

**Gladyah NAMUKASA****LIVING HOPE**

Kato stares at the long stretch of spear grass ahead. Far beyond, the field stretches towards the forest. He imagines himself in the security of the bramble thicket which makes up the forest undergrowth. That place, where light switches to darkness, will shut him away from the cruel guards.

Tinkles fill the air as hoes hit stones buried in the ground. The noise is unending because the ground is stony. Gradually, one by one the weary prisoners will faint and they will be dragged into a shade. Occasionally, a prisoner or two will die, but work will still continue. And an unbent back will still call for a whip from the guards. But for this moment, Kato has to keep his back unbent because it is only in this position that he can scrutinise his promising harbour.

He turns to look back. The nearby armed guard is seated on a tree stump, the handle of his rifle touching his booted feet. He is poised, ready to shoot any prisoner venturing to escape. The other three guards are at the far side of the field engrossed in raucous laughter. Kato turns and casts a furtive glance at his hoe blade. The stone, his weapon to freedom, is secure.

“You!” The guard snaps.

Oh no! The guard has already noticed his straight back. Over his shoulder, he sees the guard saunter towards him. The bowlegs. The protruding stomach threatening to push through the mis-buttoned grey shirt. The grim face heating with overt fury as if to burn the worn-out sisal hat.

“The rest continue digging, I am talking to this fool,” the guard shouts.

Kato swoops down, snatches the stone and aims at the guard’s forehead. He dashes. Thorns pierce his feet and worsen the already existing wounds. The grass cuts across his face and bare torso but he has to get away. He can’t be caught, never again. He is going home to his wife – and child. The child he has never seen.

Gunshots ricochet, mingling with the chorus of voices. Gun powder pollutes the air, but Kato smells home. He smells fish smoking on his homemade fireplace. He smells the distinctive aroma of freshly brewed *tonto*.

Noises: pursuing footsteps, bullets piercing through the elephant grass, heading for his head or chest. He has to outdo the bullets, outdo light, time – yes time. Time runs fast – so it is said, but he has to disprove the saying. If time runs fast, why have the ten years he has spent in prison seemed like centuries? He has to beat his wings hard and leap into space, soar in the sky like an eagle. He has to get away!

The hedge unfolds ahead of him, rising higher as he approaches. He takes a stance and hauls his body in the air. His right leg entangles in the hedge top. As the left leg follows, he charges down the band of thick shrubs. A tingle grabs his left thigh. The foot lands on a

broken bottle piece. Blood spurts from the punctured thigh. It flows along his leg and mingles with that from the sole of his foot.

He struggles on. It's long since he ever felt physical pain. The years in prison transformed his body into a log. Now, he is inured to physical pain. It's the psychological pain he was left with: the agony of missing his wife – and child, the indignation of his unfair imprisonment, the gloom of living the life of a yokeless shell despised even by a fly. That pain which has held tenaciously and ripped his heart apart day by day. That pain which has for ten years confined him in misery. Now, what is physical pain which comes and goes?

The late evening sun welcomes him to his harbour. He's lost his pursuers. When, and where he cannot tell. He approaches a fallen *murule* trunk and sits down on the low end. He looks down at the wound on his thigh. It's a deep wound. The blood is congealed and dark but it will heal. Physical wounds always heal. All the scars on his legs, face, and back were once wounds, some of them as wide as the unending heavens and others as deep as boreholes. Scars: results of daily battering and assault. These scars always stir flames of anger in his heart; anger which heats up and transforms his heart into rock. Yet rock that cracks when Edna finds her way into his mind. Like now; is she still single? Will she accept him – love him again?

He jolts up and then gathers his torn khaki shirt and clutches it around himself. Edna is waiting for him, and he must get to her! He moves on with a determination that overpowers tiredness. *Kanule* shrubs worsen the tattered khaki shorts. He tears off the lower part of the short to mid-thigh level. The night walk is peaceful because he is going home. It's safe too because wild animals are better than people. If you do not bother them, they do not bother you. If they are satisfied they do not bother you. Definitely they spent the whole day hunting so they cannot be hungry. Besides, animals are friendly and fair. The enemy is a fellow human being, man.

The voice of the dusking forest is so sharp in his ears: chirping crickets and croaking frogs, monkeys jumping on and off trees – saying goodnight to each other – and to him perhaps. As he struggles on, he stumbles over a wandering root and swoons down, face first. He can't go on.



The early morning breeze streams through the treetops, humming a tune for the leaves. The dancing leaves perspire, sending beads of sweat to the ground. A droplet spatters on Kato's forehead. He rises, jerking his back off the ground as if he has just been bitten by a gnat. Is it moonlight? Daylight? More droplets spatter on his body, washing the flash of illusion off his eyes. He smells a fresh scent of rotten leaves, bird and monkey droplets, and tree sap: the animating scent of freedom. A fragrance that makes him forget the ghastly odour of the cell. He sits up and looks at the ashen skin of his scarred arms and legs. It's covered with clotted blood, dust and humus. His feet are sore. His stomach is rumbling. But it is all right; after all he is going home.

A sudden noise cuts through the silence. Kato places his palms behind his ears and listens; pounding footsteps, breaking sticks, and voices! Panic jolts through his body. It grows to fear. Fear paves way for terror. He creeps backwards and crawls into the thick

undergrowth. He lies flat and presses his body against the soft earth. Something under his stomach prods him: a stone perhaps. But it's okay. Physical pain doesn't last long.

The noise gets louder, footsteps nearer. The rustle through the shrubs intensifies. Two of the guards have taken the direction of his hideout. What slices through his heart is the fact that they halt near his hiding place. One of them, famous among the inmates for his Baldhead., is facing the thicket. The other, famous for his long legs is facing away; they are so close that he can smell their familiar odour, a mixture of stale cigarettes, tobacco, urine, sweat, alcohol. He, too, smells that unmistakable stench of the bucket in the inner room of the cell.

"We must find him!" The finality of Baldhead.'s words is etched in his red eyes. "I still can't understand how this happened. I had strict orders on Kato since his forth trial of escape."

"He stoned the guard," long legs says.

"But there were many guards on duty!"

"It was a mess, Afande. Some of the prisoners tried to escape, but we all did our best."

"But Kato escaped."

"I did my best, Afande. I chased him, I even tried to shoot him, but the man —"

"But the man did what, dodged the bullets? Do you know the extent of the risk we stand now? We lose our jobs, or we get arrested..." A chesty cough interrupts his speech. He coughs so hard that his shoulders shake as if he's having a fit. He later spits. Some of the sputum messes up his shirt buttons. He seems not to have noticed as he takes a step closer towards long legs and says, "Find him!"

"I think we should alert the village locals, especially around this area where the forest connects to the swamp. I know many are already in their gardens."

"Sweep the forest. Shake it till he drops to the ground."

Under the shrubs, Kato is just a piece of ghee in a heating saucepan. He feels as if the shrubs are opening their mouths to talk, to give him over to Baldhead. Every leaf and stick above is mocking him; telling him they are jumping away any second. That he was a fool to trust their safety. He squeezes his eyes shut to stifle the welling tears because if they flow, they will carry away hope of seeing his wife – and child. He waits for the two to either sweep his hiding place or move away, but when he opens his eyes, he sees long legs hurrying forward.

Baldhead. takes a few steps forward then halts. Suddenly, he jumps back, drops the gun and then fidgets to pull off his trousers. Ants!

Kato steals up. Luck is on his side. And since luck isn't static, he has to act now that ants have opened the door. He reaches for the stone under him and aims at Baldhead.. Baldhead. makes a guttural sound as he thuds down.

Kato darts forward and grabs the gun. He points the nozzle at Baldhead.. "You move I shoot." He is trembling. He has lived with guns for ten years but he has never touched one. And he hates this commanding machine. On the many occasions its nozzle has

faced him, he's had to freeze. He's had to die to his desires, especially the desire of escape, and live for whatever the gun commanded. He's afraid he can touch the trigger and kill Baldhead. or kill himself or even alert the rest of his pursuers.

As he stands irresolute with the gun, he notices that Baldhead. is already unconscious. He drops it and dashes. This time he is saying goodbye to his pursuers. He extends his thanks to the forest for being a fair harbour. He thanks the birds, snakes, monkeys, worms and all the forest inhabitants as well as trees for loving him, for supporting his cause.

Noises mingle with the continuous croaks in the swamp: the chorus of yells as of children cheering a fast runner, and the shriek of hungry pigs. Kato approaches a field of maize and plucks a shoot of maize corn. He peels it. The grains have barely grown. He steals into a field of flowering coffee plants. His home village is still very far away, but looking at these gardens brings hope to his heart.



Night has taken on its duty. The moon is full. Mosquitoes bob and swish, some trying to stick their teeth into Kato's skin. He is heading for what he knew as the tree-hedged path that led to the football field adjacent to his home. The journey is over. He scrambled over rocks, took paths in bushes to avoid any prying eyes, walked uphill and down hill, now he is home! He imagines himself at home, knocking on the door, Edna waking up and asking who it is in a low voice – soft and smooth. Edna's voice is soft and smooth. What will he say that won't frighten her? Edna will open the door, and – his child will be clinging to her skirt. Edna will reach for the kerosene lamp and scrutinise his face. She will blink her eyes to make sure what she is seeing is real...

The imaginations widen the smile hovering on Kato's lips. He hurries forward but the tree-hedged path he is heading for does not appear. The road is deserted. He had expected people to be moving any hour of the night because this is a new government: the government of freedom – or so he heard. He halts in his steps, turns to look back and then forwards. There is no mistake; this is the way to his home. But where are the coffee plants and the banana plantations which are supposed to be surrounding the mud-and-wattle houses? Where are the large compounds where coffee is supposed to be spread for drying?

He dashes forward, through the football field, past the low set wide house which he recognises as Mzee Mukasa's house, and stops at the site of his own home. What once was his home is now a dilapidated building surrounded by overgrown weeds. The house has no roof. This house which took him three years of hard work to build is supposed to be a mud-and-brick house with wooden doors and windows! It is supposed to be Edna's house! Where is his bride Edna? Where is his child? Or is he lost? Of course anyone could get lost especially after ten years of being cut off from normal life. Anyone but not him; the picture of it all is still fresh in his mind. Right here at the edge of what was his compound, is where the army vehicle found him...

That night Edna started feeling premature labour pains accompanied by bleeding.

"Relax my dear, I am going to borrow a bicycle from Mzee Mukasa and rush you to hospital." Kato said, and rushed out of the house. A sudden flash of car lights blinded his eyes. 'Sumama!' a voice said. Two soldiers jumped off the vehicle; one held his arms towards his back while the other blindfolded him. The first blow landed in his ribs. He jerked to a

crouch, ducking from the second blow, which was aimed at his stomach. He fell down. More blows rained on his head. Every word of plea, every wince of pain called for more blows. When the beatings stopped, two hands pulled him up into a vehicle. They drove off...

"It's me, Kato. Mzee Mukasa, please open for me."

The door opens immediately. Mzee is holding a kerosene lamp forward; his eyes are squinted as he tries to scrutinize the face of the late night visitor.

"It's Kato. I am back." He takes a step inside. The light of the flickering lamp casts a shadow across Mzee's wrinkled face. The old man seems to be either dumb or deaf or even blind. "I am your neigh... was your neighbour."

"Kato?" Mzee whispers. "Kato is dead. He was killed ten... he disappeared—"

"I didn't die."

"Kato?" Mzee says but his voice is still a whisper. He places the lamp on the floor and opens the door wide.

Kato moves slowly and takes the offered seat in an upholstered armchair: the only chair in the room. This house used to be full of chairs, full of children, full of noise, and full of food especially fish, sweet potatoes, Matooke, and yams. Right now Mzee's wife and grand children would have been hurrying out of their bedrooms to see the late night visitor.

"Are you alone in the house, Mzee?"

Mzee stares at him for a long time. Without a word, he disappears into the next room and returns with a shirt. "You must be cold."

"But I am not, Mzee." It's hard for such blood, violated as his has been, to feel cold. Ten years of chilly mornings left his once warm blood inured to coldness. And what's more, these scars etched on his body scarred away the skin sensations. But cold or not, the real issue is that it's not worth for Mzee's shirt to touch his filth.

"I am so much used to being without a shirt," Kato adds but he does not resist when Mzee drapes the shirt over his shoulders. He clutches on to it.

It is silent, each listening to the other's hiss of breath. Kato hates such silence because it liberates the noises in his head. He especially hates the echoes of the chesty coughs which always covered the cell at night. Mzee disappears into the room again and returns with a plastic cup. Kato notices that both Mzee's hands are shaking terribly and the water in the cup is pouring on his bare feet.

"Take this water."

"Thank you, Mzee." Kato receives the cup in both hands. It's not that he really needs this water, but he is only glad to be here. This scent of freedom is so alive and fresh like newly cut grass on a drizzling morning. Receiving this cup from Mzee makes him feel loved. And being loved cements his hope of Edna's existence.

"My wife..." he starts, then pauses to read the expression on Mzee's face. The flickering glow of the kerosene lamp only highlights Mzee's carefully arranged look of

surprise and disbelief. Suddenly, Mzee turns his back once again, reaches for the Kerosene lamp, and disappears back to the same room.

Kato feels weak. For ten years he has lived to make his heart believe Edna and – the child are alive. But now, this moment, a moment so close to the truth only serves to highlight his insidious anxiety. He forces the cup to his lips and takes a sip. The water chokes him, and he places the cup down.

The approaching patch of light tells him Mzee is back to the room. Slowly he lifts his face and finds that Mzee is walking towards him with a plate of food. He rises off his seat and takes the plate from Mzee's hands. He says, "I will eat, Mzee, but please tell me, is my wife... is my wife—"

"Your wife is fine and your son too."

"My son?" Kato places the plate of food down on the floor. He falls on to his knees and says, "thank you, Mzee Mukasa." He then sits back into the chair and reaches for the food. Ten years ago, this would have been fish with either potatoes or Matooke. Now it's a mixture of half-cooked beans and cassava. If food changed with the change of government, then the government changed for the worst. Kato notices that Mzee is still standing and watching him. "You still can't believe I am the one, Mzee. It's me, Kato, and you've just brought life back into my wasted body. My wife and son are alive, not so Mzee? You've just told me so."

"Yes I have."

"Please sit down now." Kato leaves the upholstered chair and instead sits down on the floor.

"I should sit down but I can't," Mzee says. "I want to know what happened to you, where you have been, why... how... I don't know what to ask you first, Kato."

"Are you alone here?"

"My wife died. My children got married and left home. I live with two of my grand children but they are asleep already."

"I am sorry for your wife."

"Eat. Finish that food. You need it."

Kato picks a piece of cassava and nibbles on it. He later says, "Take the seat, Mzee. I am more comfortable here on the floor."

"I take the seat; you eat and finish up the food."

"And my wife?"

"Eat, Kato. Finish the food."

"I left her helpless, Mzee. She was bleeding."

"She is a brave woman. She walked up to my house soaked in blood. My wife helped her. The baby was immature, but my wife knew what to do. The baby survived. They both survived."

Kato knows he should either be jumping or crying for Joy, but he is just nibbling at the food. He is still searching every angle for an explanation for the cause of his fate.

“That night, I was coming to your house to borrow a bicycle to take Edna to hospital. I was kidnapped, blindfolded, and tortured... Does she think I abandoned her?”

“I haven’t said that, Kato, and no one ever thought you abandoned her.”

“So then does she still love me?”

“How can I answer that?”

“Well then, just tell me, is she still single?”

After a long, heart-suspending silence in which Mzee refuses to answer his question, Kato bends and props his elbows on his knees. He continues, “I was blindfolded, I don’t know for how long. The next time I was able to open my eyes and see clearly, two naked men were lying next to me. First I heard a chesty cough escape from one corner. It sparkled off multiple coughs. The atmosphere smelt of stale cigarettes, tobacco, urine, sweat – and yes, I was already a prisoner! Why, Mzee, why?”

“I wish I had a valid answer to your question.” Mzee finally talks. “Those were times when all questions remained hanging on our lips.”

“Why?” Kato whispers to himself. He wonders if the blazing flame in his heart will ever cool down. This is not desperation; neither can he term it as mere anger. It hits him, whirling in his heart like a possessed cloud of dust. Even in this absence of an answer, he still can’t call himself a victim of those times. Times when once one was a soldier, then one could make orders and those orders had to be obeyed without question. A soldier could come to your house, command you to pack all your belongings and then carry them to wherever he wished them to be carried. Those times: times when one could be forced to hold down the legs of their own wife or daughter for a group of rapist soldiers. Times of the rowdy army! Kato wonders who to blame for those times; the president, no doubt: a president who had no idea an army needed control. A president whose regime only aimed at hurting the common man: like him, a farmer, a groom who had only known the happiness of marriage for one year, a man who was yet to hold the child of his own strength in his arms.

“I never hurt anyone, Mzee, I wasn’t even involved in any political parties! I was just a farmer.”

“It was a disastrous time, Kato. A time of great instability, insecurity, undisciplined army—”

“Still, that doesn’t explain why I was captured.”

“I am not trying to explain why you were captured. I am trying to remind you of that time when law and order was a component of the blowing wind.”

“I had done nothing wrong.”

“Don’t torture yourself, anymore. There is only one word that can explain your fate. Curfew! You were found outside after eight in the night! That is the crime you committed.”

“A crime I committed?”

“Yes. You broke the curfew rule.”

“Well then I needed a trial. I needed to defend myself in court. I broke a curfew rule as you’ve said, but I had good cause. Anyone would have done anything to save the life of his wife – and child!”

“Yes, you deserved a trial,” Mzee says.

“And then the government changed. And we heard it had changed for the best. That Museveni had come as a liberator, so I waited.” Day by day Kato waited to see ‘the best’ in the change of government. But the days of waiting lagged on, leaving behind snail marks of hopelessness. Some prisoners were killed, others released. Some of the political detainees were released, and others killed.

“I remained in prison; no one came to visit me.”

“No one knew you still lived, Kato. Six months after your disappearance naked bones were discovered by the bank of river Kasanje at the junction where the river meanders down to the Kasanje forest. Word went around that it was work of the army. And as you know, if such a declaration was made, then there was nothing else to be done, no one to follow such a case unless one was only calling for his own death. Hundreds crowded at the site. Whoever had a missing relative declared him dead and among the naked bones.”

“And so I was declared dead, and among the naked bones.”

“Yes.”

Kato is aware that it wasn’t unheard of during Obote 2’s regime for people to disappear mysteriously and forever. The rowdy army engaged in all sorts deadly activities. Everyone was left to wonder who gave orders to kill who, or to capture who, or to loot whose house, or to torture who.

“Your father did his best to search everywhere for you.”

“My father didn’t search enough. He never went to check with the prisons.”

“The search was still on, but after the naked bones, everyone lost hope.”

“Did Edna lose hope too?”

Mzee laughs, for the first time since Kato entered his house. “Edna is the only person who never accepted your assumed death. She always said you would come back, always.

Kato sits straight. He smiles, and then laughs too. “I knew she was alive too. I believed she had survived the deadly experience.” He puts the empty plate of food down and instead reaches for the cup and gulps down the water. The water flows to his stomach then rises again to settle below his heart like a supporting cushion. He loves this feeling. Edna is alive. “Where is she now?” he asks.

Mzee’s face is already re-arranged. The wrinkles are more pronounced now, eyes narrowed as if he is squinting. Kato can clearly tell the laugh on Mzee’s face has transformed into sadness.

“It wasn’t only the change of government. Many things changed too. Children were born, children grew up, people died ... people ... got married—”

Kato knees in front of Mzee. “Are you saying Edna got married?”

Silence again. This time it's hot, blazing drying up the water which had settled below his heart. He trembles. His body heats up. Sweat breaks through his skin. His breath quickens.

"Edna has waited till she could wait no more," Mzee says. "Her wedding is pending."

Kato pats his ears. What Mukasa has just said is the loudest phrase he's ever heard yet he isn't sure he's heard it. It has to be repeated before he can believe it but he is not sure he wants to hear it again. He prefers death. He prefers being kidnapped and put in prison: locked up forever. Deafness is better that he can never hear again. Edna. Her wedding is pending.

"Pending," he says. "Ten years...." for ten years he managed to convince his heart that Edna was alive, and that she was waiting for him. Perhaps it was just a means of facing life inside the high walls: living the life of a yokeless shell. It was a means of waking up every morning, toiling on the *shambas* under the blazing sun, swallowing the once-a-day meal of *posho* and beans; trying to fill the forever space in his stomach. It was the reason he was named 'escapee' and it was the reason for a successful escape. But her wedding is pending!

He rolls up his trousers to expose a deep scar on the left calf. "This is one of the marks of my trials for escapes. The rest are on my chest and back. I tried, Mzee, I did the best I could, all for Edna."

"She has tried, too."

"Tried what?" Kato shouts.

"She had vowed to stay in her house with her son and wait for you. For seven years, she waited, and she was determined to wait, but your relatives forced her to vacate the land."

"But it's my land, my wife's land, my son's land!"

"You were not here to explain that to them."

"I know."

"They harvested all the food Edna had grown, harvested all the coffee, and left the land uncultivated."

Kato lowers his voice. "I saw my desolate home already, Mzee. When is her wedding?"

Mzee pats Kato's arm, making skin contact for the first time. "I wish I could tell you otherwise but...her wedding is two days from now."

"I am not too late, Mzee." He jumps to his feet. "Where is she? I must be on my way now."

"It's way past Midnight, too late to move."

"Things changed, Mzee. No curfews. No rowdy army. There is freedom of everything. For many years I waited to see 'the best' in the new government. Now is my time."

"I promise you, Kato, I can only give you her home address in the morning. For now, you need some rest."

Kato bends slowly and sits down on the floor. He cries.

The face that first appears in the doorway is old and crinkled. The owner of the face is holding a hoe. Edna's mother. She stares at him, mouth agape. The hoe in her hands drops. Another face emerges from the kitchen. Edna's young sister. She is winnowing a basket of fried groundnuts. The basket drops the moment she sets eyes on him. She raves the compound shouting, "ghost. Kato's ghost!"

More faces appear. More voices chorus, "Kato's ghost. Kato's ghost." Among the faces that appear there is a boy of about ten years – if he can guess. No mistake, his son! He dashes to cling to his grandmother's skirt. His son: the child he had never seen. The child has Edna's round face. "My son, I am your father," he whispers. He wants to rush forward and pick him up but his body can barely move. Another face appears. It's not Edna. It is Edna's aunt. They have all gathered for the wedding. This is how they gathered when he was marrying Edna. More and more people swam in the compound.

Edna appears. Instead of coming from inside the house taking delicate steps, her face shining with effects of *Samona* jelly; just as it is expected of any ripe brides, she emerges from a small path behind the house, a jerrycan of water balanced on her head with skill. Unlike all the people who have dropped what ever they had in their hands because of the shock of seeing him, Edna drops her jerrycan only to be able to run to him with arms opened wide. Edna. The round face. The soft, welcoming torso. He feels the warmth of her embrace. She smiles: the smile that mends the crack in his heart, the smile that drowns the darkness he's dwelt in for ten years. Edna, his bride, his wife; the mother of his son. His tears dissolve in her *kitenge*. Her tears dissolve in Mzee's shirt. He holds her in an everlasting embrace. He will never let her go. She lifts her beautiful teary, face and looks in his eyes. She says, "There is only one thing I want to do now. I want to tell the whole world that my proposed wedding is cancelled. My husband is back!"

Kato rises from the unknown depths of his sleep. Mzee is holding a cold compress over his forehead.

"You were dreaming," Mzee says. "From what I observed, your dream had a bad beginning, but the ending brought a big smile to your face."

"Edna still loves me."

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