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MEMORIES OF A CURFEW

It was not odd that the first few days of our curfew were enjoyed by most people. It was a welcome change for us, like the noisy downpour that comes suddenly in January and makes a watery crackle on the street and ends the dry season. The parties, though these were now held in the afternoon, had a new topic of conversation. There were many rumors, and repeating these rumors made a kind of tennis match, a serve and return, each hit slightly more savage than the last. And the landscape of the city outside the fence of our compound was fascinating to watch. During these first days we stood in our brightly flowered shirts on our hill; we could see the palace burning, the soldiers assembling and making people scatter, and we could hear the bursts of gunfire and some shouts just outside our fence. We were teachers, all of us young, and we were in Africa. There were well-educated ones among us. One of them told me that during the Roman Empire under the reign of Claudius rich people and scholars could be carried in litters by lecticarii, usually slaves, to camp with servants at a safe distance from battles; these were curious Romans, men of high station who, if they so wished, could be present and, between feasts, witness the slaughter.

But the curfew continued, and what were diversions for the first days and weeks became habits. Although people usually showed up for work in the mornings, work in the afternoons almost ceased. There were too many things to be done before the curfew began at nightfall: buses had to be caught, provisions found, and some people had to collect children. We visited the bars so that we could get drunk in the company of other people; we played the slot machines and talked about the curfew, but after two weeks it was a very boring subject.

The people who never went out at night before the curfew was imposed – some Indians with large families used to matinees at the local movie houses, the Africans who did manual labor and some settlers – felt none of the curfew’s effects. And there were steady ones who refused to let the curfew get to them; they were impatient with our daily hangovers, our inefficiency, our nervous comments. Our classes were not well-attended. One day I asked casually where our Congolese student was – a dashing figure, he wore a silk scarf and rode a large old motorcycle. I was told that he had been pulled off his motorcycle by a soldier and had been beaten to death with a rifle butt.

We left work early. In the afternoons it was as if everyone was on leave but couldn’t afford to go to Nairobi or Mombasa, as if everyone had decided to while away his time at the local bars. At the end of the month no one was paid because the ministry was short-staffed. Some of us ran out of money. The bar owners said they were earning

less and less: it was no longer possible for people to drink in bars after dark. They would only have been making the same amount as before, they said, if all the people started drinking in the middle of the morning and kept it up all day. The drinking crowd was a relatively small one, and there were no casual drinkers. Most people in the city stayed at home. They were afraid to stay out after five or so. I tried to get drunk by five-thirty. My memory is of going home drunk, with the dazzling horizontal rays of the sun in my eyes.

The dwindling of time was a strange thing. During the first weeks of the curfew we took chances; we arrived home just as the soldiers were drifting into the streets. Then we began to give ourselves more time, leaving an hour or more for going home. It might have been because we were drunker and needed more time, but we were also more worried: more people were found dead in the streets each morning when the curfew lifted. For many of us the curfew began in the middle of the afternoon when we hurried to a bar; and it was the drinkers who, soaked into a state of slow motion, took the most chances.

Different prostitutes appeared in the bars. Before the curfew there were ten or fifteen in each bar, most of them young and from the outskirts of Kampala. But the curfew was imposed after two tribes fought; most of the prostitutes had been from these tribes and so went into hiding. Others took their places. Now there were ones from the Coast, there were half-castes, Rwandans, Somalis. I remember the Somalis. There was said to be an Ethiopian at the Crested Crane, but I never saw her; in any case, she would have been very popular. All these women were old and hard, and there were fewer than before. They sat in the bars, futile and left alone, slumped on the broken chairs, waiting, as they had been waiting ever since the curfew started. Whatever other talents a prostitute may have she is still unmatched by any other person in her genius for killing time and staying on the alert for customers. The girls held their glasses in two hands and followed the stumbling drinkers with their eyes. Most of us were not interested in complicating the curfew further by taking one of these girls home. I am sure they never had to wait so long with such dull men.

One afternoon a girl put her hand on mine. Her palm was very rough; she rubbed it on my wrist and when I did not turn away she put it on my leg and asked me if I wanted to go in the back. I said I didn’t mind, and so she led me out past the toilets to the back of the bar where there was a little shed. She scuffed across the shed’s dirt floor, then stood in a corner and lifted her skirt. Here, she said, come here. I asked her if we had to remain standing up. She said yes. I started to embrace her; she let her head fall back until it touched the wood wall. She still held the hem of her skirt in her hand. Then I said no, I couldn’t nail her against the wall. I saw that the door was still open. She argued for a while and said in Swahili, ‘Talk, talk, we could have finished by now!’ I stepped away, but gave her ten shillings just the same. She spat on it and looked at me fiercely.

Anyone who did not crave a drink went straight home. He took no chances. There were too many rumors of people being beaten up at five or six o'clock by drunken soldiers impatient for the curfew to start. As I say, the drinkers took the risks, and with very little time to spare dashed for their cars and sped home. For many the curfew meant an extra supply of newspapers and magazines; for others it meant an extra case of beer. A neighbor of mine had prostitutes on his hands for days at a time, and once one of the girls' babies in a makeshift cot. Many people talked about rape.

The car accidents were very strange, freak accidents, ones that could only happen during a curfew. One man skidded on a perfectly dry road and drove his car through a billboard six feet wide; dozens of people, as if they had been struck blind, plowed straight across the grass of rotaries. And there were accidents at intersections: not hitting oncoming cars, but smashing into the rears of the cars ahead of them. These rear-end collisions were quite numerous and there were no street sweepers to cope with all the broken glass. It was hard to go a hundred yards without seeing shards, red plastic and white glass, sprinkled on the road. Overturned cars on the verge of the road are rare in Africa, but they became very common around Kampala. Accidents in Africa are usually serious; few end with only a smashed headlight or simple bruises. Either the car is completely ruined or the car and driver disappear. We had some of these fatal accidents during the curfew, but there was also, for the first time, a rash of trivial accidents: broken lights, smashed fenders, bent bumpers, bruised foreheads. I think these were caused by the driver glancing around as he drove, half expecting to see angry people about to stone him, or troops aiming rifles at him. I know I tried to pick out soldiers as I drove along, and I always watched carefully for roadblocks which were so simple (two soldiers and an oil drum) as to be invisible. But it was death to drive through one.

There were so many petty arguments those days. In the bars there were fights over nothing at all; with this, a feeling of tribe rather than color. It was not racism. It was a black revolt, northern Ugandans were killing Bugandans, and neither side was helped to any great extent by anyone who was not black. The lingua franca in Kampala was bad Swahili instead of the usual vernacular which was Luganda. At any other time Swahili would have been a despised language, because only the fringe people used it – refugees, Indians, white men, foreigners. But after the curfew began it was mainly the fringe people who took over the bars.

The curfew reminded many of other curfews they had sat through in their time. During the day, in the bars, if the curfew was mentioned, old-timers piped up contemptuously, 'You think this is bad? Why, when I was in Leopoldville it was a lot worse than this …' Sometimes it was London, Palermo, Alexandria or Tunis, or for the Indians Calcutta, Dacca or Bombay during the Indian emergency. It brought back memories which, though originally violent, had become somewhat glamorous in the long stretch of intervening time: days spent in haggard platoons in the Western Desert, in the dim light of paraffin lamps in Congolese mansions, in London basements with the planes

buzzing overhead, in Calcutta with the sound of blood running in the monsoon drains. These men enjoyed talking about the other more effective curfews, and they said that we really didn't know what a curfew was. They had seen men frightened, they said, but this curfew only bored people. Still, I knew then that some time in the future I would recall the curfew – perhaps recall it with the same fanciful distortions that these men added to their own memories. It is so strange. I was in Africa for five years; I remember nothing so clearly as the curfew.

The cripples who sold newspapers at the hotels and down by the Three Stars Bar no longer had to shout and point at their stacks of papers. As soon as the new papers arrived they were sold. The ones from Kenya and Tanzania were in demand since they were printing all the facts and even some of the rumors. The local papers which showed some courage during the first weeks were banned or their reporters beaten up. They now began all their curfew stories, 'Things are almost back to normal …'

More and more people began tuning to the External Service of Radio South Africa, and after a time they didn't even apologize. People traded rumors of atrocities (the gorier the story the more knowledgeable the storyteller was considered). No one except the anthropologists chose sides. The political scientists were silent (it was said that as soon as the tribal dispute started a half a dozen doctoral dissertations were rendered invalid). We waited for the curfew to end. But the weeks passed and the curfew stayed the same. At night there was stillness where there had been the rush of traffic in town, the odd shout, or the babbling of idle boys in the streets. Barking dogs and the honk and cackle of herons in our trees replaced the human noises. The jungle had started to move in. Every hour on the hour the air was thunderous with the sound of news broadcasts, but after that, at our compound, you could stand on the hill and hear nothing. Lights flashed soundlessly and to no purpose. Nothing outside the fence moved. Viewed from that hill the curfew seemed a success.

'This is your friend?' asked the Somali girl in Swahili.

The Watusi next to her ignored the question. He turned to me, 'C'est ma fille, Habiba.' When I looked at the girl he said in Swahili, 'Yes, my friend Paul – rafiki wangu.'

'Très jolie,' I said, and in English, 'Where'd you find her?'

'Sur la rue!' He laughed.

For the rest of the evening we spoke in three languages, and when Habiba's friend, Fatma the Arab, joined us the girls spoke their own mixture of Swahili and Arabic. Gestures also became necessary.

I did not know the Watusi boy well. We had spoken together, our French was equally bad, but it was interlarded with enough Swahili and English for us to understand each

other. And that was a strange enough patois to create a bewildered silence around us in the bar. I knew he was from Burundi; he claimed a vague royal connection – that was one of the first things he had told me. I had bought him a drink. His name was Jean. His surname had seven syllables.

He leaned over. ‘She has a sister,’ he said.

At six o’clock we drove to the Somali section of town, a slum like all the sections inhabited by refugees. Even the moneyed refugees – the fugitive bhang peddlers, the smugglers – seemed to prefer the anonymity of slums. Habiba’s sister came out. She was tall, wearing a veil and silk trousers, but with that sable grace – long-necked, eyes darting over the veil, thin, finely made hands, a jewel in her nostril – that makes Somali women the most desired in Africa. Jean talked to her in Swahili. I smoked and looked around.

There were about a dozen Somali families in this compound of cement sheds; they leaned against the walls, talked in groups, sat in the deep mud ruts that coursed through the yard, eroded in the last rain. Some men at the windows of the sheds sent little boys over to beg from us. We refused to give them any money, but one begged a cigarette from me which he quickly passed to a tough-looking man who squatted in a doorway.

Habiba came back to the car and said it was impossible for her sister to come with us. The men would be angry. The Somali men, forced by the curfew to meander about the yard of their compound, the ones sending little boys to beg from us and chewing the stems of a green narcotic weed (the style was the hillbilly’s, but the result was delirium) – these refugees with nothing to do and nowhere to go might lose their tempers and kill us if they saw two of their girls leaving with strangers. They could easily block the drive that led out of the compound; they would have had no trouble stopping our car and beating us. They had nothing to lose. Besides, they were within their rights to stop us. Habiba had a husband, now on a trip (she said) upcountry; technically these other Somali men were her guardians until her husband returned. Two dead men found in a drain. It would not have been a very strange sight. Corpses turned up regularly as the curfew was lifted each morning.

Habiba got into the car and we drove away. I expected a brick to be tossed through the back window, but nothing happened. Several men glared at us; some little boys shouted what could only have been obscenities.

Take a left, take a right, down this street, left again, chattered Habiba in Swahili. I drove slowly; she pointed to a ramshackle cement house with a wooden verandah pocked by woodworm and almost entirely rotted at the base. Some half-caste children were playing nearby, chasing each other. The racial mixtures were apparent: Arab-African, Indian-Somali, white-Arab. The texture of the hair told, the blotched

skin; the half-African children had heavy, colorless lips. We entered the house and sat in a cluttered front room. There were pictures on the walls, film stars, a calendar in Arabic, and other calendar pictures of huntsmen in riding gear and stiff squarish dogs. And there was a picture of the ruler whose palace had been attacked. No one knew whether he had been shot or managed to escape.

Some half-castes and Arabs drifted in and out of a back room to look at us, the visitors, and finally Fatma came. She was unlike Habiba, not ugly, but small, tired-looking and – the word occurred to me as I looked at her in that cluttered front room – dry. Habiba was very black, with a sharp nose, large, soft eyes and long, shapely legs; Fatma was small, ageless in a shriveled way, with frizzed hair and one foreshortened leg which made her limp slightly. Her eyes were weary with lines; she could have been young and yet she seemed to have no age. She was cautious – now seated and carefully smoothing her silk wrappings, not out of coyness but out of the damaged reflex of pride that comes with generations of poverty. Even the small children in that room looked as concerned as little old men. I felt like a refugee myself who, moving from slum to slum, took care in an aimless, pointless way. Fatma offered us tea.

At that moment I changed my seat. I moved into a chair with my back to the wall. I know why I did it: I was sitting in front of a window and I had the feeling that I was going to be shot in the back of the head by a stray bullet. During the curfew there was always gunfire in Kampala. That was four years ago, and in Africa, but I am still uneasy sitting near windows.

‘No time for tea,’ Jean said in Swahili. He pointed to his watch and said, ‘Curfew starts right now.’

Fatma left the room and Jean nudged me. ‘That girl,’ he said in English, ‘I support her.’

‘Comment?’

‘La fille est supportable, non?’

We had only fifteen minutes to get back. We drove immediately to a shop and bought some food and a case of beer, then hurried back to my apartment and locked ourselves in. It was precisely seven when we started drinking. The girls, although Muslims, also drank. They said they could drink alcohol ‘except during prayers.’

As time passed the conversation lapsed and there was only an occasional gulp to break the silence. We had run through their life stories very quickly. Habiba was eighteen, born in Somalia. She came to Uganda because of the border war with Kenya which prevented her from living in her own district or migrating to Kenya where she was an enemy. She married in Kampala. Her husband was away most of the time; in the

Congo, she thought, but she was not sure. Fatma's parents were dead, she was twenty-two, not married. She was from Mombasa but liked Kampala because, as she said, it was green. The rest of the conversation was a whispered mixture of Arabic and Swahili which the girls spoke, and the French-English-Swahili which Jean and I spoke. Once we turned on the radio and got Radio Rwanda. Jean insisted on switching it off because the commentator was speaking the language of the Bahutu, who were formerly the slaves of Jean's tribe. That tribal war, that massacre, that curfew had been in 1963.

Jean told me what ugly swine the Bahutu were and how he could not stand any Bantu tribe. He squashed his nose with his palm and imitated what I presumed to be a Hutu speaking. He said, 'But these girls – very Hamite.' He traced the profile of a sharp nose on his face.

The girls asked him what he was talking about. He explained, and they both laughed and offered some stories. They talked about the Africans who lived near them; Fatma described the fatal beating of a man who had broken the curfew. Habiba had seen an African man stripped naked and made to run home. She mimicked the man's worried face and flailed her long arms. 'Curfew, curfew,' she said.

Jean suddenly stood and took Habiba by the arm. He led her to a back room. It was eight o'clock. I asked Fatma if she was ready. She said yes. She could have been a trained bird, brittle and obedient. She limped beside me into the bedroom.

At eleven I wandered into the living room for another drink. Jean was there with his feet up. He asked me how things were going. We drank for a while, then I asked him if he was interested in going for a walk. If we went to sleep now, I said, we'd have to get up at four or five. We switched off all the lights, made sure the girls were asleep, and went out.

The silence outside was absolute. Our shoes clacking on the stones in the road made the only sound and, at intervals, the city opened up to us through gaps in the bushes along the road. Lights can appear to beckon, to call in almost a human fashion, like the strings of flashing lights at deserted country fairs in the United States. The lights cried out. But we were safe inside the large compound; no one could touch us.

When we were coming back to my apartment an idea occurred to me. I pointed to the dark windows and said, choosing my words carefully, 'Supposing we just went in there without turning on any lights … Do you think the girls would notice if we changed rooms?'

'Changez de chambres?'

'Je veux dire, changez de filles.'

He laughed, a drunken sort of sputtering, then explained the plan back to me, adding, ‘Est-ce que c’est cela que vous voulez faire?’

‘Cela me serait égal, et vous?’

Habiba was amused when she discovered, awaking as the act of love began, that someone else was on top of her. She laughed deep in her throat; this seemed to relax her, and she hugged me and sighed.

Jean was waiting in the hallway when I walked out an hour later. He was helpless with suppressed giggling. We stood there in the darkness, our clothes slung over our shoulders, not speaking but communicating somehow in a wordless giddiness which might have been shame. At the time I thought it was a monstrous game, like a child’s, but hardly even erotic, played to kill time and defeat fear and loneliness – something the curfew demanded.

But after the curfew ended, I changed my mind. I had not been playing; all my gestures had been scared and serious. I stopped trusting. I became rather jumpy and found I could not teach anymore. And so I left Africa, deciding I needed a rest, and checked into a hotel in the south of France. One day while I was sunning myself at the swimming pool, a large black man appeared between two flowering bushes at the far end. He was wearing a light suit and he carried a briefcase. He walked heavily along the poolside, toward me, and I imagined for a moment – a moment in which the memory of the curfew rubbed and mumbled – that he had come to kill me. He passed by me and entered the bar. He was, I found out later, a famous Nigerian economist. He stayed at the hotel for three days, and committed no outrage.