Convergence

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Convergence

By Marilyn Bruce

Acceptance in Partial Completion
In Requirement for the Degree
Master of Arts

Kathleen L. Kitto, Dean of Graduate School

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MASTER’S THESIS

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Marilyn Bruce

May 2012
Convergence

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Marilyn Bruce
May 2012
Abstract

*Convergence* is a collection of linked short stories focusing on the 2007-2008 post-election violence in Kenya. The narratives explore themes of identity and family, both in Kenya and in the United States, and how these concepts adapt or remain unchanged during times of crisis. Through the narrative of Joseph, a boy living in Kibera during the post-election violence, the collection provides a reader with an understanding of the events that occurred during the crisis and their complex origins. The prologue explains how the fictional author of this collection experiences the tasks of writing and researching and how the project affects her. The story, “The Language of Masks,” explores how two teenagers with a shared sense of responsibility for their families can connect and make sense of their lives through correspondence. All of the stories in this collection converge, showing the ways humans connect across families and national boundaries.
Table of Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... iv

Prologue: Another Way to Measure Distance .............................................................. 1

The Price of Tea ............................................................................................................. 14

The Language of Masks ............................................................................................... 31

Blood’s Beginning ........................................................................................................ 60
Sweat dripped from my arms, wetting my T-shirt, pooling above my belly. The woman with the purple skirt tucked her baby close to her chest, and I nodded as though I understood what the men standing beside me said to her. (I didn’t.) I gripped, tighter, the smooth tip of a Bic, the pen’s end bite mark freckled. Beyond the tent in front of me, acacia trees—thorny and twisted, matted with leaves—flecked the bowl-shaped grassland, and the hills surrounding the camp rose into the distance. That heat. That light, arid heat, I wasn’t used to the way it dug beneath my skin, so I scooted to the seat’s edge and readjusted the angle of my pen to the paper, then put a small period at the end of a question mark, *election*?

Q: Why was I there?
A: I shouldn’t have been there.

Q: Why?
A: Because I was collecting tapes. This doesn’t make sense, I know, but I wanted more tapes to hide behind. More stories. Then I wanted to run.

But I didn’t do that.

Rewind. A friend of mine promised me this trip to *Africa* guaranteed my death, not a psychological death but a physical one, the end of my life. “You,” he swore to me, “will die.” But I climbed into a crowded bus from Nairobi to sit on an upturned bucket placed in the middle of this field in Maai Mahiu, Kenya. I was surrounded by houses, tents, and Internally Displaced Persons. Though my face felt it might burst any second (the hot, pink sunburn a
reaction to Doxycycline, an anti-malarial), I wasn’t physically dead. I wrote stories on graph paper. I propped the left-handed notebook on my knees.

A: I wasn’t charting graphs or left handed. I was a writer, a student interviewing IDPs, discussing the post-election violence in Kenya, and I didn’t examine my notebooks before buying them (the day before I left). And later I didn’t realize the problem with writing answers on graph paper, but then someone cried, or looked away, and I glanced down, following the little stacks of squares and it felt like I was plotting tragedy as a point on the Y-axis, determining the slope (or scope) of an event. Exactly how poor were those who lived in the slum, without running water? I wondered how both tribes felt to learn that Kibaki, a man who had possibly cheated, a Kikuyu, won the election again. How did Miriam’s house appear before the Kalenjin boys lit it on fire? What time did her family retreat to the fairgrounds, chased by boys hacking machetes through the air? What was it like to live in a campsite, toe to foot with other Kikuyus? What was it like to watch your home wreathed in flames?

I handed the woman in front of me a consent form, and while my friend Simon explained the words in Swahili, I stared at the digital recorder, the blunt corners, the glossy, straight skin, perfectly spaced little holes, and buttons that performed a clean set of functions: Record. Stop. Cut. Delete. A recorder always chose the correct paper. A recorder never felt emotions osmose. No crying. The narratives, mine and theirs, remained distinct, our accents different; one voice asked the questions, and the other answered. Or so it seemed.
Overwrite. If I was to overwrite a week earlier, I would have said something better when Sam said, “Africa, why the hell would you go there?” But I didn’t have an answer other than because, for my thesis. I couldn’t tell him that Kenya, nineteen hours by plane, was the distance necessary for me to write.

Fast-forward to now, and I would have my better reply: Why the hell would you say that?

Fast-forward to now, and I might ask the same thing: why was I running?

We were seated outside a coffee shop in Bellingham, Washington, with a few members of our writing group, lounging on the patio overlooking the bay. Lattes, their creamy, sweet scent, floated along the boardwalk. Sails fluttered across the ocean. Sam rocked back on the metal legs of his chair, feet hinged to the table, and spread his arms over the wood railing. “Kenya,” he shouted. “Africa! Why would you go there? That’s like guaranteed death. There are two things in Africa.” He counted them on his fingers. “Wars and disease. There’s also boring Africa, North Africa, which doesn’t have anything, so no one wants to go there.” I paused. I stared. Morocco. Mauritania. Sudan. Egypt. But I said, because, for my thesis, there’s a lot more to it than that, and I hoped my look—flat eyes, arched brows—would end the debate. Sam paused, but then admitted he was actually more bothered by the people who “helped” developing countries, helped by taking photos with children, then posting these photos on their Facebook pages with captions like: Today we taught spelling to the kids in Lima. It feels so great to make a difference!

“It’s so delusional,” he said.
Eager to distance myself from these tourists, though I knew they really weren’t that bad, I agreed, “Oh, I know. It’s so self-interested.” Then I sipped my coffee.

And later I wondered if these tourists bought left-handed, graph paper notebooks to document their third-world experience. Did they go to Lima to collect or to graph things? Maybe they were running. Maybe they wanted to write about something far away in order to write about something that was close to them.

Play. Miriam and Simon’s circular vowels filled the morning, and I remembered that Portuguese, Arabic, and Bantu blended to form Swahili, a language written from these voices, echoing even more languages, more stories from its history. Simon turned to me and repeated what Elizabeth said, so I wrote what she said (or he said) in my notebook. I suppose.

Record.
Q: What is your name?
A: Marilyn.
Q: Where do you live?
Delete.

Record.
Q: What is your name?
A: Simon.
Delete.
Q: What is your name?
A: Miriam.

Q: Where do you live?
A: Elodoret IDP camp, Maai Mahiu.

Q: Where are you originally from?
A: Eldoret.

Pause.

Rewind. Growing up an only child, I attached to my best friend—best friends since preschool. She had no siblings either, and I had a parasitic identity. I affixed to her and her parents, who were calm as July, when they sipped iced tea by the lake, and I stuck to them fast, my face appearing in family pictures, at the dinner table (requesting more tater tots, please), at her mother and father’s birthdays. I was sticky as sweat on them, because my family was slick as gasoline. Greer had toys that filled two rooms, a Barbie jeep, and a playhouse, and every day we played at her house, not mine because I couldn’t go home—not physically, but psychologically. I was running.

We weren’t related, and we didn’t look alike, but our teachers and friends referred to us as a single person. Greerandmarty. Or Martyandgreer. Inseparable like Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley, Oliver and the Artful Dodger, Triceratops and Stegosaurus, we starred in our own stories: the documentary about an overdose on candy, the Hunchback of Notre Dame remake, or the epic of lovesick Barbie who took a suicidal plunge down the staircase. We
wrote the films, and her father recorded them. The DVD compiled from this stack of VHS movies rests under my TV. I watch the movies occasionally.

The youngest me is tiny. Already she speaks with my gravely, low voice. Forty minutes in, I grow rounder. My torso lengthens, my jeans tighten, my skin reddens with little bumps my friends call acne, and I no longer appear as myself in the tapes. I’m wearing a wig, or I’m the voice for a puppet Barbie or the hand that launches Barbie’s pink Ferrari into the lake. This older me has decided: Never. Ever. Would I want to be me. Not me. Not my home. Not my family.

In the summer, we brought our Barbies on her family’s boat. Each wore a pink doll-sized swimsuit. Greer and I wore life preservers. Their straps clench our chests—padding so high we only nodded and shook our heads side to side. Her preserver was blue with bright-colored balloons. Mine was purple. The deck’s metal reflected the sun in spots so hot I could barely touch my hand to the railing. Our Barbies dived overboard, where we held them as they gurgled underwater and shouted in their Barbie voices.

“Wow, it’s cold,” Greer’s doll shouted.

It was. We lived in Montana.

Mine replied, “You should get out of the water, then.”

Greer splashed for a second. Then her doll shouted, “I’m going to have a popsicle,” and Greer stood. (Her doll wasn’t one for uncomfortable things.) But my Barbie wanted a few more splashes in the lake, while the pontoon boat cruised a bit farther. And farther. I
tried to hold my Barbie tight, so she could spend another second underwater, but when I
squinted my eyes, the boat pulled and I couldn’t tell what felt like my hand or the water or
Barbie. She slipped into the bubbling wake, farther out, away from the boat, and eventually
she bobbed, alone, in the middle of the lake, as we chugged away from her. By the time I
tugged Greer’s father’s shirt, and we turned around to find my doll, she was almost lost,
bobbing with only one hand above water. “Sorry,” I said and I grabbed her.

I wonder if anyone apologized for tribalism.

This would make a great plot for one of our movies.

Q: Why were you always at her house?

A: I can’t talk about that yet.

My father picked me up from Greer’s in a white truck. He turned Van Halen up loud
and said, “This is a great tune,” and I pretended to like the tune too because I didn’t want to
hurt his feelings.

He fumbled for the stick shift and told me that he loved me, but he told me this so
much I only nodded in reply. Already my heart pounded as though I was running. I would
always be running, most times uninvited, farther and farther away from that car with the torn
upholstery or that home with the tears, the stories, the clenched fingers, the salad thrown against the wall, where evenings I crouched under my bed and scribbled in a notebook: *I wish. I wish. I wish I could burn you.* Then *I’m sorry.* And that became my story.

Until someday I’d sit in a Kenyan field, surrounded by people I barely knew—near a town known for crime and prostitutes—and in that place where there were very few directions to go, I’d listened to a woman who would cry as she spoke, and I pressed the dipped, curved button on my tape recorder.

Record.

Q: What is your perception of the 2007 election crisis?

A: It was bad. It was—a very bad time for us.

I heard my pen humming along the paper while I wrote. Simon said something else to her, and Miriam said something Simon didn’t repeat. I’ll never know that part of her story. Then she spoke again.

A: She says that she lost everything during that time. It’s been very hard.

I pressed my pen to the paper to make a round period. *Hard.*

Q: Did you support either candidate?

A: No.

Q: Why?
A: Because I didn’t think that either of them was interested in regular people. Neither of them cared about me.

Pause.

Rewind. Here’s the real story: There was a rosy bottle of wine sleeping underneath the deck. There were other empty bottles too, some that read Shiraz, Merlot, Malbac, some that read Coors or Rainier. There was a mug in his closet, lined crimson.

Here’s another story: a balding man squatted on his bedroom floor. He smelled like sunflower seeds, and he sewed a net of wire-knotted facts. He kept it afloat with corks and empty beer bottles and used it to trap his family. That white truck smelled like cigarettes and beer.

I’m sure that illusion belongs only to me.

A: I don’t care about the candidates. I don’t care about the election. Not this one or any future elections. They forgot us here. They abandoned us.

Miriam’s eyes stopped on a rock near my feet when she said this, and her lips almost stopped when she said the word abandoned. I have never been abandoned.

Q: Describe your experience during the 2007 election.

A: They said they would burn my house. They came and told me so, so I left.
Miriam turned so that her back faced me. Her shoulders heaved. Her shirt waved with the breeze, the same gust of air that blew across my skin. She sighed and moved her baby farther up her chest. His head peeked over her shoulder, his eyes closed. My heart leapt to my throat, and I swallowed, a sound that filled my ears, a sound it seemed everyone heard. She turned around, her eyes red. She nodded. Simon whispered, “continue.”

I always lied about my family.

Q: What do you think are the future prospects for Kenya?

A: Nothing, I don’t think anything about this.

Q: Why?

A: Why? Because no one in this country cares about anyone else. Look where we are. They’ve abandoned us here to forget us, even though we lost everything. The killers burnt my home to the ground, and they can’t even give me a house like these other people. They give homes to other people here but I don’t get one, even though I have all of these children, three children and no one to help me.

There’s something else, too. My mother disappeared during the violence, and I haven’t seen her since, and now every day when things are hard—really hard. Did I tell you that when it rains, my tent leaks, so we are wet, cold, and freezing? During this time, I remember my mother, that she can’t be here with me.
After the election, my sister was at the camp with us, but then one day she left and disappeared. Gone. She didn’t take her kids, just said that she was leaving for a bit and promised she’d come back, but she never came back and she never writes and I don’t know what happened to her. And so I have her kids. I have my own. I have her two and no mother. I have no food. Nothing, only the little bit they give me, and three kids to feed. Sometimes we go days without food, with nothing to eat. So you ask what is the future? This. This is the future. Nothing and that is what it will always be. Nothing.

Q: Pole. I’m sorry.

Miriam choked with tears. Words clustered the paper, and if I plotted their bell curve, it said I was here to find what was true, to find stories, to find a true story. Finally, a true story.

Q: What about me? What happened to me?
A: I haven’t gotten there yet.

Rewind. When my father set himself on fire, he unfurled his arms like he wanted to hug—his face blackened. Tendrils of flame crawled across his shirt, singed to rags. The flame’s blast dissolved his polyester pants and left two holes that revealed his thighs, bare and white. He stumbled toward our deck. We moved as though we were reflections buried in water, slow, too slow. The fire happened during a dinner party.
The fire hit fast, died quick, the only remains these little string-flames, edging his shirt, stifled quickly with a stream of cold water from the hose. My father, shaking, naked in the shower, swore that despite the gunpowder smell still heavy on his clothes and the smoky puffs of gray clouding his glasses that rested beside the sink, he was okay. Sixteen ounces of gunpowder to start the fire and he swore he was fine. The blast two-stories high. He was fine.

Someone younger than me cried. Debbie, a friend of the family, washed the dishes and stacked them beside the sink. My mother drove him to the hospital, and he looked alright except he was hairless and shaking and pink. In the days to come, he swelled like a wet sponge, wrapped in white gauze and bandages. IVs dangled from his bed like chains, and the words “Don’t let anyone see me,” came hot on his breath whenever he spoke to my Mom and me. Then, when she left, “Would you hide the cup in my closet, the one I used to drink wine?”

And when I finally found the cat, cowering beneath the deck, he was curled between these glass mines, his white fur touching the bottle’s labels, curled by age. My father sewed another story, another one for my mom to believe: drinking, not drinking, the truth tucked like those bottles under the wood, a story that never involved the word sorry. So I travelled to Africa to find a real story. To run away and find a real story. What is a real story?

It’s hard for me to tell where another person ends and where I begin. So when I write, it must be about me, though isn’t about me. And it must be about Miriam though it isn’t about her, and the same for Simon and my mother and father. It isn’t Portuguese, Bantu, Hindi, or Arabic, but it’s, all of them at the same time. I interviewed the IDPs, and the day
wore away into evening and into America and back to my school and my home with a leather couch and a golden border collie. Home. There was their story. That was my story. This one exists in between.
The Price of Tea

There were a few things Joseph knew that evening: he knew he didn’t want to go home. He knew that when the darkness ebbed, and the horizon beyond the expanse of copper roofs lightened, the sun was hours away from rising. And he knew that his steps were heavy. His mouth still tasted like liquor, and his head had begun to hurt. He couldn’t remember what they were saying about the election that evening, but Joseph remembered the energy that swelled through the group of men when the winner was announced, “Mwai Kibaki is president of Kenya. Mwai Kibaki is president of Kenya.” He still felt the disgust that rose between his teeth, as the men—packed together in a small shack—threw peanut shells at the television screen and booed. “Cheater,” Joseph had shouted. “Kibaki is a cheater. Kikuyus are cheaters,” wishing the peanut he flicked at the Electoral Commission Chairman’s nose was instead a bullet, a bullet for the rent prices Kikuyus charged, for their strangle-hold on the nation, for their—Joseph spit in the dirt—disgusting circumcision.

Joseph reached the corner, where the red dirt dipped then climbed, twisting through houses made from corrugated tin sheets, wooden poles, fabric, mud and rope, the houses stacked tightly together. The ground, like everywhere in Kibera, was covered in plastic bags, rusted cans, and wrappers, the amalgam ground slick from the passing of feet. The road wove between houses and shops, businesses and fruit stands, now empty. Beyond the small hill Joseph climbed, was his home, not far from the white high-rise apartments lining the horizon.

###
Belinda’s feet poked from the mattress’s end. She and her husband slept separated from their common room by a light blue sheet. Behind them, their two children curled together on a stack of old clothing, rags beyond the point of patching or sewing. Her third child was missing again, and, as she lay awake, stretched across her bed, Belinda remembered the conversation she’d had with her husband earlier that evening.

“It’s okay,” Simon had said. “I’m sure he’s fine.” He smiled and stared at his hands, which held a mug of tea. He always said this when Belinda asked about Joseph.

“But what about the election?” she had said. “This situation with Kibaki? Do you really think a young Luo like him should be running the streets when Kibaki has, obviously, stolen the election?”

“He’s not that little.”

“Don’t you care?”

Simon didn’t reply.

And so that night Belinda slept in bursts. She lurched awake every hour. She flopped from one side to another, always a lump or a pain that dug into her skin so hard she could barely close her eyes. Finally, late in the evening, when Joseph opened the door with a bang and stumbled into the house, Belinda leapt from her bed. She wrapped her arms around him and whispered, “Joseph, where were you?”

“Out. Doing work. Work until late.”

“It’s the morning, Joseph. How could you be gone so late? Didn’t you hear about the election? How could you ignore the election? Not to come home and let your parents know you were alright.” She shook her head.
He pressed a fistful of bills on the table, collapsed on the couch, and pushed his face into the cushions so his back faced her.

“Joseph—Joseph,” she said, but he remained silent. She poked him, but he didn’t move. He stunk like liquor. She watched as his breathing slowed and his shoulders relaxed, and when she was sure he was asleep, she returned to her bed and closed her eyes. Belinda sighed.

Belinda never felt like she slept, but in the morning, when she opened her eyes, her son was gone. The wrinkled bills had disappeared. She touched the sofa, the cushions still warm to her fingertips. She threw open the door and looked either way, but his green jersey shirt was gone. She held the door open for another second—it was so quiet. The roads were empty. She waited to hear the cluck of a chicken, a child crying. Nothing. Belinda shivered and shut the door.

She returned inside and knelt over the stove, adding leaves to the water and stirring until the smell of black tea filled the room. Simon awoke. He stood and stretched his thin arms, revealing his angular hip bones. She poured him a cup while he sat on the sofa. “Joseph came home last night,” Belinda said, watching Simon as she handed him the cup. “Then he left again this morning.”

“Did he go to work?” Simon rubbed the warm mug.

“I don’t think so. I don’t think he’s working. He smelled like alcohol.” Belinda crossed her arms. “The smell was all over his clothes and his breath. He stumbled around the house, then collapsed on the sofa, not to be woken by anything.” She stared at Simon, but he
didn’t reply. “He’s making trouble. I know it. I think he’s spending time with those older boys who come around here. I think they’ve formed some type of gang.”

Simon shook his head.

“You don’t think so?”

“I don’t know. Even if he had, what would we do?” Simon looked up.

“We would tell him to stay home, threaten him, take away that phone he got from someone, and then maybe we wouldn’t have these problems.” Belinda had already tried these things.

Simon shook his head. “I don’t think that would help. He has no school, no money. I don’t think these threats would make him less angry.” Simon sipped his tea. “He wants to hang out with other kids who are upset. There’s not a lot else for him. Maybe he can make a bit of money.”

Their daughter began to cry, and Belinda ran to the other side of the sheet. Simon sipped his tea, and ran his palm over his thin hair. He adjusted his position in his seat.

###

Joseph never meant to leave the wad of bills at the house. He crushed them into his pocket after he awoke to the sound of his phone vibrating on the couch beside his nose, where he had dropped it the night before. He knew he shouldn’t leave after the election—that his mother would be upset again—but he didn’t care.

The message was a text from a friend about meeting somewhere, with someone, for something. His eyes still blurred with sleep and beer, Joseph only guessed where and what,
but at the bottom the message read clearly: “Kibaki should die.” Joseph stood and closed the door gently. It made a low clang, quiet enough not to wake his mother.

Dawn lined the horizon pale purple. An old man wandered the street and smacked the ground with his cane. Joseph punched a text to his friend Ochola, asking for directions and walking where he believed he would find this place—some man named John who lived there—and he moved fast so he might arrive on time. Joseph stumbled over a ditch struck through the middle of the road, but he caught himself quickly—his feet accustomed to Kibera, where the road was torn in strips, punctured with holes. The streets weren’t crowded. The morning held a pungent, sweet odor, but he barely noticed. His mouth was filled with the scummy taste of alcohol from the night before, when one of his friends had waved a panga in the air and threatened to cut them open, all of them, the Kikuyus. Joseph laughed to himself. They deserved it.

Farther down the road, a few men wandered the street. They glanced at him, but Joseph, caught in the glow of the screen, didn’t notice. If he had, he would have assumed their look held respect, admiration, a glance they never would have given him when he walked as a child with his mother and father. Now he had a cell phone. He had a clean, green jersey tee like the football players wore and almost-white sneakers.

Thirty minutes later, he arrived at a house crammed between stores and more homes, the shack made of rusted metal scraps tied to wooden poles, a structure that formed sharply angled holes in the walls. A red blanket hung from a wooden rod served as the door, so Joseph rapped his knuckles against the chilly metal walls. The cold stung his fingers. The metal rattled. The place trapped a thick smell of decay that caught in Joseph’s throat, mixing
with the liquor that still boiled hot in his stomach. He wished he was back at Ochola’s, drinking beer and imagining the ways they’d make Kikuyus regret this election. He shifted his weight between his feet.

“Karibou,” a voice shouted. Joseph drew back the door to reveal a pinched room, dark despite the large gaps between the walls’ metal scraps, a room where a man with long, wiry arms sat in a wooden chair that faced the door, his elbows on his knees. A slim streak of light hit his forearms. Joseph’s eyes followed as something curved through this ray of sun, and he noticed a woman crouched behind her husband, her hand returning to her knees. The room was almost bare, just two seats, and a mattress with a large hole in its cover where the stuffing poked through. Joseph shook his head, dismal, even for Kibera.

“Karibou,” the man said again and motioned to a chair near the door. Joseph sat. Despite the pointed sunlight streaks that cut through the room, the place felt stale, and the smell he noticed outside grew stronger. He fingered the phone in his pocket, hoping to feel it vibrate.

“Do you have money for me?” The man smiled. His teeth were very white, very clean.

Joseph nodded and pulled the bundle of bills from his pants and pushed it into the man’s hand, and the man’s fingers flicked through the paper, while he smacked his lips after he whispered each number. He folded the stack and shoved it deep in his pants. He extended his hand. “John.”

“Joseph.”
The woman squatting on the floor glanced between the two men. Joseph coughed then scooted forward in his seat. He coughed again.

“Do you know about the election?” John asked.

“Yes, last night I was out drinking at Ochola’s, with a few others—people you might know if you know Ochola. He’s the one who told me to bring you the money. We watched it there.” Joseph threw his hand in the air, a motion like he was throwing something. “I just can’t believe it. The Kikuyus won’t let us have anything.”

The woman shifted between her feet. She was huddled over what looked like coals, though Joseph couldn’t tell because of the darkness. He glanced at John and traced the long brown stains curling up the white fabric of John’s shirt. The shirt was missing two buttons.

John rolled his tongue over his teeth.

Joseph continued, “Kibaki stole this election. It’s stupid. It’s just more of the same. Everything. Always for one tribe, the Kikuyus.” He kicked his foot against the ground. “I’m tired of it.”

“Sarah, why don’t you make some tea for our friend?” John said.

She reached into the darkness, grasping a few sticks by her side.

Joseph ran his hand up the arm of the chair and a small sliver shot through his finger. He jerked away. His finger throbbed. He heard a man outside talking, just quiet enough that Joseph couldn’t understand what he was saying. “The Kikuyus won’t even give us a chance,” Joseph said.

Sarah pushed a flickering match toward the kindling, and as John leaned close to speak, his damp breath lingered in the air. “Ever since Kenyatta, this has been a Kikuyu
country. Some of us, we don’t have anything. Not many things.” He gestured to the walls, the
two chairs, the fire that began to crackle behind him, the mattress. “What should we do,
though?”

“We should protest, show them what it’s like to be this angry. Show them what it
feels like to have nothing.”

“I was thinking that exact thing,” John said and leaned back in his seat. “It’s a good
thing you came here, Joseph. We’re thinking the same things. Have a cup of tea.” Sarah
handed Joseph a mug, and John stood and put his phone to his ear. “I will do some calling.”
He spoke to Joseph as they waited, the phone tucked to his shoulder. “The problem is that
some of us are hungry. For some of us it’s time to eat, you know? It’s time for us to have a
turn to gain. These Kikuyus, they’ve taken everything.”

Joseph finished the mug of bitter tea while John spoke. The smoke now stretched to
each corner of the house, and Joseph wondered how they could cook this way, why they,
Luos, had to cook this way. Certainly someone had died from the fire, the fire’s fumes. Sarah
leaned closer, as if in response to his thought, and whispered, “It’s our turn too.” Her voice
was so quiet he almost wasn’t sure she had spoken. She rocked back to her place and stared
at the fire as though she hadn’t, and before Joseph could ask, John slapped his phone shut
and turned to him. “I have some ideas for our protest,” he said. John motioned toward the
door, and Joseph followed John through the red blanket, wishing he had listened to John’s
conversation. Joseph felt his heart beat in his throat. He thought about what they might say,
what they might do, and his shoulders tightened.
Outside the street was crowded. More people than earlier, and those they saw didn’t rush to work, to open their shops like they did on a normal day. Some lingered in the same place, or they paced back and forth, and Joseph didn’t smell the warm corn flour baking or see the women walking their children to school; there were very few women or children this morning. Groups of men gathered, their backs to the street. The men’s talk, when it happened to drift Joseph’s way, punctured the air with the same words: election, Kibaki, and Kikuyu, the same thoughts that had clung to Joseph’s mind since the previous evening. The smoky smell didn’t leave his mouth, though they walked further and further away from John’s house. His skin prickled.

They turned a corner, and Joseph’s heart quickened when ahead he saw that a group of young men blocked the street, their bodies—he smelled their sweat immediately—wound together, shirts stuck to one another. They were pressed against the metal buildings, arms rubbing. Their voices sounded like a hum that passed through the shifting mass of people. They pointed and moved their hands. They shook their heads. Their eyes narrowed. John walked straight toward them, red, orange, purple, white shirts, and Joseph followed. A look hung low in these men’s eyes—some he knew, some he didn’t—and their shoulders stretched taut, their muscles clenched. Joseph hated Kibaki. He felt his blood churning.

Joseph hung at the edge of the group. There were only about twenty young men packed between the tilted houses. John stood for a moment, then ducked through the men clustered together, leaving Joseph hanging on the periphery. John clapped the men’s backs, stopped and spoke intently, gesturing with his hands, while Joseph watched and waited for something.
The man standing beside him turned and said to Joseph, “It’s disgusting, isn’t it?” He looked to be about eighteen and wore a red ball cap.

“Very upsetting,” Joseph said.

A tall man standing next to the first turned around and added, “Kikuyus. Everything, always for the Kikuyus. Kikuyus and Kibaki.” He shook his head. This man was missing a tooth.

“This slum,” the man with the red hat gestured toward the ground. “We don’t have a chance right now, not one chance. Even if we worked hard every day, they’d still keep us down here. No matter what we do or how hard we work, there will always be someone above us, checking to make sure we are Kikuyus before they let us have a real job or a real home. If you aren’t a Kikuyu, you can lose your job like that. Tribalism.” The man clapped his hands.

“I know,” Joseph said. “It has to change.”

“If you are a Kikuyu, they’ll keep you around no matter what.” The red-hatted man continued. “You can do anything. And if you think I’m imagining this, or just pretending, I’ll give you a real example. My brother worked for a newspaper, and they weren’t making as much money as they used to, having trouble selling the paper and getting people to subscribe, so one day they decided to let go some of their employees. Now, do they let go the Kikuyus, those who had shown up late and let the newspaper run with errors, those who had been caught talking on the phone during the time they were supposed to be working, or do they let go the Luos, those who worked hard and had not made any mistakes in the whole time they’d worked there? You can guess who they let go already, but I’ll tell you anyway. They let go the Luos. So my brother now has no job and he lives in Kibera, in my home, with me and my
wife, his wife and his family. He worked hard and received this, a punishment just because of our tribe.”

“What do you think?” the man who was missing a tooth asked Joseph.

“It’s not fair.” Joseph punched his fist through the air. “Kikuyus.”

The man with the red hat nodded. “Not fair. You know, we deserve a chance too, one of ours to be president so that we can be on top for a little while. I have a wife. A family. Now my brother lives with me, but I just do cash work when I can. It’s not enough.”

“Me too,” a man in front of them turned around and spoke. He looked older, maybe thirty. “I have five children to feed and a roof that leaks.”

“My brothers and sisters sleep on a pile of old clothing,” Joseph said. “We have to walk two miles for fresh, overpriced water.”

“Tsk, it’s terrible,” the older man said. “This wouldn’t happen if we were Kikuyus.”

“It is terrible,” the man who was missing a tooth said. “But I have another terrible story for you.” The group they had formed looked at him and he cleared his throat. “Another story about Kikuyus. I grew up in Nairobi. Not Kibera, but real Nairobi, where everyone lives boxed together in apartments, and there’s real running water and toilets. I lived there with my three brothers and one sister and my mother who stayed at home and my father who worked all day at the grocery. So one day—one day three of us were playing in the streets, my brother, my sister, and me. My older brother was much older than us so he didn’t play. We were playing kicking a ball back and forth, pretending we were playing football, and these boys came along, five of them. They were bigger than us, and we knew, because they had nice clothes and thick arms and they were short but stuck their noses high, that they were
Kikuyus, but we didn’t say anything, nothing to them, we just kept playing. We knew the Kikuyus wouldn’t want to play with us Luo, so we left them alone.

“And one of these boys, he came close to me, and he pushed me into the ground. ‘Hey Luo,’ he said. ‘What are you doing on our street,’ but it wasn’t their street. It was a Luo street in a Luo district, and even so, the streets belong to everybody, but two of the others pushed my brother, and then they started saying things to my sister—things I don’t want to repeat.” The man looked down. “We tried to stand, but the boys they came and punched us and beat us, while the others they—they took my sister, and they did things, you know? She screamed.” He looked away for a second. “And when they were done we had to hold her arms and lead her home. This happens when you are a Luo.

“So we ran home and we told my mother, and she called my father, and they decided to tell the police so that these boys could be prosecuted. They could be punished for what they did to my sister, who is not the same since. My parents called the police office and the police said, ‘Oh, how terrible. We will try and find these boys.’ But three days passed, no word, so we called the police again, and they said, ‘Oh, yes, we haven’t forgotten. We are still looking.’ So we waited, and then another week passed and so we called, and this time my parents asked to speak to the police chief. And the woman said he wasn’t in but he would call back. But he never called back, so finally they walked down to the police station, and they demanded to see the chief, and do you know what he did? This big, fat Kikuyu chief laughed. He was even holding a sandwich at the time, laughing, and he said that it was just little kids having fun. Then he took a big bite and laughed with his mouth open. My family
needed to have a sense of humor because the Kikuyus were just being kids. He said that. Then he asked my parents if they even liked children.

“No, you think this fat Kikuyu would have said such a thing if we weren’t Luos? I’ll tell you another thing too. These little boys, they came back to that street, and they walked back and forth and stuck out their bellies like they were proud they had raped my sister, and when we called the police again and said, ‘Here they are. The criminals, they are here. Come get them,’ the police didn’t do anything. Not one thing.” The man without a tooth stopped. He turned and walked away from the group. He wiped his eyes with his hands.

Joseph shivered. He remembered a comment Ochola had made the night before, “All Kikuyus are guilty,” guilty for the Luos’ inconsistent jobs, guilty for their lack of land, guilty for their president’s loss. Joseph repeated it.

The man with the hat agreed.

“All of them, guilty,” the older man said. He shouted it louder so the man who was walking away could hear, and the man with his back turned raised a fist and nodded.

Ochola was right. All of them, all of the Kikuyus, were guilty. During the time he spoke with these men, the crowd swelled. Their voices had grown louder. The day was becoming hotter.

Someone shouted “Forty-one against one,” and Joseph recognized the phrase from Odinga’s, his candidate’s (his friends’ candidate’s) campaign. Forty-one tribes against one, the words pulsed through the crowd in seconds. Joseph said the chant and it felt like the words trapped their voices, tightly binding them into a single body, hot and damp with rage. The men around him stomped the ground. Joseph looked for John, and when he caught sight
of John’s shirt, he watched as John criss-crossed his way to the front of the group, stopping to talk, pointing a finger, and kicking the plastic wrappers, scattered across the ground, with his sandal. In the sunlight Joseph now saw the real filth of John’s shirt, the long brown stains he’d suspected he saw when they sat in the house together. His pants were almost as dirty, and when John turned sideways to move between two groups, Joseph saw the pants had an unpatched hole in the left knee. Joseph heard John’s voice shouting above the rest, their bodies aglow with sweat, and John’s eyes, when Joseph caught them, flickered hot like the fire that had warmed their tea.

They pumped their fists in the air, and Joseph did too. His chest smoldered. He thought of the slum and the plastic garbage that skid under their feet, the same outfits that they wore day after day, the smell he noticed when he took his clothes off, then put them back on again. They didn’t have anything, not the land covered in trash, nor the free water that poured through their leaking roofs, not an education, nor a future. He wanted something better than this, so he shouted.

And this is what Joseph tried to think, but he also imagined his family, the legacy of his parents: his mother, his weak, quiet father, their shack with the hole and the sun that woke him at four in the morning, the house built upon ground that sunk during the rainy season, the thin blankets they received from Oxfam, blankets that never covered them fully, his brother and sister rolling on the floor just like he had, like little termites, how his mother’s brother lived in the city, with running water and food from Naukmatt. His uncle taught at the University and wore a clean suit ironed crisp every day, and his children lived in a house that smelled like flowers and detergent. That could have been him, Joseph, living like a Kikuyu,
but his mother didn’t marry a Kikuyu, like her brother did. Instead his parents had given him this, these poor Luos that had nothing, no connections, not anything. His family could have had food and expensive clothes and running water, but his mother and father gave their children a road that smelled like the shit people threw from their windows. They and the Kikuyus. He had seen the Kikuyu’s wealth and knew it was their fault, his parents and the Kikuyus, that he lived this way, that he didn’t have money. He pumped his fist as he shouted.

An hour passed. Their numbers grew larger while they kicked the dirt, the dust covering their shins in a thin red skin. They spoke of the ways they had been cheated by Kikuyus. They shouted about Kikuyus, then about Kibaki. Joseph wasn’t sure how they started a new idea, but he repeated whatever they told him, whatever the men next to him shouted. His shirt was soaked with sweat. It stuck to his chest. When Joseph glanced to the front of the group, he realized that John was leading them, far enough in front that Joseph could see him when John waved his fist through the air and yelled, “This must change.”

The group cheered, “Change.”

“We will win whatever way we can. We must show them.”

Another cheer.

“How many times have you wondered why you were born this way, in this filth? You were born with nothing and had you been born a Kikuyu, you would have had everything.”

John pointed to the apartment buildings in the distance. “Everything, and instead you were born to this—this poverty.”

They cheered again.
“Yes, poverty. Where you wait and wait for work, and then you don’t get any. Where the devil makes you pay for the water God gives you from the sky. Where you want a turn to eat like the Kikuyus, but even sugar costs more than you make in one day, and then they take the only thing you have, your only chance to make gains. They take this election, and they cheat.”

The word cheat was followed by booing, and they stomped their feet.

“Yes, exactly. Cheat. The Kikuyus cheat, and we want to eat.”

The crowd cheered, “We want to eat.”

“It’s time that we protest,” John said.

“Protest,” they repeated.

Kikuyus took that man’s brother’s job, they raped that other man’s sister, they were the reason Joseph had nothing, the reason his family had nothing. He pictured his aunt, perched beside her breakfast table, sinking lump after lump of sugar into her tea. Offering Joseph cookies, as if they fell from the sky, as if they were free, telling him most of the other tribes were just lazy—that’s why they couldn’t have anything. “Protest,” Joseph shouted as loud as he could.

“Protest them,” the crowd yelled.

“They’ve taken our education, our futures, our ability to have a successful life, so we must show them,” John shouted. “Protest, yes.” He paused for a second. Joseph felt sweat rolling down his cheeks. The crowd looked to John, their breath held beneath their tongues. “And then, we will kill them. We will kill these Kikuyus,” John shouted.

“Kill the Kikuyus.” They screamed, cheered, and shouted.
“Protest. Tell them in words or in blood what we think,” John said, and he shook a panga overhead—Joseph didn’t know where John had found the machete. Then John ran. The group followed, braiding between the houses on either side, all of them spreading toward the district they knew held Kikuyus.

Joseph ran behind John. He would kill somebody. He knew it. He quickened his pace to a run and followed John’s brown-streaked T-shirt through the streets, farther and farther away from his family.
Charlie pauses, feeling every click of the volume dial, feeling exactly how loud each rising decibel blasts through his computer speakers. *Eight. Nine. Ten.* When the music thumps loud enough to rattle the pens and pencils splayed across his desk, he almost can’t hear Conner, but he still smells meatballs and marinara, Conner’s favorite, simmering downstairs.

Charlie despises garlic and basil. He doesn’t want to write this email to his pen pal Joseph, and, no matter how hard he tries to make it sound nice, to make it sound smart, what he wrote appears exactly stupid on his computer screen.

*Dear Joseph,*
*Hi, I’m Charlie. I’m 15. I like skateboarding. My Physical Geography teacher told me to write this email. Everyone in our class is writing one. She said she met you this summer, researching for her novel. Her name is Ms. Bruce. What’s it like being an Internally Displaced Person? Things are okay in the US, probably really different than Kenya.*
*What’s it like there?*
*You can write back, but if you don’t it’s okay.*
*Charlie*

He doesn’t press send. Charlie scoots his chair back and thunks his head into the crook of his arm. There it is again. Conner’s low growl, the huffing sound Conner makes when his mind repels his body like two negative magnets, swells above Lil Wayne’s singsong voice.

“I can’t do my homework with that noise,” Charlie shouts at the floor. He tugs his math book close, his head still couched in his elbow. He feels the papers tucked in the pages
and props the book open. They’re doing fractions. Fractions. Charlie hates fractions more than any single thing in mathematics.

“Fuck it,” he mutters, and his mother opens the door. “Charlie. Dinner. I’ve shouted that five times now.” Hearing Lil Wayne explain, *I’m the pussy monster*, she cringes slightly. “And please, turn off the music before you leave.”

###

Seated at the table, Charlie drinks orange juice. So does Conner. Their father crouches over his seat as though he’s afraid to sit fully. He has that look, like he sat at work an extra hour and a half today, hunched over his keyboard typing data into a spreadsheet.

Charlie’s mother glides into her seat and asks, “How was work?” She gives a small laugh, though no one said anything funny.

Charlie’s dad replies, “Great.” It’s never anything else, just “great.”

Conner fists the handle of his spoon, which looks like a large, plastic ice cream scoop. His arm trembles as he lifts a noodle strand, soaked red with sauce, to his lips.

“So,” their father asks. He swallows a mouthful of pasta. “What did you learn in school?”

Charlie rolls a meatball across his plate, “Nothing.”

“Nothing? Sure you learned something.”
Conner rocks forward, makes a low sound, and twists his neck. His hand jumps toward his plate. “Conner what did you learn?” Charlie asks. He pushes the meat to the plate’s farthest corner, and Conner watches him. “Yeah, exactly. Nothing.”

“You have something to say son? Say it to me.” Bill slams his fork on the table. “Say it.”

Charlie watches Conner lower his spoon, Conner’s blue eyes watching Charlie.

“Say it.”

Charlie stares at his food. He scratches his fork against his plate.

“Fine, then don’t say anything.”

His mother coughs, then laughs. Her eyes betray that she isn’t smiling. “Bill, Charlie says they’re writing pen pals in Kenya,” she says. “That’s something he did today.” She touches the ends of her bobbed hair.

“That sounds interesting. Have you heard anything back from them?”

“I haven’t sent the email yet.”

“Well, maybe you could send him one of your drawings.”

“You should,” Nancy says. “Maybe you could send the one you did of Conner a couple years ago?”

Charlie doesn’t reply.
Nancy glances at Bill, who swallows. He and Charlie reach for their glasses almost in sync. The fridge hums. Their forks scrape their plates.

“So personally,” she says, “I think it would be great if Charlie and Conner took an art class together. Conner’s counselor had him paint the other day. He did this wonderful picture of Max. It was really amazing. I showed it to you, didn’t I, Charlie?”

Charlie shrugs. “Yeah, I mean, it looked like a cat, pointy ears and everything.”

“How old do you think they are Nancy, three?” Bill gulps his water.

Conner stops eating and stares at the garland of pansies designed on his plate.

“No, well, I’m just thinking that if they took art together, maybe they could talk about the same—I mean, do some of the same things.”

“Conner doesn’t talk yet, Nancy.” Bill’s tightens his grip on his glass. “In case you forgot, you’re taking him to Dr. Erickson next Wednesday.” “Not art therapy.” Bill forces a smile, and he turns to Conner, and his shoulders ease. His eyes soften. “But at least he’s trying.” Bill signs “good work” with his fingers.

Nancy turns and asks Charlie, “How would you like to take a class with your brother?”

Charlie shakes his head vigorously and mouths the word, no. No way in hell, he thinks.
Conner rocks forward in his seat, so close it seems like he will topple onto his salad. Bill leaps from his chair and grabs his son. He pulls Conner back into his seat.

“Jesus,” Bill mutters. He walks to the kitchen for another fork.

“Fine,” Nancy says, and she grabs the can of parmesan and pumps it over her plate. “I guess that no one gives a shit about Conner except for me.” Flakes of cheese fly through the air, pelting her spaghetti.

When Charlie looks up, Conner is staring at him, and it’s almost like facing a mirror. Almost. The twins look alike, blond hair, blue eyes, except Conner’s face twists into a grimace. His hands curl. His body forms hinges where there should be curves. He hunches forward, shoulders pulled to his ears. I’m a piece of shit, Charlie thinks—neither for the first nor the last time. Outside someone shouts. The fridge rattles as it starts to churn ice. The cat taps across the floor, and Bill stands, turns on the television, and returns to the table.

Charlie writes about the disease in his email. “P.S. My brother has cerebral palsy.” Then he presses send.

###

The email comes in two months. It comes with its own subject heading, which reads: “Hello Charlie!,” not “RE: Hi From America.”

Dear Charlie,
Greetings from Kenya. I met your teacher last summer. She’s nice and said someone might be connecting with me from America. Karibou, welcome! I’m pleased to meet you.
I don’t know much about Cerebral Palsy, but I’m sorry to hear about your brother. Things are very hard here too. We have very little food and no money. I go to school with all the children in the IDP camp. We go to the same place with a teacher, Mrs. Njewa. She’s very nice, but there are many of us, and I think there are times we make her feel crazy. Sometimes I help teach with the younger children. The IDPs lost many things during the post-election violence. Do you go to school? If so, what is your favorite subject?

Sincerely,
Joseph

Charlie sees the message during English—when their class meets in the computer lab—the message a break from watching the cursor blink on his blank Word document. The prompt his teacher gave them was: “Write about the one thing you wish you could change,” and Charlie would rather not write about anything so he reads the email three times. His friend Owen leans over Charlie’s shoulder and reads.

“Huh, you heard back from somebody. That’s cool. I haven’t gotten anything. Seriously, what a pointless assignment, anyway, as if these people care about what we have to say to them. They’re probably just trying to survive, like that guy.” Owen points at the screen.

“Yeah.”

Charlie watches Owen’s eyes move down the email and rest on the word “palsy.”

“Hey, how is your brother?” Owen asks. “I see him around sometimes, but I don’t talk to him.”

“He’s fine.” Charlie clicks back to the Word document, where he should be typing. No one really talks to Conner anymore, not even Charlie.
“I know you guys were going to try some new therapy, like talking computers?”

“Yeah, that went alright.” Charlie shrugs. “My dad thinks it was a waste of money. He says the therapy doesn’t work if the kid doesn’t use it.” Charlie says the words in imitation of his father—he even moves his hand over his hair the way his father does—and Owen laughs. “Now my mom wants me to do more stuff with him because she thinks the school doesn’t do a good job helping him. It’s really annoying. Like she doesn’t want to take care of Conner anymore.” Charlie types a few words onto the page. “But who cares, really?”

“Yeah, I mean, isn’t it her job to take care of him?”

“Exactly.”

###

When he arrives home that afternoon, Charlie listens, like he always does, for his mother and brother, but he doesn’t hear anything except the dryer’s clack and whirl, so he grabs a bag of Cheetos and trots upstairs to his room, his computer, where he types a reply to Joseph’s message. Cheeto grease dusts the keys.

Charlie begins like he’s writing an IM message to Owen but after a few words, he pauses. Charlie realizes Joseph might not understand—maybe lol means something different in Swahili—so he deletes and starts over.

*Dear Joseph,*

*Being an IDP sounds hard. Things aren’t that bad here. We definitely don’t need basic stuff like food and water like you do.*
I go to school a lot, and my favorite subject is Art. I’m good at drawing, but I’m pretty bad at painting because my paintings always end up looking muddy. I don’t really like school, but I do my homework anyway to try and help for my family. What about you, what’s your favorite subject? Do you get different subjects or are you too busy helping with the children?

Having a brother like Conner is tough because everyone always worries about him. I know it’s not his fault, but he definitely gets all the attention, especially from my mom.

I feel bad for my mom. She’s always taking care of him. Even when he goes to school, she’s got the housework, the cooking and cleaning and other things. She doesn’t have much of a life. She wants me to help with Conner but I just can’t. She doesn’t understand. I used to help, but I don’t anymore. Do you think I should? I’d think that for you worrying about Conner seems pretty silly. Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Sincerely,
Charlie

The downstairs door creaks. Charlie hears Conner’s feet drag and shuffle, his mom’s footsteps brisk and loud. Nancy clears her throat before she calls up the stairs, “Charlie, are you home?”

Charlie types WTF!!!!!!! in his letter, then deletes it. “Yeah.”

“Come downstairs, please. I’m taking you somewhere.”

“I have homework.”

“I’ve seen what you do for homework. You play on the computer and listen to rap music. You sleep on your desk. Come downstairs. I’ll give you to the count of three. One.”

“Can’t it wait?”

“No, it can’t wait. Two.”

“You know the whole counting thing stops working when you leave the third grade?”
“Are you coming, or will I have to come up there? Three.”

“Fine.” He sighs and leaves the room. Their calico cat, stands at the door, and Charlie bends down to pet her, sprinkling orange crumbs on Max’s back.

His mom is standing in the middle of the foyer. She holds Conner’s arm in hers. Conner bends toward her like a parenthesis, his weight resting against her jeans, her green turtleneck, his head angled to the door. He folds his arm into his chest and signs “hello” to Charlie before his hand jumps to his hip. Charlie stands on the stairs, right where he can see both of them.

“Yeah?” he asks. Nancy pulls Conner closer.

“Come on. We’re leaving.”

“Where are we going?”

“You need to help me with grocery shopping.” Her voice wavers.

“Why?”

“Because I’m sick of carrying the bags by myself and picking out things that no one eats.”

Charlie doesn’t move.
“Look, if you want me to stop treating you like a third grader, you can behave like you’re fifteen. Conner helps me grocery shop every time I go.” Come on, she motions. “You haven’t done a single chore in over a week.”

“This is stupid,” Charlie complains, but he follows her out the door and into the passenger side of their sedan, the seats shagged in green fabric.

###

When they pass the grocery and his mother doesn’t turn, Charlie starts to talk, but Nancy interrupts him. “Charlie, I know you’re not going to like this.” She exhales. “But we’re not going grocery shopping. I’m taking you to an art class.”

“What? Why would you do that? Why would you trick me?”

“After school, with Conner.” She smiles slightly. “Conner’s therapist thinks it should help him express himself, and after that fiasco with Dr. Erickson—”

“Why would you do that? Why would you sign him up? He can’t even do art. I do art.”

“He’s right behind you Charlie. Don’t talk about Conner like he isn’t here.”

Charlie looks back, and Conner is staring out the window, watching the houses tick by. Red. Blue. Green. “Wait till I tell Dad you went ahead and did it. He’s going to be so pissed. Remember what Dad said? I shouldn’t have to take care of Conner. Period. He does his job and I do mine. You do yours. Yours is taking care of Conner, remember? End of
discussion.” Charlie hacks his hand through the air, a motion he saw his father make when he said this exact thing. End. Chop. Charlie’s face burns red, and when he feels a tear roll down his cheek, he wipes it away with his sleeve.

“You’re upset,” Nancy says. She glances at him. “I know, but I think this will help us. It will bring us back together, as a family.” Her voice trembles.

“How the hell is art good for our family?”

“I don’t know—I don’t know what else to do. I don’t know how to help him. I don’t know what happened with you two, what made you not like him anymore. I mean, it’s because you’re older now, right? That’s the thing? You got too old for your brother?”

Conner doesn’t reply.

“I still remember when you were little. Remember how you made that card for me for Mother’s Day? Remember how you drew it and Conner helped with the paint? ‘For our Supermom, a mom who can do anything. Love Conner and Charlie,’ you wrote that, and then you helped Conner sign his name.” She exhales. “That was my family. Now all I have are these men who disappear, to their rooms, to their offices, to their schools, as though if they don’t see him, then Conner just goes away. As if we can all just go away and forget each other.” Nancy glances in the rearview mirror. “Conner, I’m so sorry honey, but why do I have to be the one who cares? Why does everyone get the luxury of hiding their love in their art, in their homework, in their actuarial tables and their spreadsheets, and I stare it in the face every fucking day?”
Charlie starts to speak, but she cuts him off. “I’m sick of being the only one who
though you want to listen to rap music and skateboard with your friends, eat all the chips in
the house. You will care about your brother. That’s how it’s going to help this family.” She
smacks her palm against the steering wheel.

Charlie glances at Conner in the rearview mirror. Conner’s eyes are fixed on
Charlie’s, but his face is turned toward the window. Though they’ve heard about this card
almost a thousand times, they’ve never seen her act this way.

“Do you want to do art with Charlie?” his mother asks.

Conner signs yes. He looks away.

“I can’t believe this. This is such bullshit. Why do you have to make me feel bad?
Don’t I feel bad enough already?” Nancy stops in front of a pink office building and turns to
Charlie, the corners of her eyes still wet when she begins to speak, but Charlie interrupts her.
“Fine. I’ll do it, but don’t expect me to enjoy it,” Charlie says as he shoves the door open.

Nancy rubs her silver heart-shaped necklace with her fingers. “Thank you Charlie.”

***

The therapist, a woman in a long, teal sweater, cups Charlie’s hand in hers. She
introduces herself as Eva. Her soft palms, her wafting voice, her brightly colored clothes that
float like the shell of a lantern, remind Charlie of the old-fashioned song his parents used to
listen to (back when they waltzed together in the kitchen, and his mother sipped a glass of red wine). “She’s like a Moonglow,” Charlie whispers, as much to himself as to his brother.

After his mother leaves, the families collect in a circle, one parent to one child. The parents smile at one another, then look away. A woman plays with the seam of her pants. Someone else adjusts her sleeves. They’re moms mostly, one dad. They wear clothes from the same year of unfashionable, turtlenecks and sweaters; their kids slope at the same, slightly crooked angles into their parent’s shoulders. These adults remind Charlie of his mom, her way of smiling and not smiling at once, the way she moves Conner with her elbows and her hips and lifts with her knees. Charlie is the only sibling.

“Circle around,” Eva says, motioning the circle of tables and chairs. “It’s time for giving introductions. Please take a seat.”

When they’ve finished saying their names, Eva explains, “For the next few sessions we’re going to paint masks. This is a process that will help you externalize emotions. It will show on the outside what you’re feeling within. Is everyone okay with that?” Someone nods. Charlie isn’t listening. Since he introduced himself and Conner, Charlie has been daydreaming about Joseph helping teach the younger children, what it would be like to be one person responsible for everyone, everything. “Alright, everyone I want you to start and just breathe.”

“Breathe,” Eva repeats. “Today, we’re going to try and identify the difference between our roles in life, our externalized self, and our personal thoughts and feelings. So I want you to close your eyes.” Everyone closes their eyes except Charlie. “Breathe, and listen
to your thoughts.” Charlie scans the parents’ faces, their eyes closed, squinted, and focused, as though they’re solving a long division equation: divide the external by the internal, and the remainder is their inner I.

“Don’t try to block any of your emotions,” Eva continues, “even the ugly or sad feelings. Listen. Listen to your quiet self, the one you keep hidden down low, the one who is kinder, more sensitive than the person who you typically portray. We’re bringing this inside voice out into the open. Listen because this is the person, idea, or emotion you will portray on the mask’s face.” Everyone in the room breathes deeply. “When you’ve finished listening, open your eyes and find a comfortable place where you can paint.” Each couple is seated at their own table, so no one moves. Instead they turn toward their bundles of brushes and cups of water. “Be sure you’re painting over the newspaper,” Eva adds, when she hands them a papier-mâché mask with a tiny, rosebud mouth and wide eyes.

Charlie takes his time painting. He slaps the black paint on the mask, then scrubs his brush back and forth over the same spot. He stares at the clock. Next to him, Conner struggles to grasp the brush with his fist, and his hand lurches toward the brown face, dropping an orange gob on the newspaper.

Eva lingers beside their table. She leans over them to examine their paintings. “Beautiful work boys,” she says. “But, Charlie, it looks like your brother needs help guiding his brush. Will you help him?”

Conner shakes his head and mumbles no. He drops the brush again, covering the handle in orange paint, then grabs it, and Charlie reaches for his brother’s hand without
realizing: that he’s forgotten the feel of his brother’s skin, that it’s been years since he
touched Conner in a way other than the occasional brush of their shoulders or playful shove.

Conner’s knobby muscles extend beneath Charlie’s fingers. Charlie shudders. He tries
to move his hand so the shiver seems natural. Soon the mask’s brown face becomes brighter,
brilliant, fluorescent orange as the brush sweeps over its skin. It’s brash orange, without
apologies, like Charlie wishes his mask could be. But Charlie is painting black.

Nancy picks them up at six, before Bill arrives home at quarter-till-seven for dinner,
late, like he is almost every evening.

“How was it?” she asks in the car.


“Eva told me you were making masks. How was that?”

“It was fine.”

“What do your masks look like?”

“Mine’s black.”

Conner motions that his is orange.

Charlie smiles. “There was someone there who painted her mask with glitter, nothing
else just glitter.” He laughs. “I guess that was her inner self.” Nancy looks in the rearview
mirror, and Conner is also smiling. Charlie follows her look. “Conner did really well too, Mom. You should have seen how good he painted his mask.”

Conner signs, “You too.” He smiles. Their faces look so similar when they’re happy.

“Nah, mine’s pretty boring, just some designs.”

Conner shakes his head, no. He signs “good.”

Nancy parks the car in front of the house, and Charlie jumps out. Nancy asks him to help his brother, and Charlie opens the back door and unbuckles the silver strap that holds Conner in his padded seat. Charlie grabs Conner’s arm and leads him inside. Nancy waits. She stares at the receipts scattered across the console, the floor, the granola bar wrappers. The car smells like Gatorade and peanuts, and she remembers the time she dropped the boys off on the last day of music camp, three years ago, and Charlie led Conner through the group of children who cheered for them. Fifteen minutes later she walks inside.

Seated at the dinner table, no one mentions the class. It’s as if—all three of them feel it—speaking about the masks might ruin the glow that Eva sprinkled over the boys, the halo of orange that makes Charlie reply when Bill asks about his day.

That night in bed Nancy mentions the therapy to Bill. “Great,” he mutters. He says this and smashes his pillow over his face, in order to fall asleep while Nancy reads. “You know how I feel about that shit,” he mumbles through the down. When Nancy mentions that Charlie seemed to like helping his brother—that Charlie walked Conner to the house—the fist that grips the pillow loosens its hold, slightly.
The next email arrives quickly, almost two weeks. Again Joseph has changed the subject, this time to “Kenyan greetings!”

Dear Charlie,

Please, don’t worry about writing about your brother. I know this must be difficult for you. For me it was hard to say how I thought and felt to my parents. Up until the violence, I ignored them. I didn’t spend much time at home, and I regretted it. You might think about this when you decide whether or not to help with Conner.

I have a younger brother and a younger sister. This isn’t very much for Kenya. Many of my friends have seven or eight brothers and sisters.

My favorite subject is math.

What does it look like in Stillwater? Here it’s flat with hills on all sides. It’s very hot, and the ground is dry and not good for planting corn. Some of us live in tents, but I’m fortunate that Habitat for Humanity built us a house before they left. I raise chickens, when I’m not going to school. I’ll try to write soon next time.

Sincerely,
Joseph

Charlie is sitting in his room, listening to rap music when the email chimes, and he reads Joseph’s message. He’s eating Ruffles. Fingers on the keys, he remembers how Conner’s rocky muscles stretched under his hands the day before in class. He’s grown used to the churning in his stomach when he touches Conner, the feeling that makes him feel hot and cool at the same time. Yesterday Conner painted the anarchy symbol on Charlie’s mask. Charlie laughs and smiles.

Dear Joseph,

Wow, that’s a lot of siblings. I’m glad you and I don’t have a lot.

Stillwater is very green. It gets really cold in the winter, but our house stays warm because we have heating. There’s a creek in our backyard, and at night we can hear the frogs croaking.
I've been taking my brother to art therapy. We've been working on painting masks, and I've had to help Conner a few times. I feel funny about Conner, but that's not worth mentioning. My mask is black with lots of brand names and graphics from skateboard companies and skateboard designs. Conner's is orange with fake jewels he glued to it, and he's connecting them with a yellow string. I don't know what we'll do with the masks when we're done, but I'll probably keep mine. Just between you and me, I think the class is pretty okay, but I'd never tell Mom that. I think Dad knows we're going, but he never mentions it. Dad's dad was an alcoholic. I only met him three times. Mom said Dad raised his family, which ruined his childhood, so he wants her, not me, to raise Conner, and he doesn't like the idea of me and Conner at the art class. So we don't talk about it. Wow, you had problems with your parents too? I never would have thought. Are they in the camp?
Good to hear from you,
Charlie

He saves the message for two days before he sends it. Charlie doesn’t want to appear too desperate.

###

In class the next session, the two boys, the mothers, the father, their sons and daughters, finish their masks. Charlie fastens the last piece of string with a glue stick, helping Conner. “This looks really good,” Charlie tells his brother. The pairs finish with an hour left, paint dried, and Eva smiles to them and folds her hands. She wears another sweater that sags off her shoulders, like she does every day.

“So now, I’m sure you’re wondering, why masks. What do we do with these masks?” She looks at the class. “Behind this mask I want you to become the one who explored that emotion on the first day we convened. Use the mask to express whatever it is you were experiencing. Tell it to your partner, and partners, I want you to just listen. When you’re
through listening, I want you to switch. Then the partner will do the same sharing. Any
questions?” She pauses, but no one says anything. “I know that some of us struggle to
communicate with words, so if you would like to draw or sign or to act out your feelings,
those are also acceptable ways to communicate. Let’s start at the beginning of the circle. If
you don’t feel comfortable sharing, you can just tell us about the mask that you designed.”

The words “emotion” and “sharing” catch in Charlie’s chest. His feelings for his
brother are immotile, heavy like the sweat that begins to soak his hairline. What will he say?
The first pair at the end of the circle shares, and Charlie’s face flushes. He stares at his hands.
He feels like he does when the teacher calls on him and he hasn’t done the reading. What’s
he going to say? The mother four seats away holds her mask designed like a fish to her face
and says, “Your disability is hard for me. It makes me feel like I live somewhere else, even
though I’m still here. I feel like I’m here and there at the same time. Does that make sense?”
Her daughter nods. “I love you, always, but sometimes it can be so overwhelming.” Tears
cloud her eyes, and Charlie stares at the black mask in his hands. No freaking way. The girl
with the glitter mask says she still feels beautiful, in words her mother has to interpret to the
rest of the class. She feels beautiful, even though others don’t see her this way. Then another
parent and child speak, and it’s the boys’ turn before Charlie can think to excuse himself to
the bathroom. Charlie lifts the mask to his face and says, “I love you Conner. There that’s
what I was feeling.” His fingers are so wet they almost slip from the paper.
Eva leans close to the boys. “Keep going, Charlie. I see more to it than this. Your mask is painted black. You’re hiding behind the brands of these companies. What’s the emotion that makes you want to hide, Charlie? Why is it a struggle to be seen as yourself?”

Charlie lifts the mask quick to his face, “I guess you can embarrass me sometimes.” He removes the mask and looks away.

“Remember, if you don’t feel comfortable sharing behind the mask, you can also discuss why it’s designed this way.”

“These are my favorite brands. It’s black because that’s my favorite color.” Charlie stares at the mask while he speaks.

“Anything else?”

“No.”

“Okay, that’s good. Maybe you will feel comfortable sharing more next time.”

“Conner,” she turns to face him. “It’s your turn. Would you like to share your feelings with your brother?”

Conner shakes his head, no.

“Are you sure? What about the design of your mask?”

Conner shakes his head again and signs no.

“Alright we’ll come back to you boys at the end, if you’re ready.”
The rest of the class passes in a blur of masks and emotions, tears and hugging. Charlie and Conner both refuse to discuss their artwork, and when the clock hits six, Charlie stands abruptly to leave.

“Don’t forget your masks, boys.” Eva says and walks toward them. “I hope you’ll feel more comfortable sharing next time. Remember that you’re in a place with friends, that there’s no judgment here.” She extends the painted faces. “You can still use the masks at home if you’d like.”

“Yeah,” Charlie says and runs out the door. Conner follows him, grabbing the masks from Eva, then dropping the faces, then lurching to pick them up as he leaves.

In the parking lot, Nancy sits in the car, the engine idling.

“How was class?” she says

“Stupid,” Charlie says as he slides in the front seat. Conner stumbles out the door behind him. He falls, and Nancy runs from the car to help Conner stand and to carry the masks. She buckles Conner into his seat.

As she begins to drive away, Nancy says, “But it seemed like you liked it.” Her voice sounds strained.

“Yeah but then they wanted us to talk about our emotions. That class is just stupid. I don’t want to take it.”

“Conner what about you? What did you think?”
Conner shakes his head, no.

“We’re not going back.” Charlie says. “Forget whatever it is you’re doing with making a family.”

Nancy is silent.

“That class is dumb. I don’t want to take it.” Charlie adds.

“Don’t you like working with your brother?”

“Whatever.”

“What about you Conner? Don’t you want to take the class? Tell your brother you want to take the class. Don’t you?”

Conner thunks his head against the window and stares at the rain.

***

At dinner everyone is quiet. Bill hovers over his chair. He stayed at work late (again) this evening, plugging data into another spreadsheet.

“What did you learn in school?” he asks Charlie.

“Nothing.” Charlie pushes his fork into his mashed potatoes.

“Nothing?” Bill asks.

Charlie creates a hatch-print in the golden mound. “Yup.”
“Yeah?”

Charlie doesn’t reply.

“What about that class?” Bill continues, softly. Everyone stops, forks in mid-air and looks at him. It’s the first time he’s mentioned art therapy.

“Idiotic.”

Bill coughs. “I told you Nancy. I told you it was a bad idea to have Charlie taking care of Conner.” He stabs his steak with a knife. “What a waste of money.”

Nancy cuts her food into smaller and smaller pieces. She stares at her plate, but she doesn’t eat.

Everyone grabs their water, except Conner. Max meows. Bill stands and turns on the TV.

That evening Charlie writes another letter to Joseph.

Dear Joseph,
I know that you haven’t replied, but I’m going to tell you something. After you know this, you might not want to be friends with me.
When Conner and I were born, we shared a placenta because we were twins. No one told me about this for a real long time, but one day Grandpa said it to me. Then he told me not to tell that he said anything.
Grandpa said that while we were still inside my mother I took the placenta from Conner. I pulled it toward me like a blanket, like I was too cold. I took more and more of it from Conner till he didn’t have any oxygen. Then when we were born Conner had cerebral palsy because he didn’t have enough air. I did this to Conner. That’s the thing I said “wasn’t worth mentioning.”
I know I’m probably acting silly. Other people will just think it was silly because I was little, and it wasn’t my fault, really, but whenever I look at Conner, especially when I touch him, I just feel bad.
What makes it worse is that everyone just ignores him in school, and I do too, even though he’s my brother. So it really is my fault. But who knows? I can’t stand looking at him and feeling guilty and angry at the same time.

Sincerely,
Charlie
P.S. I think I’m done with those art classes.

###

That night Charlie awakes to a rustling sound, a shred, a thud—at first he assumes it’s Max—but the noise continues, furious in pace, without any sign of stopping. Charlie clenches his eyes shut, go away. The noise continues, louder, broken by a definite punch on a board. It’s coming, he knows, from Conner’s room. Charlie covers his head with his pillow. He hears the whack again. Another shred. After a few minutes, the noise doesn’t stop—it grows louder and quicker—so he stands, walks to Conner’s room, and knocks lightly, “Conner, what are you doing in there?”

A rip.

“It’s really loud, whatever it is.”

A thud and a tear.

“Can I come in?”

Conner makes a sound.

“What was that? Is that yes? Is that no? Conner? Okay, I’m coming in. You’re warned.” Charlie pushes the door open. Conner sits on the carpet, legs folded butterfly style, but only his feet touch. He’s surrounded by a shower of orange and black mâché paper, the
black and orange flakes scattered about Conner’s legs, a dainty jaw, the chin dotted with a fake ruby. It’s Conner’s mask. It’s his mask.

“Conner, why would you do this?”

Conner rips a large chunk smaller with his teeth.

“You’ve destroyed my mask and yours, Conner.”

Conner doesn’t look up.

“You should go to bed, really.” Muffled voices sound downstairs. Charlie’s stomach flops. He feels sick.

“Come on, I mean. What is this? What are you doing?” Charlie steps toward his brother, but Conner still doesn’t look at him.

Conner’s arms lurch apart as he attempts to tear another part of the mask. He leaves a tiny gash in the paper before he picks up the piece and continues to pull it.

“Just stop it, okay. Mom and Dad are going to come up here, and they’re going to be pissed. Dad’s going to freak out, right?”

And as soon as he says it Charlie hears his father stomping up the stairs, and their mother pattering behind him.
“Stop.” Charlie runs toward his brother. “They’re coming up here.” Conner kicks him. Charlie falls, then pushes himself back up. “Conner, why are you doing this? Just stop it—stop it, okay.”

“Conner, what’s going on?” Bill opens the door. He squints as his eyes adjust to the light. Nancy peeks from behind him. She rubs her necklace. “What is this, boys?” Bill says. “Do you know what time it is? It’s too late for you to make more art projects.”

Conner doesn’t look up. He reaches for the jaw and begins to punch it. He holds it down with one of his feet, and pulls. He drops it, then grabs the piece again and yanks.

“What the hell is going on here?” Bill’s voice grows louder. “What is this?”

“They’re masks.” Nancy whispers.

“Masks. Why do they have masks?”

A shred. Conner punches the torn jaw.

“It’s from that stupid class you forced them to take, isn’t it?”

The jewels lie in the trash with little bits of string covered in glue. Only one small strand still rests on the floor, and Charlie picks it up and places it in his pocket.

He didn’t even ask Conner if he liked the art class.

Conner bites and rips another mask piece.
“Son, drop the paper.” Bill runs to Conner’s side and pulls the shreds of the mask from his fingers. “Drop them. Drop it. It’s not important.” Bill shoves the paper into the trash. Then he hugs Conner to his chest and pulls him up onto the edge of the bed. “What did you do, Nancy?”

Conner stops moving, except the jerk of his arms. His arms are always moving.

“This is what I work ninety hours a week for? Another bullshit therapy? Look, even Charlie’s crying.”

Charlie wipes his face. His brother isn’t moving. Conner stares at the chunks of mask tossed in the waste basket. Bill follows his gaze and grabs the trash. “Here.” He thrusts it at Nancy. “Can’t you see it’s disturbing him.” Nancy doesn’t move. “Nancy, take this away please.” Conner stares at the floor. He doesn’t even bother to kick the scraps of mask scattered near his feet. He hangs like a limp rag.

“Take it.” Bill thrusts the trash toward his wife. His face glistens with sweat.

“It wasn’t that bad, Dad,” Charlie mutters.

“What?”

“The class, it wasn’t that bad. It was okay.”

“Okay? How was that class okay? Conner is traumatized. Look at him.” Bill looks at his son, floppy in his arms. He chokes, and rubs his forehead with his palm, then starts again.
“We’re just trying maintain, Charlie. Maintain. We can’t maintain with all of these therapies that keep hurting your brother.”

“Maintain what?” Charlie kicks a black piece near his foot.

Bill begins to speak, but Charlie interrupts him, “Look, Conner, I’m sorry I didn’t want to do the mask exercise.” He turns to leave, then stops and continues, “I actually liked it when we went to art therapy.”


“Goodnight” Conner motions with his fingers to Charlie’s slouching shoulders, silhouetted against the dark hallway.

Charlie walks to his room and locks the door. He can hear his father pacing the hall. He can hear him talking loudly, but no one knocks and soon Bill stomps downstairs, and Charlie then hears his Mom and Dad below shouting. He doesn’t listen. He doesn’t really care to know what they’re saying. Charlie lies down, but he can’t sleep, so after a few minutes, he turns on his computer. Then he checks his email. It’s almost noon in Kenya, and there’s a message from Joseph, already, and Charlie wonders how it came so quickly.

_Dear Charlie,_
_I don’t think the placenta is your fault. You were young, a baby, and so you couldn’t help it. You Americans feel so guilty! Your teacher was like this when she visited the camp, always worrying about what she’d done to help cause the tragedy, how she wasn’t helping. Sometimes I feel guilty too, like when I think about my mother and father._
My parents don’t live in the camp. I ran away from them during the violence because they told me to leave, and I took my brother and sister. I haven’t seen my parents since. Maybe they’re still alive. I don’t know. Do I think that I could have stopped the killers during the post-election violence? Maybe, but probably not. It isn’t worth it to dwell on such things. Just like the placenta, there are some things that are God’s doing, not ours.

In the camp, I take care of my little siblings with money from my chickens. I’m sad to hear you are no longer taking the art class with Conner. It’s good to take care of family.

I would still like to be your friend, but I think you should be Conner’s friend too. He sounds lonely.

Sincerely,
Joseph

Charlie slides away from the computer. He pulls the string from his pocket. From the glow of the computer screen—the only light filling the room—the yellow strand seems almost white, almost blonde, the color of his twin’s hair, and from the other room, Charlie swears he can hear Conner. Maybe he’s mumbling. Maybe he’s laughing. Charlie isn’t sure, but he wonders what his brother might be thinking.
Blood’s Beginning

Joseph followed John’s white T-shirt, stained brown and gray, through the crowd. He felt like a flood pounded through his veins. The men from the slum shouted, and Joseph remembered the thump of their hands as they patted one another’s backs, the stories of Kikuyu oppression they shared while they crowded shoulder to shoulder protesting. Kikuyus, and Kibaki, Joseph thought of the cheater, Kibaki, who had stolen the election from his tribe, the Luo. He thought of his mother ringing her hands because of his disappearance this morning, his father staring into a cup of tea. Joseph’s heart hammered in his chest. He was going to kill somebody, he knew, because they lived in a tiny shack, surrounded by other Luos in homes made from metal scraps, without their own land or running water, their rent overpriced, their work inconsistent. Joseph was going to kill a Kikuyu because Kikuyus had all of these things.

The men spread around the rusted metal, sticks, and red clay that formed houses. They spread like water dividing and reconnecting, flooding into every corner littered with plastic bags and broken glass, empty jugs they leapt over then continued to run, every one of them pushing toward the same place, the Kikuyu district. In his excitement, Joseph kicked a wall. “It’s our turn to eat,” he yelled, and the smoke from earlier drifted through the crowd—as it had when Joseph visited John’s house that morning, when he shouted protests with the group of sweaty men—grew stronger. Though Joseph wasn’t sure of its source, his heartbeat filled his ears.
John skidded to a stop. He looked left, then right, his eyes moving across the houses, his lips whispering. Joseph and a few men paused behind him. John’s eyes stopped, and his shoulders slumped, a look that seemed almost disappointed, but when John spoke again, Joseph decided he had misunderstood the gesture. John’s voice sounded fast, high pitched.

“This,” John pointed to the house beside them, layered in uneven metal squares, warped around the edges. “This is a Kikuyu I worked with once, doing cash work for the university. I know he lives here.” John smiled. “He’s probably very wealthy now because he’s a lover of Kibaki. He probably hides his money underneath his mattress, two mattresses instead of one, unlike the one me and my wife must share. What do you think? Shall we see?” John kicked the small padlock holding the door shut. “Open up Kikuyu. Give us some of your money.” John kicked the door again. “It’s our turn to eat. Some of us Luos must eat.” John swung his machete, clanging against the metal. It groaned. He smacked the door again, kicked the house, and the men standing beside him beat flat dents into the building, using their sandals, elbows, and sticks. Joseph threw his shoulder against the wall. The house shook slightly. Then he kicked. John grabbed the door to the house and yanked the tin sheet, and as John pulled, they kicked. Joseph slammed the wall again, and when he turned to see if the door had opened, he noticed that blood dripped from John’s knuckles, where the metal edge dug deep into his hands. John yanked. He tugged harder until a tall man joined him and together they jerked at the door until it shot open, blood dripping from John’s palms onto the twisted plastic bags stringing the street. John wiped his hands on his shirt. The movement streaked the shirt bright red, the blood mixing with dirt worn into the fabric.
The door swung open, and Joseph exhaled. He hadn’t realized he was holding his breath until he saw the house was empty, and he pushed past John and snatched a chair, then carried it outside. Two other men followed him. They drug a mattress and another chair into the afternoon’s hot, white light. John gathered the man’s pan and mugs and plopped them on the pile.

Joseph kicked the chair, but his foot bounced off the wood. The man to his left raised the second chair and smashed it on the ground, the chair’s legs collapsing underneath its seat. Joseph kicked again, and the chair cracked. The other men cheered. He kicked it harder, then faster, and he reached down and yanked one of the legs free and raised it above his head and they cheered again. He would use this as a club to kill somebody. Not anybody, a Kikuyu. He wished a Kikuyu was living in this house. He slammed the club against the pile of belongings.

They tore through the home and scattered what they found in the dirt. John dumped corn meal upon the ground, the familiar, sweet scent ripening sour as it mixed with the bright red dirt, food scraps, and plastic wrappers strewn across the streets. They poured the man’s tea leaves in the dirt, and rubbed them into the soil. They beat the house with his pots and pans, leaving more deep dents and cracking the poles that held the home upright. They pulled one of the metal scraps loose so it dangled at an angle, the large hole exposing the inside of the now-empty room, barren except for the sugar sprinkled across the ground. When they finally pulled the roof to the earth, they cheered as it thumped. Then they ran.

Joseph carried the club made from the chair’s leg. He smacked another house with the wood and followed the mob. Joseph recognized some of his friends and men he had seen
every day in his district as they sprinted through the streets. They grabbed food, water, tables, chairs, mattresses, coffee, tea, makeshift toys made from sticks and string, baskets, and plastic bottles, dragging them from the buildings. They carried these things home or dumped them in the road. Groups paused at every home, and a new sound rose through the warm air, hovered on the wind, the sound of screams.

Joseph recognized a few other faces too. These were not angular and thin, with wide cheekbones, like those of Lous and his friends, but rounder, fuller, their eyes wide and their arms trembling. They ducked through the shade. Their eyes darted back and forth, and Joseph thought they might be Kikuyus, though he didn’t know where they lived or know their last names in order to prove his theory.

Joseph leaped over a ditch in the middle of the street. He heard John’s voice behind him. John’s eyes were wide, his skin scintillating. Joseph slowed.

“They deserve this, you know. The Kikuyus. They had to know it was someone else’s turn to eat,” John said. “Come,” John motioned. “I need your help with something.” They walked for a minute as John scanned the homes. John pointed to a house ahead. “Let’s destroy that one, for now.”

John clubbed the wall with his panga. The metal thundered. Someone Joseph recognized from the crowd—a man he stood and spoke with before, wearing a red hat—approached and struck the wall with a pipe. A tall and long-limbed man followed him. He carried a torch made from a long stick, and Joseph also recognized this person—the one whose sister was raped by Kikuyus—the man without a tooth.
“You cheated,” John said. He beat the shack again. Joseph cheered, and the other men yelled. The man with the torch kicked the door.

“We know you’re a Kikuyu,” John shouted. He struck the house again. The side of the building, braced by a thin trunk of wood, crumpled with a bang.

The door opened and a man shuffled into the bright sunlight, his eyes still squinted, adjusting to the difference. He lifted his arms slowly in surrender and his pants hung from his waist. His face was wrinkled, his eyes wide with surprise. “What are you doing?” he asked. He was small, his shoulders hunched.

“This cheating, why have you done this?” John asked. The old man opened his mouth to speak, but the man with the red hat threw a pipe hard against his curved back. The old man toppled, limbs radiating from his sprawled body. Joseph jumped.

“Kikuyu,” John spat.

Joseph lifted his foot and kicked the fallen figure, but his foot fell softly between the man’s ribs. He could have used the club he held, but—this wasn’t what he expected. He remembered the soft tone of the man’s voice, and he wondered: could this old man really have done anything?

“Thief!” John said. The man wearing the red hat raised and swung his pipe, hitting the body again. Then the four men pushed through the home. John grabbed the man’s clothes, his few pots, his sack of sugar and dumped these things on top of the fallen body, one of the pans knocking the old man’s head as it fell. Joseph kicked the old man again, tapping the man’s thin stomach. Was he still alive? The shriveled body remained still, even as John grabbed the torch and lowered it to the base of the house. The wood crackled in
minutes and glowed with long petal-shaped flames. The man who was missing a tooth grabbed the limp body and tossed it through the door. He tugged the metal shut, and the men stepped back and watched as the fire grew longer and unfurled over the roof.

Joseph shuddered as he watched the flames lap up the building. He backed away. Then he turned and walked from the burning home. “I’m going to find someone else,” he said, though he was sure that none of the men could hear him. He wanted to kill someone, but killing an old man—feeling his foot hit skin, crumpled clothes, and bone—didn’t seem the same, and watching the dead body thrust into the pyre didn’t excite him in the manner Joseph expected. That thin old man didn’t seem like a Kikuyu. He looked poor. He looked like someone’s grandfather, and while Joseph walked, he imagined the old man waking up and pulling himself from the building to the safety of the street. Maybe the man would lay there and pretend he was dead, wait for everyone to leave, and then he might get up and walk away, brush the dirt off his shirt.

Joseph slowed to a walk and he turned. Down the rows of houses, men dragged Kikuyus into the street, screaming. Fire tore the sky around him, and the smell like smoke now filled his nose and his mouth, so thick he stopped to heave into the orange earth. When he stood he scanned the buildings, avoiding those places where the shouting and wailing was loudest and looking instead at the few houses that still stood undisturbed. The homes were so small. Some had only a sheet to protect their doors, most were covered in rust and dirt. They looked like shacks with holes in the walls, like the place where Joseph lived with his family, like John’s home, and like the house of the old man, and Joseph scuffed his foot in the plastic surrounding his feet. These didn’t look like the high-rise apartments in the distance beyond
Kibera. Had he really expected they would? With no one beside him, Joseph felt suddenly
cold despite the crowds that filled the streets. He shivered. He felt a hand slide over his back,
and catch on his shirt.

“Are you scared?” John asked.

Joseph jumped. He dropped his club. “No, I just left. It looked like that one was dead,
definitely. With the fire, that killed him.”

“Good, I worried you had become scared. You’re tall, and this fools people, but
you’re very young, aren’t you?”

“Not that young.” Joseph answered.

“Really, because before I tapped your back, you seemed to be shivering like a little
boy would, not someone who was friends with Ochola. Ochola must be seventeen?”

“I don’t know I—I still want to kill someone, a Kikuyu I mean, just—”

“Just, what?”

“Not someone old, not like that old man. That doesn’t seem right.”

“If it’s a Kikuyu, it’s right. Remember Kibaki cheated. Remember that everything, up
until this moment, has always been for only one tribe.” John grabbed Joseph’s arm. His
hands were so sticky. “I know where we are now. Follow me. I have one you will enjoy
killing.” The calm, even tone of John’s voice reminded Joseph his father, when his father
commanded him to do something: your mother would like it if you watched your brother and
sister today, please attend your classes, or, come home for dinner. Joseph walked faster so
John’s hand slid from his elbow.
They pushed through the crowds that filled the road. They walked past the marketplace, where the produce stands were abandoned—a few collapsed into the street—and men and women rushed to fill their arms with bananas, mangos, and yams. Joseph looked back, and he noticed the same men were following them at a distance, the tall man who was missing a tooth and the man wearing a red hat, weaving through the same gaps in the cluster of people.

“Don’t worry about them,” John said. “They’re helping me.” He pointed ahead to a house made of boards tied together with rope. John smacked his lips, and Joseph caught a sparkle he hadn’t seen in John’s eyes. “There, that’s where we’re going.” A small smile crossed John’s face.

“Why there?”

“A Kikuyu lives there.”

“But Kikuyus live everywhere around here.”

John didn’t say anything.

John threw every bit of his weight into the metal door of the wooden house. The house quivered. The boards rattled. “Kikuyu,” John shouted, then, a few seconds later, “Mary. Mary,” he said again, but no one answered. “I have an idea.” He motioned for the tall man with the torch, who approached and, at John’s signal, lowered the flame to the base of the building. The wood crackled then ripped wide into fire glowing redder than the dirt surrounding the house, arching high into the clear afternoon.

A woman burst from the home. She carried one child in her arms and held the hand of a girl who coughed. She looked at John, who twisted his face in a smile, and then she looked
down. In the brief time she held up her face, Joseph noticed she was very beautiful, with wide brown eyes, and long, thick lashes. Joseph felt sick. First the old man, and now this young mother, these weren’t the Kikuyus he thought of when he pictured Kikuyus. They weren’t like the politicians on TV, the people in commercials, or his aunt, sipping her overly sweet TV, telling him, “Those Luos just need to work harder.” He turned and heaved in the street.

“You, are a Kikuyu,” John said.

“You are John,” she said and made a move as if to run, but the man in the red hat grabbed her and their circle closed tight around her, so that she faced them or her burning house, popping and crackling. The child she held began to cry.

“Aren’t you a Kikuyu?” John asked.

The two other men laughed.

Of course she was a Kikuyu, she lived in the Kikuyu district. Joseph bent over again, but nothing came from his mouth, so he gasped like a fish. His lungs felt empty. The man with the red hat pulled him upright. Joseph wanted to go home, not to his friend’s, not to John’s, just home, away from these people and this woman who looked a bit like his mother, standing with his younger brother and sister.

“Of course you are,” John continued. “And do you know what your president did in this election? He cheated, again, like his predecessor Kenyatta.”

Mary looked up. Goosebumps spread across Joseph’s skin. “I know you’re not here because of the election, John,” she said. “If you are, I didn’t vote.”
“You didn’t vote, eh? But you’re still a Kikuyu. So you’ve obviously benefitted from Kibaki’s reign. Benefitted from your position in the bar because you were a Kikuyu.”

She sighed and glanced up at him. The house behind her blazed a golden crown into the morning. A thin smoke cloud rose higher and higher into the light. Sweat balled on Joseph’s skin.

“Don’t you want to defend yourself? Don’t you have anything to say about being a Kikuyu, about Kibaki?”

“No, I know why you came here.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying.” John’s eyes glowed. A smile tugged the corners of his mouth. “Why would I care about a whore? Why would I care about a—Kikuyu.” He spit the last word through his teeth.

She glanced up at Joseph.

Following her eyes, John said, “She’s trying to trick you, Joseph. She’s trying to fool you. That’s how they work, you know, Kikuyus. They’ll trick you, like this one tricked me. You have to kill her.”

The woman mouthed the word please.

“She’s making you think that she isn’t guilty. But you have to do it. Kill her. Shove her into the fire. Do it.” John’s voice felt hot against Joseph’s face.

Joseph wiped his eyes. The little girl raised her arms and pushed John. She beat John’s legs with her fists. The child in Mary’s arms wailed, as she tried again to push free. John laughed. “Let’s go Joseph. Now you can kill a Kikuyu.”
Joseph tried to make his hand reach for the torch, but he couldn’t. He shook his head.

“I don’t think I want to,” he muttered.

“Fine, traitor,” John said. He grabbed the torch and held it for a second, looking back and forth between the flame and Mary. Then he pushed the torch into the tall man’s hand.

John paused. Then he motioned, and the man shoved it at Mary, who started to run at the same time. The fire caught her skirt’s fabric and Mary screamed and struggled to push through the men, her body writhing in flame, and Joseph turned away. “Please,” she shouted to Joseph. From the corner of his eye, he saw the little girl standing and crying, watching her mother, and before Joseph could think, he grabbed her in his arms and ran.

He leapt over the holes in the road. He pumped his free arm as fast as he could. He jumped over the broken chairs, the mattresses, the bicycle parts that were dumped in the street. He turned and he wove through the houses, the small body beating against his chest. He listened, but he didn’t hear them behind him. Still, he ran. He ran past the Kikuyu district, past the bodies sprawled out upon the ground, the fires that leapt from every building. He tasted metal. The little girl clung to his chest tight, quiet though Joseph could feel the small pulse racing. He ran past the place where they stood in a group and shouted for hours about the injustice of the election, before John had led them to attack. He ran until he reached the roads his feet followed blindly, the homes he recognized exactly, the white apartments in the distance.

Joseph shoved open the door to his home. His chest heaved. His mother sat in the corner, knelt over her stove. “Joseph.” She stood and opened her arms. “What are you doing home?” It had been weeks since he came home during the daytime.
“Nothing,” he answered, “I’ve—”

“What is this? Is this a baby?”

“Things have been strange all day today. I—I found her. While I was walking to work I found her. They were going to kill her.” He set the girl down and the child glanced back and forth between Joseph and his mother. Then she began to cry.

“Joseph, why would you bring a child here? I have your brother, your sister, and you to look after. Don’t I have enough children already?”

“They were going to kill her,” Joseph repeated.

“And what happened to your shirt? It’s so dirty. Take it off. Let me clean it for you. Why are you sweating? Did you run? Are we even supposed to have this girl? Will someone come looking for her?”

Joseph exhaled. He didn’t know. He was going to kill someone, and instead he’d come home with this baby, this little girl who grabbed Joseph’s leg, balled her fists tight, and cried.