Discovering Home

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There is a problem. Somebody has locked themselves in the toilet. The upstairs bathroom is locked and Frank has disappeared with the keys. There is a small riot at the door, as drunk women with smudged lipstick and crooked wigs bang on the door.

There is always that point at a party when people are too drunk to be having fun; when strange smelly people are asleep on your bed; when the good booze runs out and there is only Sedgwick's Brown Sherry and a carton of sweet white wine; when you realize that all your flat-mates have gone and all this is your responsibility; when the DJ is slumped over the stereo and some strange person is playing 'I'm a Barbie girl, in a Barbie Wo-o-orld' over and over again.

I have been working here, in Observatory, Cape Town, for two years and rarely breached the boundary of my clique. Fear, I suppose, and a feeling that I am not quite ready to leave a place that has let me be anything I want to be – and provided not a single predator. That is what this party is all about:

I am going home for a year.

So maybe this feeling that my movements are being guided is explicable. This time tomorrow I will be sitting next to my mother. We shall soak each other up. Flights to distant places always arouse in me a peculiar awareness: that what we refer to as reality – not the substance, but the organization of reality – is really a strand as thin as the puffy white lines that planes leave behind as they fly.

It will be so easy – I will wonder why I don't do this every day. I hope to be in Kenya for thirteen months. I intend to travel as much as possible and finally to attend my grandparents' 60th wedding anniversary in Uganda in December.

There are so many possibilities that could overturn this journey, yet I will get there. If there is a miracle in the idea of life it is this: that we are able to exist for a time – in defiance of chaos. Later, we often forget how dicey everything was: how the tickets almost didn't materialize; how the event almost got postponed. Phrases swell, becoming bigger than their context and speak to us with TRUTH. We wield this series of events as our due, the standard for gifts of the future. We live the rest of our lives with the utter knowledge that there is something deliberate, a vein in us that transports everything into place – *if* we follow the stepping stones of certainty.

After the soft light and mellow manners of Cape Town, Nairobi is a shot of whisky. We drive from the airport into the City Centre; around us, matatus: those brash, garish minibus-taxis, so irritating to every Kenyan except those who own one, or work for one. I can see them as the best example of contemporary Kenyan Art. The best of them get new paint jobs every few months. Oprah seems popular right now, and Gidi Gidi Maji Maji, one of the hottest bands in Kenya, and the inevitable Tupac. The coloured lights, and fancy horn and the purple interior lighting; the Hip Hop blaring out of speakers I will never afford.

This is Nairobi! This is what you do to get ahead: make yourself boneless, and treat your straitjacket as if it is a game, a challenge. The city is now all on the streets, sweet-talk and hustle. Our worst recession ever has just produced brighter, more creative matatus.

It is good to be home.

In the afternoon, I take a walk down River Road, all the way to Nyamakima. This is the main artery of movement to and from Public Transport Vehicles. It is ruled by manambas (taxi touts) and their image is cynical – every laugh is a sneer, the city is a war or a game. It is a useful face to carry, here where humanity invades all the space you do not claim with conviction.

The desperation that is for me the most touching is the expressions of the people who come from the rural areas into the City Centre to

sell their produce: thin-faced, with the massive cheekbones common amongst Kikuyus – so dominating they seem like an appendage to be embarrassed about – something that draws attention to their faces, when attention is the last thing they want. Anywhere else those faces are beauty. Their eyes dart about in a permanent fear, unable to train themselves to a background of so much chaos. They do not know how to put on a glassy expression.

Those who have been in the fresh produce business for long are immediately visible: mostly old women in khanga sarongs with weary take-it-or-leave-it voices. They hang out in groups, chattering away constantly, as if they want no quiet where the fragility of their community will reveal itself.

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I am at home. The past eight hours are already receding into the forgotten; I was in Cape Town this morning, I am in Nakuru, Kenya now.

Blink.

Mum looks tired and her eyes are sleepier than usual. She has never seemed frail, but does so now. I decide that it is I who is growing, changing, and my attempts at maturity make her seem more human.

I make my way to the kitchen: the Nandi woman still rules the corridor.

After ten years, I can still move about with ease in the dark. I stop at that hollow place, the bit of wall on the other side of the fireplace. My mother's voice, talking to my dad, echoes in the corridor. None of us has her voice: if crystal was water solidified, her voice would be the last splash of water before it solidifies.

Light from the kitchen brings the Nandi woman to life. She is a painting.

I was terrified of her when I was a kid. Her eyes seemed so alive and the red bits growled at me menacingly. Her broad face announced an immobility that really scared me; I was stuck there, fenced into a tribal reserve by her features. *Rings on her ankles and bells on her nose, she will make music wherever she goes.*

Why? Did I sense, so young, that her face could never translate

into acceptability? That, however disguised, it could not align itself to the programme I aspired to? In Kenya there are two sorts of people. Those on one side of the line will wear third-hand clothing till it rots, they will eat dirt, but school fees will be paid. On the other side of the line live people you may see in coffee-table books. Impossibly exotic and much fewer in number than the coffee-table books suggest. They are like an old and lush jungle that continues to flourish its leaves and unfurl extravagant blooms, refusing to realize that somebody cut off the water – often somebody from the other side of the line.

These two groups of people are fascinated by one another. We, the modern ones, are fascinated by the completeness of the old ones. To us it seems that everything is mapped out and defined for them – and everybody is fluent in those definitions. The old ones are not much impressed with our society, or manners – what catches their attention is our tools, the cars and medicines and telephones and wind-up dolls and guns.

In my teens, I was set alight by the poems of Senghor and Okot P'Bitek; the Nandi woman became my Negritude. I pronounced her beautiful, marvelled at her cheekbones and mourned the lost wisdom in her eyes, but I still would have preferred to sleep with Pam Ewing or Iman.

It was a source of terrible fear for me that I could never love her. I covered that betrayal with a complicated imagery that had no connection to my gut: O Nubian Princess, and other bad poetry. She moved to my bedroom for a while, next to the kente wall-hanging, but my mother took her back to her pulpit.

Over the years, I learned to look at her amiably. She filled me with a lukewarm nostalgia for things lost. I never again attempted to look beyond her costume.

She is younger than me now; I can see that she has a girlishness about her. Her eyes are the artist's only real success – they suggest mischief, serenity, vulnerability and a weary wisdom. Today, I don't need to bludgeon my brain with her beauty, it just sinks in, and I am floored by lust: It makes me feel like I have desecrated something.

Then I see it.

Have I been such a bigot? Everything. The slight smile, the angle

of her head and shoulders, the mild flirtation with the artist: *I know you want me, I know something you don't.*

Mona Lisa: not a single thing says otherwise. The truth is that I never saw the smile: her thick lips created such a war between my intellect and emotions that I never noticed the smile.

The artist is probably not African, not only because of the obvious Mona Lisa business but also because, for the first time, I realize that the woman's expression is *inaccurate*. In Kenya, you will only see such an expression in girls who went to private schools, or who are brought up in the richer surburbs of the larger towns.

That look, that toying slight smile could not have happened with an actual Nandi woman. In the portrait, she has covered her vast sexuality with a shawl of ice, letting only the hint of smile reveal that she has a body that can quicken: a flag on the moon. The artist has got the dignity right but the sexuality is European: it would be difficult for an African artist to get that wrong.

The lips too seem wrong. There's an awkwardness about them, as if a shift of aesthetics has taken place on the plane of muscles between her nose and her mouth. Also, the mouth strives too hard for symmetry, as if to apologize for its thickness. That mouth is meant to break open like the flesh of a ripe mango; restraint of expression is not common in Kenya and certainly not among the Nandi.

I turn, and head for the kitchen. I cherish the kitchen at night. It is cavernous, chilly and echoing with night noises that are muffled by the vast spongy silence outside. After so many years in cupboard-sized South African kitchens, I feel more thrilled than I should.

On my way back to my room, I turn and face the Nandi woman thinking of the full circle since I left. When I left, White people ruled South Africa. When I left, Kenya was a one-party dictatorship. When I left, I was relieved that I had escaped the burdens and guilts of being in Kenya, of facing my roots, and repudiating them. Here I am, looking for them again.

I know, her red-rimmed eyes say. *I know.*

A fluid disposition: Masailand, August 1995

A few minutes ago, I was sleeping comfortably in the front of a Landrover Discovery. Now I have been unceremoniously dumped by

the side of the road as the extension officer makes a mad dash for the night comforts of Narok town. Driving at night in this area is not a bright idea.

It is an interesting aspect of travelling to a new place that, for the first few moments, your eyes cannot concentrate on the particular. I am overwhelmed by the glare of dusk, by the shiver of wind on undulating acres of wheat and barley, by the vision of mile upon mile of space free from our wirings. So much is my focus derailed that when I return to myself I find, to my surprise, that my feet are not off the ground – that the landscape had grabbed me with such force it sucked up the awareness of myself for a moment.

It occurs to me that there is no clearer proof of the subjectivity (or selectivity) of our senses than at moments like this. Seeing is always only noticing. We pass our eyes upon the landscapes of our familiars and choose what to acknowledge.

There are rotor-blades of cold chopping away in my nostrils. The silence, after the non-stop drone of the car, is as persistent as cobwebs, as intrusive as the loudest of noises. I have an urge to claw it away.

I am in Masailand.

Not television Masailand – rolling grasslands, lions, and acacia trees.

We are high up in the Mau Hills. Here there aren't vast fields of grain – there are forests. Here impenetrable weaves of highland forest dominated by bamboo cover the landscape. Inside them, there are many elephants, which come out at night and leave enormous pancakes of shit on the road. When I was a kid, I used to think that elephants use dusty roads as toilet paper like cats – sitting on the sand with their haunches and levering themselves forward with their forelegs.

Back on the *choosing to see* business: I know, chances are I will see no elephants for the weeks I am here. I will see people. It occurs to me that if I was White, chances are I would choose to see elephants – and this would be a very different story. That story would be about the wide, empty spaces people from Europe yearn to get lost in, rather than the cosy surround of kin we Africans generally seek.

Whenever I read something by some White writer who stopped

by Kenya, I am astounded by the amount of game that appears for breakfast at their patios and the snakes that drop into the baths and the lions that terrorize their calves. I have seen one snake in my life. I don't know anybody who has ever been bitten by one.

The cold air is really irritating. I want to breathe in – suck up the moist mountain-ness of the air, the smell of fever tree and dung – but the process is just too painful. What do people do in wintry places? Do they have some sort of nasal sensodyne?

I can see our ancient Massey Ferguson wheezing up a distant hill. They are headed this way. Relief!

* * *

A week later, I am on a tractor, freezing my butt off, as we make our way from the wheat fields and back to camp. We've been supervising the spraying of wheat and barley in the fields my father leases here.

There isn't much to look forward to at night here, no pubs hidden in the bamboo jungle. You can't even walk about freely at night because the areas outside are full of stinging nettles. We will be in bed by seven to beat the cold. I will hear stories about frogs that sneak under one's bed and turn into beautiful women who entrap you. I will hear stories about legendary tractor drivers – people who could turn the jagged roof of Mt Kilimanjaro into a neat afro. I will hear about Masai people – about so-and-so, who got 14,000 rand for barley grown on his land, and how he took off to the Majengo Slums in Nairobi, leaving his wife and children behind, to live with a prostitute for a year. When the money ran out, he discarded his suit, pots and pans, and furniture. He wrapped a blanket around himself and walked home, whistling happily all the way.

Most of all, I will hear stories about Ole Kamaro, our landlord, and his wife Eddah (names changed).

My dad has been growing wheat and barley in this area since I was a child. All this time, we have been leasing a portion of Ole Kamaro's land to keep our tractors and things and to make Camp. I met Eddah when she had just married Ole Kamaro. She was his fifth wife, thirteen years old. He was very proud of her. She was the daughter of some big time chief near Mau Narok *and she could*

read and write! Ole Kamaro bought her a pocket radio and made her follow him about with a pen and pencil everywhere he went, taking notes.

I remember being horrified by the marriage – she was so young! My sister Ciru was eight and they played together one day. That night, my sister had a terrible nightmare that my dad had sold her to Ole Kamaro in exchange for 50 acres.

Those few years of schooling were enough to give Eddah a clear idea of the basic tenets of Empowerment. By the time she was eighteen, Ole Kamaro had dumped the rest of his wives.

Eddah leased out his land to Kenya Breweries and opened a bank account where all the money went.

Occasionally, she gave her husband pocket money.

Whenever he was away, she took up with her lover, a wealthy young Kikuyu shopkeeper from the other side of the hill who kept her supplied with essentials like soap, matches and paraffin.

Eddah was the local chairwoman of KANU (Kenya's Ruling Party) Women's League and so remained invulnerable to censure from the conservative elements around. She also had a thriving business, curing hides and beading them elaborately for the tourist market at the Mara. Unlike most Masai women, who disdain growing of crops, she had a thriving market garden with maize, beans, and various vegetables. She did not lift a finger to take care of this garden. Part of the co-operation we expected from her as landlady meant that our staff had to take care of that garden. Her reasoning was that Kikuyu men are cowardly women anyway and they do farming so-oo well.

Something interesting is going on today and the drivers are nervous. There is a tradition amongst Masai that women are released from all domestic duties a few months after giving birth. The women are allowed to take over the land and claim any lovers that they choose. For some reason I don't quite understand, this all happens at a particular season – and this season begins today. I have been warned to keep away from any bands of women wandering about.

We are on some enormous hill and I can feel the old Massey Ferguson tractor wheezing. We get to the top, turn to make our way down, and there they are: led by Eddah, a troop of about 40 women marching towards us dressed in their best traditional clothing.

Eddah looks imperious and beautiful in her beaded leather cloak, red khanga wraps, rings, necklaces and earrings. There is an old woman amongst them, she must be 70 and she is cackling in toothless glee. She takes off her wrap and displays her breasts – they resemble old gym socks.

Mwangi, who is driving, stops, and tries to turn back, but the road is too narrow: on one side there is the mountain, and on the other, a yawning valley. Kipsang, who is sitting in the trailer with me, shouts 'Aiii Mwangi Bwana! DO NOT STOP!'

It seems that the modernized version of this tradition involves men making donations to the KANU Women's Group. Innocent enough, you'd think – but the amount of these donations must satisfy them or they will strip you naked and do unspeakable things to your body.

So we take off at full speed. The women stand firm in the middle of the road. We can't swerve. We stop.

Then Kipsang saves our skins by throwing a bunch of coins onto the road. I throw down some notes and Mwangi (renowned across Masailand for his stinginess) empties his pockets, throws down notes and coins. The women start to gather the money, the tractor roars back into action and we drive right through them.

I am left with the picture of the toothless old lady diving to avoid the tractor. Then standing, looking at us and laughing, her breasts flapping about like a Flag of Victory.

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I am in bed, still in Masailand.

I pick up my father's *World Almanac and Book of Facts 1992*. The language section has new words, confirmed from sources as impeccable as the *Columbia Encyclopedia* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The list reads like an American Infomercial: Jazzercize, Assertiveness-Training, Bulimarexic, Microwavable, Fast-tracker.

There is a word there – *skanking*: it is a style of West Indian dancing to reggae music, in which the body bends forward at the waist and the knees are raised and the hands claw the air in time to the beat.

I have some brief flashes of ourselves in 40 years' time, in some

generic Dance Studio. We are practising for the Senior Dance Championships, plastic smiles on our faces as we skank across the room.

The tutor checks the movement: shoulder up, arms down, move this way, move that: Claw, baby. Claw!

In time to the beat, dancing in this style.

Langat and Kariuki have lost their self-consciousness around me, and are chatting away about Eddah Ole Kamaro, our landlady.

'Eh! She had 10,000 shillings and they went and stayed in a Hotel in Narok for a week. Ole Kamaro had to bring in another woman to look after the children!'

'He! But she sits on him!'

Their talk meanders slowly, with no direction – just talk, just connecting, and I feel that tight wrap of time loosen, the anxiety of losing time fades and I am a glorious vacuum for a while just letting what strikes my mind strike my mind, then sleep strikes my mind.

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Ole Kamaro is slaughtering a goat today! For me!

We all settle on the patch of grass between the two compounds. Ole Kamaro makes quick work of the goat and I am offered the fresh kidney to eat. It tastes surprisingly good. It tastes of a slippery warmth, an organic cleanliness.

Ole Kamaro introduces me to his sister-in-law, tells me proudly that she is in Form Four. Eddah's sister – I spotted her this morning staring at me from the tiny window in their Manyatta. It was disconcerting at first – a typically Masai stare – unembarrassed, not afraid to be vulnerable. Then she noticed that I had seen her, and her eyes narrowed and became sassy – street-sassy, like a girl from Eastlands in Nairobi.

So I am now confused how to approach her. Should my approach be one of exaggerated politeness, as is traditional, or with a casual cool, as her second demeanour requested? I would have opted for the latter but her uncle is standing eagerly next to us.

She responds by lowering her head and looking away. I am painfully embarrassed. I ask her to show me where they tan their hides.

We escape with some relief.

'So where do you go to school?'

'Oh! At St Teresa's Girls in Nairobi.'

'Eddah is your sister?'

'Yes.'

We are quiet for a while. English was a mistake. Where I am fluent, she is stilted. I switch to Swahili and she pours herself into another person: talkative, aggressive, a person who must have a Tupac t-shirt stashed away somewhere.

'Arhh! It's so boring here! Nobody to talk to! I hope Eddah comes home early.'

I am still stunned. How bold and animated she is, speaking *Sheng*, a very hip street language that mixes Swahili and English.

'Why didn't you go with the women today?'

She laughs, 'I am not married. Ho! I'm sure they had fun! They are drinking Muratina somewhere here I am sure. I can't wait to get married.'

'Kwani? You don't want to go to university and all that?'

'Maybe, but if I'm married to the right guy, life is good. Look at Eddah – she is free – she does anything she wants. Old men are good. If you feed them, and give them a son, they leave you alone.'

'Won't it be difficult to do this if you are not circumcised?'

'Kwani, who told you I'm not circumcised? I went last year.'

I am shocked, and it shows. She laughs.

'He! I nearly shat myself! But I didn't cry!'

'Why? Si, you could have refused.'

'Ai! If I would have refused, it would mean that my life here was finished. There is no place here for someone like that.'

'But...'

I cut myself short. I am sensing this is her compromise – to live two lives fluently. As it is with people's reasons for their faiths and choices – trying to disprove her is silly. As a Masai she will see my statement as ridiculous.

In Sheng, there is no way for me to bring it up that would be diplomatic; in Sheng she can only present this with a hard-edged bravado, it is humiliating. I do not know of any way we can discuss this successfully in English. If there is a courtesy every Kenyan practises, it is that none of us ever questions each other's contradictions – we

all have them, and destroying someone's face is sacrilege.

There is nothing wrong with being what you are not in Kenya – just be it successfully. Almost every Kenyan joke is about somebody who thought they had mastered a new persona and ended up ridiculous. For us, life is about having a fluid disposition.

You can have as many as you want.

Christmas in Bufumbira, 20 December 1995

The drive through the Mau Hills, past the Rift Valley and onwards to Kisumu is a drag. I haven't been this way for ten years, but my aim is to be in Uganda. We arrive in Kampala at ten in the evening. We have been on the road for over eight hours.

This is my first visit to Uganda, a land of incredible mystery for me. I grew up with her myths and legends and her horrors – narrated with the intensity that only exiles can muster. It is my first visit to my mother's ancestral home, the occasion is her parents' 60th wedding anniversary.

It will be the first time that she and her ten surviving brothers and sisters have been together since the early 1960s. The first time that my grandparents will have all their children and most of their grandchildren at home together – more than a hundred people are expected.

My mother, and the many visitors who came to visit, always filled my imagination with incredible tales of Uganda. I heard how you had to wriggle on your stomach to see the Kabaka; how the Tutsi king in Rwanda (who was seven feet tall) was once given a bicycle as a present. Because he couldn't walk on the ground (being a king and all), he was carried everywhere, on his bicycle, by his bearers.

Apparently, in the old kingdom in Rwanda, Tutsi women were not supposed to exert themselves or mar their beauty in any way. Some women had to be spoon-fed by their Hutu servants and wouldn't leave their huts for fear of sunburn.

I was told about a trip my grandfather took when he was young, with an uncle, where he was mistaken for a Hutu servant and taken away to stay with the goats. A few days later his uncle asked about him and his hosts were embarrassed to confess that they didn't know he was 'one of us'.

It has been a year of mixed blessings for Africa. This is the year that I sat at Newlands Stadium during the Rugby World Cup in the Cape and watched South Africans reach out to each other before giving New Zealand a hiding. Mandela, wearing the Number Six rugby jersey, managed to melt away for one incredible night all the hostility that had gripped the country since he was released from jail. Black people, for a long time supporters of the All Blacks, embraced the Springboks with enthusiasm. For just one night most South Africans felt a common Nationhood.

It was the year that I returned to my home, Kenya, to find people so way beyond cynicism that they looked back on their cynical days with fondness.

Uganda is different: this is a country that has not only reached the bottom of the hole countries sometimes fall into, it has scratched through that bottom and free-fallen again and again, and now it has rebuilt itself and swept away the hate. This country gives me hope that this continent is not incontinent.

This is the country I used to associate with banana trees, old and elegant kingdoms, rot, Idi Amin, and hopelessness. It was an association I had made as a child, when the walls of our house would ooze and leak whispers of horror whenever a relative or friends of the family came home, fleeing from Amin's literal and metaphorical crocodiles.

I am rather annoyed that the famous Seven Hills of Kampala are not as clearly defined as I had imagined they would be. I have always had a childish vision of a stately city filled with royal paraphernalia. I had expected to see elegant people dressed in flowing robes, carrying baskets on their heads and walking arrogantly down streets filled with the smell of roasting bananas; and Intellectuals from a 1960s dream, burning the streets with their Afrocentric rhetoric.

Images formed in childhood can be more than a little bit stubborn.

Reality is a better aesthetic. Kampala seems disorganized, full of potholes, bad management, and haphazardness. The African city that so horrifies the West. The truth is that it is a city being overwhelmed by enterprise. I see smiles, the shine of healthy skin, and teeth; no layabouts lounging and plotting at every street corner. People do not walk about with walls around themselves as they do in Nairobbery.

All over, there is a frenzy of building: a blanket of paint is slowly spreading over the city, so it looks rather like one of those Smirnoff adverts where inanimate things get breathed to Technicolor by the sacred burp of 30 per cent or so of clear alcohol.

It is humid, and hot, and the banana trees flirt with you, swaying gently like fans offering a coolness that never materializes.

Everything smells musky, as if a thick, soft steam has risen like a broth. The plants are enormous. Mum once told me that when travelling in Uganda in the 1940s and 1950s, if you were hungry you could simply enter a banana plantation and eat as much as you wished – you didn't have to ask anybody, but you were not allowed to carry so much as a single deformed banana out of the plantation.

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We are booked in at the Catholic Guesthouse. As soon as I have dumped my stuff on the bed, I call up an old school friend, who promises to pick me up.

Musoke comes at six and we go to find food. We drive past the famous Mulago Hospital and into town. He picks up a couple of friends and we go to a place called Yakubu's.

We order a couple of beers, lots of roast pork brochettes and sit in the car. The brochettes are delicious. I like them so much, I order more. Nile beer is okay, but nowhere near Kenya's Tusker.

The sun is drowned suddenly and it is dark.

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We get onto the highway to Entebbe. On both sides of the road, people have built flimsy houses: bars, shops, and cafés line the road the whole way. What surprises me is how many people are out, especially teenagers, guided hormones flouncing about, puffs of fog surrounding their huddled faces. It is still hot outside and paraffin lamps light the fronts of all these premises.

I turn to Musoke and ask, 'Can we stop at one of those pubs and have a beer?'

'Ah! Wait till we get to where we are going, it's much nicer than this dump!'

'I'm sure it is; but you know, I might never get a chance to drink in a real Entebbe pub, not those bourgeois places. Come on, I'll buy a round.'

Magic words.

The place is charming. Ugandans seem to me to have a knack for making things elegant and comfortable, regardless of income. In Kenya, or South Africa, a place like this would be dirty, and buildings would be put together with a sort of haphazard self-loathing; sort of like saying 'I won't be here long, why bother?'

The inside of the place is decorated simply, mostly with reed mats. The walls are well finished, and the floor, simple cement, has no cracks or signs of misuse. Women in traditional Baganda dress serve us.

I find Baganda women terribly sexy. They carry about with them a look of knowledge, a proud and naked sensuality, daring you to satisfy them.

Also, they don't seem to have that generic cuteness many city women have, that I have already begun to find irritating. Their features are strong; their skin is a deep, gleaming copper and their eyes are large and oil-black.

Baganda women traditionally wear a long, loose Victorian-style dress. It fulfils every literal aspect the Victorians desired, but manages despite itself to suggest sex. The dresses are usually in bold colours. To emphasize their size, many women tie a band just below their buttocks (which are often padded).

What makes the difference is the walk.

Many women visualize their hips as an unnecessary evil, an irritating accessory that needs to be whittled down. I guess, a while back, women looked upon their hips as a cradle for the depositing of desire, for the nurturing of babies. Baganda women see their hips as great ball bearings; rolling, supple things moving in lubricated circles – so they make excellent Dombolo dancers. In those loose dresses, their hips brushing the sides of the dress as they move, they are a marvel to watch.

Most appealing is the sense of stature they carry about them. Baganda women seem to have found a way to be traditional and powerful at the same time – most of the ones I know grow more

beautiful with age and many compete with men in industry without seeming to compromise themselves as women.

* * *

I sleep on the drive from Kampala to Kisoro.

We leave Kisoro and begin the drive to St Paul's Mission, Mutolere. My sister Ciru is sitting next to me. She is a year younger than me. Chiqy, my youngest sister, has been to Uganda before and is taking full advantage of her vast experience to play the adult tour guide. At her age, cool is a god.

I have the odd feeling we are puppets in some Christmas story. It is as if a basket-weaver were writing this story; tightening the tension on the papyrus strings every few minutes, and superstitiously refusing to reveal the ending (even to herself) until she has tied the very last knot.

We are now in the mountains. The winding road and the dense papyrus in the valleys seem to entwine me, ever tighter, into my fictional weaver's basket. Every so often, she jerks her weaving to tighten it.

I look up to see the last half-hour of road winding along the mountain above us. We are in the Bufumbira range now, driving through Kigaland on our way to Kisoro, the nearest town to my mother's home.

There is an alien quality to this place. It does not conform to any African topography that I am familiar with. The mountains are incredibly steep and resemble inverted ice-cream cones: a hoe has tamed every inch of them.

It is incredibly green.

In Kenya, 'green' is the ultimate accolade a person can give land: green is scarce, green is wealth, fertility.

Bufumbira green is not a tropical green, no warm musk, like in Buganda; it is not the harsh green of the Kenyan savannah, either: that two-month-long green that compresses all the elements of life – millions of wildebeest and zebra, great carnivores feasting during the rains, frenzied ploughing and planting, and dry riverbeds overwhelmed by soil and bloodstained water; and Nairobi underwater.

It is not the green of grand waste and grand bounty that my country knows. This is a mountain green, cool and enduring. Rivers and lakes occupy the cleavage of the many mountains that surround us.

Mum looks almost foreign now; her Kinyarwanda accent is more pronounced, and her face is not as reserved as usual. Her beauty, so exotic and head-turning in Kenya, seems at home here. She does not stand out here, she belongs; the rest of us seem like tourists.

As the drive continues, I become imbued with the sense of where we are. We are no longer in the history of Buganda, of Idi Amin, of the Kabakas, or civil war, Museveni and Hope.

We are now on the outskirts of the theatre where the Hutus and the Tutsis have been performing for the world's media. My mother has always described herself as a Mufumbira, one who speaks Kinyarwanda. She has always avoided talking about the differences.

I am glad she has, because it saves me from trying to understand. I am not here about genocide or hate. Enough people have been here for that (try typing 'Tutsi' on any search engine).

I am here to be with family.

I ask my mother where the border with Rwanda is. She points it out, and points out the Congo as well. They are both nearer than I thought. Maybe this is what makes this coming together so urgent. How amazing life seems when it stands around death. There is no grass as beautiful as the blades that stick out after the first rain.

As we move into the forested area I am enthralled by the smell and by the canopy of mountain vegetation. I join the conversation in the car. I have become self-conscious about displaying my dreaminess and absent-mindedness these days.

I used to spend hours gazing out of car windows, creating grand battles between battalions of clouds. I am aware of a conspiracy to get me back to Earth, to get me to be more practical. My parents are pursuing this cause with little subtlety, aware that my time with them is limited. It is necessary for me to believe that I am putting myself on a gritty road to personal success when I leave home. Cloud travel is well and good when you have mastered the landings. I never have. I must live, not dream about living.

We are in Kisoro, the main town of the district, weaving through

roads between people's houses. We are heading towards Uncle Kagame's house.

The image of a dictatorial movie director manipulating our movements replaces that of the basket-weaver in my mind. I have a dizzy vision of a supernatural moviemaker slowing down the action before the climax by examining tiny details instead of grand scenes.

I see a continuity presenter in the fifth dimension saying: 'And now it's our Christmas movie: a touching story about the reunion of a family torn apart by civil war and the genocide in Rwanda. This movie is sponsored by Sobbex, hankies for every occasion' (repeated in Zulu, then a giggle and a description of the soapie that will follow).

My fantasy escalates and there is a motivational speaker/aerobics instructor shouting at Christmas TV viewers: 'Jerk those tear glands, baby!'

I am still dreaming when we get to my uncle's place.

I am at my worst, half in dream, clumsy, tripping and unable to focus. I have learnt to move my body resolutely at such times, but it generally makes things worse. Tea and every possible thing we could want will be available to us on demand (and so we must not demand).

My uncle Gerald Kagame and his wife both work at the mission hospital. I discover it is their formidable organizational skills that have made this celebration possible. There are already around 100 visitors speaking five or six languages.

Basically, the Binyavangas have taken over the Kisoro town and business is booming. During such an event, hotels are not an option. The church at St Paul's is booked, the dorms are booked, homes have been hijacked, and so on.

We are soon driving through my grandfather's land. In front of us is a saddle-shaped hill with a large, old, imposing church ruling the view. My mother tells us that my grandfather donated this land for the building of the church. The car squishes and slides up the muddy hills, progress impeded by a thick mat of grass.

I see Ankole cattle grazing, their enormous horns like regal crowns.

'Look, that's the homestead. I know this place.'

It is a small brick house. I can see the surge of family coming towards the car. After the kissing and hugging, the crowd parts for my grandparents. They seem tall but aren't, just lean and fit. Age and time have made them start to look alike.

My grandmother stretches a long-fingered hand to Ciru's cheek and exclaims: 'She still has a big forehead!'

How do you keep track of 60 grandchildren?

She embraces me. She is very slender and I feel she will break. Her elegance surrounds me and I can feel a strong pull to dig into her, burrow in her secrets, see with her eyes. She is a quiet woman, and unbending, even taciturn – and this gives her a powerful charisma. Things not said. Her resemblance to my mother astounds me.

My grandfather is crying and laughing, exclaiming when he hears that Chiqy and I are named after him and his wife (Kamanzi and Binyavanga). We drink rgwagwa (banana wine) laced with honey. It is delicious, smoky and sweet.

Ciru and Chiqy are sitting next to my grandmother. I see why my grandfather was such a legendary schoolteacher: his gentleness and love of life are palpable.

At night, we split into our various age groups and start to bond with one another. Of the cousins, Manwelli, the eldest, is our unofficial leader. He works for the World Bank.

Aunt Rosaria and her family are the coup of the ceremony. They were feared dead during the war in Rwanda and hid for months in their basement, helped by a friend who provided food. They all survived; they walk around carrying expressions that are more common in children – delight, sheer delight at life.

Her three sons spend every minute bouncing about with the high of being alive. They dance at all hours, sometimes even when there is no music. In the evenings, we squash into the veranda, looking out as far as the Congo, and they entertain us with their stand-up routines in French and Kinyarwanda; the force of their humour carries us all to laughter. Manwelli translates one skit for me: they imitate a vain Tutsi woman who is pregnant and is kneeling to make a confession to the shocked priest:

'Oh please, God, let my child have long fingers, and a gap between the teeth; let her have a straight nose and be ta-a-all. Oh lord, let her

not have (gesticulations of a gorilla prowling) a mashed banana nose like a Hutu. Oh please, I shall be your grateful servant!'

The biggest disappointment so far is that my Aunt Christine has not yet arrived. She has lived with her family in New York since the early 1970s. We all feel her loss keenly as it was she who urged us all years ago to gather for this occasion at any cost.

She and my Aunt Rosaria are the senior aunts, and they were very close when they were younger. They speak frequently on the phone and did so especially during the many months that Aunt Rosaria and her family were living in fear in their basement. They are, for me, the summary of the pain the family has been through over the years. Although they are very close, they haven't met since 1961. Visas, wars, closed borders and a thousand triumphs of chaos have kept them apart. We are all looking forward to their reunion.

As is normal on traditional occasions, people stick with their peers; so I have hardly spoken to my mother the past few days. I find her in my grandmother's room, trying, without much success, to get my grandmother to relax and let her many daughters and granddaughters do the work.

I have been watching Mum from a distance for the past few days. At first, she seemed a bit aloof from it all; but now she's found fluency with everything and she seems far away from the Kenyan Mother we know. I can't get over the sight of her cringing and blushing as my grandmother machine-guns instructions to her. How alike they are. I want to talk with her more, but decide not to be selfish, that I am trying to establish possession of her. We'll have enough time on the way back.

I've been trying to pin down my grandfather, to ask him about our family's history. He keeps giving me this bewildered look when I corner him, as if he is asking, 'Can't you just relax and party?'

Last night, he toasted us all and cried again before dancing to some very hip gospel rap music from Kampala. He tried to get Grandmother to join him but she beat a hasty retreat.

Gerald is getting quite concerned that when we are all gone, they will find it too quiet.

We hurtle on towards Christmas. Booze flows, we pray, chat and bond under the night rustle of banana leaves. I feel as if I am filled

with magic and I succumb to the masses. In two days, we feel a family. In French, Swahili, English, Kikuyu, Kinyarwanda, Kiganda and Ndebele we sing one song, a multitude of passports in our luggage.

At dawn on 24 December I stand smoking in the banana plantation at the edge of my grandfather's hill and watch the mists disappear. Uncle Chris saunters up to join me. I ask: 'Any news about Aunt Christine?'

'It looks like she might not make it. Manwelli has tried to get in contact with her and failed. Maybe she couldn't get a flight out of New York. Apparently the weather is terrible there.'

The day is filled with hard work. My uncles have convinced my grandfather that we need to slaughter another bull as meat is running out. The old man adores his cattle but reluctantly agrees. He cries when the bull is killed.

There is to be a church service in the sitting room of my grandfather's house later in the day.

The service begins and I bolt from the living room, volunteering to peel potatoes outside.

About halfway through the service, I see somebody staggering up the hill, suitcase in hand and muddied up to her ankles. It takes me an instant to guess. I run to her and mumble something. We hug. Aunt Christine is here.

The plot has taken me over now. Resolution is upon me. The poor woman is given no time to freshen up or collect her bearings. In a minute we have ushered her into the living room. She sits by the door, facing everybody's back. Only my grandparents are facing her. My grandmother starts to cry.

Nothing is said, the service motors on. Everybody stands up to sing. Somebody whispers to my Aunt Rosaria. She turns and gasps soundlessly. Others turn. We all sit down. Aunt Rosaria and Aunt Christine start to cry. Aunt Rosaria's mouth opens and closes in disbelief. My mother joins them, and soon everybody is crying.

The Priest motors on, fluently. Unaware.