

Floating

RUTH MUKWANA

My name is Matthew Mukiibi. I've lived in Harlem with my mother for almost ten years. It's the longest we have stayed in one place since the United Nations relocated us from the refugee camp in Forgotten Country to America. We were relocated from the camp after Grandma vanished as it was no longer safe for us there. Promising to join us soon, Pa remained in the camp to pursue his political struggle of toppling the Ugandan government that he accused of killing its people. All of this I learned much later after asking too many questions. Ma doesn't give up information easily, and yet I have a thousand questions about my past, about my grandmother, about the night I witnessed the murder of a woman in the forest outside the camp whose name I later learned was Stella Onyango.

Many of the places where we have stayed since coming to America are distorted in my memory, but I remember Columbus, mostly because it was the first place we lived, and it was in a church with large windows painted with Jesus's portraits and murals. During that period Ma constantly needed to feel God's presence and spent hours praying. Besides, we didn't have a home, and the church embraced us like family. As she had no job, Ma offered to keep the

church clean, and the priest in turn fed us and allowed us to sleep in the church. We'd spread our sleeping bags under one of the murals. Jesus's face, illuminated by yellow light, made us feel safe, but something as simple as the sound of a car backfiring made our hearts race, taking us back to the gunshot in the forest in the camp. The forest wasn't far from the refugee camp, but I was forbidden from going there. Bad things happen to the people who go there, Ma and Grandma used to tell me. To scare me from going there, I used to believe, until the night Ma and I followed Pa there, and we witnessed the murder.

We spent six months in Columbus before Ma felt safe outside the church. During the day, she asked me to go out and beg for money to send to Pa. She'd make me wear torn and faded oversized shirts and trousers and taught me how to turn my eyelids inside out, drop my shoulders, and bend my neck. I wasn't tall, but I dropped a couple of inches. To make my eyes red, she'd rub chili powder into them. I looked like I was crying all the time.

"Off you go, just tell them it's to help refugees back home. Your father is doing good things. He's helping the refugees," she'd whisper, "and don't talk to them." She need not have worried about that: none of the people I begged from understood the English I spoke or my accent, and neither did I comprehend theirs.

All I had to do was stick out my right hand, palm splayed, and say, "I am hungry." People going into the supermarket gave me change. When the priest got concerned about where I spent my days and started asking questions, Ma stopped sending me to the streets.

After a lot of counseling about how to live in America, we left the church and stayed with several refugee families before we moved to California. Ma wanted to feel the sun and she had heard that there were more Ugandans there. A woman she had befriended at the church arranged for us to stay with a family in California. The Owukos were a kind and generous family, but with five children in a two-bedroom house, it was a crowd. They let us sleep on their couch for a few months. I remember staying up late at night waiting for the children to switch off the Ugandan videos they watched lying on the sofa, which doubled as my bed, and it was Ugandan music that woke me up in the mornings. We finally found a Kenyan family who rented us their basement, but we moved again; the basement was suffocating.

We had lived in California for three or four years when Ma came home

one day and said we were moving to New York. A few Ugandan refugees in California recognized her—the wife of a rebel leader—and started giving us the *look*. It was then that the whispers about us started. “We’ll be mysterious in New York,” she said. It was years before I understood why we needed to be mysterious. Just before we left, she changed my name from Timothy Okello to Matthew Mukiibi. She didn’t want me to keep my father’s name. Once we arrived in New York, she cut her thick dreadlocks that used to cascade down her shoulders like twisted brown ropes, and bought a wig that covered most of her face.

Going through school in America hasn’t been easy. To pay my college tuition, Ma has looked after many children and scrubbed countless floors. Bleach has broken the skin on her hands. As a refugee, she was given a work permit but she failed to find a white-collar job. I remember her seated on the dirty old couch, which used to be white, that we picked from the streets like the rest of the mismatched furniture in our first small studio on 135th Street and Lenox Avenue. The bright yellow light from the only lamp brightened her dark face as she meticulously completed job applications. She was lucky if the companies sent her the standard response—*Thank you for showing interest in this position. We regret to inform you it has been filled.*

“Why do they say regret when they have no regret?” She’d look at me until I felt I had to say something. “I don’t know, Ma,” I’d say and shrug.

“Can you believe it? They want me to go back to school to work as a nurse. A nurse! I was a doctor. A doctor,” she’d pound her chest as though reminding herself of what she once was. She’d sigh, and in that sigh, I heard all the weight of what she had lost.

“They took everything away. That government. Everything. Don’t ever forget that. Your father is fighting so we can go back. One day . . .” her voice would trail off. She couldn’t bear to finish her thought about going back home. In that sentence that she left hanging in the air, I felt the drop of hope that kept her going, Uganda and her husband. “You must study hard. These hands,” she’d spread them out, “are because of you. Am here because of you.”

And now, here I am in my purple gown, and hat on my head, holding my law degree. Ma can’t stop smiling or talking, and I can’t stop looking at the gap in the centre of her front teeth. It has been so long since I’ve seen her happy, since we have walked together.

“Congratulations!” people on the streets call out as we walk by. Others talk

about the humidity. They sit on the old brick stairs of their brownstone houses with giant Coca-Cola bottles and fruit juices. The smell of grilled meat fills the stale air, its circulation cut off by skyscrapers. Children ride scooters and bicycles up and down the pavement lined with trees. Their laughter intertwines with the songs of birds. We walk up to the fourth floor of the brownstone where we live.

As Ma goes to the kitchen to make coffee, I climb the stairs of the duplex apartment to my room. It only has a reading table, desk lamp, closet, and bookshelf fixed on the wall. I don't collect things. Memories are a boulder. The one possession I have on the shelf is the ball I made with my father years ago, when we were still in the refugee camp, when my name was still Timothy. I reach for the ball and cradle it in my hands. Many are the times I've held this ball and yearned to re-create the moment we made it: Father and I sat on the sand. The sun blazed and sweat trailed down our faces. His gun protruded from his pocket. The air around us reeked of intimacy. This ball, the only possession I brought from the refugee camp. The refugee camp with its barren soil, with its sharp heat that cut everything, with its flat land; when it rained, water flooded our house and bred mosquitoes. The refugee camp where I spent ten years of my life, where Grandma vanished. I wish I had known that making the ball would be the last intimate moment with my father. Often, all I want is to go back to that moment, and for my life to freeze there like a still image.

I drop the diploma and hat on the reading table, lie on my bed, and let the air conditioner cool me as I remember the day Ma and I started to drift. We were close before we left the refugee camp and in the years following our arrival in America. She compensated for all the things I lost when we were relocated—my friends, my father, my grandma, all that was familiar to me, all that I missed. People often ask me how I can miss destitution. They don't know that you can only love what you're accustomed to, that you yearn for what you cherish.

It was spring, four years ago. I had joined the New York Debaters club, a group open to all students passionate about debating the fate of Africa. We met once every month, and it was there that I met Mike, a fellow African student who was also the chairperson of the club. Because he was very outspoken and adamant that all the dictators on the continent deserved to be hanged, I told him about my father, who wanted to get rid of a dictator.

“Really. Moses. Moses Okello, the Commandant, is your father?” he asked. I could see the confusion cloud his eyes.

“Yes, he is,” I said. First, I saw his body that had been an open leaf turn inward and he rubbed his eyes as though he wanted to clearly see me. “No, he can’t be your father. That man is a murderer.”

“But he’s fighting to get rid of a dictator.”

“No, my dear, your father is not a freedom fighter. He’s murdering Ugandans. Dictators must be hanged, but after a proper legal trial. What your father is doing is despicable.” He must have seen the disbelief on my face. “If you don’t believe me, look up Stella Onyango. She was killed fourteen years ago.” He whispered as though he wanted to spare me the impact of what he was telling me, as though he felt sorry for me.

“Oh, Stella. That was an accident,” I said quickly.

“You’re burying your head in the sand, my friend.” He patted me on the shoulder and almost ran away.

I ran from 116th Street and Lexington Avenue all the way back home. I found my mother in the ethnic room. I adopted the name from one of our neighbors, an old woman living alone who used to invite herself over for tea. The first time she came by, she looked at the *tinga tinga* paintings and masks dotting the living room walls, the bright-colored African fabrics on the sofas, cushions, and curtains in the windows, and said it was very ethnic.

“Ma!” I shouted. “Pa, he killed Stella. Pa, he killed her. Mike just told me.”

It took her a moment to realize what I was talking about, and when she did, she stood up and paced around the room. She walked over and stood in front of me all the while her eyes fixed on mine, before she circled around me, and then walked to the window where she stared at the trees that were waking up from winter, before she walked back, and stood in front of me again. I smelled her breath. Coffee and the garlic she ate to manage her high blood pressure. She sighed and sat down.

“Sit with me,” she said and tapped the couch. “It was a very long time ago. What do I remember? At the time, your father had mobilized a political movement in the camp. Young men and women. He was organizing peaceful protests. Negotiations with the government of Uganda. That sort of thing. The futility of it all,” she shook her head. “I used to tell him. I often wonder if I shouldn’t have said anything. I don’t know when they turned violent. Anyway,

they captured Stella. She was a government informant. They wanted to rough her up, scare her. That sort of thing. That's all they wanted to do. But things got out of control. It was dark. When he cocked his gun, he intended to scare her, but the gun was faulty, and it went off. He didn't mean to."

That was the first time she told me the full story. I recall thinking that wasn't how I remembered it, but I also thought that she had no reason to lie to me. I did some research but didn't find anything. It was then that the pain at the bottom of my stomach that would not go away started. I never went back to the club.

Ma calls me. Coffee is ready. I spoon sugar and milk into my coffee mug as though compensating for the years we had no sugar, as though tomorrow there'll be none.

"It'd have been good to have a party, a real party with friends," I say as the coffee burns my tongue. I've no friends to speak of, but I say it anyway. Ma has baked a chocolate cake and cupcakes with colors of the American flag to celebrate. This only heightens the emptiness in our lives. I stretch my legs and they touch the kitchen wall. I think about Grandma and wish she was here today. She was the one who taught me how to write. She'd sharpen a stick, take my hand, cover it with her bony hands, and we'd write in the sand. The day Pa and I made the ball was also the day Grandma quarreled with him about the gun he carried everywhere with him and the blood on his clothes. That was also the day she vanished from the refugee camp. I remember her seated on the old brown sack, her back against our house, her legs outstretched, a tobacco pipe in her mouth, her hands dancing above her head, lamenting how the camp was going to kill her, how she missed her home in Kampala.

"Grandma would have been so proud of me," I say.

Ma strokes the fringe on her wig. She flattens the sides with her hands before she removes it, combs it with her hands and puts it back on her head. The fringe almost covers her eyes.

"Do you know what happened to her?" I don't know how many times I've asked her this question. When I found out that we were leaving the camp, I refused to get in the van without Grandma. My father carried me kicking and screaming and dropped me on the lap of my mother, who held on to me with all her strength. "You're now a young man. I need you to look after your mother. I promise you, I'll continue to look for my mother," he said. Ma's answer is always the same.

"You ask too many questions. Some things are better left unsaid."

"You know what would have made my graduation perfect?"

"Tell me."

"A party."

"I spent the whole day baking cupcakes for you. You like my cupcakes," she says, a bitter smile on her face.

"I like your cupcakes, Ma, but what have they got to do with having a party?" I ask, but she concentrates on stirring her black coffee over and over, although it has no sugar, and watches the dark liquid dance in her cup. It makes a ring on the coffee table. I don't like silence, I never have. It forces me to keep talking.

"Stop stirring the coffee," I say. It consumes all my energy not to shout at her.

She stops and looks at me. She has given up so much to get me here. I know how much she misses my father.

"It's not that I am not grateful. I am. For everything. I am. But how can anyone live in a place for years and not even make one friend?"

"I've never stopped you from making friends."

"Then let's throw a party and invite everyone over."

"Go ahead and throw your party. If something should happen to me . . ." Ma does this, says something unrelated to what I've said, and I have to pretend I was talking about the thing she's now talking about.

"Nothing is going to happen to you." I hope she hears the impatience that chokes my voice. This is how we communicate, with clues in our voices, facial expressions, talking around all that must be said. I drink the coffee and look at her and see that she has aged, her cheeks have thinned, the lines on her forehead deep from frowning. She looks at me, about to say something when the phone rings once, twice, and on the third ring we know. It's father calling. She puts on her shoes and goes outside to talk to him. I wish she didn't talk to him. I wish he were dead. I go back to my room.

Ma is the only one who talks to him. I pleaded and cried to talk to him during the months that followed our departure from the refugee camp. There was so much need in the camp. Food. Medicines. Water. How I went around, my shoulders held high, begging for money for the refugees back home. This was before I knew the money was used to buy guns and bombs, before he became

the secretary general of the Revolutionary Front, before he declared war on the government, before civilians became targets, before they started detonating bombs in public places, before I stopped believing my father was a hero fighting for the millions of refugees, and those who never left and were being persecuted by the government, before I became suspicious about Grandma.

Even though I don't talk to him, he's a ghost I can't lose. I see him in Ma's eyes when a rain cloud glosses over them before she tells me I am his replica. He's the reflection I see first thing in the mornings as I shave my beard, comb my hair. My eyes are large and out of focus. Some people put it down to not belonging. Maybe they're right. Ever since I came to America, I've felt like a nomad. I could have tried to plant myself but there are so many things about me that must remain in a coffin. Humans are social beings. They aren't content just knowing my name, that my favorite color is brown, that I'd pick reggae music any day, and that I've read *Diary of a Bad Year* a hundred times. They want to know who I am, even when they'll forget as soon as we stop talking, even when I don't know who I am. Sometimes, I tell people different things when they ask me the same question twice, thrice, to see if they'll notice. They don't.

Two hours later, I hear her heavy footsteps as she climbs the stairs to my bedroom and I turn off the lights. I know she wants to talk about Father. Her movements reveal the tragedy that follows her. I don't think about how sad she is, how weary she must be. Her knock on the door is tentative. The door squeaks. Light pours in through the half-open door. She's afraid to disturb me, even though she knows I am awake. It's easier for her not to see the hatred wedged in my eyes. All she wants is for me to understand. Her voice is broken as she tells me about him, about their conversation, how he's very proud of me and wishes he had been with us today.

"Then he should have been here."

She picks up my clothes from the floor and folds them. "Of all days to pick a fight, must it be today?"

I am spoiling for a fight, but I know she's right, so I think about the only person I'd have wanted to celebrate my graduation with, the only woman I had the courage to ask out a few months ago.

Nina and I hit it off when we met on the subway. I was coming from the United Nations Secretariat, where I worked as an intern with a group of other

students during my summer holidays researching peace processes in the Horn of Africa. Nina needed two dollars and fifty cents to pay for her ride. She had a one-hundred-dollar bill, which she held in her hands, and the credit card machine was broken. I offered her my train card. We were both taking the 3 train. We talked. Her contagious laughter lifted above the loud chatter of passengers squeezed into the train car. We held onto the silver rods of the car, our bodies crashing into each other every time the speeding train halted suddenly. It was her sing-song laughter that made me want to see her again. I asked her out, and a week later we met for dinner. We were having dessert when I noticed her studying me like a specimen in a laboratory, convinced she had seen me before.

“You aren’t a news reporter, are you?” she asked.

“Nope, never been on TV.”

“We didn’t go to the same schools . . .” she squinted her eyes as though she was looking at the sun and her long nails, polished black, started to tap her wine glass. Miles Davis’s “Blue in Green” filtered through the silence. A waiter asked if we wanted more wine as he lit new candles. It was getting late and the following day was Wednesday. As an intern, I didn’t feel obligated to work every day but Nina was a human rights student. She ordered a cappuccino and I asked for a cup of Earl Grey. I looked at the walls lined with black-and-white pictures of weddings and birthday parties the restaurant had catered over the years; smiles all around.

“There’s something civilized, cultured, about cappuccinos,” Nina said, as she sipped hers.

“Yes, there is,” I agreed, even though I didn’t. It’s all coffee. My brain searched for something to talk about, anything, but it was full of Pa. The knot in my stomach and sweat in my armpits were immediate. I wanted to tell her about him, but where could I start? If only he was a freedom fighter; it’d still be difficult, but at least it’s honorable. I remembered Mike’s reaction.

So, with Nina, I steered away from my parents and stayed on light topics, but she wasn’t having any of it. “You aren’t a news reporter, have never been on television. Where have I seen you?”

“I have a common face . . . strangers often walk up to me and start talking before they realize I am not who they think I am!”

“Really? Never happens to me.”

“I’d remember your beautiful face,” I said, hoping to distract her. She was beautiful, but even to me the statement was a hollow drum. The waiter brought the check. I didn’t feel bad about splitting it. I knew I wouldn’t see her again.

“You haven’t said anything about your parents,” she said. The knot shot to my throat. I considered telling her that my father is dead. It’d make her sorry for asking, and she’d quickly change the subject, but before I could say anything she said, “Bingo, it’s the rebel leader of the Revolutionary Front. Do you know him? Human Rights Watch recently published a report about his movement. The group has committed all these heinous atrocities, horrible, people burned to death. It’s very disturbing.” She talked rapidly, her voice elevated by alcohol and the excitement of finally placing me. She didn’t notice that I sat far away from her in the yellow cab that sped through the straight, wide streets of Manhattan, making its way to Harlem, or that my right hand, which would have reached out to hold hers, was buried deep inside my pocket.

I considered telling her that I knew him. “I don’t know him,” I said as I counted the green traffic lights as far as I could see.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Why should I know him?”

“Because he’s on the news a lot.”

“What’s his name?”

“Moses. His fighters call him Commandant. You must google him if only to see how much you two look alike.” I could only marvel how it was in this city of millions, many of whom believe Africa is a country, I met a girl who knew a lot about my father! The lie didn’t bother me. My desire to see her had evaporated, releasing me from the turmoil that had been churning inside me.

Before she got out of the cab, she scribbled her number on a piece of paper. I crushed it with my hand, squeezed it, and threw it on the car floor. I saw it as I got out of the car, picked it up, straightened it out, and put it in my wallet.

And yet, Ma doesn’t understand why I detest him as I do and I don’t know how to tell her that I want him to leave me alone, to die. It’d be easier to say I don’t have a father. Most of all, I hate that I follow his life even though I don’t want to. He has made it into American living rooms, on their televisions, iPads, smartphones, computers, each time he issues a press statement confirming he has bombed a village. Most of all I hate that she loves him.

More than a year has elapsed since my graduation and increasingly I want to repair my relationship with my mother, but I can't seem to find the right moment to talk to her. She's fixated with shoving advertisements in front of me of jobs I should apply for, even as I tell her I'd like to complete the internship, and then what, she wants to know, but my plans remain vague. The truth is, I don't know what I want to do. She wants me to find a job, she doesn't care what job anymore, she just can't continue paying for my upkeep.

I obsess about that night in the forest, desperate to figure out what I ought to have seen. I remember the group of children, women and men scantily dressed, their faces lit by flashlights, gathered under the baobab tree. The blindfolded woman with her arms tied above her head in the center. Pa, standing at the outskirts of the gathering. Pa, grabbing the woman's head. Pa shooting the woman. It was no accident.

"Where are you going?" Ma asks one morning, as I get ready to leave the house. She's sitting on the sofa in the dark. I switch on the light.

"Running and then work."

"You mean your internship."

"It's work, and I'm looking for a job in a bar."

"After everything I've done to get you that law degree."

I don't say anything.

"I spoke to your father. He says hello."

"Are you still raising money for him?"

"Soon, the war is going to be over. We're going to go home."

I shake my head and leave. I'm tired of fighting with her.

I am running in Central Park and listening to the BBC's "Focus on Africa." The sun is bright. It bounces off the snow. The cold bites my skin, even though I'm bundled up like a caterpillar in a cocoon. I look at the outstretched bony arms of the naked skeleton trees. Central Park is quiet, not like in summer when it's a sea of people, bikes, dogs, and strollers. I am waiting for the traffic lights to turn red, when I hear the bombs explode. They sound like firecrackers I watch during the Fourth of July celebrations. I sprint and run into a tree before I realize they're from the radio, from my earphones. A BBC reporter says a string of bombs has gone off across Kampala. She plays them over and over.

The blasts stop. The reporter provides details. Bombs have gone off at two

o'clock in the afternoon. One of the bombs exploded at a market full of people buying groceries. She says two small girls, twins, their severed hands are on a basket of maize flour, fingers intertwined, and asks what kind of monster does a thing like this?

"My father," I whisper. My teeth chatter from the cold. I remove the earphones. I don't know how I find my way home. Ma is watching the news. It's everywhere. I find her in the ethnic room.

"Monster. What do they know?" she says.

"It's worse than a monster. Attacking people buying vegetables and fruits," I say, even as I want to believe that he could never do something like this. "Did you know? Please tell me, Ma, you didn't know, that you have nothing to do with this. Tell me he isn't capable of a massacre." I feel dizzy.

"We have to hit the government where it hurts. Now they're going to listen. It's over. We're going home." Her voice is excited, confident. As I watch her, I realize that she knew, and I know there's nothing left for me.

In the morning, it's Ma's banging of pots and pans in the kitchen that wakes me up. I can't remember the last time I slept throughout the night. She's whistling to herself as she makes pancakes. I stand in the doorway and watch her. She has removed the wig, and twisted her hair into dreadlocks.

"I'm leaving," I say.

She stops whistling. "But we're going to go home," she says and smiles. It's when she sees my bags that she switches off the oven. "There must be something I can do to make you stay."

Our eyes meet and I realize that all these years we've never really *looked* at each other. I think she's ready to tell me the truth and I think about the many questions I can ask, to understand, for example, why she lied to me about what happened in the forest, which I now know was one of my father's early crimes, but I ask her the only question that could change everything, and we could try to mend our brokenness slowly like a tailor sewing a delicate fabric.

"I know Pa meant to shoot that woman, but what happened to Grandma?"

The question surprises her. She doesn't expect the dead to talk from the grave. Ma has this one chance and she doesn't say anything. She tries. She can't. This is why her silence screams at me. Oh my God. He did it. He killed his own mother and then lied that whoever killed her was after his family and we were

resettled here for our safety. We look at each other for the longest time and through our tears I see her plea for understanding, compassion, forgiveness, but it's not for me to forgive. I hope she can see that I want her to let me go; maybe I still have a chance. I finally understand why some things are better left unsaid.

We both know that this is the last time we shall see each other. I have nothing with me, only the clothes I'm wearing and my thoughts, my hopes, and the ball in my bag. At the brick stairs of the brownstone, I stop; I want to see her one more time, her small frame in the partially open curtains watching me; maybe I'd give a small wave, but I know it'd be prolonging the moment that neither of us will ever recover from.

I don't think about where I'm going, where I'll sleep tonight. For the first time everything around me is crystal clear. It's only four o'clock in the afternoon, but it's already dark, the streets empty. My hands are cold and I bury them inside my pockets. I stand at a traffic light and wonder where the millions of people in New York disappear to during winter. A yellow-cab driver leans from his car window and yells at me to get out of the road.

Cars honk. I cross to the train station at 125th Street and Lenox Avenue. A homeless man lies at the entrance. His face is ash. He doesn't even bother to ask me for change. The 3 train snakes into the dark station. It's empty except for a mother with a small child standing between her parted thighs. I've always found trains comforting, maybe because we arrived in New York in the middle of winter and our apartment was a freezer. I spent many hours on the warm trains, reluctant to go home. Even now the train immediately warms me.

I get off at Times Square and make my way to Grand Central. In the concourse, I lean on the wall next to the escalators opposite the clock and watch people waiting for friends, lovers taking pictures of their kisses, and tourists of the sculptures on the ceiling, of the chandeliers. The laughter, human contact, animated conversations make me realize how alone I am. I slide down the wall and squat for a few minutes before I lie on the floor and stare in awe at the starry ceiling. It's hunger and cold that wake me up, and I make my way to an apartment on 49th Street and 1st Avenue, where the other interns share a one-bedroom apartment.

Pa officially joins the coalition government as prime minister. I don't want to think of this as a bad omen, and yet the knot in my stomach is permanent. I

watch him at press conferences, my mother in the background, giving interviews in European capitals; a warlord turned statesman. He has shaved his beard, wears dark suits, and shakes the hands of presidents who once called him a terrorist. They line up to meet with him, to take photographs. He no longer talks about holding free and fair elections. He no longer mentions the hundreds of people who remain imprisoned, in torture camps, who continue to disappear. The refugee camp welcomes more refugees on its sandy, barren land.

A few days later, I turn up drunk at Tills, a small bar tucked away on one of the busy street corners in Harlem, where I've been working for the past six months. The job was supposed to be for only a couple of months as I figured out what to do next. The bar is a long corridor with a high table from the door to the restrooms and wooden chairs. Black-and-white portraits of famous Hollywood stars line the walls. The tips are good; Freddie, the owner, is kind. I work at night and sleep during the day.

The bar is still empty. Freddie stops leafing through *The New Yorker* and watches me. My hands shake as I unscrew a bottle of Black Label. The bottle crashes. Glass particles fly in the air before falling on the bar, on his magazine. I stagger and reach for another bottle. I don't see Freddie walk over to me and haul me away from the bar.

"What's wrong with you?" he asks. His voice is gentle, but it's lost on me. I hurl myself at him. He moves out of my way. I slam into the wall. Clients walk in as I pick myself up and stumble to the bar. "Give us a drink, just one," I say. "One more. For my father. Did you know that my father is a president? Yes, he is, but what you don't know is that he's also a murderer. He wasn't always a murderer. Wait a minute, wait, he always was. And my mother. Oh, my mother." I burst into laughter. Freddie calls me a cab. Back on 49th Street and 1st Avenue, I collapse on the sofa and sleep. I don't think about where I'll find the rent for the sofa.

I convince myself that I can do something and join the protests. I hold a placard with the names of people the Revolutionary Front has murdered. Other protestors hold pictures of the dead or missing, and still others carry portraits of my father. We walk up and down the five blocks from 42nd to 47th Streets on 1st Avenue where the United Nations is located. The strong winds from the East River slap our faces. We have to hold the placards tightly to keep them from

flying away. “Stop the killing, down with dictatorship,” we chant. The police watch us, ready to pounce should we get violent. United Nations staff walk hastily by in their crisp black suits looking ahead at their shining skyscraper, avoiding eye contact, pretending they don’t see us. The flags of all of the 193 member states dance wildly from the white sky.

I link up with Milo, a fellow protestor whose father was killed by my father, and we start to track the movements of government officials and wait for them outside the United Nations, where they come for meetings. As soon as we see government officials from Uganda, we run and scream the names of people who have been killed.

“I want to show you something,” Milo says one day as I organise my placards. He shows me a YouTube video of us accosting a government official. I look like a wild animal. My eyes are dilated, my hair is dirty, my face sweaty. It isn’t me I see. It’s my father.

“What are we doing?” he asks.

“Protesting.”

“I know, but what’s the point? We both have law degrees, and here we’re looking like savages. I am not coming back tomorrow,” he says as he gives me his phone number and address and walks away.

I want to run after him to convince him to come back. I don’t. The UN flags dance. People walk past me—to make something of their lives. The sun is bright and hurts my eyes. I think about my father and remember his tender eyes full of love as we made the ball. He’s now a prime minister. I am nothing. He got me here to become something. I think about Grandma, whose death was used to have me resettled here. I take all the placards and make my way to the river. I watch the last placard that floats away and know that I must stop floating, open the coffin, and talk about my father. In my wallet, I find Nina’s number. I walk slowly to 116th Street and Lexington Avenue. At the back of the room, I listen to Mike’s speech about dictators. I wait until everyone has left the room and walk up to him. I remove the ball and put it down on the table. Before he says anything, I begin, “My name is Timothy Okello. My father is Moses Okello. I made this ball with him when we were still in the refugee camp.”

“Let’s sit down,” he says.

