

Caine Prize Stories 2009:
Shortlist

How Kamau wa Mwangi Escaped into Exile

Mukoma wa Ngugi

I

HE HAD BEEN RUNNING for hours. His lungs were about to implode. Each heartbeat, a resounding thud of pure will, sounded spaced out, lonely even, as if at some point the distance between each beat would grow larger and larger until only his body would be left running. He was wheezing and heaving for breath. He had been running for hours through small gardens, then larger farms, tea plantations and now through a dense forest trying to make it to the meeting point. Earlier he had had to abandon his rucksack, his survival kit of two books, roasted goat meat, a pair of expensive black dress pants, white shirt and newly polished black leather Prefect shoes. Before abandoning it, he crumpled a brand new passport (but not before in the moonlight quickly looking at the passport photo with a bemused look as one does at the airport before handing it to the customs officer) in the back pocket of his jeans. Into his left front pocket he tacked in a few thousand shillings and in the other school transcripts which looked out of place in his large sweaty hands in the middle of a forest.

Besides what was in his pockets, his other possession was an army flask. With its strap broken, he had to carry it in his hand. Earlier, the sound of water hitting its insides had seemed louder than it actually was. Now, even though empty, it was getting heavier and heavier. His temples were throbbing and his body felt as if his blood was going to break its banks and he would bleed to death. Before, to take his mind off things, he had become fascinated by how quickly the rings of smoke he spurted out dissipated into the cold air but now the only thought in him was to make it to the meeting point. Moonlight was folding back into the night. The early sun, peering underneath the earth's plate, was beginning to heat the soil and more smoke appeared to be rising from under the forest canopy. It was almost daybreak.

Feeling his t-shirt and jeans clinging uncomfortably to his body like they were made out of wet rubber, he realised just how unprepared he had been for this

moment. He would have been better off running in his nice trousers and shirt – they were lighter. He had thought of running without a shirt but a quick look at his bare arms, sliced in a thousand places by thorns and dry branches, had convinced him not to take it off. He did not mind the pain as sweat-drops rolled into the razor-thin crevices. The pain kept him feeling alive. He realised he had to stop soon. For the last two or so hours he had been running at a crawl. He wanted to live. He came to a stream. He drank some water. The water was still very cold, even though the sun had revealed itself fully. He contemplated filling the water flask halfway to keep it light but decided against it and filled it to the top.

He looked around the stream. He hadn't gone as far as he'd thought. Even though he had been running for five or six hours he hadn't gone that far – not with fences to climb over, maize and napier grass plants cutting into his skin and tea plantations arranged like a maze. Not with the frequent pauses to make out trees and shrubs from silhouettes of imagined soldiers and policemen with their dogs. When he was young, he and friends would sneak out of school to come and play here. What used to be an hour's drive had taken him half a night.

He walked to a mugumo tree which, contorting high into the sky, looked like many hands lifted up in prayer. It had been drilled hollow by time and now its huge trunk looked like a Maasai hut without a door. The massive tree was supported by muscular roots that ran from its round bottom like huge veins deep into the earth. They would sometimes smoke stolen cigarettes here. He sat in its hollowness, this silent witness to generations and generations. It in turn embraced his battered body. For thousands of years, his ancestors prayed and sacrificed to their God here. He remembered how he and his friends joked that back in those days, it was thieves and the poor who answered the prayers by eating the food and warm muratina beer left as sacrifice. He was hungry and regretted the food he had thrown away. He wondered if he looked around whether he would find some cured meat, a bone that he could crush to find marrow preserved over many generations.

For the last few hours, he hadn't thought about his father, girlfriend, relatives and friends and how they would take his flight, how they would cope with the harassment that would follow. He wondered if exile was a selfish act, like suicide. But no, he had to trust their judgment, they would be happy that he had escaped. He was alive and therefore there was hope. They would not, even in their imagination, sacrifice him to cosy up to the authorities. Besides, they were all doing the same work in different ways.

As he sat inside the mugumo tree, he thought about Odhiambo. They had grown up in the same town. They had gone to the same schools, and even though they had enrolled for different university degree programmes, they had been admitted and graduated at the same time. His parents were managers at Bata

Shoe Company, which made the Prefect shoes he was wearing. In addition to Luo, he also spoke Kamau's language, Gikuyu. But the thing about it all was that neither the Luo nor the Gikuyu trusted him and herein lay the stupidity of the whole thing, Kamau angrily thought. To understand other African cultures was to be diluted, to be on the fence, to be compromised. It was to be dirty. He painfully dragged himself from where he was sitting to lean against the inside wall of the tree. He wondered if, after all the sacrifices done at this tree, would the culmination of their magic save his life? Embraced by the mugumo tree, he felt safe and protected and the warmth of sleep came over him.

He dreamed that there were loud voices and army trucks and helicopters circling above the tree looking for him. He felt the heat of a bright searchlight in his eyes. He wasn't dreaming. How could they possibly have found him? He opened his eyes to find a bright mid-afternoon sun streaming into his eyes. He closed and opened them again. The sun had found a hole through the mugumo to launch its invasion.

He was relieved. But just as he felt safe, he heard loud voices, screams and then machine-gun fire that sounded like a thousand people clapping loudly at a rally. He crawled about one hundred feet towards the stream. He made it just in time to witness the last of the executions, bodies dancing violently before falling to the ground. The soldiers began to pile dead bodies on top of one another in a shallow but wide grave that resembled the first dig to lay a foundation. They stacked them like cabin logs so that each head was locked into the feet of the other until they rose into the sky. He was well hidden by rocks and the long grass by the river's bank but he felt vulnerable, like he was completely out in the open.

From where the bodies were stacked, a slow but widening flood of blood was flowing down the bank into the stream, cutting it in half – upstream, clear and frothy white water and downstream, water thick with a bright, heavy and velvety redness.

It was fratricide. The dead and the dying wore army uniforms. He lay there transfixed, a reluctant witness immobilised just like the mugumo tree. The soldiers, tired farmers leaving the field after a hard day with their guns slung on their shoulders like hoes, were making their way back into the trucks. Only one soldier, fumbling in his pockets and resembling a smoker looking for matches, remained. It was then that Kamau noticed that the place reeked of gasoline.

They were going to burn the bodies and bury the remains. He thought of the schoolchildren who would some day find the remains but realised that this area would be cordoned off. This piece of land was owned by a well-respected local politician.

For the soldiers, everything was well under control. He felt dizzy and for a

moment he did not know where he was. It was then that, as the soldier fumbled through his pockets, Kamau noticed one of the bodies had come back to life and was starting to move. It was stirring. At the same moment their eyes met. The man in the pile of bodies was waking up as if from a nightmare, disoriented. As he began to grope around, his confusion lifted just long enough for him to remember what had happened and he understood why there was a pair of eyes hidden across the stream frantically telling him to be still. When the shooting started, he had felt a sharp but heavy blow on his temple and, as he fell unconscious, he believed he was falling to his death. As he was realising what was now happening, he was at the same time trying to stop his hands from moving but it was too late.

His body had obeyed his earlier command. The soldier had seen him stir. He saw the soldier drop the lit match and snuff it out with his foot. As the soldier began to march toward him, he turned his eyes to the pair of eyes across the stream. He felt a series of unpunctuated sharp blows to his chest. He felt his head getting heavier and heavier as the back of his neck locked against the feet of another dead soldier.

It was then that Kamau realised who the dead man was. It was the soldier who had told him to run for his life the night before. He had given Kamau a list of people to be rounded up and assassinated by the Special Branch in case of an emergency. Kamau had asked him why he was giving it to him.

"Just in case we fail," the soldier replied. It was not until Kamau met Odhiambo and Wambui that he knew the coup attempt had failed. Another matchstick struck the rough surface. It lit up and then began to fade away such that the soldier had to carefully cup it with both hands as he leaned over to light the pyre which hungrily welcomed contact. As a soft but determined wind fanned the flames, they began to flutter furiously, sounding like flags in the wind. The soldiers left, save for two who were guarding the burning bodies. Tomorrow they would be back. They had ploughed the field and would be returning to plant bones and skulls into the earth. The smoke from burning flesh began to rise into the sky. He looked around and saw it was a beautiful day. Looking into the stream that had now turned from deep blood red to a mucky black colour, he selfishly thought how lucky he was to have tapped a full container of water. Then he doubled up and started vomiting. He was afraid the two soldiers would hear him but not above the flutter and crackle of the flames and burning flesh. He was a witness taking flight, taking the pictures of the dead with him.

Kamau crawled back inside the mugumo tree. As he once again leaned against the inside wall, he noticed he was bleeding heavily from his stomach. He must have crawled over something sharp. He was in a state of shock which numbed him from feeling. He wished for the pain back. Perhaps this was the culmination

of generations upon generations of sacrifices. He thought of the soldier and how he had come to his house the night before, unarmed and alone. Even without his weapons he had not lost his arrogance, so that when Kamau asked him for his name, he said in an off-hand manner it was none of his business. Kamau wasn't scared of him, though a few months before, even with him unarmed he would have been – soldiers and dictators rule through the threat of violence and the uniform without the gun is the same as one with a gun. It was like colonial white skin – whether it carried a Bible or not, the most important thing was the wrath of the army it threatened to visit upon the souls that refused to be harvested and rebelled. Over time white skin became the stand-in for the army itself.

He was not afraid of the soldier. He had experienced everything but death in their hands and, short of killing him, there was nothing more they could do to him. But that was Kamau the victim and survivor. Kamau the witness wondered if this held true any more. There was a lot more to be afraid of. Like people who conduct massacres in the middle of a beautiful day as carelessly as if they were on a lunch break.

“Look,” the soldier had said to Kamau, “I... we do not want to see more people dead. Especially the young people and even though we anticipate more trouble from the likes of you, you professional agitators, this is our country and you are needed. Protect yourselves and your friends. We shall deal with each other later. Like men... eye to eye. If you do not leave tonight, there is a chance you will be dead by tomorrow morning.”

The soldier gave Kamau the list and left. Perhaps he had been one of Kamau's torturers, perhaps an assassin doing one act of penance or perhaps he was just being pragmatic. But no matter, the soldier had saved his life. Kamau had not doubted him. He had felt the vice tightening. After torture and release he was aware of being followed. He was sure that their house phone was tapped. Some politicians – moderates, nationalists and radicals – had disappeared into black holes. Something had to give. He understood this with that same instinct that informs soccer players in a tight match or soldiers that tables are turning in a war. He felt that the culmination of all the right and wrong moves had brought things to a point where decisions had to be made. And for him, it was victory, death or exile. Regardless of which one claimed him, he understood that things could no longer remain at the cusp of a violent implosion. Someone had to go for broke. It was not the movement that he belonged to that made the first move. It was a section of the army and the dictator had just exacted his revenge – a first instalment of a hundred or more deaths. He and those like him who were part of the Second Independence Democracy with Content Forum (SIDCF) were going to feel the full effects of whatever had just transpired.

After the soldier left, Kamau studied the list. It had been hastily written, not even typed but first written in pen or pencil then stencilled. Some names were carelessly cancelled out. He wondered if that meant they had already been contained or had won a reprieve. The ones he could make out, like his, were names of members he knew to be alive. The names were written in different handwriting. Due to promotions or demotions and being processed by different agencies, the list must change hands quite often, he thought. He became very angry. Here, on this piece of paper, stencilled and crumpled, were people's lives. How many anti-government speeches earned one an assassination? How many rallies? How about silence when asked to sing? How many silences added your name to the list? From his cellphone, he called Odhiambo, who knew to walk to a phone booth and call Kamau at a neighbour's house. Kamau gave him the names on the list and asked him to contact as many as he could. He called those he knew he could easily reach and then made his escape plans with Odhiambo. There were two meeting points, one certain and the other a contingency. He returned home and started packing.

Inside the mugumo tree, he thought about how his father had slept through the soldier's visit, his packing and flight and started to smile but the energy left him. He should have woken him up. The sun began fading. He thought it was time to move on. But it was the fire. By creating thick dark clouds of smoke, it had hastened evening. Inside the mugumo tree the smoke was swirling angrily as it looked for a place to escape. Finding the small window that earlier had streamed in the sunlight, it billowed through. His eyes misted. He realised that he was crying. The shock had begun to wear off and he was feeling the pain that comes with thawing. He shut down and, even though awake, nothing registered, not the pain, not the burning bodies outside nor the torture he had endured a few months ago, not the wound that ran across his stomach nor his father who by now would be worried. When he finally woke up from his catatonic state, the moon was out but it was dark enough to continue. Even though he did not know it at the time, and it would take him even longer to register, he swore to himself that he would live. A wounded animal, limping and stumbling, he continued with his journey towards exile. The soldier who had saved his life was dead. But he was alive, a survivor and a witness.

II

Odhiambo heard a rustling noise and, as his heart contracted into a tight squeeze, he noted just how jumpy and scared he was. With the old wooden door open and the moonlight behind the silhouette, Odhiambo's eyes did not adjust to the light long enough to make it out before it pushed the door closed. The silhouette

walked in dragging its feet along the floor, which was covered with sawdust to protect it from mud during the rainy season. Odhiambo fumbled in his pockets for a match. As he struck light, he heard the silhouette gasp and shuffle towards the door. It could not be Wambui. He whispered Kamau's name and, as the light from the lantern filled the room, the silhouette turned around. On seeing Kamau, he could see that something had gone terribly wrong.

Kamau looked as if he had splashed about in a pool full of blood. His white t-shirt was soggy with it and, as he shuffled along, he left little drops of blood which mixed with the sawdust on the floor and looked like little balls of mercury, each self-contained and shimmering. He was doubled over, holding his stomach with one hand and the water bottle like a grenade in the other. His long dreadlocks were full of black jacks, leaves and little twigs and his arms, neck and face were lacerated. But it was the expression on his face. His normally jovial face, alive in debate or jokes, was gaunt. In no time it had wilted. His eyes were flashing disbelief, fear and outrage, at once vacant then full of anger, at times ashamed then exhilarated. He was experiencing a thousand human emotions rapidly; emotions that were intense, sharp and without relief.

And the light from the kerosene lantern, not quite a bright white and not quite a bright red, almost yellow in fact, the light was painting everything in the room a hue of sick colours – jaundiced colours. Lazily pulling shadows long and short as it blew through the cracked walls, the lantern made matters worse. It was a wonder that Kamau was not on the ground paralysed.

After calling out his name, Odhiambo had not said a word. He pulled a dusty wooden chair for him to sit. This woodshed in their old primary school was their contingency plan. For Odhiambo the coup attempt and for Kamau the massacre had triggered it. With the coup attempt, there were complications. There would be road-blocks and of course a list against which every ID would be checked. All their plans had changed. They could no longer bluff and bribe their way through the airport. There was too much at stake now for the corrupt immigration official. They would need a million shillings at the very least whereas before they only needed thousands. In any case here was Kamau bruised up and without his dress shirt, trousers and pants. Odhiambo did not know what to do. At that moment Wambui walked in. Kamau tried to stand up as she walked in but he was too drained. She paused for a moment before motioning to him to remain seated and walked over to him. She looked at Odhiambo as if to ask for help but he just shook his head. Kamau reached out and held on to her.

Since his ordeal had begun, even though not more than 24 hours ago, it was only when he saw Wambui that he thought he might be okay. He knew he would be safe when he saw Odhiambo but Wambui made him feel he might be okay.

Witnessing the executions had unnerved him. The last part of his journey to the school had been painful. He had never felt so much fear in his life. Not even when he was arrested for the first time. To get to the tool shed he had to walk through the open soccer field, otherwise he would have had to double back and climb the fence behind the school. He did not have the energy to change the route he had taken. But if he had known that his heart would be pounding so hard as to make him think he was going to die, or that his chest under the vice of terror would tighten till he felt like he was going to vomit his insides, or that the dull moon would feel like a spotlight on him and that he would feel so vulnerable and lonely as he waited for an assassin's bullet, and that he would be so terrified as to wish for certain death, perhaps he would have changed his route.

But Wambui was here now. He had made it. He started crying, first slowly, sobs that heaved both him and Wambui, who was standing and holding him close to her stomach, back and forth. Then the anguished wails started that were so low that both Wambui and Odhiambo felt them without hearing them.

They got louder and louder until they thought the wails would rip them into pieces. Odhiambo watched helplessly as Wambui thrust Kamau back, took one step back and then slapped him so hard that he spun on the chair which swivelled on one leg, hesitated for a moment and then came crashing down, taking Kamau with it. She thrust her arms under his armpits, lifted him up from the ground and sat him down on a plastic pail of dried-up red paint. Then she explained to them how they would get him out of the country.

Kneeling before him on the dusty floor, she took some red ochre from her bag. As if she had done this all her life, picking out the black jacks and dry leaves, she began applying it to his dreadlocks. Its richness fought the smell of kerosene out of the woodshed. She kneaded it into his dreads. At times she would treat them one lock at a time, lift them up as if they were thread and she were sewing. With the balls of her hands she worked the ochre in. She massaged it into his roots in sharp, quick movements that appeared to Odhiambo to be rough. But to Kamau it was relief as the ochre lodged deep into his scalp, a cool, gritty healing potion. When it was all worked in, she straightened up, took the lantern and held it to his face. It would need time to dry but they had to move soon. She asked him to take off his t-shirt and trousers. He did not hesitate. She pointed to the blood-soaked boxers as well. She poured some water from Kamau's flask onto a cloth and scrubbed the blood off his face, chest, genitals, thighs and legs. She took off a long green wrapper that was holding her dreadlocks in place and wrapped it around Kamau's back and stomach to stem the bleeding from the wound.

From her bag she removed a long, flowing red cloth, the red bordered by black squares. She was glad to have picked red cloth – it would camouflage any

bleeding. She draped it over his left shoulder and under the armpit of the right, leaving it bare, and then let the rest of the cloth fall to his ankles. She checked through his jean pockets and found the passport, school certificates and money. It was risky to be without a form of identification but it was even riskier for Kamau to be caught with his passport on him – with him on the list, they would all be shot dead on the spot. She stuffed everything back except for the money which she first folded into a small note and then, taking the left-hand side of the cloth, she knotted the money into it. She stuffed his bloody clothes behind some empty drums in the shed. They would come back for them later when it was safer. She gave him 12 amulets made of what seemed like a million rainbow-coloured little beads to put on each wrist.

Finally, to complete the ensemble, she gave him a calabash. It was full. He opened it. It contained fermented porridge that was still warm. As he painfully lifted it to his lips, Wambui looked at him. He almost resembled a Maasai warrior now but without a sword, spear or a fighting club he would not pass. But only if a Maasai cop stopped them – and such a cop, in disguise as well, would not peer too closely. In a sense Kamau's disguise was perfect. To everybody else in the country, a Maasai wore a red cloth, had red ochre in his or her hair and stank horribly. They were not seen and when they were, they were wished away because they reminded the Africans of their having sold their culture to the European only to till his garden, work as maids, oversee his estates and manage his bank accounts. In this world called a village, the Maasai reminded the African of who had elected the Westerner the village elder and, for this, they were punished. But the Maasai trudged on wearily, land continually taken, culture under siege from other citizens and European tourists who posed for photographs with them and their gold, diamonds, lions, antelopes and elephants. They wanted the red ochre to rub off onto their skins and carry back to their capitals the smell of a true African. Now other Africans were attempting to succeed where the coloniser had failed – to conquer the Maasai.

What also made the disguise perfect was that, while Kamau might suffer some insults and gruff treatment when stopped by the police, there was no way they would expect an educated African, even a radical, to go as far as disguising himself as a Maasai. What would the Maasai think? She did not have time to ponder. Odhiambo was already suggesting that they move if they were to get to the border. "*My ilkiliyani, let's go,*" she said.

Kamau managed a smile for the first time. The porridge and his new persona had given him a second life. Perhaps he wouldn't have smiled if he'd realised she had called him her 'junior warrior'. He got up and followed her outside. Odhiambo snuffed out the lantern lamp and pulled the door behind him. They

walked to an old Datsun pick-up. He noticed the number plates – KVG 750. It was his father's car. It was good he was once again able to record details. They put him in the uncovered back. That was how the Maasai were transported by the middle class whose conscience whispered but was easily assuaged by such gestures.

III

In spite of Wambui's confidence in the disguise, the first checkpoint was the worst. They did not know what to expect. The police officer who walked over to them was armed with a machine-gun, a pistol, a grenade and an army knife. They were not relieved to note that handcuffs were not part of his arsenal. He was not here to place people under arrest. He screamed of what in the files of Amnesty International became extra-judicial killings. Neither did they feel relieved that he was bureaucratically polite when asking for Wambui's driver's licence and Odhiambo's ID. It meant he knew exactly what he was doing. He checked their names against the list. As the flashlight tore through it they could see it bore the same careless marks as the one from Kamau. He walked over to his car to radio in their names. They heard a voice filtering through the static to tell the police officer to be more thorough; Odhiambo and Wambui were known radicals and the car they were driving belonged to a suspect's father. He came back and politely handed back Wambui her driver's licence and Odhiambo his ID.

As he ordered them out of the car, she noticed that the one thousand shilling note she had tacked in her licence was still there. This was a senior officer and before Wambui could decide whether to continue with his bidding, he was already carefully patting them down. He flashed through the glove compartment, under the long leather seat, under the mats and even inside an unused cigarette ashtray that sat on the dashboard. The officer walked to the back of the Datsun pick-up, hand tensely hovering over his pistol. Wambui knew that Kamau would not pass his scrutiny. This officer was too meticulous, a civil servant who, while he might not enjoy his job, prided himself on doing it well. The kind whose parents, with slaps and kisses, instilled in their children the discipline that said a job worth doing is worth doing well. The officer looked under the car. He flashed the surrounding bushes. With his free hand, he looked under the spare tyre. He signed for Kamau to stand up. Both Wambui and Odhiambo knew it was all over. He tore the flashlight through Kamau. He looked under where Kamau was sitting. Looked at Kamau again and then walked back to his car. They heard him asking if he should detain the two known radicals just in case and voice over the static telling him to let them go because they were not on the list.

By this time the other police officers had begun walking towards the pick-up, interest piqued by the amount of time it had taken to process it. Before they

reached it, the officer beckoned them to get moving. Their relief did not last long. When they came to the spikes he flashed for them to stop. As he walked over to the car, Odhiambo looked at Wambui to say they were going to die soon and there was nothing they could do. The spikes had not been moved from the road to make a path for them. Making a run for it only to be immobilised by flat tyres would be certain death. They could not reverse without being shot at. In any case the old Datsun couldn't outrun the new Peugeot police cars which Wambui, for lack of something else to think about, decided looked elegant painted black. The officer walked over to the driver's side, reached through the window into the dashboard and, deliberately sliding his arm across her right breast, from her driver's licence he extracted the one thousand shilling note. He ordered them to drive on. As Wambui eased the car into motion, he waved the money in the Maasai's face.

IV

Not much conversation took place between Wambui and Odhiambo. They drove in silence. They were both present but needed time to reflect, regroup, plot and allow for the months ahead. Soon they were four or five kilometres from the border post. It was not safe to get any closer. Kamau would have to get off here and find a suitable place for crossing. They knew that the border post, a stall with a thick and heavy nylon rope that cut across the road, did not consist of much but it was still not worth the risk. With the coup attempt, there were bound to be soldiers.

They got out of the pick-up and walked a few hundred metres before slowly lagging to a stop. Kamau looked at Wambui. He thought he would be seeing her soon. They would win soon and he would come back or she would leave the country to join him. And she, she looked at her junior warrior. They held each other for a long time trying to burn this last moment, before the interruption in their memories. And when they both felt that it was imprinted on their skins and on their breath and memory, they let go. He tried telling them about the massacre by the stream on a beautiful day, how he had been woken up by gunfire, how the mugumo tree had sheltered him, about sacrifices and black smoke and how the soldier who had given him the list was also killed. He spoke too fast and it came out jumbled. They could not follow his words, but it had been a strange day and they understood him intuitively – his body told the story, the cruel laceration across his stomach as if the earth had tried to cut him open as he crawled to the stream. Odhiambo remembered his eyes that alternated fear and vacancy and Wambui remembered the hysteria. He was out of breath. He stopped talking and then, as if the words had been stuck somewhere inside him, he told them in one quick flood to approach the massacre site from the side of the mugumo in case

there were soldiers there. He again fell silent.

Odhiambo hugged him. As they were getting into the car, Wambui thought about their love, how he was so broken up that when she held him she could hear each heartbeat echo in a growing emptiness.

Kamau stood still for a while and watched the furious ball of dust and light roll further and further away and then he started for the border. He hadn't been walking for long when he noticed car headlights rapidly digging holes into the night, sometimes all but disappearing then reappearing as the car dunked in and out of dips in the road. He stopped to wait to see his friends again. When the ball of dust screeched to a stop, instead of the old pick-up hurtling toward him, it was a massive 4x4 full of white tourists. They wanted to take photographs of him but he signed that he wanted to be driven in their motor car to the big city across the border.

"Probably to buy a wife," one of them said.

"Well, let him hop in," another said.

They did not put him in the carrier cabin at the back as Africans would have done. They squeezed him into the back seat. "Mr Maasai, can you teach us to say hello? How – do you – say – hello?" they asked him, gesturing wildly. Odhiambo probably would have known. "Wi mwega," he said in Gikuyu. They didn't know he was speaking Gikuyu and if they did, they didn't care. They repeated after him in chorus "Wi mwega."

"Why do you people kill lions? Do you know I once dreamed of hunting a Maasai hunting a lion?"

"Man, he doesn't look too good – perhaps the hunt did not go too well."

And thus their journey continued, slowing down only once to show their white skin and their one Maasai to the soldiers at the border post. Soon they reached Kiliko town. The flashlight tore into his eyes as they took what felt like a thousand photographs of him. The townspeople, composed of natives in tribal costume, administrators with suits that had bruised collars and tourists with cameras and long hair went about their business. But even then, some of the other tourists crowded in as if on a kill to snap a few photographs of him. He had made it out of his country barely alive. But he had survived, he was still alive and for now that was enough to work with.

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