lights and shadows fidgeted, and she retreated into her 'room'—a bed, with a cloth screen closing it off, and she lost herself in her happiest book: *The Darling Buds of May*. (A Love Gift from the People of Liberty, Mississippi).

Then there was a scratchy squiggle of a key in the lock. Rain and wind and laughter burst into the room like a loudspeaker. Gordon's voice was deep, and nasal, and it slid off the walls with static, as sure as television. Mum sounded drunk and erratic, her voice mewling and laughing, and Milka knew to be cautious. The light came on, and brought with it giant shards of shadow. Glasses clunked on the coffee table, and liquid gurgled loudly. She felt naked—knew that she was a moving, shadowed lump in their eyes. All her movements were too loud, her bed a stage, facing the sofa.

“Milka?” Mum's voice was soft and toned to comfort, scary. Milka wrapped a 'khanga' around her nightie, from the chest, for the first time in her life, not from the waist. She slipped out of her room.

He sat on the sofa, leaning back, hands behind his head, leather-shod foot over knee, his skin angry and red, and she wondered for a moment if it hurt. He smiled and called her Young Lady, which she liked, and she took her finger out of her mouth quickly, and clasped both hands in front of her, which seemed grown-up. Mum's eyes were bright, and she kept trying to pat her weave back to life. It hung limply, wet from the rain, shining from hair spray.

The car jumps over a rocky bump. It is too hot to read; too hot to think; too hot. There is a song her granny used to sing to her...*maua mazuri zapendeza*...and it would climb into the chorus, then slide downhill so sweetly, zoom zoom zoom *nyukilia we*..

Milka fought with mum this morning, for the first time since she was a child.

Over the sheer, torso-shaping, frilled-at-waist pink t-shirt, bought for her by Auntie Linda. She had planned, for weeks, to wear it somewhere: her birthday, Parent's Day at school, their weekend shopping trips to Sarit Centre. She was always losing

nerve at the last minute, always somewhat despondent after failing to put it on. So this morning, the t-shirt stood between them: her mother pulling it one way, Milka pulling it towards her. And before her fear of her mother could overwhelm her, Milka let out an urgent breath of words, from her stomach, in Gikuyu: I'll tell Gordon. Her mother gasped, let go, and turned away. They have not spoken since this morning.

Gordon is driving the car, and mum is sitting next to him. The two TV people, and Linda, a friend of Gordon's, sit behind them.

Earlier, she could hear them whispering, the CNN woman saying, "Look at his head... shaped just like gravitas isn't it?" And they both laughed, and Milka could see the top of Gordon's large and square head bobbing in front of the car seat, waves of grey and black running down his head. CNN has over the years, called Gordon a 'Maverick American Missionary', A hero to 'The Forgotten Peoples of Africa'.

There is a race. Milka is now aware of something she has felt under her skin for weeks now: that mum's will crack before the baby is born, and Gordon will leave her. Them.

Mum has said it already.

"We will move to a bigger house after the baby is born."

"Don't worry baby, Cucu will come to visit us when the baby is born."

The baby will allow mum to snap at Gordon, make him take off his shoes in the house, allow her to ban smelly people from the house; allow her to remove the eyeless Nigerian masks from the living room wall, the beaded Masai leather tunic on the wall that smelled of old age and smoke and fear.

Milka has often wanted to touch his hair. Those waves are the same every day; each wave precisely in the same place, yet the hair is blowing in the wind! How does it fall back in place so reliably? Does his barber know the shape of each wave to keep it this way? That hair is too flimsy to be so reliable.

Gordon has two types of friends: those she often hears laughing and drinking whiskey on the veranda, dressed in Bush jackets, or t-shirts distended by overuse, and dirty jeans, talking about places like Rwanda and Congo and Propaganda and Iraq, and choppy verbs: grabbed, shot, burst, hit, gripped.

Guerrillas, Milishia – which she thought would make a nice name, Milishia.

Aisha. Maybe a Somali name. They sit by the swimming pool for hours, and she sinks into sleep upstairs, her head dizzy with the overheard detail. The stories rush always from location to location: “—left window, across the street, swung his cameras over—Bunia, Kigali, Club Tropicana, RPF, SWAPO Janjaweed ...and then we got on a lorry and dropped off in Kisangani.”

She cannot understand yet the connection between these people and those places, has not yet grasped the idea that people make the worlds they occupy, and cannot see anything clearly outside of what they have made. All worlds belong utterly to whoever is talking about them. What were they doing in Bunia? Why didn't they go to Zanzibar, or Ruwenzori or to the Serengeti, where beautiful things were?

Sometimes she sat around them, answering only when directly asked a question. She hoped one day to test out the jumble of language and thought and books that she kept simmering inside her.

One day, over dinner, one of them mentioned Kibera, where she and her mother had lived for one year—and it seemed not like a place she knew, mundane, and full of small neighbourly entanglements, smelly, cosier than Lavington. It became a place they had built themselves, in that wondrous, Swishy-Light-in-Dubai way that white people built things. This Kibera had choppy verbs: Flying Toilets, Death by Machete, AIDS, a whirlpool. Slumlords. A thriller.

What a possibility! That Kibera was all those things!

“Didn't you live in Kibera for a while?” Gordon asked.

“Yes.” She said, and sentences rose and fell and crashed into each other in her head, “Near the sub-chief.”

There was brief awkward silence as she retreated.

Solemn: a word she associates with the way lips that are sealed by silence, part flesh visibly when quiet people speak.

Francois the Canal France guy broke into the thick air:

“Catherine Peale was fucking the SPLA commander. She always knew what they were up to before anybody?”

“Didn't they send her to Iraq?”

“David Clarke married his Mombasa prostitute.”

“Nooooo!”

“Yep. Some American marines came with their women and started a fight. Wigs flying. Dave and his wife spent their wedding night in Mombasa police station.”

There is Linda, another friend of Gordon’s, another type, who sits with the two CNN people in the car, and who always says things like, He didn’t understand that I needed some Me-time... People are dying... You’d think they care...or...It’s such an empowering book.

‘Empowering’: a word Milka associates with the rising steam, and bitter smell of njahi beans, which mum cooks with coconut when Linda comes to visit. Linda is a vegetarian, the only friend of Gordon’s that mum likes. Linda hates the System— a word that is swirling around Milka, a slow tornado collecting samples everywhere, which will turn in on itself and solidify to one idea, in one startling moment.

Linda works with AIDS orphans, for an NGO called It Takes a Village. She used to work for the UN. She has introduced new words to Milka’s vocabulary: DIFFID, DANIDA, MSF, USAID, SUSTAINABILITY, and EDUCATING THE GIRL CHILD.

Sometimes she comes to write funding proposals for Gordon in his study.

Gordon always sounds irritated when talking to her, and Milka does not understand why they are so close.

He hates ‘DevelopmentSpeak’.

Gordon’s other friends are all black Kenyans, Indigenous Peoples Linda calls them: Masais, Pokots, Turkanas, all men. They come home with him from his dusty field trips, all of them are bewildered and shy, none of them speak English, and Milka’s mother loathes them all.

They all smell the same: like blankets left too long in the sun; like smoke, and paraffin and sweat and sometimes there is, steaming around them, the sweet, intolerable, seductive, fermenting smell of busaa.

They never spend the night. Mum cooks a large pot of ugali, fries up sukuma wiki with onions and tomatoes and crushed peanuts, cursing all the time: these people, these people in her home. Gordon unloads a crate of warm beer and they

drink from the bottles for hours. Mum bangs things in the kitchen. Gordon barks in his nasal, slippery Kiswahili, struggling to harden his consonants, and presenting this hardening as clipped instructions – a ubiquitous way the language is presented when spoken by white people and Gikuyu tycoons: not full of gentle negotiations, it becomes a way for a man to issue directives, ‘in an African way’.

One day, Gordon issued an especially crisp instruction, in English, but sounding deliberately African: vowels rounded, standing straight, not slanting, consonants hit hard against the walls of his mouth, when mum had been sharp with Ole Tomanga, over the toilet:

“Stop it! Do Not Make Him Lose Face!”

Ole Tomanga, one of the regular Masais, always speaks slowly, an old man, taking soft chesty paths to his point. He has an accordion laugh, it wheezes in and saws out in one gentle windy movement, and she always waits for it.

Lose Face. Lose Your Face. Three days ago, in her new school, Milka pushed a pencil deep into Lisa Macharia (of the Funeral Parlour Macharias) – just to see her smug face break. Why couldn’t she make them stop laughing at her?

She knows Ole Tomanga’s fragility – the wrong words will quickly cut him to violence or departure. There is no way for his behaviour to adjust to insult. He has nothing to negotiate in this leafy suburb.

Face. Face. Face. Television: woman laughs, pulling on tights, saying: ‘WAIT! I haven’t put on my face yet!’

Faces have spun in her mind for weeks. Face Off! Drums blare, trumpets promise drama on FM Radio Current Affairs, and government ministers compete to insult each other, the whole country riveted. Lets Face it, says a woman on TV, bouncing energetically in tights, with a KISS FM accent, with lips cut clean and symmetrical and ruby coloured, never wobbling, Pads are boring.

Matte, gloss, lined lips, new eyebrows, so many possible faces! You look like a prostitute, said her mother, when she was caught playing with lipstick.

Gordon is telling them all about his conversion to this place.

“The church did not understand, sending fucking lurve gifts, talking about bringing people to the heart of Jesus! Jesus! Do you know what Jesus means to

the Pokot? During the colonial era, there was a great wave of conversion here. A Kalenjin woman, I forget her name, told people that Jesus was coming. She was going to lead people to the Promised Land. They were all carried by the ecstasy; and the Pokot converted en masse, and a huge mass of people set off to gather and meet Jesus. Coming over a hill, they were seen by a British District Officer, who shot at the crowd, and some died. The Pokot struck back – the British brought reinforcements to crush them, and the Pokot went home and never stepped into a church again.”

Linda, “Aren’t they just beautiful? So sleek and lean and sexy?”

Gordon’s voice is grave, “Man has lived here, maybe longer than anywhere else. The Turkana who live not far from here, have been found to be the oldest society of humans so far to be traced by DNA tests. It is here that man evolved, we know these landscapes in our bones.”

Milka sees a group of young Pokot stand by the road, staring at the car without guile, as startlingly improbable as the desert rose. The men are more spectacularly dressed than the women, one has cut his hair into a small disk at the top of his skull; blue beads decorate this circle. His torso is taut and ridged, and around his neck is a little blue and red choker. Milka avoids the naked breasts of the young woman, who is smiling shyly at the car.

Gordon has opened up his library to her, a whole wall of books in his study. It

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took a while before she let herself in—it seemed impertinent to spend time in his room. She has managed to restrain herself from being too familiar in the house. She no longer has a source of books. She used to exchange books with street traders for thirty shillings on the street wherever they lived. Mum was free with money for this, never minding how many books Milka found. She is still trying to steel herself to broach the school library which sits behind a jagged bottle-neck of American accented girls, stopping to chatter where four corridors meet.

She does not understand Gordon’s taste in books; she was sure, is still now convinced, that he must have, somewhere, solid, reliable books (Like *Oliver Twist*, or Mark Twain or Wilbur Smith or Robert Ludlum or *Black Beauty* or *To Kill a*

*Mockingbird*, her favourite book). Steady books, like him—not books so slippery and difficult to escape to. The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test had jumpy sentences that she could not train her eyes to.

Slippery. Like her mother. The thought stood up suddenly in her mind, and turned. There is a certain elegant upside-downness about this idea: mum, slippery and unreliable, life see-sawing, reading Reliable American Romance Novels; and Gordon so steady, so finicky about the smallest things (packing the car!), so strange in his tastes for books.

One day she carried one of Gordon's Africa books to her room. After rubbing her toes against the duvet to make it warm, she opened the Africa book, and saw the pictures: dead bodies, some skeletons with clothes on: Rwanda. She dropped the book, and said her prayers fiercely, frowning and trying to close off her mind, as her mother's voice rose up the stairs, drunk: laughing, music playing. Gordon's voice spooled in the background, almost inaudible; all she could hear was regular, comforting waves of bass, which touched her. And that night, she wished with all her heart, promised God that she would be good, would make Gordon like her; would read his books, and talk to him about places like Propaganda and Bunia. Would be good to Ole Tomanga. Would not be shy and stiff, would be bendable and laughing, comfortably rude even, like the children of his white friends.

Late late that night, unable to sleep after the Rwanda pictures, she heard mum squealing, like the wet wheels of a fast car, and Gordon growled in regular wheezing breaths, as if he was the grainy road that kept the car from slipping out of control, and the desperate regularity of his gasps seemed to suggest that one day mum would slip off the kerb, beyond him.

The car rolls past flat lands covered in small rocks; the road is bumpy now, and fine dust has squeezed through the seams of the doors and windows, everybody's hair takes on brown highlights.

Mum sits at the front passenger seat, reading a Zebra Historical Romance, and sipping a cold light beer. She hasn't spoken to Milka since they left, and Milka misses her already. She uses less foundation these days, it barely covers the skinlightener scars and patches. No perm anymore. Gordon does not like it—now

mum always has braids, with African beads (made in Taiwan) woven in.

“You okay sweetheart?” Gordon’s eyes crinkled in the rear-view mirror.

“Yes.....yeah. Yeah am fi ne?”

“What do you think of Pokot?”

The faces in the back seat in front of her turned to face her, all smiling, and she could not release the solemn. Her pink t-shirt seemed wrong now, the wrong thing to wear here.

“I like it. It’s nice.”

“They’re so real, aren’t they?” Linda winked at her.

“Yes.”

Mum used to have a thick transforming night mask: new eyebrows, mouth smiling carefully, top lip tapping bottom lip gently and regularly expelling a soft whispered pout, face expressionless, and blemish-free. Or no makeup when she was at home: dressed in a khanga, ruthlessly cleaning. Scrubbing that one room. Perm under a headscarf. Rollers on. Scrubbing. Often moody from the night before, sometimes singing from the night before, soft and happy.

Milka brought another Africa Book for this trip. She had browsed through it, and the prose read like Gordon sounds. There is, in this collection, something by a writer called, Kapu...Kapu-scin-ky...

She sort of hoped that Gordon would see her reading it, and say something warming. He loves Kapuscinsky. He hadn’t yet. After the city’s starts and stops, and the startling fogs, the climb, so high they could see clouds below them, and it was cold. Then they spiralled down the Rift Valley Escarpment, a giant view spread out before them: Mt. Longonot and two lakes. When they got to the dry flats past Naivasha, she opened the book, and read, and was caught by a shocking paragraph. She gasps.

“Good book?” Gordon had said, smiling at the mirror for her.

“Yes, he sounds like you.” And everybody in the car except mum had laughed, and the CNN camera guy had taken the book to look at it.

“ Ah! Kapuscinsky. Fucking amazing. Did you read *The Emperor?* ”

She tries to speak, but her mouth is stuck in solemn again and Gordon feeds

the car with anecdotes about people he knows who know Kapuscinsky. And the Kapuscinsky paragraph rings in her head, like a choice.

“The European mind is willing to acknowledge its limitations, accept its limitations. It is a sceptical mind.

The spirit of criticism does not exist in other cultures. They are proud, believing that what they have is perfect.”

Mum has hardly spoken since they left Nairobi. This is not her scene. As is usual when Gordon is with his people, they only spoke to negotiate tasks—Is there enough water? Did you switch off the geyser? Pass the watermelon, baby.

“Here it is!” Gordon booms, “The museum.”

He stops the car, and they open the doors, which shrug off brown earth. They unpack themselves. All groaning and stretching, and Milka makes her ears pop, her back crack, and makes one lip two lips, breaking the solemn, and then grimacing the car with anecdotes about people he knows who know Kapuscinsky. And the Kapuscinsky paragraph rings in her head, like a choice.

its limitations. It is a sceptical mind.

wide as if to test run the limits of jollity.

Spread out all around them is a flat, stony plain, soft dry earth under her shoes.

Museum?

Gordon looks happy, blocky, and bronze, wrinkles in him are not a loosening of skin, they are cuts and crevices.

“You good?” he asks Milka, and she smiles shyly. He winks and whispers, “I like the t-shirt.”

The CNN man fiddles with the camera, and then hoists it over his shoulder.

The woman looks around her, irritated for a moment. “What museum?”

“The Pokot museum. See these stones over there?”

They all turned, and on the ground was an enormous circle of small rocks.

“Imagine this,” Gordon is magisterial, and the cameraman scrambles to get

a shot, “Stones piled on each other in a perfect circle, a wall, an immaculate and simple camp. Thorn bushes surround this wall to keep wild animals away from thousands of cattle.”

“That’s great,” says the cameraman, “Could you move a little forward? Yeah yeah..that’s it..”

“Can I go on?”

“Yeah.”

“Imagine—a young moran sits that night on that tree to the left as the lookout. Imagine the Masai defeated. This great empire of warriors has had to retreat – they have been pushed out by the Pokot. Years of drought, and Rinderpest and civil war had brought them to this. This is their last camp before the migration to Laikipia and the Mau hills. Soon, the British will...”

“Hold on, hold on – could you walk around it as you speak, keep your eyes on the camera.”

Gordon frowns, and waits for the cameraman to move around him as he turns and circles the stones. Everybody follows behind.

“The British will soon completely remove any threat they offer, then immediately adore them. Imagine the recently circumcised warriors, bellies swollen from stuffing themselves with meat, eyes ready for war, some wounded from the weeks of battle. Sullen that the elders have said they must give in and move on. Young boys and girls restless and excited; cattle bicker in the corral, unfamiliar with being in such a large gathering. Did the elders have any trouble restraining the Moran? Did the Pokot warriors follow them, or line alongside jeering?”

They all stand. Quiet. Moved, but not quite able to assign so much drama to this bleak landscape. And Milka thinks of Ole Tomanga, and turns to look at her mother who is uncapping a bottle of water, disinterested.

The CNN woman breaks the silence, “So what about now? Aren’t they getting Food aid?”

Gordon turned to them again, “You see. Now the Masai, the Pokot are cursed by the greatness of their past. Accepting what they need to change in order to thrive makes the past irrelevant. Those that had weak cultures, like the Gikuyu,

gave it all up for modernity.”

Mum turns to Gordon, mouth turned down to a sneer, and the cameraman swings to her direction, “Ai! Ngai! What did you say? When the Masai were crying for help in Narok we were fighting the British in the forests. It is us Gikuyu who are building this country – while these people sit here and beg. And all of you get happy because they suck your breasts and say nothing. Why didn’t you marry a fucking Pokot if Gikuyus are weak?”

Milka sees Gordon’s jaw swelling and receding. She can’t bring herself to move. Gordon does not say anything, and mum turns back into the car and switches on the radio.

The CNN people ask mum to turn the radio down. Mum is sulking on the front seat, and Linda has snapped at Gordon, “Fuck you Gordon! You’re such a fucking Patriarch!” Linda goes to the car to comfort mum.

Gordon is rescued from awkwardness by the arrival of a lean, ropey young man in a crisp white shirt and trousers. “This is Simon—the sub-chief of this area!” The TV people pounce on him, and they walk with Simon around the museum. Gordon and Milka follow.

Simon is telling them, “These stones are not touched by anybody...they are our memory of a great time....even children know not to touch anything...Us Pokots do better than most tribes at school, but most of us leave all that to come back here. When I finished at University they sent me to Masailand to be chief there, but I couldn’t live there. Then they sent me to Kericho, but eventually I came back home...”

Gordon swells up again, and soon is summoning majesty for the camera, eyes gazing out to the distance, framed by crisp lines, “Is it that we see our way of living as life itself? Is this man’s greatest gift? His curse? That we will not relinquish our way, whatever our intelligence tells us?”

He spreads this arms wide, to the landscape, “We will live our way, and walk free across fenced land with our herds of cattle; or build ever-larger buildings, and guns. Not even a wall of fate in front of us will make us give up our way. We will crash

into it at full pace, convinced our way will push us through. And often it does, and sometimes it does not.”

A few minutes later, Gordon slaps Simon’s back, and grabs Milka’s neck into a soft hug, while the cameraman takes shots of the landscape. Mum had turned the radio loud, and was asked to switch it off by the TV woman. They board the car and head for the borehole and tanks—Gordon’s World Bank funded water project.

Milka knows her sister will speak like television, like International School of Kenya, like We Are the World, We are The Children. Like, Make It a Better Place. This baby will not share mum, like she had – she inside Mum, layers of shared secrets and lies separating them, tying them together; she aloof from Mum, mum open to her – both of them silently agreeing not to acknowledge this situation. And Milka knows herself, already, as mum’s assistant in this endeavour: less a daughter, more a partner. For the past year, she and mum have been uncertain around each other. Mum has been afraid of her, has alternated between over-affection and sharp, hot, threatening whispers, far from Gordon’s hearing.

One night, some months ago, Gordon and mum went for a party at the UN Headquarters, and came home early, catching her in front of the mirror in the living room, dressed in his drawstring pyjama trousers, and in mum’s loose and baggy cardigan, dancing hip-hop to some angry South African kwaito music, which was blaring out of the music channel on television. She turned to find them standing at the door, and was ashamed. In the moments it took to tune down the television, the living room: the masks, the creaking and crackling rattan furniture, the framed prints of various tribal peoples Gordon had met in his work in Kenya and Papua New Guinea and Malawi; the collection of manly oddities on the mantelpiece: old Congolese beer bottles, black and white photos of naked Nuba men, a little goatskin tobacco-pouch, a grimy old pair of binoculars; the bright and beaded collection of pygmy knives, spread out in a fan—and Gordon, weather-beaten in khakis, diminished in force by the bright television colours, by the rat-a-tat rap, by the wide mouths, and pointing fingers, so close to the screen, they seemed to be

addressing each person in the room.

Mum groaned and covered her ears. Gordon muttered, 'Rubbish', and his eyes remained on the screen, until the volume button on the remote control rendered the musician's movements ridiculous.

Cominatcha is not working for Milka on the trip back to Nairobi, there are too many small frictions in the car.

Simon is squashed between Linda and the CNN woman, legs angling sharply, thighs as taut as forearms under his trousers. Linda is speaking animatedly, her voice less prickly than usual, asking Simon about Sustainability of Local Institutions. Linda's hand is on Simon's thigh, and the cameraman keeps glancing at them, and smiling to himself.

Simon turns to Milka, asks her name, and which school she goes to.

"International School" and she is ashamed to say this; can hear how much her accent has changed, as she speaks to him.

Two young women step out of the brush in front of them, in leather tunics, with short mud-coloured mops of dreadlocks on their heads. They stare the car down fiercely and turn back in the bush.

Simon points at them, "Those are initiates.

They were circumcised last month. They have to

live in the bush now until the next ceremonies. No men can cross the line on that road. They will kill any man that approaches them."

Linda gasps. "You support this? That's terrible! How can you support mutilation?"

Simon laughs, and Milka squirms. She has found herself, so many times, hearing some comment from some member of a group of girls, that cuts her deeply, and she laughs, and her whole body loses instinct for a moment, everything is heavy and awkward, as she tries to arrange her face not to care.

Milka's voice bursts out, louder and shriller than she would like, "They look like warriors. I want dreads like that!"

Mum laughs, an edge behind it, "No Mau Maus in my house girl!"

Gordon is grave, "Some women run away to be circumcised. We try to stop it."

Linda is facing the window, tears running down her cheeks. The CNN people want to stop and film.

Simon says no, sharply, his body suddenly concerned with its seating—he closes his knees, and places two hands awkwardly on them, like an uncertain schoolboy. A hard nut swells and thins on his jaw. Linda vows to nobody in particular that she will come here and have a gender mainstreaming workshop, if she can find the funding. The car dips into a suddenly verdant strip, trees above them, and Milka's skin is bombarded by thousands of leaves of cooling shadow.

They cross a stream, and are out again on stone and dust, and goose bumps prise her thoughts out of the group, and spread warmly through her body. Her t-shirt is dusty, and she is uncomfortable in it. Pink dirties badly.

Milka leans closer to Simon's back. He smells of sharp clean sweat, a charcoal iron, lifebuoy soap, and sunlight. She wants to touch the bones that run down his white shirt.

"Uncle Gordon?" she asks, "Will Simon come and visit us at home?"

Mum slaps her tongue loudly against the roof of her mouth, and Gordon turns to look at her sharply.

"Simon is a busy man. You must ask him."

A group of young men walk in front of them, and the TV woman sighs, "They are so beautiful. I wish I could take one home."

Gordon growls, "Don't be silly."

Linda peers out of the window, squinting at the afternoon glare, "They don't seem to be malnourished and they don't have ring worms like the people in Ukambani."

Gordon responds, "That's because they haven't yet met enough tourists and the fucking church and modern life. Just you watch and see how they will be when the World Food Programme is done with them. Already people here have adjusted their habits to Food AID. The young men refuse to take the cattle to the mountains

to graze when there is no rain. The old men drink Busaa all day in Loruk and the women wait for food packages. They are finished."

Simon's face has not changed. Milka sees his back tighten, a train of bones reels down his back, his hands become string instruments, tight cords climb sharply to knob cliffs. She is prickly and hot and soft. Her hand reaches out, and she fists it and curls it back into herself.

He smells of ironing and charcoal and sweat and truth.

"If you drop me off here I will be fine," he says. Gordon drops him off, and

says goodbye in Pokot. Simon ignores him, and Milka shouts, “Bye!”  
Milka turns to watch him walk away; he swerves off the road and into the bush,  
his walk springy and alien. His shirt and trousers fl ap in the wind, suddenly ugly and  
fragile as brown dust and thorns threaten.

And soon they are on the tarmac—built by Gordon’s physics, Linda’s donors  
and Kapuscinky’s mind—straight and clean and making equal rock faces, and  
escarpments and geology and hundreds of unknowable hominid fossils, and ten or  
twenty tribes and fi ve or ten towns and fi ve lakes and rain and sun and grimy city  
suburbs and leafy city suburbs and the tensions Milka knows will make the house  
unbearable this evening. This once Great Rift Valley, which held First Man prisoner  
for tens of thousands of years, will be comfortably digested by cushions, powersteering,  
and a two-hour session of mental cominatcha.

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