

In the Plantation

Oyet Sisto Ocen

I still recall its sweetness when he gave it to us. Uncle Tom found us playing in the banana plantations. We were searching for *nsenene*, the grasshopper which appeared seasonally when it rained in our village. We searched for them on the ground and in the folds of the banana leaves. The first time we tasted it was when aunt brought it back from Kampala, “Nakato and Kato come and get some sweets,” she’d cried. We were plucking the legs and wings off *nsenene* in the backyard of our grass-thatched hut. The sweets were different colours. I unwrapped the white *vuvera*, polythene paper, from one and threw it in my mouth. I felt the sticky honey sweetness fill my mouth and I swallowed.

We ran past Joe’s house to reach Katumba’s house so that he could taste the *nsenene*. Kato was panting. We wanted to tell Katumba the news quickly and run back home. Mummy didn’t want us playing with Katumba. She said he had bad manners; he liked playing with his male part in front of us.

“Katumba, our aunt came from Kampala,” Kato told him, from the cool shade where he was seated. He was plucking the wings and the legs of *nsenene*. The wind was blowing the bananas leaves lightly, swaying them from side to side. “She brought for us some sweet.” Katumba dropped the saucepan he was holding. Kato broke the sweet, which looked like a small stone, into two halves with his teeth and gave one to Katumba, “Eat.”

They had been good friends in spite of mummy’s restriction. Katumba threw his half into his mouth. Then he opened his mouth, his lips moulded, formed to look like a hallway. He was missing two lower teeth which left a path for us to see his tongue rotating. It made us laugh.

“It’s sweet, like ripe banana,” said Katumba laughing.

“Yes, Aunt Janet said it makes children’s teeth grow,” said Kato.

When Katumba heard this he started rubbing a small remnant of the sweet on his pink gums which made us laugh more. We ran through the long trail of the banana plantation which connected our home with that of Katumba’s. It was owned by Mr. Mukasa the old man. He planted oranges and pawpaw trees at the side of his plantation. We always stole from his trees when we emptied our fruit trees. Mummy didn’t encourage stealing so we only did it when she was away.

When we reached home, we found aunt was telling mummy about the city. She told mummy that Uncle Tom’s business had made him one of the richest men in the city. He had so much money he could buy the whole village and its contents.

That morning aunt brought out the metal she brought from the city. It was for piercing ears. Aunt insisted for our ears to be pierced so that we did not fall prey to child sacrifices. But daddy was against the piercing of the boys’ ears, he said it made them look like rouges. So aunt and mummy pierced my ears and not Kato’s. It was painful, but aunt said when it heals, I would put on glittering earrings which would dangle to my shoulders which would make me look beautiful.

When Katumba and Joe came home, we sneaked into Mr. Mukasa’s plantation to steal some pawpaw. After getting the pawpaw, we ran to our backyard, where no one would see us. The plantation was situated by the road which ran from our village to the school we attended – it was the same road that aunt used to come from Kampala. In our playground, we would sit for hours competing with each other to see who could throw stones the furthest. Sometimes we would fight over something small. We would then reconvene in the same place. In the playground we would

dream of becoming somebody big in future. Kato dreamt of becoming president, Joe dreamt of becoming a driver, Katumba, the head teacher of our school. I too, dreamt of teaching in our school, I wanted to be a class mistress and wear transparent spectacles like Miss John our class teacher.

Uncle Tom came down that road. He waved, beckoning us to come over. We ran in his direction. We were already imagining what he might give us. When we reached his car, he pulled the sweets from the black *vuvu* and gave it to us. We were very happy and we began eating the sweets immediately. He drove off and we ran after his car. He lowered his panel and gave something to the men who were playing cards in the shade. He left them cheering, '*mukulu, mukulu*, big man, big man.' We kept on running after him until he disappeared down the village where we couldn't see him. We stood there watching the dust raised by his car. Katumba said the smell produced by the car was very nice and he felt like eating it with bread.

When we were coming back from school the next day, we followed the marks left by Uncle Tom's car tyres. Katumba and I were on the right side, while Joe was on the left. Kato didn't come to school that day, he was not feeling well. Mummy decided to leave him at home and went to tend the garden. We missed his company on our way back. But we kept on playing as usual. Reaching our backyard, Katumba saw something red mixed in with the sand.

"It's blood," he said.

"No, that is Mr. Mukasa's pawpaw," said Joe and we laughed.

"My mum has cooked chicken today," I said.

In that same spot, our lovely playing ground, whenever mummy wanted to prepare chicken soup, she slaughtered the chicken there. She was skilled at it. She stepped on the chicken's wings with her feet then on the legs of the chicken with the other, holding the knife with her right hand and the head of the chicken with her left. She sliced the neck of the chicken with one stroke. Then she let the chicken fly headless and it flapped about repeatedly, blood jetting from its neck. Kato and I would stand there watching the chicken struggle until it stopped and mummy would submerge it in hot water and pluck its feathers.

When we returned to the compound we found people had gathered. Every space in the compound was occupied. Men sat in silence with their heads bent. Most women were inside, tears flowed from their eyes. One voice came from inside the house. It was a familiar voice to me. I squeezed through the bodies and rushed to the door, I wanted to see mummy and ask her why people were everywhere in our compound. But the doorway was congested; I could not access the house. Aunt came and carried me from the door and went with me to the edge of the compound, she was crying. I put my fingers into my mouth and could not ask her what had happened. I imagined mummy and daddy were no more and decided I would find Uncle Tom and beg him to take Kato and me with him to the city, for I could not stay without mummy and daddy in this village. In the distance I saw Mr. Mukasa coming to join the crowd. His face looked like he was either laughing or crying, I couldn't tell which. He was stooped over with one hand on his waist, while the other held his walking stick. It was the posture Kato liked imitating when we played.

"It is Kato," aunt said amidst tears. I looked into her eyes to make her tell me what had happened to Kato, but she bent down her head and I felt warm tears on my arms.

"Where is Kato?" I asked aunt.

"His head has gone."

The head, I spoke to myself. What has happen to his head? And why should he accept his head to go and leave him. What is aunt saying now, she should be clear. "Kato's head has gone". What does this mean?

Then I heard aunt whispering amidst the crying; "I wished your father had agreed." She sobbed. My eyes were filled with tears, but I didn't know why I was crying. Perhaps I was crying because

aunt was crying? What she told me shouldn't have made me cry. If Kato's head had gone, it would come back. It would find Kato and fix itself, we would still run in that long trail of the banana plantations, we would meet Joe and Katumba, probably we would still plan to go and steal the pawpaw from Mr. Mukasa's plantation and eat in our backyard.

When I opened my eyes, tears fell down. I saw that Joe and Katumba were still standing along the road near our compound; they had not gone home since we came from school. Aunt continued crying.

"I knew your dad was wrong, he should have allowed the piercing."

She explained that when she was in Kampala; she saw many posters warning parents to protect their children from the witches who hunt children for sacrifices. The witches believed when a human is sacrificed, a big sum of money would be acquired to boost their business. I became confused with what aunt was talking about, that's when she finally told me - Kato had been killed. My brain shut down after hearing that. I was seeing everybody as a distant mist. I tried to slide down from aunt, I wanted to roll down and cry, but she held me tight.

For two days, mummy and I didn't say a word to each other. I wanted to say something to break the silence which had descended on us like unexpected rains. I wanted to tell her that Uncle Tom had been giving us sweets whenever he came from Kampala, but I didn't know how to say it. I wanted to confess to her about the time we followed the marks from Uncle Tom's car tyres when we were coming from school. However, no matter my desire to speak to her, I couldn't break the silence between us.

When I looked at her, I thought of the way she had slaughtered the chicken over Christmas. How when she had cut its neck, it still flew high in the air. How Kato and I laughed at it while blood was jetting from its severed neck. I was almost laughing at that image again. But when I thought that that same knife may have been used to slice through Kato's neck, something came like strange wind and blocked my throat. I was breathless. Invisible hands were squeezing my throat so that tears could flow from my eyes and roll onto my cheeks. When I cried, mummy screamed like she was mad.

One day Joe and Katumba came to see me. Since Kato's head went, I hadn't played with them. I stayed with mummy most of the time watching her flowing tears as she cried silently. Only when aunt was around would she talk in a low voice.

"Daddy said it was Uncle Tom who did it," said Joe.

"I don't know," I said.

"He might have given Kato some sweet for buying his head," said Katumba.

"Dad said police got him several times doing the same thing, but always he gets away. He told me not to respond when a stranger calls me."

"But Uncle Tom is not a stranger."

"He is. He does not live in this village anymore, he only comes to hunt for small penises like yours to be taken to the witch."

"That is why he is rich?"

"Yes, he deals in children's head and penises."

I thought about what the two boys said. God knows what they were talking about. I was seated listening to them. I pictured mummy's face since the death of Kato, how she would bend over a bunch of *matooke* for hours before she could pick one and peel.

"What if he gives us sweets again like last time, should we take them?"

"Ha, you joke, your big head with the missing teeth will go and make money for somebody. Even that penis you always play with, perhaps with all the testicles." Katumba laughed.

Their words were unbearable. At the age of six, Katumba did not know when he was being insensitive. His words drove me away I couldn't stay with them anymore. I went to the plantation and sat near a cluster of banana trees, where we had all played since we were three with Kato. We had imagined why bananas gave birth from their roots, why it does not germinate and why the tree is cut down once it bears fruit. I sat there wondering whether I would see Kato again, if the money his head would make would come to mummy as well. Hearing Katumba and Joe faintly, I started singing a song, which I have never known before. And the song didn't come to my tongue in sound; it remained in my heart, song of a missing beloved brother! When I came back, I found the two boys were still talking.

"Nakato, don't cry, dad will bring some sweets today. I will give you some."

"I no longer eat sweet Joe," I said.

"Uncle Tom will be caught and killed," said Katumba.

"I don't care, that will not bring back Kato."

The two boys remained silent. The wind stopped blowing the banana leaves. My heart was a public drum, beating loudly with longing. One *nsenene* leapt up before it went down again. I remembered that day Katumba was plucking off the head of *nsenenes* with ease before putting them in the saucepan. Could Kato have turned into *nsenene* in Uncle Tom's hands and then his head plucked off with ease or he could have changed into that chicken that we enjoyed on Christmas Day? In this plantation, do children sometimes change into chicken or *nsenene*?

"But why don't they stop him?" asked Joe.

I heard Katumba laughing before he said, "They will stop him one day if they get him."

"When is that one day, tomorrow?" I asked.

"I don't know, but one day."

My worry was mummy, she could cry the whole day. Daddy travelled to the city almost every day and I didn't know why he was going so often. Could he still be looking for Kato? I didn't know. I wish dad could bring Kato back. I wish the lobe of earth that I threw without looking into the pit could bring back his head and bind it back to his neck. If dad's frequent going to the city was with the hope of finding him again, that would be good news for me, even Joe and Katumba would celebrate with me. But when dad spoke faintly to mummy in low voice, my hope vanished. When I heard a sob in mummy's voice, I cried. When I heard dad telling mummy that Uncle Tom was caught with a sack and blood in his car and that was not enough evidence, I didn't know what to think. I coiled there on my lonely bed. The space left by Kato's death was very big, we had been together in the womb as twins - this new space was unbearable.

Mummy told daddy to leave everything. But dad insisted he would still go back. He would pay the money which the policemen said would act like a stone – anchoring Kato's file so that it is not 'blown by the wind' as they investigated the case. He would give the money for bringing Uncle Tom back to the prison, since the time he was captured, he left to urinate and didn't come back. He would want to see the witch doctor who confessed that he dealt with Uncle Tom, but was rubbished by the police as being insane.

I wanted to open my eyes and see, but the night was so dark. It was blinding. The night was long. I could hear the conversation of Katumba and Joe coming to my ears faintly. They kept me awake in bed. When morning approached, mummy's face was heavy. I had to look for the company of Katumba and Joe. Much as their words made me uncomfortable, at least they gave me company. Although Joe was only two years older than Katumba, he spoke much more maturely.

When I was with Joe and Katumba, I forgot my problems a bit. Katumba advised us to go and get some pawpaw from Mr. Mukasa's plantation. We sneaked in. Mr. Mukasa was busy inside his hut; he only greeted us with the white smoke on top of his hut. Katumba picked one ripe pawpaw. We

moved farther into the middle of the plantation where the banana leaves wouldn't give way to sunlight. It was very dark, but we loved it. We were getting accustomed to darkness in our village. When we cleared ground, we uncovered the banana leaves which were softened by moisture and covering the place. We sat down, Katumba cut the pawpaw. We ate while giggling. Joe stood up, we saw his leg going down into the earth, he pulled it out and he told us to run. Though I didn't know why, I started running after him because I always believed in Joe. Katumba remained, laughing at us.

"Why are you running?" he said.

I stopped and looked at him. "Come we go, let's leave this place, it's so dark." Joe didn't talk, he was just running ahead. I saw Katumba kneeling down near the place where Joe's leg had sunk.

"There might be ripe bananas inside."

He started scooping the soil with his hands and throwing it behind him. I went back and stood near him watching. Joe stood the furthest away from us. Katumba continued until he saw a sack, that confirmed his thinking. Mr. Mukasa had buried bananas there. When he scrubbed all the soil from the sack, he removed it at once, expecting to see the yellow bananas. He jumped abruptly to his feet. Looking at me, I saw his eyes open wide, his eyeballs dilating.

Joe came near me. We moved toward Katumba together to see what he was seeing. Without a word, we began running. We ran, when we stopped somewhere to catch some breath, Katumba said, "His head is alive."

"I...I don't know," said Joe.

"It is true Joe; he was looking at me when I removed the sack."

"Go...go and...and you call, let him out and we'll go home." He started running again. Katumba followed Joe and me. It was horrible, more than anything I have ever seen. I didn't expect to see Kato's head. Truly Kato was alive. His eyes were open. *He was seeing*, I whispered. *He was clearly seeing, only that he can't talk. His voice cannot be heard, now. Kato was seeing, but his voice.* I kept on saying things which I didn't know to myself as we ran toward Mr. Mukasa's hut; we needed somebody to help us.

The last thing we saw was the big silver cross which fell from the sack.

"That cross he is putting on, we can also put on," huffed Joe as we were running.

"Yes, we can all put on." I said, not knowing exactly what I was saying.

"I hope he cried, before he was killed," said Joe.

"Maybe."

"If someone had heard they could have helped him."

"Kato's voice was small, no one could hear. And this place is very dark, we are in the plantation, no one will ever see this."

Katumba was running very fast ahead of us, we saw him entering inside Mr. Mukasa's house. We rushed after him; when we reached the door he was coming out of the room. He told us he had seen blood in the bottle in Mr. Mukasa's house. Before we could ask him, he started running again. We followed him before I branched and ran straight home.

When I reached home, dad was sitting at the door. I didn't know what I told him. But I heard him saying, "I will go and pick it." I didn't know which one he meant, the head or the bottle. I couldn't imagine dad holding Kato's head.

I rolled in my bed and closed my eyes tight so I would not see Kato's head in my mind. When I imagined Mr. Mukasa and Uncle Tom squeezing blood from Kato's head, I bit the blanket. I wanted to climb on top of the hut and throw myself down. I lay on the bed waiting to see what dad would bring. And I kept on whispering, *Dad will fix back Kato's head and we shall be together again.*

Pre-Naivasha Days

Emmanuel Monychol

We used to fight flies and heat
In the bullet ridden grass thatched huts,
We lived in the hope of milk and honey.
We tried to share the little we got with guerrilla forces
Who lived in hope too and tried
To survive with little or no food and water
Tyre sandals for shoes and old clothes looted or donated.

The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement united us.
Yes! We were united: together, Army and ordinary Citizens.
We decorated our bodies with ostrich feathers;
We danced and smiled, we laughed and celebrated
Together, we ate, together we drank,
Together we poured libations to bless the spirits
Of the fallen heroes buried or abandoned.

The Guerrilla Generals-turned-Politicians
Cruised the V-8 vehicles in our new dustbowl
They swim amidst ill-hooked wealth,
Cool Juba heat with the air conditioners
Chilling out of the newly furnished
Bungalows and palaces.

We fight flies and fan off the airless heat in congested
Tin roofed shelters without ceiling boards
And ventilated window
- after Naivasha Days.