

Mizungo

by **Sophia McGovern**

Kampala is a hive. Streets teem with cold, dark faces that turn to land on me from everywhere—from the backs of motorbikes, from inside vans bursting with strangers. From police officers wearing semi-automatic rifles like sashes. These faces stare at my white skin that reeks of money and a life in an America that more closely resembles the lost Eden.

Strange hands brush over my skin, and quickly take hold of my soft hair. The one familiar hand I cling to leads gently. It wards off propositions and proposals from men who can't see past my female form and pale skin.

I am coveted.

My body is all they want because it is wrapped in a promise of a better life. I am *mizungo*. I have no identity besides my lack of color. It is a sign of the poverty that has passed over me, but clings to this air and sprawls out all around me, possessing this crazy city.

I am untouched, blessed and desired.

The leisurely days in Lyantonde show me that I can fly. I grip the back of the motorbike as it grumbles under me, lugging us up the infinitely orange hills and into the rural villages three hours west of Kampala where our project lies. Our goal is to provide housing and sanitation for a family still grieving the loss of a husband and father.

As we continue to climb, my host's brother guides the bike around the potholes. His grip on the handlebars, like his brother's, protects me. The jungle snakes. Children weave in and out of trees flashing smiles, waves and shouts of "*mizungo!*" The wind that promises rain twists and frees my hair from its elastic. It pulls hidden music, smells and orange dust—"fufu"—through my flying hair. I am powerful in our partnership.

The haunted nights in Lyantonde remind me that I am running. Instead of children flashing waves and smiles, my mother, nearly a skeleton, breaks into my thoughts. She stares ahead with hollow eyes in a yellow nightgown that hasn't been washed in weeks.

I see my sister and me, mere children, hiding her notes and the kitchen knives. Anything she could cut away her life with so that the younger ones don't wake up motherless.

I can barely sleep in this world so far from my own. I spend the nights living the nightmares and counting the minutes until morning. I am relieved she finally tried and ended her empty threats, but even more relieved she failed and that I escaped.

"You should be scared. It is not natural to jump off a seventy-five-foot drop."

A man jokes and laughs as he ties my ankles together, trying to make me smile. Instead, the flashing reflection of the sun off the water of the Nile below me demands my attention.

I sit on a tribal throne as he works. Below me is the veranda. The Dutch couple I have befriended promised to watch. We *mizungos* have a bond. I smile and wave to their distant faces knowing they can only see my gleaming white t-shirt.

I stand at the edge of the drop forcing myself to look straight ahead.

"The trick is to jump out not down, and at the count of three you'll do it."

Fear is blocking nearly every thought, sound, and smell, but I trust his voice. I inhale.

One...

My knees weaken as I stare out across the miles of treetops.

Two...

My lungs contract as my gut clenches.

Three...

My arms pull above my head, and my knees bend and launch my body over the emptiness. I hang in the air, weightless, and feel as if I belong there. That second stretches and I am invincible.

My stomach turns as gravity catches up to me, pulling me by the gut toward the

flashing water. I am close to bursting with fear before it rips out of me in a horrified scream. The water zooms closer until it is a foot from my fingertips. I can see my dangling form reflected in the surface. All I need is to hold that bold girl's hand.

The bungee tugs me back before I break the surface, bouncing me into the air five or six more times. Each time I am farther and farther from the water, until I am released by two men bobbing in a raft below me.

The countdown man meets me at the shore as I crouch, trying to catch my breath. He scoops me into a hug.

"My dear! What a beautiful jump. You are much braver than you think."

My bags dig into my shoulders, and my knees buckle from exhaustion as I knock on the door in Tempe I've missed for the past month and a half.

"Hey, you at the door, go away for a second. I don't want you home yet!"

The minutes stretch as I hear my roommate scurrying around inside, the frantic shadow of a tall woman etched on the blinds of the kitchen door. Since I have seen her last, a death has crippled her, and I've searched the entire flight for what to say.

When the door flings open, I'm engulfed in her hug.

"You smell like a hippie."

On our scavenged kitchen table is a bouquet of roses and baby's breath and a casserole dish. The dish, never before used, is filled with goopy brownies and an entire box of lit candles melting onto them.

In the next few hours, nothing is said about death or anything we are running from. We devour the brownies on our hand-me-down futon and watch our favorite show until the sun rises.

It is the second finals week of my college career. Instead of studying, I have burned through way too many hours of Netflix. The familiar Facebook ding draws me away from manly biker adventures.

A message from my sister pulses on the screen.

"Mom and the kids are in the hospital."

My breath catches.

“There was a car crash. I don’t know what happened. The cops just showed up and took my dad to the hospital. Grandma and Grandpa are there too.”

“The stories don’t match up, honey. No one knows exactly what happened.” My grandma’s voice is tired, careful, and comforting. It’s the voice I always wish my mother had.

“Your mom says there were other cars, your sister says there weren’t any.”

My dorm room feels smaller and farther away than it ever has.

We both know what I was really asking.

My youngest sister fractured a vertebra, my brother’s face was sliced, and my mother’s nose smashed against the windshield as the car rolled. She wasn’t wearing a seatbelt, but somehow, she didn’t fly through the glass. A miracle, they said.

The permanent breeze plays with the leaves of the mango trees, pawpaw trees, and banana plants. The sun beats at a constant eighty degrees, bouncing off the endless green. Gospel music blares from the speakers, fenced in by scrap metal. The whole town is mingling in the tiny yard thanking Jesus for the heaping plates of food and endless love. It is Sunday and a Day of Thanks. Everyone is full of smiles.

Children with their hair shaved short bounce and weave in and out of the crowd. For hours they laugh and sprint and play with one another. They pose for my camera, sure they will be famous, captured by the rare *mizungu*. They feel my skin, wondering if the white can be washed away.

A hand lightly touches my shoulder, pulling me away from the children. “That one in the blue dress is a boy. He likes to wear dresses and his stubborn mother lets him.”

Inside, the World News constantly plays, showing bright politicians chanting about shooting gays and bisexuals on the street. International lawyers fight to kill the law supporting homosexuals’ and bisexuals’ imprisonment and torture.

The people laugh and words of hate float up behind the Gospel music, mixed in with words of love from my new family.

“His mother is stubborn. She is teaching him to defy God.”

The children continue to bounce and play under the sun, posing for my camera

as my hands shake.

The big Utah backyard bursts with cousins I hardly see. The green grass combs my long skirt as I mingle, and my brother tells them about the bags of candy from that week's parade.

My grandparents sit in the shade, holding hands. My mother sits next to them.
Removed.

At the end of the night I gather my things from inside my aunt's home. Shoes of every size clutter the entryway, and the happy shrieks of childhood games filter through the screen door. The living room is dark and almost hides them.

I'm watching a secret.

My grandmother holds her daughter. Tears illuminate her face as the words tumble out. They are too far away for me to hear, and my mother's expression is cast in shadows, but I can feel the words I want to say to her grounded in that embrace.

I slip away not ready to say them.

Back in Tempe, my girlfriend holds my hand as we sit in an outdoor loveseat in an open-air market. The sun reflects off her Ray Bans as it sinks lower into blue dusk.

We sit for an hour while the meaningless legs of strangers drift by at eye level. The familiar prick of stares coats us. A man points.

A family of six walks by, each child the same bright shade of blonde. The baby smiles at us. My girlfriend's face lights up with hope for her own clan of curly-haired little babies.

The second youngest boy stops to look at us.

It is a look of curiosity, unthreatening. I wave to him, and he smiles, looking over his shoulder as he catches up with his family, waving goodbye to the two women in love, sitting in the setting sun.

This room is my space. My new family added a lock to the door and bars to the window to keep unwanted people out. To keep my American skin and valuables safe. Sometimes it is a sanctuary, other times it is a hiding place for my other self.

I have made it across the world on my own. At times I feel utterly alone. My body has come to crave the touch of those I cannot have. I have loved men, but it is she I crave in the darkness thousands of miles away. Her fingers slide into me; her hair falls to my chest as she kisses my neck.

A carnal moan rips from my mouth.

The house is silent.

I hear someone shift in his bed.

No one moves, and I start to breathe again.

Piles of freshly printed photographs of Uganda overtake my bed in Tempe. I add these pictures to the twine that zigzags across my walls and documents milestones. My girlfriend watches me work, lying at my feet. She listens as the stories seep from me. Ugandan children caked in dirt stare back. Theirs are some of the voices muted by poverty in Lyantonde, the town I grew to love. I stand on my bed, arranging the photos so the colors flow, but those eyes, pinned back by clothespins, cannot blend in with the rest of my American life. I have made these children decorations.

My guilt haunts me as I tell her their stories, and about my group's goal to provide them with water tanks so they can strive for more than basic survival. I tell her how beautiful those children are, but how little one water tank can do. So much more needs to be done; so many more families need clean water in that green land. I wish I could show her that beautiful country. I wish that I had not taken these photos, but I keep them as a reminder of my power.

Ugliness and danger would await our love on those green hills and orange roads. But we are *mizungos*. We have cameras and the power to turn a nation into wall hangings as children serenade us.

It is midnight, and my plane sits in the Entebbe Airport. There is nothing but blackness outside, and only the double-paned glass keeping it out. I feel submerged. I am exhausted, and the cabin's fluorescent lighting is offensive.

The screen on the back of the seat in front of me flashes, tracking my location. The plane straddles the Equator, resting after the ten-hour flight from Schiphol.

My ears are numb from straining to hear the outside world.

Everything I know fits into two small backpacks that cling to my sides and throw me off balance. I step out of the plane. Every part of me, every exhausted pore feels that small step.

The linoleum is scuffed and gray. Ads wrap around everything in sight, reminding travelers that this is the Pearl of Africa. The fluorescent lighting flickers. Bulbs, like so many things need replacing.

I can't bring myself to make eye contact with the woman who stamps my passport.

I'm supposed to meet my host outside.

The doors slide open and noise envelops me, rushing in after ten hours of absence. The night air is chilly, commandeering my lungs, which are almost used to the recycled junk.

Men crowd together, dressed in plaid button-downs, jeans, and leather shoes. Some sit on motorbikes, most wave, all call out to me.

I am ashamed.

The faces blend and meld together. I only know his from photographs, but I cannot find him.

The car with slashed leather seats weaves in and out of the others. None are new, and none adhere to the sloppily painted lanes lit up only by dim headlights.

My bags fill the seat next to me.

No streetlights give meaning to the looming shapes in the darkness. With concentration, my eyes begin to adjust as the cool night air rushes in and around me.

We speed to an abrupt halt behind a pickup riding low to the ground. "POLICE" is spray painted on the side, barely visible in the headlights. Men with rifles slung across their chests stand in the bed, their eyes scanning the landscape in all directions.

Ramshackle steel structures, decorated with Christmas lights instead of neon, blast music that whips through the car as we zoom past the policemen. The silhouettes of dancing people are etched behind my eyelids. A few of the policemen see my face, their eyes following mine before distance robs them of me.

The buildings get closer and closer together. I have not missed a single tree, smell, or woman in a long skirt walking on the side of the road.

The car leaves us, and we walk for a few minutes weaving through identical turns, and a few staring men. The hotel surprises me. In the midst of crumbling cement, the marble floors of the lobby gleam.

He checks me in and tours the room, examining every corner, every drawer with his hands.

The bed looks like someone just left it, and I try not to wonder what secrets it keeps.

He pulls the curtain shut and makes sure I can lock the door. I am warned not to answer for anyone.

We will meet at eleven in the morning.

I turn the lock and it echoes through the floor.

The bus from Kampala to Lyantonde bounces and screeches across three hours of green. Vendors with baskets balanced on their heads shove chunks of meat and bright fruit through my open window at each stop, hoping to pierce my American wallet and feed their families. I am told not to buy anything; my stomach was not made to handle these things.

The bus is overcrowded. It's the only way to get to rural Uganda from crazy Kampala. People spill into the aisle. His tight grip never slides off of my bags as exhaustion pulls me under.

Lyantonde emerges. As we clamber off, all eyes stick to me, and the fact that this is home for the next six weeks begins to settle on my rumpled clothes along with the dust.

His worn expression dissolves into a huge grin as I reposition my things into a thief-proof hold. "Drop your bags, and stretch, sister. This is your new home. We are so happy to have you."

The air here is calm. Music and scents of roasting meat lazily make their way to me as huge trucks bumble by on one of the only paved roads outside of Kampala. They lug goods from Kenya or Tanzania, places I never thought could be closer than a news

story. The people walk slowly. Time gets stuck somewhere on the way to town and doesn't translate well. Their looks, instead of dissecting me from my skin and valuables, are curious and friendly. "Hello, my mizungu friend" a man in a tattered suit jacket beams while strolling by.

We weave in and out of tiny shops and houses. Nearly everyone greets me. We duck through a gate, and a lovely house with carefully kept flowers and grass jumps into view. I enter the front door, and an old man whose smile is bigger than any I've seen, stands up from the couch. "Welcome to your new home. I am your new father!" My breath catches as he hugs me, and I realize he means everything he says. I am now a part of this family.

The Internet café's roof is an unfinished, cool private space where the town of Lyantonde sprawls below me. Dusk casts a light blue tint on the buildings with their scrap metal roofs, some of which are decorated with worn bike tires and warped from the rain.

As the sun sinks lower, brightly dressed women crop up in the corners of streets and blossom in the entrances to winding alleys. Truck drivers stuck for the night slink after them into the shadows.

I watch the town's nightlife bloom, and revel in our work. That day, I was actually of use. We talked for hours with past beneficiaries and designed programs meant to foster opportunity. After a week in the tropical sun, the mother of last year's project's family had cleared an entire hectare of jungle, ready to harvest potatoes. On her own she had reclaimed land from the green, slashing and burning hope. She only needed the seed.

With our funding, she could yield seven times what we would invest in her. Her children wouldn't be forced to leave school because she couldn't afford uniforms. She could be independent and teach them to thrive instead of struggling to survive. I am satisfied instead of aching from my uselessness in the face of the intense poverty that grips so many.

I see death. They see life, and we are worlds apart.

The screams pierce my mind, and my thoughts go numb. My head is filled only with the cries of the goat as the butcher hacks at its throat. The cries turn into huffs as the blunt knife hacks the vocal chords into shreds. Its kicks turn from desperate to hopeless as it sags, its life deflating in the red pool surrounding it, filling the jagged cement of the courtyard.

I've been snapping pictures. My friends here wanted me to see the slaughter. This is the first meat they've eaten in weeks. Family members from all over the country have come to celebrate Eid.

Here, the Muslim and Christian populations flow seamlessly. "We worship the same God, what is there to hate?"

The goat is strung up in an outside doorway. A bucket below its head fills with its draining blood. Its tongue lolls to the side looking no different than it did before the slaughter. The knife slides in and out of the creature mechanically. The butcher's face does not change. A barefoot toddler dressed in tiny jeans waddles by sucking his fingers, and staring at the carved goat, not blinking as its fur is separated from the meat, and the meat from the bones.

The camera shutter continues to click. I try to capture the moment when this creature morphs from a living thing to chunks of lifeless meat, but all I can hear is its screams.

The flesh is passed to another man. He has laid out banana leaves and is surrounded by sliced fruit, vegetables and huge pots boiling and bubbling with bits of chicken and sauces. He is armed with a machete, and sits cross-legged staring blankly at the meat before him. With no signal he starts hacking at the tough goat meat. He keeps on for ten minutes, looking like a perverse wind up toy.

The family around me sings and celebrates. The courtyard, usually filled with gray, is bursting with the brightness of the chopped fruit and vegetables, the headscarves of the women, the white tunics of the men, and the brightly printed clothes of the children.

Later in the evening of Eid, I sit in the courtyard.

The sky opens and it pours. The colors of Eid are stripped from outside and

stuffed into the many rooms of the complex.

The celebration remains vibrant, but becomes more subdued with the filling of bellies. Earlier that morning, my new family offered well wishes to their friends. “We have no bad blood, they worship the same God. If He is happy with them, it will rain.”

It rains for hours. God is happy.

I am still shaken from the slaughtering. Apparently, worlds cannot be left behind with travel, no matter how far or for how long. We carry them with us from place to place.

For the first time in over a month, I am not the only *mizungu*.

The river churns and attempts to swallow everything. Our raft bounces and wriggles shooting along the Nile’s rapids. My host is in the front and the rest of our crew paddles in sync with him. With one last tug at the water, we fly forward into calmer water, the adrenaline still numbing everything but the pounding of blood and pride in our ears.

A couple from Amsterdam speaks Dutch then slips into English to include me in the conversation. We share sunscreen and laugh at our burning skin and oily white noses.

That night we stay in a lodge in Jinja overlooking the Nile squeezed in between miles of trees filled with monkeys and wildlife I have only ever seen caged. My host goes to sleep, but I choose to stay with the other *mizungos*. We talk until we are the only ones left on the veranda hanging over the dark jungle night.

They too are haunted by the intense poverty that warps the children’s stomachs, swelling their starving bellies, and by the hate that lies behind the most genuine smiles. They too are shocked by the love that passes between Muslims and Christians in Uganda, yet has caused thousands of years of war and misunderstanding in the Western world and the Middle East. They too are enchanted yet horrified by this wonderful world.

When I first arrived in Lyantonde, it seemed to be a place of the past. Power wasn’t guaranteed, I bathed from a bucket, and flush-toilets were an unattainable

luxury. But looking again, I see the future developing alongside tradition. I see culture translating opportunity. Women in their seventies swathed in bright traditional dress talk on cellphones, even though running water is scarce. Teenagers constantly update Facebook at the Internet café. Children head back from school in immaculate uniforms speaking near perfect English with dreams of becoming world leaders and doctors.

The days are filled with hope for the future while the nights are filled with power play. They are an escape from the past and present where women bloom in the alleyways, and children complete their homework in candlelight with strength that my hands never needed to know.

It rains, earlier and harder than ever before, and the farmers worry about the fate of their crops, and ultimately their families. The roads are too dangerous to travel by motorbike. We have no connection to our project or the beneficiaries.

Instead we wait.

It rains for three days. The smell of rain is different here. It is stitched with worry and destruction instead of hope and life. The sky churns into a formidable indigo instead of the deep purple coated with pink clouds that usher green change into my beautiful desert.

When the sky clears, the real world is beckoned back with the flip of a switch. The workers have fixed the power line somewhere between here and Tanzania. “One break in the line and the whole countryside goes dark.”

The World News flickers on. I am more informed here in rural Africa than in the developed world. Here, there is no option to look the other way. I watch with my host family as people continue to die by the hundreds. Palestinians and Israelis. Children in Syria. Hospitals and schools bombed. Each night the death count rises. The whole globe gripped by the same rain. A village in India completely reclaimed. Buried. Loved ones beg for help and more search parties.

“God has a plan and reason. We are His people and His instruments, and God is good.”

I can't see a God or a power to call upon, and I can't see a reason. Especially not

a good one. I am isolated from the people I live with who have opened up their home, and welcomed me into their family.

The loss and death all seems so distant, held back by the secure electricity and plumbing of my world—until it isn't.

The desert I miss is worlds away and filled with those I love. Our apartment seems even farther, and I want nothing more right now than to hold my roommate's hand. To have her know that I was there for her, really, and that her friend's death was not her fault. People break. Some pull others down with them, and some pick up the fallen. She was stronger, and for that she must suffer. I just need her to know that she has a right—no matter how far off it seems—to be happy. She can and will carry pain, but she has chosen, unlike him, to *live*, and she must do that. She has a right to move forward, which is not moving on or forgetting. It is accepting.

This is life. This is our world. Like Lyantonde, it's beautiful, it's ugly, and it's honest.

Each night the death count rises everywhere in the world, but death only holds the fringes of my life. I hurt from my roommate's grief, but it is borrowed pain.

"Everyone here has lost a child, a brother, a sister, an aunt. People here know death well, so we understand your loss, and we pray for you and your friend."

I am hardly unpacked, and my roommate is in a world warped by the horrors of an acid trip. She pleads with me to join her, but sleep is a higher priority, something that won't happen tonight.

"I'm in Hell."

She stands on the bed that's pushed against the wall, arms outstretched, her tongue twisting so only her demons can understand. Her eyes roll back. For a moment, she is serene.

She falls back, shattering the window above the bed and the silence of three AM.

I yank her away from the shards as she screams, clinging to me. Somehow there is no blood. I pull her to her room, needing her to feel safe.

Her body is taken by the trip. She flings herself into every sharp corner, finally convulsing on the floor. I hold her shoulders down as she claws at me, and her teeth break my skin.

When her body grows limp, a cry fills the room—her lost love's name.

The darkest hours of the night are filled with her grief until her demons release her, and she slips into sleep.

Clapping hands, harmonized voices, and swaying bodies in their best clothes fill my host family's church. A young woman next to me holds a worn bible, which has been pieced back together with newspaper. In the row of uncomfortable wooden benches in front of me, a child is squeezed in between her parents, yet stands facing me, the *mizungu*, and stares without blinking. The hymns bounce off the walls and all around me, filling what little space isn't taken by bodies too close to understand the concept of Western space.

The hymns and sermon are in Luganda. The broken windows behind the pastor take my attention, while the child and some grown men continue to stare at me. From my seat I can see directly into somebody's room in the house next to the church. This person skulks back and forth in front of the window, yet never faces us.

My host sister hands me her bible and tells me which passages to flip to. I read, holding it between us as she scribbles notes in what little space is left in the margins. The words I'm supposed to be absorbing are squeezed out by the feeling of the eyes boring into my skin.

The service ends, and my host mother steps up to the center of the aisle. She is dressed in bright orange and holds the basket out for the tithing. People pile into the aisle. They sing as they drop money into the basket. Each offering is at least ten percent of what they've made that week. Some give more than the bill that is crinkled in my hand. All are proud. The money piles higher, and as I step up to the basket, she locks eyes with me, beaming.

Those who could not offer cash leave the building and wait outside. They march in with bushels of bananas, stocks of sugar cane, live hens, eggs, grain, and seeds. One man drags a bleating stubborn goat.

They stand in front and face everyone. These are the poorest of the poor, yet they give all that they can.

The pastor begins to auction off the items. “What good is a hen to a church?” he asks. “Do we not care enough for our God?”

People then offer more money. The pastor’s smile widens and his accusations get sharper until everything is sold.

My host mother neatly counts and packs the money into an envelope and hands it to the pastor.

A young girl in the choir cleans up the goat shit.

My legs are grateful for the walk home, happy to shed the eyes of the clergy, and replace them with orange dust. It clings to my toes and the white hem of my skirt.

My host sister walks beside me and asks questions about my strange world.

They all lead back to divorce.

“In our country it is unacceptable. It doesn’t happen. How can it be so common in yours?”

There was a time when I asked why, but eventually I understood, even if I wished I didn’t.

Here in Lyantonde, life without poverty is a blessing, and marriage is the only way to live. It is a way of combatting hardships. Back home we have options. We have the choice to marry unhappily, and we have the option to end it.

“When you say your parents had ‘problems’ I assumed you meant hunger, disease, poverty. Real problems. Depression isn’t reason enough.”

The Utah sun beats down, contending with the infamous sun of the Sonoran. My siblings and I are lined up on the driveway in four foldable chairs, waiting for the parade, while our mother stays inside, hiding from my questions. I count the browning weeds cropping up in the cracks, as my brother, the youngest, bounces in and out of his chair. He is armed with a grocery bag and the impatience of an eight-year-old, and demands to know where the parade and his candy are. Hoping to tire him out and shut him up, I tell him the faster he dances, the faster the parade will come.

My sisters and I laugh as he bounces and smiles, his mouth pulling at the jagged scar running down his cheek.

It has been one year since my mother's hospitalization. The parade continues, and they jump and race for the fallen pieces, snatching them up before I can.

The scar on his face tugs at the moment, adding an aching for the mother we almost lost, now inside, missing another memory.

"I think she tried to kill herself. No one will tell me what happened."

I read the message from my sister again and again as the phone rings to depletion.

No one answers, and the line grows cold.

Days go by. Mother fills the silence haunting every mirror. Every step seems lost and packed with lines, phrases, lyrics. They pour out of me onto every surface and thought.

How long before her fall?

My grandpa's calm voice ends the silence as the sun slips underground, pulling the campus into blue.

"She said she was calling to say goodbye."

He kept her on the line. She told him with slurred words about the pills she took and the liquor she drank. He kept her talking. He kept her conscious. My grandma phoned the police on the other line. He heard them break through the door. She cursed him.

We beg to know the woman who was free.

It is dark. My legs begin to ache from the huge boulder I'm sitting on with no recollection of the numb steps they took to get there. Fellow students' laughter and

chatter slowly start to filter back into my consciousness.

“That call was a cry for help. There’s a chance this is not the end of her tries. Hope for the best, and prepare for the worst.”

How do we make this woman stay?

No visible disease or virus threatens my family. But there are still threats.

My brother and sisters jab at the car windows, ecstatic about the desert’s red rock, which is so new to them. Our mother jumps in, begging my stepdad to pull over so that we can explore the red sand dunes of Snow Canyon.

When the car slows, we fling off our seatbelts and run into the desert. Our laughter fills the empty canyon, fading into the towering sandstone.

Our mother pulls off her combat boots and peels off her socks, tumbling into the sand with my youngest siblings. She makes a sand angel beside my brother, the scar still pulling at his face. Her dancer’s body is graceful against the red sand. Floating in the colors of the desert, she is filled with life.

The police chief’s uniform is so white it almost hurts my eyes. His beret has the perfect tilt, and his manners are impeccable, though hardened. We walk through the station past the lower ranking officers who salute him with their shiny rifles swept across their chests.

The women’s cell is pitch black at midday. It is an eighty-square-foot metal shanty with a padlock. The door stands wide open. One empty bucket for bathing sits in the center of the cell with a dirty rag slopped over the side. There is no latrine. The tropical sun beats at the cell and I can only imagine how stifling it must be behind that locked door.

I know nothing about the criminal justice system here, only that there is no record system across districts and towns. There are hardly any roads to transport people, let alone information. I wonder how national law finds its way or if it gets tangled up in all of the green.

Laughing voices drift to me from inside a brick structure slightly bigger than the women's cell. It has pane-less barred windows and a bulb swings lightly in the breeze, illuminating the brick.

"These are the men's quarters."

We make our way to his office where a worn fan lazily disrupts piles of paperwork that crowd his desk. He tells me Lyantonde is "blessed" to have me, and he will answer any of my questions.

I wonder what crimes the chatting men inside have committed. I wonder how long they have had to sit in that tiny cell, and how much more time they have in that block. I wonder if anyone's crimes involve a love their beautiful country cannot understand.

Every meal is stitched with the World News. I yearn for one story in particular, rationing out my meal so that it will last until it airs, the challenging of Uganda's homophobic law.

The colorful heaps of food pile before me as the stories unfold. I wait and swallow. Mashed and steamed banana known as *matoke*; fish; Irish potatoes; steamed pumpkin; rice with my favorite purple ground nut sauce; greens, including a sour eggplant; and a plate of the most sensuous pineapple and watermelon. This feast of a lunch would fill the barren fridge in my college apartment and last me a week.

Outside, next to the goat's pen, where the stories are mere murmurs, sits a garbage heap. Anything I don't consume is left to rot.

The story flashes, my ears strain, my chewing stops. International lawyers joined forces to strike down the homophobic law designed to imprison gays, bisexuals, and "accomplices," those who do not turn them in, for life. A pastor becomes a national hero, denouncing and damning anyone who pardons such crimes against God.

It is time for Parliament to make their decision.

The tiny screen sits across the room, yet is all I see and hear.

Someone has entered the house and sits beside me. He leans toward the T.V. too. I chew again, forcing back the nerves.

The lawyers have found a loophole. I exhale.

Members of Parliament were not present when the law was voted in.

It is invalid.

My fist clenches with the celebration I must keep hidden. Against the waves of hate coursing through the region, with the whole world watching, the law is struck down.

My host's protective hands clasp mine, and my fist relaxes. "My dear sister," he says, "this is a great victory."

We sit on our raft letting the water of the Nile drift by. I talk about the sun and the Mexican food that I miss, and the Dutch couple asks which parts of my beautiful desert they must see. Wildflowers bloom in my mind's eye, and my skin aches, missing the sun's blast.

The shore is a bouncing wave of children shouting "*Mizungu* bye!" They run after our raft as we smile and wave back until they fade from sight, their cries lingering on the surface of the river. The lazy water laps at the raft and the breeze alleviates the slow burn of the sun.

"What does *mizungu* actually mean?" my new friend asks our guide.

At the back of the raft he looks up from the river he knows so well. His dreadlocks frame his face perfectly and he folds his toned arms across his chest and smiles.

"It is an old word from the time of colonization. It means 'explorer.'"



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