A LEOPARD'S TAIL: The Life and Work of Alice Nderitu of Kenya

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A NOTE TO THE READER

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews, and a table of best practices in peacebuilding as demonstrated and reflected on by the peacemaker during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the table of best practices if you are interested in peacebuilding methods and techniques, or go to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemaker's own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemaker's work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

The Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights — as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women — those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation — must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.[1]

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER – ALICE NDERITU

A commissioner in Kenya's National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC), Alice Nderitu stands at what she sees as a crossroads in her country between peacebuilding and human rights. "I am a child of these two worlds and the need to bring the two together is urgent," she says. With rich and varied experience in both worlds, Nderitu is an essential leader in preventing and transforming conflict in her native Kenya.

In the aftermath of Kenya's notorious 2007-8 post-election violence, Nderitu joined the newly created NCIC to mediate ethnic and race-related conflict and promote peaceful coexistence. As a mediator and a human rights and ethnic relations specialist for NCIC, Nderitu leads and builds mediation teams in Kenya's conflict hotspots. Often working within traditional structures, she brings elders from conflicting ethnic groups together to dialogue and defuse communal tensions. But she also challenges traditions, pushing for women to be included in the rigidly male-dominated elder institution. Similar to her work in Kenya's highest official levels, Nderitu is often the only woman at the peace table with the elders.

With NCIC, Nderitu has developed peace education curricula, pushed for the implementation of laws on hate speech and hate crime, and directed a nationwide television show discussing ethnic differences and conflict. She has also taken her conflict prevention lessons outside of Kenya to South Sudan in preparation for their referendum on independence.

Prior to her role as an NCIC commissioner, Nderitu worked as a prison officer, a teacher and a reporter before joining the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights in 2003 as its first staff member. There she created and headed the commission's human rights education department and pioneered the first human rights curriculum for public officers.

For several years, Nderitu has been training law enforcement and military officers on civil-military cooperation and the rule of law at the International Military Peace Support Training College and at the Rwanda Military Academy. She also directed the Education for Social Justice Program for Fahamu, a UK-based charity, facilitating human rights and conflict prevention training for civil society in Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and Uganda.

CONFLICT HISTORY — KENYA

Summary

Until recently the Republic of Kenya was considered one of the most developed, economically robust and politically stable nations within a volatile region of the African continent. However, this perception was called into dramatic question in 2007-8 when the country erupted into violence, leaving an estimated 1,500 dead, 650,000 displaced and 3,000 women and girls raped.

Disputed election results between the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) and Party of National Unity (PNU), arising from a mismanaged electoral process and allegations of vote rigging, is seen as the trigger for the post-election violence.[2] Yet Kenya's modern political history stretches back to British colonization and provides a critical context for a comprehensive understanding of the underlying issues and unresolved historical grievances, which contributed to the outbreak of violence.

The systemic and structural conflict drivers may be summarized as: a culture of impunity; high unemployment, widespread poverty and radical inequality; land reform; resettlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs); ethnic tensions; weak institutions and regional and socioeconomic inequality.

Colonialism

Failures by successive governments to address long-simmering grievances over land is key to understanding Kenya's current challenges. From 1893 to 1963 the British claimed a vast parcel of the interior, ranging from the Indian Ocean to Uganda and the Great Rift Valley. Prior to British control, 42 diverse ethnic nations had inhabited the region for thousands of years.

Colonial rule was characterized by unprecedented acts of violence targeting the local population, including massacres, torture, ill treatment and various forms of sexual violence. The colonial administration implemented divide-and-rule policies that have had lasting effects on ethnic and race relations.

In addition, the colonial government appropriated valuable land from the local population. They invited white European settlers to purchase large parcels of the most fertile land for plantations in the Rift Valley and Central Province and the surrounding highlands. Primarily Kikuyu, but also Luo, Embu, Maasai and other ethnic groups were forced from their ancestral lands and many became squatters or tenant farmers working for settlers in exchange for a small plot of land. African farmers who were pushed onto "native reserves," usually located on arid, marginal lands, were also required to pay taxes yet were denied political representation and rights.

Depriving Africans of legal ownership and rights to their customary lands instigated a pattern of disenfranchisement and dispossession, and spurred campaigns by indigenous Kenyans. In 1913, Mekatilili wa Menza a woman from Kenya's Coast Province, called on her people — the Giriama — to refuse payment of taxes and provision of forced cheap labor on white-owned private plantations or public projects.

Harry Thuku, co-founder of the Young Kikuyu Association (later called the East African Association), campaigned against increased taxes, forced labor, lack of title deeds for African lands and the abuse of young African women by European settlers. By the end of the 1920s, the East African Association had evolved into the Kenya African Union (KAU) under the leadership of Jomo Kenyatta and called for land reform and political rights. In the 1950s, the Mau Mau uprising, involving primarily the Kikuyu people, eventually led to the deaths of 200,000 fighters and 200 British and African security forces over an eight-year period.

Kenya African National Union

When independence was finally won in 1963, however, the policies enacted by founding president and liberation leader Jomo Kenyatta failed to meet the needs of the displaced population. The Kenya African National Union (KANU) government established a free market land system of "willing seller willing buyer" and encouraged the landless to join land-buying companies with promises of resettlement on land that was vacated by colonialists. But many landless failed to benefit. Instead, middle-class elites acquired land or the schemes were misused by corrupt senior politicians in the Kenyatta administration, who allocated themselves major swathes of land.[3] The Kikuyu were primary beneficiaries at the expense of others, such as the Luo, the Maasai and the Kalenjin.[4] Kenyatta's government was also associated with gross violations of human rights including killings, torture and arbitrary detention without trial of political opponents and activists.[5]

Following Kenyatta's death in 1978, Daniel arap Moi became president. The change in leadership, however, did little to interrupt the pattern of human rights violations by the government. Moi's government oversaw massacres; unlawful detentions, torture and ill treatment of political and human rights activists; assassinations, illegal and irregular allocations of land; and economic crimes and corruption.[6] The 1990s were a particularly violent period, with state-sponsored violence carried out against a backdrop of an ailing economy and political liberalization. From 1969, nine years before Moi took power, until 1982, KANU had made itself the sole legal party in Kenya — effectively making Kenya a de facto one-party state.

In the early 1990s, local and international political pressure began to build for Moi to restore a multiparty system in Kenya. He eventually yielded but not before engaging in ethnically divisive politics: painting the opposition as Kikuyu-led and multiparty politics as an exclusionary ethnic project to control land.[7] He evoked majimboism, a form of federalism that preferences provincial autonomy based on ethnicity. Where the Kipsigius (the largest sub-group of the Kalenjin),[8] Kikuyu and Kisii had previously coexisted relatively harmoniously, violent interethnic clashes occurred as KANU politicians attempted to evict non-Kalenjin from "stolen land" in the Rift Valley and western Kenya. Between 1991 and 1994, 1,500 Kenyans died and approximately 300,000 were displaced.[9]

The multiparty elections in 1992 and 1997, which Moi won, were marred by political violence on both sides. Moi skillfully exploited Kenya's mix of ethnic tensions in these contests, with the ever-present fear of the smaller tribes being dominated by the larger tribes. This period also saw the institutionalization of violence during presidential and parliamentary elections, as Moi and his supporters attempted through force to ensure victory at the polls.[10] High-ranking political figures, civil servants and others close to the government organized and used violent gangs to intimidate people in areas of potential opposition support, most of whom were Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, Kamba and other groups.[11] Several inquiries by government and civil society confirmed senior Moi

politicians had been responsible for the violence but prosecutions or punishments did not eventuate.[12]

2002 – Present-day

In 2002, the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) government led by Mwai Kibaki was elected in the country's first free and fair elections since independence. Although there was less poll-related violence than in previous elections, voter intimidation was nevertheless widespread, with attacks being suffered by candidates and supporters on all sides.[13] The new government managed to revive the economy, recording a 6-7 percent growth in its five years of leadership. Yet benefits of economic growth did not have an impact on the incomes of the most vulnerable people who were suffering extreme poverty in urban slums. Public perception was that the government prioritized their own wealth accumulation to support lavish lifestyles and were accordingly out of touch with the economic realities for the poorest Kenyans.[14]

The government also failed to resolve issues regarding land, squatters, corruption and impunity. In 2004, the Ndung'u Commission report — the result of an inquiry set up by the NARC government to examine irregular allocations of public land — was handed to the president but no action was taken.[15] Serious allegations concerning human rights violations have been made against Kibaki's government which include, unlawful detentions, torture and ill treatment; assassinations and extrajudicial killings; and economic crimes and grand corruption.[16]

In addition, differences between the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) wing of the NARC government, headed by Raila Odinga, and Kibaki's National Alliance Party of Kenya (NAK), emerged. Odinga claimed Kibaki had defaulted on a formal pre-election agreement on the sharing of government positions and discord grew during the 2005 referendum on a new draft constitution. The NAK supported the draft while LDP formed the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) and campaigned against it, contending there were significant divergences from the one agreed at the constitutional conference. The proposed constitution was rejected by 57 percent, indicating majority support for ODM.

Kibaki reacted by dissolving his cabinet and expelling LDP members from the government, which caused significant shifts in political alliances. LDP and rebel KANU parliamentarians merged in coalition to formalize ODM and contest the 2007 elections. Kibaki in turn hastily coalesced an alliance of parties into the Party of National Unity (PNU).

The election occurred in a context of immense disillusionment with the president and the political system. Strong ethnic overtones in the campaign period exploited long-held historical grievances that successive post-independence governments had ignored. The campaign was intense, with each side taking unprecedented steps to try and gain an advantage. Opinion polls conducted a few days before the election indicated that Odinga, the ODM presidential candidate, held a minor lead, fanning the hopes of supporters. There was a record turnout, particularly of young voters, on December 27, 2007.

Tensions began to rise during the vote count after the chair of the Electoral Commission of Kenya hinted at fraudulent activity. ODM pointed to significant discrepancies between the tallying center

results and the figures filed by returning field officers, but nevertheless the commission announced Kibaki the winner.[17]

Late in the evening of December 30, Kibaki was sworn in at a hastily convened ceremony. In a parallel press conference, ODM repudiated the results and presented an election officer who claimed the announced figures had been concocted at the tallying center.[18] Both spontaneous and premeditated violence immediately erupted in ODM strongholds and throughout various parts of the country. Security forces were deployed to contain the situation but their intervention exacerbated the violence. Mobs of furious demonstrators murdered PNU supporters and destroyed their property. Retaliation by PNU supporters followed soon after.

PNU and ODM eventually accepted the appointment on of former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan as the chief mediator. The agenda of the mediation included: (1) immediate action to stop the violence and restore fundamental rights and liberties; (2) immediate measures to address the humanitarian crisis and promote reconciliation, healing and restoration; (3) measures to overcome the current political crisis; and (4) long-term issues and solutions. This was ultimately achieved through a grand coalition government of national unity that included both the ODM and the PNU.

The signing of the National Accord and Reconciliation Agreement (hereafter the National Accords) on February 28, 2008 had several immediate impacts. A constitutional amendment was required to create the positions of prime minister and two deputy prime ministers.[19] Mwai Kibaki and Kalonzo Musyoka (leader of the splinter group ODM-K), remained president and vice president respectively, while ODM leader Raila Odinga was installed as prime minister. ODM member, Musalia Mudavadi, filled the positions of deputy prime minister and local authority minister while PNU member Uhuru Kenyatta was appointed as the other deputy prime minister as well as finance minister.

Importantly, the agreement brought an end to the post-election violence and the new coalition government committed to tackling issues of historical injustice, implementing constitutional and institutional reforms, addressing impunity and corruption, resettling those who were displaced during the violence, and disbanding criminal groups and militia gangs.

Some important inroads have been made. For example, institutions such as the National Cohesion and Integration Commission and the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission were established and mandated to identify and address the root causes of the conflict. The former has made efforts to curb hate speech[20] and set up an early warning and early response system in collaboration with the police operation department, the criminal investigation department and the national steering committee on peace. The Commission of Inquiry on Post Election Violence completed its investigations and submitted its major report to the government.[21]

The promulgation of a new constitution in August 2010 may also be regarded as a significant milestone in transitioning to a stable and cohesive democracy. The vote passed peacefully and overwhelmingly, with 67 percent of Kenyans supporting it. The vote itself was heralded as a great success for the country; despite a proliferation of ethnic hate propaganda, it was the first time a voting process had proceeded without bloodshed since independence. The new constitution provides the basis for legal and institutional reforms and encourages an equitable distribution of resources. Power in the presidency will be dissolved through the introduction of a devolved, two-tier model of government, which sees 47 county governments possessing semi-autonomous status.

Kenya's North Eastern Province has its own unique set of complications that threaten overall stability in Kenya. Since the mid-1990s, a number of loosely affiliated extremist groups operating from Somalia have carried out or facilitated terrorist attacks in the region.[22] On October 2011 thousands of Kenyan troops were deployed to Juba Valley in southern Somalia. The incursion aimed to inoculate North Eastern Province from the chaos across its border, ease a huge refugee burden and curtail the radical influence of Al-Shabaab. In response, supporters of Al-Shabaab have launched attacks on security forces inside Kenya, as well as churches, mosques, buses and other public places in Nairobi, Mombasa, and northern Kenya. Both sides have committed human rights violations. Kenyan security personnel, for example, have employed excessive force, mistreated refugees and, in some cases, shot villagers whom they suspected were harboring attackers.[23]

The referendum vote in 2010 that brought a new constitution demonstrated Kenyans' courage and capacity to go to the polls peacefully even in a tense and volatile environment infused with fear mongering. The question now is whether Kenya will repeat the mistakes of the past, allowing historical dynamics of negative ethnicity to prevail, or whether it can build on its successes and forge a path of stability and development.

INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in Kenya and
Personal History of Alice Nderitu

1885 At the Berlin Conference, Germany, Great Britain, France and Portugal plan to regulate colonization and trade in Africa by dividing up the continent and assigning areas to each European country — disregarding the native inhabitants who have been there for centuries.

1895 Britain gains political control of Kenya. Ethnic communities come under a central administration led by a British governor who represents the British crown.

1939-45 During World War II, Britain establishes an allied base in Kenya.

1944 The Kenyan African Union (KAU) is formed and campaigns for African independence. Jomo Kenyatta becomes its leader in 1947.

1952 A guerilla group, the Mau Mau, composed of mainly Kikuyu tribe members, forms to resist colonialism and launches attacks on white settlers.

1953 The KAU is banned and Kenyatta is jailed for his role in the Mau Mau rebellion.

1963 Kenya gains independence. The first free elections are held in Kenya. Kenyatta is elected prime minister and his party wins the majority of seats. From this point until 1978, Kenyatta suppresses all political parties other than the Kenya African National Union (KANU). A small segment of the population, mostly Kikuyu and allied with Kenyatta, take over ownership of most of the country's land and wealth.

1964 Kenyatta declares Kenya a republic and himself the president. Oginga Odinga, of the Luo tribe, is vice president.

1966 Odinga forms the Kenya People's Union (KPU) in opposition to KANU.

1968 ***January 9 — Alice Wairimu Nderitu is born to Vincent Nyingi Nderitu and Edith Mweru in Nairobi.***

1974 Kenyatta is re-elected. Josiah Mwangi Kariuki is elected a member of parliament and appointed to assistant minister, despite Kenyatta's opposition. Kariuki and Kenyatta previously had been allies, and Kariuki was now viewed as a threat to the administration.

1975 JM Kariuki is assassinated.

1976 ***Alice writes a letter to a political prisoner in South Africa.***

1978 Kenyatta dies in office and is succeeded by Daniel arap Moi, who is of the Kalenjin tribe. Most of the country's wealth and land is transferred to Moi's allies.

1982 Moi and the National Assembly declare Kenya a one-party state.

1987 Opposition groups are suppressed and politically active individuals are arrested. That, and human rights abuses, draw international criticism.

1988 ***Alice commences a bachelor of arts degree at the University of Nairobi.***

1989 Political prisoners arrested in 1987 are freed.

1990 ***February 11 — Alice participates in her first university demonstration.***

1991 ***Alice accepts a position with the Prisons Department.***

Moi agrees to introduce a multiparty political system.

1992 ***Alice is posted to Langata women's prison in Nairobi, the only women's maximum security facility. She witnesses terrible conditions and human rights abuses.***

Multiparty national elections are held but the Moi regime promotes ethnic and political clashes to remain in power. Approximately 2,000 people killed in tribal conflict in the west of the country. Later that year, Moi is re-elected and KANU has a strong majority.

1993 ***Alice is transferred to Shimo la Tewa women's prison as deputy officer in charge.***

1994 ***At Shimo la Tewa prison, Alice and prison officer in charge, Mrs. Maseki, begin "breaking the rules" by opening the prison to NGOs who could provide support and assistance to prisoners.***

1996 ***Alice gives birth to a son, Mark. Her maternal grandmother dies.***

1997 Moi wins another term in widely criticized elections. His main opponents are former vice-president Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga, son of Jarimogi Odinga.

1998 ***Alice begins work with the prison's Research Department and realizes that death statistics for prisoners are very high all over the country.***

Alice is transferred to the Commissioner's Office at prison headquarters to work as a personal assistant. In this role she begins to attend meetings with civil society.

1999 ***Alice begins reaching out to the human rights community, a strategy that is initially met with shock and rejection.***

2000 Six prisoners are killed in Kingongo prison in Nyeri. The police and the prison team claim the prisoners had been shot while trying to escape. There is public outcry over the incident.

Alice conducts an investigation into the "Kingongo 6" deaths and finds that the prisoners' hands and legs were broken, but there were no gunshot wounds on their bodies.

The commissioner of prisons is forced to resign. Abraham Kamakil replaces him.

As his personal assistant, Alice writes Kamakil's first speech — "I now proclaim the open door policy" — which leads to Kenya's prisons being opened to public scrutiny.

Alice enrolls in a postgraduate diploma in public relations and journalism management at the Kenya Institute of Management, in Nairobi. She starts working with New Media House.

Moi sets up a commission to institute Kenya's first major constitutional reform.

2002 After a 24-year rule, Moi is constitutionally barred from running for president again, which ends KANU's four decades in power. Mwai Kibaki, a Kikuyu, is elected president. Kenya grows economically but corruption continues and wealth remains in the hands of a few wealthy Kenyans. Disparities increase between rich and poor. Ethnic clashes for land and urban violence increase.

2003 ***Alice commences work with the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR).***

Former President Moi is granted immunity from prosecution on corruption charges.

2004 ***Alice founds the Human Rights Education Department of the KNCHR.***

The draft of the new constitution is completed, requiring Parliament's approval and proposing to curb the president's power and creating the post of prime minister. The deadline for enactment is missed.

Kenyan ecologist Wangari Maathai wins the Nobel Peace Prize.

2005 Parliament approves a draft constitution which keeps the president's power unchecked.

Alice reports on the First Constitutional Kenyan Referendum.

In what is seen as a protest against President Kibaki, voters reject the proposed new constitution.

2006 ***Alice trains criminal justice agencies on human rights, and Kenyan ministries commence rights-based approaches to development.***

Clan violence continues over struggles for land, water and cattle along the northern Kenya/Ethiopia border. Raids and hostilities result in at least 125 civilian deaths. 35,000 Somalis escaping drought, Islamist rule and looming conflict arrive in Kenyan refugee camps.

2007 National elections are held with many parties participating. Kibaki is declared the winner but his main rival, Raila Odinga, a Luo and son of Oginga Odinga disputes the victory. An outbreak of violence leads to more than 1,500 deaths and up to 600,000 displaced people.

2008 ***Alice joins the organization Fahamu as director of education in social justice.***

February — Kofi Annan and a team of prominent African leaders broker a power-sharing deal which sees Kibaki become president and Odinga prime minister.

March — Three new bodies are formed to investigate election violence: the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission, the Commission of Inquiry on Post-Election Violence, and the Independent Review Committee on the 2007 Elections.

October — The report into post-election clashes calls for an international tribunal to try those implicated in violence.

2009 ***Alice is appointed commissioner for the National Cohesion and Integration Commission.***

2010 **February 28** — ***Alice is instrumental in bringing the president and prime minister together to discuss strategies for uniting the country in the lead-up to the referendum on a new constitution.***

Alice and her colleagues prepare Kenya for a peaceful constitutional referendum, through documentaries, media peace messages, televised discussions about ethnic conflict and cohesion, community conflict transformation processes and the Uwiano Platform for Peace project.

August — A new constitution designed to limit the powers of the president and devolve power to the regions is approved in a referendum. For the first time in Kenya's history since independence in 1963, there was no voting-related violence.

2011 ***Alice attends meetings with elders regarding the the Nakuru County Community Model Peace Agreement***

Six officials, known as the Ocampo Six, are indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity during and following the 2007-8 post-election

violence. Among them are Deputy Prime Minister Uhuru Kenyatta, son of Jomo Kenyatta.

Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai dies.

2012 ***Alice plays an integral part in the Kalenjin/ Kikuyu peace agreement. She was the only woman at the peace table during 16 months of negotiations.***

Alice is selected as a Woman PeaceMaker at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego.

This story is dedicated to the memory of Sean Hobbs

NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF ALICE NDERITU

Beginning

A mother's hands fold water over the tiny, wrinkled baby squirming, eyes shut, in the faded blue basin. Her cousin walks over, curiosity abound on her face. "Aunty, is that a baby or a dove?" Alice's mother smiles. Her second child. Her first girl. "This is Alice Pauline Wairimu."

Departure

Alice stared blankly at the black oblong of a window. From her aisle seat she was too far away to see a clear panorama of Nairobi's sprawl as the plane ascended into clouds. The patches of countless grey buildings, green bunches of trees and rusted corrugated slum roofs usually held her fascination. *Perhaps it's the contrast to the north?* she had wondered previously. *It looks so forgotten compared to this*.

But today she had barely glanced at the fleeting segments of city. *Where have I been?* she asked herself wearily, realizing it was night outside the plane and hours must have passed while she was staring into space. She raised her eyebrows high, squeezed her eyes tightly and yawned. Her neck felt tense. She rubbed it instinctively, hearing her sister's words passing through her mind.

"I'm not surprised you're tired. You can't keep going on like this. You need to slow down," Terry had lectured her on the way to the airport.

Since becoming a commissioner with the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC), Alice had been working nonstop. There was so much to do. And with the 2013 elections looming just months away, their work was as important as ever. Time was so precious that on her calendar she would write footnotes with details of alternative meetings and plans in case of a cancellation. "Like a Nairobi *matatu*[24] at peak hour," Kesi*,[25] the office coordinator, had joked after seeing her diary.

Yet sometimes Alice would find an in-between moment, like this one, stolen from the fray. Mostly she would reflect on her work. But now, restless with dissatisfaction, she wanted to think about something else. Her mind turned to the afternoon with Terry, but even then it found familiar doors to open.

"We almost had it. We were there, on the brink of something incredible. For the first time in Kenya's history we survived a referendum without violence. The people were in charge of peace," she had ranted to Terry. "But what happened? We all got lazy! Look at us now."

She was not the type of person to speak rashly but her anger was coursing. "Maybe you're right. For the first time in my life I feel like I need a break. I'm sick of counting bodies. I'm tired of smelling death. This country can go on without me," she had told Terry, waving her hand with a swift sweep of the air, like a teacher dismissing an errant pupil.

Alice felt torn. She wanted so much to see Kenya at peace with itself. More than ever she felt her country needed her. But she was so angry — angry with Kenyans because they were still spilling blood, and angry at herself. *I've failed*, she thought, digging her fingers into her palms until it hurt.

A heavy sigh escaped from her. As she tried to push the thoughts of Kenya's troubles away, memories of her younger years nudged her back in time. Whenever Alice recalled her childhood years she marveled at how many they were — siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, parents — and how they lived so happily. The warmth of 21 bodies, sometimes more, coexisting under one roof, moving together in harmony and unison.

Their days would commence early before the glow of first light. Alice's brothers, and only sometimes Alice, would wake at 4 o'clock to milk the cows. Her mother would rise before them, stoke life into the fire, fill the pot with water and boil it for the milking. By 7 the whole house would be flowing. With full stomachs they readied for a day's work at the *shamba*.

From 8 until 2 they planted either potatoes, carrots, peas, maize or cabbage, side by side bent over in a long line and inching forward as the sun beat its rays on their backs. Alice lagged behind, denting their symmetry, for which she would be rewarded with long sermons from her grandmother, "Who will marry you? Who will marry a woman like you, so slow in farming? You need to be faster with your hands."

Though still too young to care for marriage, Alice would feel hot pangs of humiliation. Pleasing her grandmother was important to her, yet she knew this was neither the first nor last time she would not measure up. Alice loved to read but struggled to swing the water container gracefully on to her back like her cousins. She would climb trees with her brothers but was clumsy at carrying firewood on her back.

"What are we going to do with this one? Her books won't find her a husband. We'll struggle to get her married," her grandmother would tut to the air each time. It was her father who would comfort her with reassuring words. "Don't worry, Alice," he would say, crouching down so he could meet her face. "This country is full of people looking for jobs. They're looking for jobs to fetch water, to fetch firewood, to dig in shambas. You keep reading your books. One day you will be the one giving those jobs."

On shamba days, it was her brothers who would distract her from the shame. Pat had a knack for finding humor in all manner of events. He was especially skilled at imitating a priggish headmaster reading the class roll. "Aaaaahhhh. Eeerrrrrh," he would mimic in drawn out nasal tones, sending hilarity through the group. Alice would giggle the longest, spurred on by watching his bare belly bounce as he guffawed at his own jokes.

Nderitu, the eldest of her siblings, would pretend to eat fat earthworms, artfully tossing them over his shoulder at the last minute, and chewing exaggeratedly. The constant hum of their laughter floated over the fields.

In the afternoon, they headed home hungry and weary but in good spirits. They would lie on the hot green grass outside the kitchen eating *githeri*, maize and beans, until they felt satisfied. Then, basking in the light blanket of afternoon sun, all would shell peas while the children pretended not to listen to the adults conversations.

Sometimes a neighbor would stop by to share stories of their children.

Other times politics would be discussed. A local woman, Mukami Kimathi, often visited them. She was the wife of the famous Mau Mau leader Dedan Kimathi.[26] "When we were in the war ..." — she would hover for a minute as if collecting her thoughts, and then drift slowly into an extraordinary tale of hardship and struggle that left the children wide-eyed. When she was done she would look around at her captive audience and always impart the same piece of wisdom: "You should never wish for war."

Eventually the sun began to close the day, gently dimming behind the mountains, and they would recede to the house where the children bathed in groups and then scurried to the kitchen to warm their shivering bodies by the wood fire. There they would sit, somehow fitting into the crowded space to eat dinner and hear their grandmother tell terrifying stories — of wild animals, of ogres — before retiring to bed, sleep, and finally dreams. It tied them together: sharing food, chores, beds and bath water. There was a natural rhythm of cooperation and coordination amongst them. It struck Alice many years later that there had never been a serious quarrel, not once.

If only our country knew how to do this, she mused on the plane.

She began thinking of the intensity of the last few weeks. Her last stop before arriving in Nairobi was Mombasa, where riots flared between Muslim youth and police after Sheikh Aboud Rogo Mohammed was shot dead.[27] All over the city thick plumes of black smoke rose from the fires of young male hatred and anger. They believed Kenyan security forces had assassinated their cleric. Rocks and grenades were hurled, shops looted, churches and cars set alight. Five dead and many more injured.

As if that wasn't enough, Alice and her colleagues, Mwaka* and Fakhir*, had fielded incessant text messages and phone calls alerting them to violence breaking out around the country. More than 100 innocent Kenyans had lost their lives. Hundreds of houses were torched and thousands of families displaced. Ethnic conflicts had erupted between the Garreh and Degodia in Mandera County, the Ogaden clans in Wajir/Garissa, the Orma and Pokomo communities in Tana River and Lamu County. The updates were like rabid dogs barking madly through the night. Unable to release the country from its misery, Alice and her colleagues felt the discomfort of disappointment and frustration setting upon them.

"My God, we just held county forums on peaceful elections," Mwaka had stormed.

"And this bloodshed just six months out from the General Election!" Fakhir followed, slapping down a pile of reports on the desk.

Alice shook her head in dismay at the thought of the last few weeks. *How is it that we're still fighting after all these years?* She closed her eyes, tilted her head back into the headrest, and exhaled. She was looking forward to the respite San Diego would offer.

Alice knew she was hurting. She had seen so much death. *People who have died over nothing*, she thought, *for no reason at all*. Messy rows of feet sticking out from police vans leaving the prison. Dead women slumped in the sticky mud of Mt. Elgon's fertile mountains. Infants, limp and lifeless, carefully

wrapped in veils like precious parcels broken in the Rift Valley. Men and boys sprayed with bullets in northern Kenya.

She had hidden her pain and locked it away. *If you're going to come back here you can't afford to lose it over this one body*, she would scold herself. But she was tired. Her bones, her feet, her skin, her heart — they ached with exhaustion from carrying this death with her. Now was her time to rest.

"Can I offer you a drink?" a woman's voice intervened, all chirp and cheer.

Alice looked up to see the wide frozen smile of a flight attendant, her perfectly arched eyebrows raised and her blue eyes paused on her.

"I'll have a Coca-Cola, thanks."

Watching the black syrup swirl with ice cubes in the plastic cup, Alice thought of the places she'd travelled to in northern Kenya. They were so remote, seemingly the farthest corners of the earth. There was no electricity and no running water. Huts were dome-shaped and thatched with dry branches, sticks and torn clothes. One could drive the whole day on dirt camel tracks that barely passed for a road without seeing a car. And at night it was so black that a person only a few meters ahead would disappear as if behind a magical curtain. Life was lived as though it was a century earlier — yet out there they had Coke. It was served in every meeting she attended.

Goodness me, Alice had pondered to herself once after failing to find some basic necessity but nevertheless was provided with the customary beverage. *How did we become a country that prioritizes Coca-Cola above almost everything else?*

As she took a sip, a thought sparked. *Well, we have Coke everywhere in Kenya. Why can't we have ethnic and race policies everywhere too? We need to get our country to end our ethnic conflicts and focus on inclusivity and unity*.

For a split second Alice considered sharing this idea with the flight attendant, but looking again at her frozen smile, she settled her lips into politeness and leaned back into the chair again — allowing her mind to wander through the desert.

Leopard

Alice listened to the elders talk. She accepted the perspiring bottle of Coca-Cola that was offered to her with a brief nod. Cloaked in a black *bui bui* which covered all but her brown face, her almond eyes coolly scrutinized the faces before her. The men of this pastoralist community in northern Kenya were tall and slender with long, oval faces and straight noses. Their skin color varied from light brown to jet black, which contrasted sharply with the bright white *kanzu* they wore.

They had gathered to discuss peace. Their recent bout of fighting over water had resulted in the expulsion of another pastoralist group. Few could say for certain how long the conflict had been waging — and most would say forever, which made the possibility of resolution an unlikely prospect. There had been periods of stability, but the 2007-8 election violence had sent them hurtling back to war.

On Alice's right was the chairperson and on her left Mwaka*, her fellow commissioners. Before them sat 40 or so men. She was the only woman in the room. For months it had been this way, in the sandy, scratched desert of the north trying to broker peace among the pastoralist tribes. Always men, except Alice. She had become used to the ways of men, and it was strange still to her that sometimes she struggled to feel herself a woman.

It was not that there were no women among the northern communities. It was just that their culture preferred them to exist as silent, invisible beings. The background was the permitted domain for women: cleaning, preparing meals, cooking, tending to the daily activities that sustained them all — away from the meaningful negotiations of war and peace. *They're so dignified in the face of such hardship*, Alice thought whenever she watched them performing their daily duties.

She always made it a point to sit with the women before meeting with their menfolk. She would find the wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, aunts and cousins, and like a diligent archaeologist discovering an ancient burial, she would respectfully unearth their wisdom. Grateful for an opportunity to talk, the women would reveal arcane intimacies about the men. "You know that one, he's so weak." "You know that one, he was also involved in another conflict so he will not want to talk about that." "That one is the chief elder."

Alice and the men sat in a bare, strangely modern building, feeling the dry winds whisk around their chairs. For hours they had turned the issues over and over like a goat roasting over coals: "Is this really the fight for pasture?" she had asked. "Is it really the fight for watering points? How can you be fighting over boundaries when you are pastoralists? This violence it keeps coming back and coming back. We need to know why."

Alice listened to the men talk over each other, as was their custom. She looked down to record a comment in her notebook. Then from a corner of the room she heard a loud voice pierce through.

"You know, it's women. The women also contribute to this."

She looked up to see a tall thin man with a wiry grey beard and old eyes.

Alice's face remained still, unperturbed but for an almost imperceptible sharpness in her eyes. *They are blaming women now?*

"We come from cattle raiding. We come from attacking another village. We come home and our women meet us. They are singing. They sing about the men, the warriors, the ones who succeeded. The ones who led in battle.

"Our wives urge us to be warriors, they want us to fight. When we go for sleep they are nagging us. 'What kind of a man are you? You've never ever killed anyone. No one has ever sung a song for you. What's wrong with you? You're just an apology for a man. Pathetic. What kind of person are you?' So we must go and do something. We must go to war. We must go out and kill because your wife is bugging you."

"But how can you stop this? You need to stop the women," Alice said soothingly, wanting to counter the rising reaction in her as much as the ire of the men.

"No, you don't understand how stupid women are! Women are really stupid. They are so stupid. You can't tell them!" the man said, jabbing his finger fiercely at Alice.

Doesn't he realize he's talking to a woman! Alice flashed angrily inside. She wanted to say something, speak out boldly in the way that had served her well in the past, but something stopped her.

She could feel the cooling voice of her grandmother whispering her earthy wisdom: "Watch this leopard sticking out her tail. They know she's there. She's dangerous, but she's not attacking." Her grandmother laughed triumphantly, "Hee, hee, hee. They don't know what to do about her. Maybe they're scared?"

•

Swish, swish.

The grass parted obediently as Alice's grandmother, short and stooping, swiped her walking stick from side to side. As the sun bowed beneath Kinangop's broad Aberdare Mountains, staining its sky blood orange, Alice clutched the blue lantern, scratched and chipped from many moons of use. The twitching flame illuminated a few steps ahead. Alice could feel thin blades of grass tickling at her knees as she walked to her grandmother's house. She crinkled her nose at the smell of kerosene mixing with the cool air.

"Shhhh!" Nderitu commanded, even though no one had spoken.

Alice's grandmother kept swiping and let out a deep, lazy chuckle. "What's wrong with you, Nderitu? You're scared of Wangari? She's so old, she can't hurt you. She doesn't even have teeth."

But for Alice and her four brothers this was little consolation. Only yesterday they had woken up, walked to the back of the house and found 14 of their sheep inanimate, their necks elegantly arched and stained by their own blood, already reeking as the morning sun lapped at their carcasses. The leopard had drained them. "Can a toothless leopard really do this much damage?" Alice and her brothers had asked each other in grave tones.

Nderitu, by far the most petrified of the group, had convinced himself it could not. And in fact the leopard's teeth were in perfect working order. So he scanned the fields with extra fervor, his chin jutting far from his neck and his eyes bulging with trepidation. Behind him Pat, Tony and Gikiri followed in a line, their uneven tread betraying their lack of confidence in their grandmother's assurances.

In front, leading the jittery procession, Alice stepped gingerly on damp soil. She held her breath tight, willing the leopard not to come tonight.

They had performed this dusk ritual many times and were versed in what to expect, yet this was not a case of knowledge bringing reassurance. The knowing gripped and gnawed at them, like an imaginary and terrifying monster. It would start with their grandmother announcing her imminent departure. The five of them would curl in their skins, feeling a communal certainty that this journey would mean their ruin. As they approached the gate that signaled the departure from the safe zone of their home and into the territory of the leopard, the words between them slowed to silence.

The first sign would always be the noise. The sinister rustling of the grass moving beside them.

Alice strained her ears as far as they could reach, beyond the sound of her brother Pat breathing hard behind her and past the swishing of her grandmother's stick. She tried to block out the choral crashing of crickets, the throbbing frogs and the chirruping of a near lone lark. She clenched her teeth. *I must be ready*, she told herself firmly, squinting and adjusting her small fingers around the blue lantern handle.

susurrus

"Was that it?" shrieked Pat.

Alice stopped and slid her eyes sideways to the noise.

susurrus

In the near dark she saw the grey silhouette of a rope — like something moving in the grass. She squinted harder. A tail!

Alice froze. Her tongue pressed into the roof of her mouth and her fingers gripped the lantern until they turned red. A pair of bright yellow eyes flashed behind the grass.

"It's here," she whispered, motioning with a tilt of her head. She heard the boys behind her inhale at once.

"What are you waiting for?" hissed Pat.

"I don't want to," Alice hissed back with a tremor in her voice.

The leopard had rested its tail on the path. Slender and snakelike, it lay still but for an occasional quiver of its muscles.

"See, you know why it's putting its tail on the path?" asked Alice's grandmother, pointing her stick at the leopard. "Because she doesn't want to be taken for granted. She wants you to know she's there."

"But," she continued, "she also wants you to step on her tail so she can attack. Because she won't attack unless you provoke her."

Alice glanced furtively at the leopard. Its eyes were averted and its head dipped low. For a moment she almost believed it was shy. But then it slapped its tail once more as though emphasizing her grandmother's point. Alice spun around, mad at herself for being tricked.

"Do we have to, grandmother?" she implored, anticipating what was to come.

But her grandmother was enjoying herself far too much to be diverted. "So now you're all going to jump over the tail and then we're really going to laugh at her."

The children knew there was no point in arguing with their grandmother. One by one they jumped, hearts in mouths and terrified. Alice, Pat, Tony, Gikiri and eventually after various threats and encouragement, Nderitu.

Alice's grandmother stuck her hand on her hip and wagged her finger at Wangari. "You see, we jumped over your tail. You think you're cleverer than we are but you're not!" she crowed.

Eruption

Alice lay on her back in San Diego, looking at the ceiling and listening to the silence humming around her. The room was dark but for the glow of red numbers on the clock beside the bed.

3:02

She had been fighting sleep since midnight when a feeling of horror had shaken her awake.

She had dreamt of an ostrich. A wildfire raged and the ostrich was running to a bright blue lake. Once there it stretched out one of its enormous brown wings, curved it into a bowl, then bowed down and scooped up some water. With fear splintering through its black eyes, it ran back to a nest where five large white and glossy eggs lay. The ostrich splashed the water from its wing on them before running back to the lake again.

It charged desperately back and forth, back and forth, dousing the eggs with water even after the eggs had cracked and blackened.

Alice's stomach felt uneasy. It was tight and tangled like her mother's bundles of knitting wool. Lying on her back feeling anxiety, grasping in the darkness, reminded her of Mandera.

With an NCIC colleague, she had gone to the northeastern triangle of land between Ethiopia and Somalia to speak to the Somali pastoralist communities about their conflicts.

There were so many layers of problems there. A British colonial legacy that left Somalis still burning with bitterness for being handed to the Kenyan government. Battles between the Ethiopian military and Somali insurgents from Somalia. Civil strife from Somalia spilling into Kenya. Inter-clan warfare. Livestock raids. Banditry.

Mandera had it all. "One of the most conflict-prone areas in the world," Alice had read in a U.S. State Department report.

How can the government refuse the Somalis self-determination, but then treat them like neglected children and ignore so many of their problems? Alice had spurted in indignation after a night of brutality that left 31 women, 11 children and 6 men slashed, speared and sprawled in a coarse paste of blood and dust.

When the second day of talking with the elders concluded, her male colleagues went to the military barracks for dinner while she and her female colleague retired to bed in the basic guesthouse room they shared. During the night they had been woken by blasts of ammunition. Like frightened rabbits running from hunters, they had scrambled under their beds. For the next two hours, Alice fixed her vision on the mattress above and listened unwillingly to mortars tearing through the starlit sky. It was the saddest and most menacing sound she had ever heard. A dull thud in the distance, a brief silence, then a wavering high-pitched whine before the crack of explosion and hot screams. The middle was the worst. *It's like death whistling*, she had thought.

Facing the clock again: 3:03. *What fools we were. We were so scared we couldn't function, yet the northern communities live with that every night.*

Alice rolled over to face the wall. On the bedside table lay her mobile phone. It had been three days since she arrived and still she had not used it. She had made an oath to give herself a break. But now looking at the phone she didn't feel rested at all. She felt Kenya's problems tugging at her like a hungry dog.

The elections are coming. We're not prepared enough. We need to get our people to vote peacefully. How can we get them to vote without regard to their ethnicity? If we allow it, ethnic politics will destroy Kenya and I'm not sure we can recover.

Alice thought of how many times she and her colleagues at the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) had warned the leaders in the run-up to the 2007 election. *We knew there would be killings. It was brewing for months. We warned everyone their* domo domo[28] *talk would tear the country apart but they went on and on. Those politicians didn't care.*

When she was a child, her mother would shoo the children outside and away from the women's talk. To entertain themselves they would fashion a ball from wet cardboard and discarded bits of paper and cloth. The afternoon would be spent kicking and tossing it around until eventually it disintegrated in tatters.

That's what they did to Kenya, she thought. *They played with it like it was made of scraps. They thought they could just throw it around so carelessly and it wouldn't break.*

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It had been two weeks since the results had been announced live on national television by a somber looking chairperson of the Electoral Commission. Peering over wire-rimmed glasses, he read without looking up from the paper he held with both hands: "Honorable Mwai Kibaki," he deadpanned, pausing momentarily to tweak his nose:

"4,584,721."

He repeated the numbers again.

"4,584,721."

He continued. "Honorable Raila Odinga: 4,352,993. 4,352,993. This means that Honorable Mwai Kibaki is the winner. The commission therefore declares Honorable Mwai Kibaki as the president of Kenya."

It took only minutes for Kenya to explode. Odinga supporters from the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) Party, fueled by the perceived injustice of a stolen election, crashed through the cities, slums and villages with machetes, guns and molotov cocktails. The Kikuyu, Kamba, Embu, Kisii, Merus became main targets, swarmed by ODM supporters in orange cloth and signs claiming "No Raila, No Peace."

In no time a wave of Party of National Unity supporters, bathed in blue, retaliated — murdering and maiming Luos, Kalenjins, Luhyias and anyone who was not them. Soon all were engulfed in the maelstrom, including the coastal communities. Years of inequality, land disputes, oppression and

poverty seemed to prolong howls and torment from all sides. The violence continued past the new year and left Kenyans sheltering in their homes praying for it all to end.

Alice and her colleagues gathered at the KNCHR office in Nairobi, 40 or so jammed into the boardroom, the latecomers standing shoulder-to-shoulder, lining the shiny tangerine walls. The windows, for some reason unexplained, remained closed. The air was stale and thick. Alice looked around at the familiar faces and saw a weariness that made them all look as if they had aged 10 years in as many days. She wondered if many had stopped sleeping, like herself.

Alice noticed the smeared green notes from last month's staff meeting. They had mapped out various scenario — A, B, C, D and possible responses — which were now almost indecipherable.

We thought we had it covered. We had people on the ground for almost a year. How did we get it this wrong? I mean, we knew there would be violence. But not on this scale and not for this long.

All but the heading remained completely legible: 27 DEC ELECTION. It was underlined three times.

Arrangements were made. For those who thought it was too dangerous to return home spent the night at the office.

People were reaching out to KNCHR and asking what to do. The police were clearly overwhelmed. ODM had stated openly that they would not take cases to the judiciary because they were not in control. KNCHR seemed to be one of the very few institutions left standing.

The sentiments around the room reflected a common vein: "KNCHR has been very strong in the past. We're highly regarded. I know that we're all feeling overwhelmed right now. It's been a difficult two weeks, but we must do what we can. We are now on our own and we must be strong." The words echoed around the room even as gunshots could be heard outside the office.

John, a light-skinned Kikuyu man with a wide girth and booming baritone, spoke from the side of the room, his arms crossed across his barrel chest. "I voted for the ODM Party. Raila made sacrifices for our country. During the Moi era we looked up to him, he carried our hope. He spoke for us and they detained him, without trial for many years. I voted for him because of that, not because of his ethnicity. But now, look. His people are attacking indiscriminately."

John cast his eyes upward and rolled his lips into his mouth as if to stifle his words. But his turmoil was insistent: "What is this I voted for?"

Sitting across from him, Jane, a Kalenjin, looked up from her lap and fastened on John's eyes. "I voted for Kibaki's party."

Alice watched Jane's eyes break from John's and roam the faces in the room. She sensed Jane was worried about her colleagues' reactions, and she knew Jane was not alone. Alice thought to herself, *We have come so far, all of us. The exposure from our travels to communities across Kenya has really broadened our perspective and tolerance. Yet even with all our education and moral principles about transcending ethnic politics, even we cannot feel easy in these times.*

Jane continued, "I am from Bomet. It took Kibaki to get us electricity and water. He made life easier. But to tell you the truth, now it doesn't matter why I voted for him. I don't know what's wrong with these people."

Over the following hours they went around the room sharing their experiences, pouring their hearts out freely but carefully, like her cousins decanting water foisted from the village well.

Alice listened and watched. She saw tears trickle down Mary's left cheek when she explained that her brother had been stabbed by a man from his own community and she could not travel to care for him.

Alice caught the wavering in Matthew's voice when he said he hadn't been able to reach his parents in the Rift Valley and he didn't know if they were safe.

More than once she heard the question, "Why are they killing Kenyans?"

Even in their positions, knowing full well the potential for this to happen, they found themselves completely unprepared emotionally.

"We weren't ready," Alice scrawled in her notebook.

Now it was her turn. Alice shifted in her chair and straightened her back. She looked toward the back of the room to avoid eye contact. She started in a subdued voice.

"I was in Mombasa. I woke early, before 5. I went to the polling station to check if everything was OK. When I was done I joined the queue. It was alphabetically ordered. The Ns and Os were in the same queue. You know I'm a Kikuyu; some of us are Ns. And the Luos, you know, many are Os. The queue was long and there were lots of men there, talking and joking. It was just lighthearted banter.

"They asked me, 'Does your name begin with O?'

"I said, 'Yes.'

"'Are you a Luo?'

"'I could be.'

"'Oh, you can't be, your skin is too light. So, we married you?'

"'You're getting there.'

"We teased and teased. Then I asked them, 'Are you N?'

"They laughed so hard, as if I had asked them the most absurd question they had ever heard. I'm sure they might have rolled on the ground had we not been standing in a queue waiting to vote. So I asked them, 'What's wrong with being N? I didn't object to being O.'

"'Naaaah, nahhh. We can never be N,' they told me.

"'You want me to be O but you don't want to be N?' I said.

"The men asked me, 'Do we look like N's? Do we look rich?'"

"I told those men, 'You know I'm going to tell you something statistically correct that you cannot dispute?'

"'Haiya! Haiya!' they said, nodding and smiling, as if I was a storyteller now.

"'The majority of rich among the Kenyan communities are the Kikuyu.'

"'Yes!' they said. They were excited, they really agreed with me on that one.

"Then I said, 'The majority of the people in prison are Kikuyu.'

"'Noooooooo,' they said. But then they thought about it and they told me, 'Oh yes, of course. They're rich because they steal!'

"'I went on and asked them, 'Did you know the majority of dead people in mortuaries are also Kikuyu? At the end of the day the Kikuyu may be everywhere, but they're not everywhere in a nice way. The majority of the poorest people in this country are Kikuyu. If you look at the poverty levels, you'll find there are very many poor Kikuyu just as there are very many rich Kikuyu. Now you know what the Ns need to do? The Ns must sit down with all their huge wealth and share it with the poor Ns. The same thing applies to the rich Os and the poor Os.'

"But then you know what they told me? 'No, no, no. You know the Os. Whether we are rich or poor we are united because we really love each other. We really believe in each other.'

"So it went like that. We never mentioned our ethnic groups. We just joked. It was actually fun. Then of course you know the rest." Alice stopped. It felt as if a fog of exhaustion had settled on her. Faces in the room were fuzzy and her body felt heavy. But she wanted to keep going. It was a relief to be able to talk after all these days pent-up with tension.

"After that it was chaos. You all know my friend Dekha who founded Peace Committees. Dekha and I took to the streets. I wore my bui bui because I knew Muslim women weren't being targeted. But there was nobody around to negotiate. Everywhere we went, people told us, 'Go home!' Even the mobs screamed at us, 'Just go home, just leave.'

"You know what was terrible?" Alice asked her colleagues. "The emails from my friends abroad. So many of them were asking 'Are you safe? Are you OK? What is happening?' I mean we are Kenyans! I felt so ashamed."

She looked around the room and saw nodding heads.

The agreement by everyone was unanimous. "History will judge us very harshly if we do not document what is going on. We don't know what we will do with it but we must continue with our work."

For the remaining afternoon they huddled around the table and discussed their strategy. Their shared pain had been melted down and soldered into determination. The green writing was erased from the whiteboard and a new plan was sketched in red bullet points and arrows.

They would return to the field and interview people all over the country and photograph the injured and the dead, the scars, wounds and graveyards — the signs of a country that lost itself.

Alice felt certain of her role and what she must do.

Escape

The doors slid open and Alice stepped inside. She pushed the button for the lower ground floor and then jabbed it again three times quickly.

She checked her watch: just after 4 p.m. "I hope Mark is OK," she thought as the doors opened to the darkened car park. Thinking of her 12-year-old son at home alone, she walked briskly to her white Toyota station wagon.

As she got in, she tossed her handbag on the passenger seat and turned the keys in the ignition. The car sputtered, and stopped. "Not again. Not now!" Alice turned the key again. The car sputtered and went still.

She got out of the car, yanked up the hood and fiddled with a wire on the battery as the mechanic had showed her last week. She got back in and turned the ignition.

Splutter.

"C'mon, c'mon," Alice urged.

The engine rolled into a wheezy roar and the car came alive. "Thank God!" she blurted. Driving toward the exit she saw Hassan and Juma, the building security guards, standing up from their chairs. She slowed to a halt and wound down her window.

"Are you going to be alright, Alice?" asked Hassan as he rested his hand on the roof of her car.

"I'm not far. I'm just in Woodley by the railway, near Kibera. I'll be home in six minutes," Alice replied, checking her watch again.

"I hear it's been bad in Kibera," Hassan said.

Alice's middle-class gated community ran along the long border of the slum of Kibera. It was so close that when the train passed, the windows of her maisonette rattled. From her home, guarded by armed estate security, she had watched some of Kibera's youth parade their discontent with increasing menace.

"*Wabaabi*, rich ones, we're coming for you," they would holler from the fence in long, drawling *sheng*, the ever-evolving dialect of Swahili, English and slum terms from Kenya's popular culture. It was easy to see the raw contrast between her life and the teeming poverty of Kibera. *They have a right to be angry*, she would think to herself.

But this is not going to help! Don't you realize what we're doing to each other! she wanted to yell back.

"Yeah, it's been bad, Hassan. But I'm a tough woman, I'll be OK," she said.

"If you feel unsafe, come right back and one of us will escort you home," he said, looking straight into her eyes as if he had sensed her true feelings.

As she pulled away she saw several thick plumes of smoke rising from all over the city. Her thoughts were all on Mark. Her foot pressed the accelerator.

Making her way through the upper-class streets of Kilimani, where the KNCHR office was based, she saw house after house completely intact and untainted by the violence. The contrast between the privileged and the angry hit her fast at Ngong Road. Street signs were uprooted, shopping mall windows had been smashed, and huge chunks of rocks lay on the road.

She heard glass crunching under her tires and she began to recall some of the stories she'd heard over the past few days. A friend had told her of a Luo man he had taken to the hospital after finding him lying nearly dead in the gutter, bleeding from his groin. He had been crudely circumcised with a machete. She thought of the woman who had watched rioters gang-rape a 12-year-old Kikuyu neighbor, while she and her daughter had trembled in the shadows of her tin shack.

One after another, images of death and destruction crept into her mind — unwelcome visitors she couldn't refuse. Distracted, she didn't notice the squall of people ahead. As she drove nearer, Alice felt perspiration form on her upper lip and her fingernails dug into the steering wheel. It was as if her eyes had alerted her body but not her brain. When she was close enough that their chanting pelted through her car, she suddenly realized what she was facing.

Hundreds of young men were plunging their fists through the air and screaming furiously,"*Haki Yetu! Haki Yetu*!" "Our rights! Our rights!" Some were holding bottles, lighting improvised wicks and hurtling them into the telephone exchange.

Alice shifted her car into reverse and darted a look in her rearview mirror. More were coming from behind, and in an instant the car was surrounded. Men with crazed faces banged on the doors and windows. "Wabaabi! Wabaabi! Wabaabi!"

She stilled herself, gritting her teeth. *I have to get out and talk to these guys or they'll kill me*. But then she thought of her car. *If I stop I might not be able to start it again. What if I put it into neutral and it rolls on one of these guys? They'll get me for sure*.

With a sharp inhalation, she put the car into neutral, jerked up the handbrake, pulled the door handle and pushed open the door. Out she lurched, keeping one leg in the car. She pumped her fist high and joined in the chanting. "Haki Yetu! Haki Yetu!" she yelled, seeing the momentary flummox around her. "Haki Yetu! Haki Yetu!" she yelled again trying to convince them of her alliance.

The circle around her began to clap and cheer. A young man, wearing torn jeans caked with dirt and a threadbare cream shirt unbuttoned to his navel, shouted above the fray, "So where are you coming from, Madam, when the country is like this? What are you doing out?" Alice judged from his swagger that he might be the leader.

"I work for the Human Rights Commission," Alice said loudly addressing the crowd and keeping her eyes on the leader. The group cheered again. The leader turned to look behind at his enthusiastic followers and Alice saw a gash across his neck, bright crimson and moist with fresh blood.

"She works for KNCHR," she heard voices passing the message along. She saw heads turn and eyes stare. "Haki Yetu! Haki Yetu! Haki Yetu!" they chanted again.

"I've just been there. Kenya is burning. There are many people in trouble so we've been meeting at the office. We're trying to help."

"Let it burn. It's about time it burned!" the leader bellowed. Angry hoots reverberated through the crowd.

"People are dying. We're saving women and children." Alice tried to meet the leader's eyes.

The leader looked at Alice and let out a low laugh. She could smell stale alcohol on his breath.

"I just live over there," she said, pointing to Nairobi Pentecostal Church primary school. "That's my son's school next to the church, so just allow me to go now." Her body was taut and she felt her palms stinging from her fingernails digging deep into the skin. She studied his face carefully for any sign of his next command.

"OK, OK, let her go past," the man said with the sweep of his arm. The group cleared a path, and like a school of fish everyone followed the flow.

Alice had to stop herself from lunging back into the car. *Steady*, she warned herself silently. She ducked into the car with forced nonchalance, changed gears, released the handbrake and pressed the accelerator. *Please car, please go*, she pleaded in her mind. The station wagon lurched forward with a grunt and kept moving. Alice wound down her window and chanted once more, "Haki Yetu. Haki Yetu." Once clear of the crowd she accelerated quickly and continued until she arrived at the school.

She stopped outside, leaving the engine to idle, and buried her face in her hands.

She rebuked herself, nearly yelling at herself in the car: *Alice, are you mad? Driving through the city like that, at this hour? You should never have exposed yourself. You're a mother! Suppose you died and couldn't take care of Mark?*

Something broke within her. It felt like the force of 20 waves crashing in and around her. Her entire body quivered.

After many long minutes Alice's body began to find a gentler rhythm. Her breathing calmed and she could feel her limbs once more under her ownership. She mustered what remaining energy she had and started to drive home.

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As she walked the steps to her house, Alice saw the living room light was on and she felt relief. "Mark, are you there?" she called out, wanting confirmation sooner than her legs could carry her. "Yes Mum," came Mark's voice, muffled through the window.

"Thank God. I've just been stopped at the posta," she said entering the room. Mark was sitting at the dining table with an exercise book and pencil laid neatly in front of him. "Are you OK?" she asked, rushing over, crouching down and wrapping her arms around him from the side.

"They were burning the posta. It was terrible. I didn't think I'd get away. And John's shop is gone. They're all gone. The poor guys, I don't even know how they survived. Except Malo Malo's. His kiosk is still there."

When Alice had reached the road leading to her house, a smell of burning rubber had stung her nostrils before she saw the glutinous black remains of melted tires. Charred shells of kiosks stood desolate alongside the road. Broken bread and masses of beans were scattered and soaking in rose-colored puddles of sour milk and blood.

She had shopped along the street every week for seven years and had spent many an afternoon joking and chatting with the vendors. John, a tall Masai with a gap between his lower teeth, sold her milk, bread and eggs. His slender long arms were stacked with wildly colored beaded bracelets that Mark and his friends would ask to wear. A few doors down, Malo Malo owned the local bicycle repair shop. Mark would ride all around Kibera's roughened roads and go to Malo Malo when some minor repair was needed. They had formed a friendship while Mark watched him fix punctured tires, loose chains and busted pedals.

"It hadn't been touched, Mark. It was the only one. Every single kiosk had been burnt to the ground except his." Alice unclasped her fingers from around Mark and went to the kitchen sink to wash her hands and splash water on her face.

She knew Malo Malo was Luo. She would not say so to Mark, but she would worry now about his influence on her son. *There is something so wrong about all those places being burnt while his was still standing*, she thought again to herself while patting her eyes, nose and then cheeks dry with a paper towel.

She looked at Mark more closely now. His cocoa eyes were narrowed and he seemed small and tired. His shoulders were hunched over and he was rolling his pencil between the table and his fingers.

"What's been happening here son?" Alice asked softly.

Mark looked down at his book.

"I was doing homework for Mr. Abasi. There were people screaming in Kibera. I saw the smoke. Are you OK?"

Alice knew from the waver in his voice that he had been worried about her.

"I'm … I'm fine now. It just shook me," Alice said wanting to reassure him.

"Why were you out when things are so bad?"

"I'm sorry, Mark. I had to go, for work. I don't want to leave you at home alone anymore. It worries me."

She saw Mark's face shift. His eyes opened up and the furrow disappeared. He shifted in his chair so he was sitting upright. "It's fine, Mum. You're always worrying too much," he said defensively, as if he no longer wanted to be seen as a young boy who worried for his mother.

"I've just been at KNCHR," Alice continued, ignoring her son's brush off. "I have to go back out to the field and document what's going on."

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Alice stopped her thoughts from running any further. She sat up in her bed in San Diego, swung her legs over the side and clenched the mattress as if to brace herself.

I had to put him in boarding school, she started her defense to herself. *All the horrible images of people being killed were going to come back on TV. I didn't want him to see Kenyans destroying themselves like that. I didn't want to hurt him. It could've damaged him for the rest of his life. He needed to be protected.*

But guilt rose up and shadowed the excuses. A memory of Mark's quiet tears when she arrived for her first visit after three weeks found its way to a clearing in her mind. Her heart strained in sadness. She heard again his soft voice whispering in her ear so his classmates wouldn't hear, "Mama, I don't like it here."

She remembered her own aching loneliness and her constant anxiety. How she had tested the headmaster's patience by calling him ceaselessly to check on Mark: "Has he eaten today? He's not a good eater. It's cold today, is he wearing a sweater?"

Closing her eyes, she pressed her lips hard together and felt her teeth cutting into them. It was as if she hoped the physical pain would block out the grinding anguish. *It was such a horrible choice. Why did I? Other kids were staying at home. I could have kept the TV off. I could have stayed to work in Nairobi instead of going back to Mombasa and the Rift Valley. But I went.*

"Please forgive me, Mark," she murmured secretly into the darkness. "I know you needed me. I didn't even ask you whether you had any ethnic problems at school. I didn't ask what it felt like for you when John's kiosk was burnt. I never asked. I never thought about what it meant for you. I was so selfish. I didn't think about what it meant for you to be cooped up somewhere in a school and know the country is burning and I was out there."

With regret embedded like a thorn under her skin, Alice stood, picked up her mobile phone and shuffled wearily out of the bedroom, down the dark hall and into the kitchen. After a few seconds of patting the wall she found the light switch and turned it on. The brightness jarred. She blinked a few times, then squinted through half-closed eyes while she filled the kettle and plucked an herbal tea bag from the open box on the counter. "It might help you sleep better," her friend had suggested. Listening to the rumble of water Alice rubbed her jaw, tender and stiff from her habit of grinding her teeth during sleep.

After dunking the tea bag a few times she flicked off the light and found her way to the armchair. She noticed then she was carrying her phone without even realizing it. *Old habits die hard*, she thought.

A yellow glow from the street lights swam through the window. For some moments her mind rested. She felt her chest rise up and down with each new breath. Enjoying the warmth of the mug resting against her stomach, she looked down at the inscribed tea bag label her fingers had found to fiddle:

Love what is ahead by loving what has come before.

Hope

Like silver rivulets sliding carelessly down the mountains of her childhood home during the long rains, thin tears began to run down Alice's face.

How can I love what has come before? she thought, far removed from her home, sitting in the common room in her apartment in San Diego. *I've failed. It has been a mess.*

Shifting forward in the chair, Alice put down her cup and leaned into her clasped hands as if in prayer. Her tears now coursed over her cheeks and trickled into the etched lines of her palms, like water arriving to quench cracked river beds.

She sobbed. Uncomfortable truths struggled free from where they had been buried and smothered. *Is it possible I have failed both Kenya and my son?* For the first time Alice allowed the question to form fully. She did not push it away or deny its possibility. Appalled, she sobbed deeply, realizing as she heard herself that she had no memory of the last time she cried.

We were the KNCHR. We should have been more prepared. The advocacy and reporting of the politicians inciting hate made noise but it wasn't enough. We educated the whole country on rights but we couldn't prevent the violence. What kind of human rights educator was I, if, in all the human rights teaching I did, I wasn't able to teach people that rights come with responsibilities? They destroyed so much. And even now I'm going to the northern communities speaking with elders, and each time I come back reeking of death.

Alice thought of her ritual when she returned home from field trips, bundling her clothes into a plastic bag and throwing them in a bin before arriving at her front door — because no matter how many times she washed them, she could not remove the stench of dead bodies.

People are still dying. It isn't stopping and I don't know if it ever will. I've given myself to this country. I've sacrificed so much, and for what?

Finally voicing what she had dared not face, the weight of her burden felt so present and almost palpable — yet also somehow lighter. She sat up and gazed out the window. A thin band of tangerine light stretched lucidly across the bay. She looked again at the tea bag label. *Love what has come before*, she sighed heavily into the air.

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The Guardian, 3 August 2010: "Tomorrow, more than 12 million Kenyan voters will finally have their own say in a referendum on the proposed laws, whose passage could usher in a new era. The poll is being held amid heavy security to ensure no repeat of the bloodshed that followed the fraud-plagued general election of December 2007, which severely damaged Kibaki's reputation at home and abroad."[29]

They had started as a hundred-fold at Freedom Corner in Uhuru Park, in brilliant white t-shirts, visors and flags with black and bold words emblazoned across: *Peace or Chagua Kenya Chagua Amani* — "Choose Kenya Choose Peace".

Alice and her fellow principals of Uwiano — S.K. Maina from the National Steering Committee on Peacebuilding and Conflict Management, Ozonnia Ojiello from United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Mutuku Nguli from PeaceNet Kenya — led the march, each gripping their section of the banner that spelled out the country's hope: "This is the year of the peace referendum."

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Several months before, Alice and Ozonnia had met in her office. They asked "How do we save the country?" in as many ways as they could. They knew that Kenya's voting history was blemished with ethnic violence and that the 2007-8 post-election brutality was unimaginably the worst episode, and wounds were still tender and raw. They knew too that the potential for violence in the upcoming referendum — which would approve of a new constitution — was dangerously high and they were determined to prevent it.

Both loquacious characters, conversation rolled easily, each speaking quickly after the other, sometimes over, agreeing and adding, leaving next to no space between words.

"The no and yes campaign is dividing the country in two," Ozonnia said peering through his frameless glasses and scratching his round clean-shaven head.

"The firewood is being gathered and the fuel is being stored. This country will burn again if we don't do something," Alice added, the flame red sweater and crisp black scarf askew on her head seemed to echo her words in unintended visual drama.

Ozonnia was nodding his head, "People don't trust the police. So many of them abandoned anyone who wasn't from their ethnic community in the post-election violence. We can't ask people to report to them."

"We need Kenyans to own this peace," said Alice. "Like I always tell the elders in the north: they own the conflict, they can own the peace. I have an idea, Ozonnia."

"Yes, let's hear it Alice," Ozonnia leaned forward eagerly.

"We need to bring everyone together, all these communities — the NGOs, the international donor community, the commissions and the mainstream government. Let's get them to come together and save the country. Ozonnia, you represent the international community. You can influence the international community, you speak to all the donors."

Ozonnia was nodding. His eyes tracked from right to left and then back again as he looked over his ideas before speaking. "Good, good, but we need to be more specific. How about we make it a conflict prevention plan? Something that will stop the conflict before it happens. We need to see results this time."

During the following months Alice and Ozonnia continued to meet with Irungu Houghton, Professor Kimani Njogu, Professor Karuti Kanyinga — members of a think tank they'd formed in 2009. Kimani and Karuti were experts on ethnicity. Alice, Ozonnia, S.K. and Mutuku began

focusing more specifically on the conflict prevention initiatives. In their third meeting, they stumbled upon it, a simple basic fact of Kenyan society.

"You know," said Alice, "there is not one person in Kenya who doesn't have a cellphone or know someone who has a cellphone. Even those who live far from electricity will send a runner with dozens of phones to the nearest town to charge them. I've been thinking about using SMS somehow. The phones may be our answer."

From this realization they drafted their strategy: an SMS, or texting, platform for early warning and response. They would call it *Uwiano*, a Kiswahili word meaning "cohesion."

"We can't be everywhere in Kenya but we can use SMS to alert us of hotspots and flare ups. Think about it, anyone will be able to help stop situations from escalating into violence, they'd just need to send a message," said Mutuku energetically in a follow-up meeting.

"And we'll use rapid response teams to head out to stabilize hotspots. We'll be linking early warning to early response," added S.K.

Alice paused, thinking about what else needed to happen. "If we really want Kenyans to own the peace we need them to understand their conflicts, the causes and conditions. We need to go all over Kenya and do conflict mapping. Right now, the communities in conflict are only seeing a small part of what's triggering the violence. It's like a hippo: they can see the hump protruding above the water, but we need them to understand the dangerous hulking mass underneath."

Later, she would share the Uwiano news at a meeting with the original think tank. "That's great Alice!" A look of satisfaction spread over Kimani's wide face and Alice saw him share it with Karuti. Alice realized they relished the idea of *wananchi*, the public, talking about ethnicity. "We'll be able to use all that information to report back to the country," Kimani continued. "Yes," said Alice nodding. "And NCIC will hold weekly press briefings notifying the country about the hotspots alerts that come in through the early warning system."

A few months out from the referendum day, the Uwiano team commenced "State of the Nation" press briefings. "When I was a journalist, Sunday was always a slow news day. No one holds press conferences on Sunday mornings. Let's address the nation then; we'll have everyone's attention," suggested Alice.

The first Sunday arrived. Alice, Ozonnia and the three other principals of the Uwiano team sat in a short row in the middle of an elegant formal room in the Serena Hotel. A vast cream-colored ceiling floated above them while cherry wood doors surrounded the room like sentinels. Behind the principals hung a large map of Kenya, spotted with red and white stickers. To the side, out of view of the cameras staring at the panel, S.K. Maina sat fiddling nervously with a wad of rolled papers. An air of nervous anticipation rustled between them. What they were about to do was unprecedented.

"Can you imagine?" one of them had asked in a planning meeting, "We'll be talking about hotspots to the whole country. Nobody has ever done this before. Kenyans know about it but it's been such a great shame for them to even admit it."

"We shouldn't even be discussing hotspots let alone having a map pointing them out!" another had exclaimed.

Yet today their anxieties remained unbeknownst to the people gathered around their televisions screens. Like consummate weather presenters, they glided over the map pointing out the temperature of conflict across the country and dispensed their prescriptions.

"Your Rongai is a hotspot. Rift Valley is a hotspot. Isiolo is a hotspot. If you want to make it into a cold spot, this is what you need to do:

"There are District Peace Committees, there are Peace Monitors. Send an SMS to peace 6478 so we can respond to the issues. We can help you set up a neighborhood group to talk peace. We can help you do that. Here's the name of a contact: Abdia. She can come and speak to you.

"North Eastern is a cold spot as nobody there is disputing the new constitution. Everyone is at peace with each other right now. But there is grazing land that these two communities have started squabbling over, so you're moving into a warm spot so you have to address the issue of the warm spot."

As the slot ended and the credits rolled, Alice let out the deep breath she had been holding. Flipping through her notes she felt satisfied they had covered everything. S.K., who was in charge of dispatching rapid response teams, was spurred to action. "OK, let's get a rapid response team to Isiolo and the Rift Valley. I'll give them a call and let them know a team is on the way. They need to get the conflicting groups together to meet."

The following Sunday the principals appeared again and reported on Kenya's progress. "As a result of last week's report about the Rift Valley, there was an intervention. ... Moses, Tabitha and Wanjiku sat together. They have resolved their issues through the District Peace Committee and they moved their province from a warm spot back into a cold spot."

Over the coming weeks the Uwiano team felt they were witnessing an incredible phenomenon. All over the country communities began to take charge of their issues. As text messages flowed in and rapid response teams and law enforcement dashed out, the hotspots became warm spots and then cool spots.

The Uwiano team continued touring the country, Alice drawing the hippo everywhere she went. "What you have told us for half a day is this little hump. The little hump is the ethnic differences. Now let's talk about this. What is this?" she would ask jabbing the body with her pen and then the deathly jaws of the hippo, submerged under the water, for effect. "The parts of the hippo that are under the water are the bigger issues that lead to ethnic differences, the ones you can't see straight away. If you don't deal with what's under the surface, the real issues, then you won't have real peace."

In places that were serious hotspots, where politicians routinely incited crowds to violence, people began attending demonstrations waving placards exclaiming, "We are not a hotspot."

"Wow, Ozonnia, it's possible this might actually work," said Alice after another State of the Nation address. "People are starting to compete with each other to look good to the rest of the country. This is bringing Kenya together. You can really see their pride is taking over from their shame."

As the day of the referendum drew nearer, the principals fine-tuned their plans for a peace vigil and voting day. Consultations with District Peace Committees, civil society organizations, the private sector, women's organizations and youth groups took place. Non-governmental organizations and media groups were engaged in planning while provincial administrators and police were all kept abreast of plans. The strong partnerships across the country became a driving force for a peaceful referendum. It looked positive. A peaceful vote seemed possible.

The day prior to the peace vigil, Alice sat in the NCIC's open-plan office reviewing plans for the next three days. In between stacks of documents and folders, yellow square notes with scribbled names, numbers and reminders stuck to her desk. She opened an email and saw an update from the morning.

> Dear Commissioner Nderitu,
>
> Just wanted to update you on an SMS we received and the action that has been taken.
>
> SMS received:
> "Good afternoon, we just received a message from Molo, Rift Valley about a looming attack by the Kikuyu. We have verified but have no mandate to call the police. Kindly follow up."
>
> Action:
> Within 25 minutes the SMS information was communicated to the District Commissioner and police have taken action including arrests.
>
> Please advise if you wish any additional action to be taken.

Alice leaned back into her chair. *Now that's what linking early warning to early intervention and response means. We've put in place everything we wanted to. We've done it … is it enough though?* Alice wondered, worry creeping in like an old dog looking for food. She already knew it was an unanswerable question, but the ring of her mobile phone, reprieved her from her thoughts. Alice picked it up instantly. She became immersed in the conversation about another fire to extinguish and worry scampered away to linger in the shadows.

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"It's happening," Ozonnia nodded to Alice, his eyes bright.

"I know, I know. It's great," Alice said, distractedly looking down at her shoes and scrunching her toes. They were already feeling tender. *Why did I wear office shoes? These are going to really hurt*, she said to herself. Looking across she noticed Bishop Abuka, the chair of the District Peace Committee from Kibera. *Goodness, this guy has a disability and he's still walking. Why am I worried about my shoes?* Alice muttered to herself.

Walking from Freedom Corner through Uhuru Park, amidst the shaggy tipu trees and rippling jade green lake, Alice thought about the courageous mothers who occupied the corner at Uhuru Park in 1992 and 1993. Month after month they stayed, demanding the release of their sons who had spoken against President Moi and his government.

Among them had stood Wangari Maathai. Alice smiled thinking of her big brazen character. Maathai had taken on the government and saved Uhuru Park from property developers and land-grabbers. The former president had assailed her as an inferior African woman, disrespecting men and failing to be seen and not heard — yet still, and maybe even because of this, she fought on. "You're a divorced man too," Maathai had countered when Moi tried to dismiss her organization as "a bunch of divorcees."

Turning to look back on Maathai's legacy, the park a sanctuary for all of Kenyans to enjoy, Alice saw thousands now marching. She felt a surge of pride.

The brass band blew boisterously while all around people chorused "*Kenya Nchi yetu, Kenya nchi yetu*. Kenya is our country. Kenya is our country." Alongside, street boys ran up and down along the procession, jumping, beaming and hooting in their ragged clothing. Alice felt goose bumps and wonder spring up, and she forgot her shoes for the rest of the day.

Arriving at the Kenyatta International Conference Centre, the crowds rejoiced. Small groups broke out and danced to the rhythmic beat of lively pipe music. Shoulders bounced, feet patted the ground, and hips swirled. Alice watched with amazement as workers on their way home stopped to collect Uwiano t-shirts, tugging them over their work clothes before joining in song with Achieng Abura, who belted out soulful gospel from the stage.

Later, Kenya's veteran comedians, the Vitimbi troupe, hurled fun at their compatriots. "Hey, these Kenyans, they're going to wake up to a violence-free voting day thinking they have died and gone to heaven!" The crowd roared. "Kenyans, we have our own little heaven here but we don't even know it," they went on chastising in good humor. Others found their place sitting casually on the courtyard ground and around the fountain savoring the atmosphere. Like balloons released from a child's carefree grasp, hope lifted their spirits to the crisp blue sky.

Speeches projected on large screens roused the crowd and called for peace and unity. Alice was watching from behind the group of Uwiano principals on stage when Mutuku prodded her forward, "You must speak," he said. She knew she wanted to remind people that the peace belonged to the people. She stepped to the microphone and spoke boldly, as though all of Kenya was listening to her.

"Kenya doesn't belong to a few people. It belongs to all of us. So we all have a part to play in ensuring that we hold it together. We are privileged to be able to have the opportunity to hold Kenya together because we're just holding it in trust for our children. We are not holding it for ourselves. What the comedians said was right, we have it all right here."

As the afternoon sun surrendered its glory, an indigo nightfall settled over the gathering and thousands of candles flickered to life. It was 6:59 p.m., and around the country televisions and radios tuned in and the country stilled itself to listen and watch. The crowd joined hands, reached for the heavens and bowed their heads in a moment of silent prayer. With closed eyes, Alice cast her plea

for peace into the dark. Over and over she repeated her mantra. "God help us to have a peaceful referendum. Thank you God for giving me this job through which I can directly contribute to changing the course of Kenya's history of violence at the ballot box. Keep our children safe, keep Mark safe."

Immediately after, the sound of their national anthem swirled around and swept away the hush. The congregation's voices converged and swelled in emotion.

> "O God of all creation
> Bless this our land and nation
> Justice be our shield and defender
> May we dwell in unity, peace and liberty,
> Plenty be found within our borders."

Together they wept in hope for their country. Alice looked up and saw text messages popping up on the screen, one after the other:

> "Thank you."
> "Thank you."
> "We'll do our bit."
> "Thank you."
> "We'll save the country."

She tried to savor the mellow spirit of unity and peace that seemed to have enveloped the country. *We're safe for tonight*, Alice told herself.

Yet she couldn't ignore an uncertainty scratching at her, too. *Will this be a morsel with no banquet to follow?* she asked herself. *And maybe one that will leave a bitter aftertaste?* As she looked once more at the thousands and cast her eyes up to the stars, she recalled the Swahili saying, "Tonight we're holding our intestines in our fists."

Dialogue

We actually did it, Alice allowed herself a rare indulgence of self-satisfaction for what she had achieved for Kenya.

Maybe I need to do this more — appreciate what I have accomplished instead of feeling like I can never succeed no matter how hard I work.

Speaking of work: She saw the day had become bright and busy in San Diego. *I better get moving.* Opening her diary she looked at her scrawled schedule for the day.

11 a.m.: university presentation

Gosh, I haven't even prepared yet. What am I going to tell them?

She saw Kenya's recent past — shadow and light playing on the surface of a lake in late afternoon, and then a future that looked like grey clouds looming on the horizon, ephemeral and uncertain. Alice questioned which picture to present to an international audience. *It's so shameful talking about the post-election violence and that it could happen again. Maybe I'll just focus on where I've really made a difference*.

A sprinkle of saturated coffee sediment assembled uselessly at the bottom of her mug. *Like soil* …, she mused.

"It's so fertile that if a bean accidentally dropped it would sprout," a man in Mt. Elgon had told her once about his region.

Well, Mt. Elgon was something else to be proud of, Alice, she reminded herself.

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"It doesn't need anyone's help. You don't even need to plant it," the National Agricultural and Livestock Development Officer explained. Having been there now a few times, Alice had become accustomed to the sticky soil that grabbed impractical shoes right off a foot.

It was a magnificent area deserving of the officer's praise. When she walked among the lustrous emerald grass, looked out at the undulating fields on the mountainside, and breathed in the aroma of fresh rain and juniper berries, she felt as if she was amid overwhelming grace, as it was first created.

But since 2006, endemic terror from clashes rooted in land access, ethnicity, political struggles and insecurity had blighted Mt. Elgon's beauty. The Sabaot Land Defence Force (SLDF) had taken up arms to resist government attempts to evict squatters in the Chepyuk area. Thousands of civilians had become victims of killing, raping, and mutilating. Police retaliated brutally, attempting to instill order. They had been accused of murder, indiscriminate burning of suspects' houses and crop granaries, and the rape of women and young girls. Carmine blood irrigated the soil where people were slaughtered or maimed, while the mountain seemed to heave with sadness for the countless women gang-raped, and the disappeared who had been tucked away beneath its viscid earth.

KNCHR had been sending rapid response teams all over Kenya, and increasingly to Mt. Elgon. One morning the team would be in the Nairobi office, then someone would announce an outbreak of violence there and within hours they'd be on their way in a convoy of four-wheel drives. The seven-hour drive stretched out space for them to contemplate their mission.

"Again? Why is it that there doesn't seem to be a solution to this conflict?" Alice sighed wearily.

"Unless that perpetrator goes to jail we really can't keep going like this," a colleague would respond.

"That's the dilemma for us. We work in human rights, we require retribution, but if we throw people into jail we'll make them martyrs and leaders. 'Go and avenge me. Go and kill,' they'll be sermonizing. There's something here that's missing. Why is it that by seeking justice we have to forgo peace?" asked Alice without expecting an answer.

"I mean, the law enforcement is just as bad. They want us to throw these guys in jail but they're engaging in assaults and murder too," her colleague replied, leaving Alice's question floating.

In the darkest moments they felt the futility of what they were doing. "Oh, we're just counting bodies. We're not preventing anything," they bemoaned, their hope billowing out the window into the wake of churning red dust.

On arriving, Alice would always feel tight fear twisting around villagers before she saw the murdered bodies. After several visits there, she stopped crying at night behind her bedroom door. She found a way to cope with death by distracting her mind with plausible realities of the victim's life. Standing above a freshly decaying corpse she studied the small details — the pattern on a headscarf, a callous on a thumb, the braid of a woman's hair — to create a character and resurrect them for a moment, until she moved along the line to the next one.

> *This woman woke up in the morning and thought to herself,* 'Today I'm going to make some beans for lunch*,' and she decided to go and get the beans. On her way to go and get the beans, she passed her neighbor and said hello to her neighbor and they spoke and they gossiped a little bit. And then she walked on and then she saw her son's teacher whom she did not like. …*
>
> *He's holding his twig toothbrush. Was he thinking of using it as a weapon or was he brushing his teeth before he died? …*
>
> *Wow, this guy had shoes made from tires. I wonder where he bought them. They don't wear out, those shoes. They'll take forever to wear out. He was given them from his uncle. …*

Retreating to a room full of alternate lives in mind, she would leave her wailing heart to itself, unheard.

For Alice, worse than death were the mutilations. The SLDF selected those they believed were loyal to the police or rival community and sliced off their ears in punishment. When talking to a victim, she concentrated on their hair, an eyebrow, the point on the forehead just above the eyes. Anything but the blatant brutalization staring back at her.

After months of auditing atrocities, Alice found herself wrestling with the inadequacies of her human rights practice. *We need to do something differently here, it's not working*, she found herself thinking.

Searching for answers, she drew on her experience in 2000 working on human rights-based approaches to development, with road engineers in Nyanza. The engineers, initially skeptical — "Why do you want to train us on human rights? Go and train the police, we don't need it" — had eventually come to see that a road was more than tar and gravel. Alongside villagers in consultation meetings, they learned that a road sustained livelihoods because it took the woman to the marketplace. They discovered it was a path to education because mothers could take their children to school. They came to see that a road saved lives because it led to hospitals.

Human rights can be practical. It's not just declarations and conventions and the UN and legal instruments and constitutions and statutes. The link was forming between human rights and development that would be part of her work in Mt. Elgon.

But ultimately it was a few sentences by Kofi Annan in his book *In Larger Freedoms* that helped her see far beyond what she had already constructed in her mind.

> Not only are development, security and human rights all imperative; they also reinforce each other. … We will not enjoy development without security, we will not enjoy security without development, and we will not enjoy either without respect for human rights. Unless all these causes are advanced, none will succeed.

It caught her attention, like watching a spark spatter from a crackling fire and rise into the night sky. She saw it, a constellation that grouped human rights, development and conflict transformation. *Here is a connection between peace and justice, between human rights and peacebuilding. And not just peace without violence but a deep peace where structural issues are addressed through development. This makes it possible to have both, we don't actually have to choose between one or the other*. Annan's words had pinpointed with such precise clarity what she had been grasping at in her work.

From there Alice charted her new course. She undertook study in conflict prevention that would augment her practical experience and reposition her perspective of human rights-based approaches. A major component required putting a conflict prevention plan in action. Mt. Elgon was the perfect case study.

At the KNCHR she discussed her plan with Chief, the chairperson. "OK, the land allocation is controversial but if any meaningful discussions are going to happen, it's vital that everyone is involved to ensure peace is restored."

"I want to get the actors of the conflict together. We'll link up the authentic community leaders, the farmers and law enforcement officers. We've been training police officers in human rights — they have a theoretical understanding. Right now they believe we ought to just throw the book at the perpetrators, but we need to change this. That approach will meet the security needs but it's not going to work for development, which we know has the potential to bring long-term peace."

Chief was fiddling with his glasses, a sign Alice knew meant he was concentrating. He nodded for her to continue.

"We have the National Agricultural and Livestock Development Officers and they've already been training farmers on human rights issues all over the country, especially in regards to the right to food and water. They're really good on the practical implementation side of human rights — they get it. The beauty of these guys is they don't have to struggle to be heard because already they are in a position of authority and their authority is not threatening. So they can really get through to the farmers. Then there's us. We have it, the three areas we need to interlink: human rights, development and security."

Chief sat for a minute contemplating Alice's proposition. He rubbed his index finger up and down his brow a few times and then tapped it once in the middle as if adding an invisible exclamation to his thought. "It's not completely what we do here. We're human rights not peacebuilding. But by all means, Alice, I know with you things get done. God knows we need something to happen in that area. Keep me updated."

And so it began. They called it "Getting the Actors to Dialogue." The National Agricultural and Livestock Development Officers brought the farmers and, together, they met with police officers around a tree, its trunk thin and canopy broad. Under the spidery net of leaves and branches they sat and tried to settle. Unsure of themselves and each other in their new questionable company, the farmers and police vibrated with discomfort.

Alice and her team started with the farmers, easing them into discussion by tapping into their source of knowledge about development. After a while they found themselves dipping into the issues of conflict in their community. Then it was the police officers turn to speak. "How can you ensure a good crop, one that benefits everyone?" they were asked. Their answers delved into their area of expertise of security.

It was time for Alice to join the dots. "Development, security and socioeconomic human rights — these are all connected and we need to address each of them if we are to have peace here," Alice told them. "In addition, we need to recognize our roles as duty bearers and claim holders."

She gestured to a farmer, wiry with grey stubble and a weathered blue cap. "You are entitled to claim the right to protection from police, but at the same time you must be a duty bearer and ensure that you contribute to maintaining peace."

Slowly, piece by piece, the farmers and police officers came to reconstruct their understanding of their community, the conflict and their rights. Alice knew they were making progress when the same farmer she addressed earlier summed it up plainly, with a crease of concern across his face: "Conflict is affecting my livelihood."

And later, she saw attitudes shifting toward security when a police officer raised his hand and stated, "You can't solve conflict by killing off people." They began to collaborate on a plan to prevent future conflict.

Over the course of a year, Alice and the KNCHR team witnessed a metamorphosis. For the first time in several months there were no dead bodies in Mt. Elgon. Life moved through the mundane acts of everyday life: they toiled the red earth and collected water. Anxious looks over the shoulder while walking alone to fetch firewood, and a quickened pulse at the sound of a door knock in the

evening, waned a little more with each new moon. The days seemed to breathe again, slowly and surely.

The farmers, police, KNCHR team and National Agricultural and Livestock Development Officers all came to partake in a day of celebration for the reduction in violence. About 30 of them sat on the green grass of the lower mountain, under a great yawning tree, the hills rolling before them. A cobalt sky held clouds like bunches of white cotton candy. Nearby half a dozen cows idled majestically, letting out the occasional grumbling mmmwwwooooooooo.

A tray of boiled maize was placed in front of them. The sight of abundant food was, in itself, a symbol of peaceful times. Alice recalled their early visits to Mt. Elgon, when they had brought their own provisions because the conflict ensured that food was scarce. Now here they sat with local produce spread amongst them.

Alice loved the power of sharing a meal: The very act of reaching across dishes could dismantle barriers and somehow seem to equalize everyone.

They talked in low hums about grains, crops and their harvests, until a woman's hoarse voice piped up. "I'm actually sitting here eating with a police officer!" she exclaimed, as if the incredibility of her situation had struck her like lightning from a summer storm.

A few of her friends tittered around her as others raised their eyebrows and turned in her direction. "For me the most powerful thing is not that these National Agricultural and Livestock Development Officers are coming to tell us about how to prevent conflict," she reiterated. "It's the fact that I can speak to a police officer, like one on one. The only conversations we used to have with police is when they'd accuse you of something. You know, once upon a time I couldn't even ask for directions. These days you can stop a police officer and ask them for the time."

The group burst into laughter together. Alice caught the joke and joined in: The precise time was irrelevant in these parts.

"And the police officer will look at his watch and say," she said, bringing her face and wrist together in a dramatic gesture before lowering her voice. "The time now is …"

The group roared even louder.

In the fading stages of the group's hysterics, the woman shifted to a more serious tone. "The fact that I can ask a police officer what the time is and he tells me, it really means things have changed. His perception of me has changed. My perception of him has changed. I was always a suspect for him and he was always a perpetrator for me. Things have changed."

Alice left Mt. Elgon for Nairobi that afternoon. The sun was setting, a fiery orange sphere filling the sky. From the backseat she watched the mountain shrink in the rearview mirror as they drove away. The outdoor merriment had lulled her into languor, but now she found herself roused with renewed energy.

We did something really unique here, and I almost can't believe the transformation. Conflict prevention and human rights can complement each other. I am no longer just a human rights educator, she realized.

Alice saw herself then, a child of two worlds that had once seemed so irreconcilable: peacebuilding and human rights.

Where will I belong now? she asked herself, knowing full well that in Kenya, human rights and peacebuilding practitioners often related like squabbling divorced parents.

Passion

Alice was standing at a lectern in San Diego, under beaming lights with an audience of eager smiles and faces looking back at her. Her cool, crisp Kenyan tones punctured the dimmed auditorium.

"So, when I was a prison officer, that experience was very important for me on so many levels … ."

Freshly graduated from university, Alice had been a personal assistant for the new police commissioner, when the King'ong'o Six scandal broke. Six prisoners had been killed in custody. The prisons, in keeping with their reputation for shameful impunity, had attempted to cover it up by calling it mass suicide.

"You know, at that time, Kenyan prisons had been closed off to everyone," Alice explained to her audience. "They were terrible. Kenya prisons had been blacklisted by the world. Back then, a Kenyan judge called the prisons 'death chambers.' He actually said that there was no need to sentence anyone to death, as the prison conditions would kill them anyway."

She continued, "At the men's prison, my house was next to the dispensary and I would watch the men walking past in various stages of near death. They would be walking past in a long file, two by two. There would be like a hundred of them walking past slowly, heavily. Actually shuffling past, not walking past. Their feet wouldn't leave the sand."

Alice thought of the grooves in the sand. She had seen them first at the prison. Then later in northeastern Kenya she saw similar markings on a stretch of dirt, and knew that death was imminent for the men and women who had been there. To walk like this you are surely on your way to death.

"So, at the prison," Alice went on to her audience, "they would be walking and you could see that they had urinated and defecated on themselves. They would arrive at the dispensary and then the police van would come and take away the dead bodies. I remember their feet stuck out of the pick-up. Mistreatment, malnutrition, diseases — all preventable. There were very many human rights abuses."

At the time of the King'ong'o Six, Alice was working with the senior assistant commissioner, Wanjala, and Salama. They decided that the prison situation had reached its breaking point. They had to open the prisons to the public.

In Alice's role at the prison, she was tasked with writing speeches for the commissioner, who always read them — word for word.

She said to Wanjala and Salama, "Let's make the commissioner's first speech really powerful."

Alice wrote:

> *I have now embraced the open-door policy …*

Salama and Wanjala approved the final text of the speech, and the commissioner read it unquestioningly.

Civil society, the media and the public showered him with praise for the progressive policy. There were then overwhelming requests to visit the prisons.

"Exactly what does this open-door policy mean? What have we done?" the commissioner questioned Alice, his concern clear.

As Alice, on stage, recalled this memory — his reaction, from the safety of many years passed — she felt assured. It had paid off. She had spent so many years worrying about whether the open-door policy would backfire, but she knew now that it had made an enormous difference.

She paused now before her audience. She saw with piercing clarity how that early experience, over two decades ago, still informed her decisions today.

Alice felt an urge to articulate her unscripted thoughts. She looked out into the audience.

"You know, it was really the turning point for me, when I realized I could have a voice through other people," Alice shared. "My mind opened up, and I saw that if you want to influence change, you have to influence change from very high levels."

She mused aloud, "Yes, writing that speech changed everything."

Alice thought of all of her encounters with politicians, in her role as a commissioner with NCIC. Her often-rehearsed lines: "The reason I'm speaking to you is not so much that I believe that you're the ones who will save this country. It's because I know that when you hold a microphone, more people listen to you than when I hold a microphone. So I might as well make you speak those words that I would like to say."

From her podium, Alice looked past the veil of lights and into the audience. She saw nodding heads and focused attention.

"Another important development comes from that time: For me, it's very, very important to build bridges."

She explained how, when working as a prison officer, she knew there was a need to collaborate with human rights practitioners. So she marched daringly into their offices and asked how they could work together.

"I went to the Law Society of Kenya — a very powerful organization — and asked the chair, Raychelle Omamo, who was the first woman chair there, whether they could work with us. I approached Judy Thongori, then acting chair of FIDA — the federation of women lawyers — with the same request. Then I asked Willy Mutunga of the Kenya Human Rights Commission the same thing," she described her strategy of nuanced approach and request.

"In retrospect, I think it was a bit crazy really. I mean, all these organizations were fighting the prisons then. They could not stand us. And there I was walking up to these organizations in my prison uniform, which was never worn away from the office. They thought I was the enemy!"

But her boldness was worth it. Alice created networks that would go on to influence history in Kenya. Raychelle became Cabinet Secretary of Defense. July Thongori is a top family lawyer in Kenya. Willy Mutunga became Chief Justice. Thousands of prisoners experienced better prison conditions.

Whether as a human rights defender, or as oftentimes simultaneously a peacebuilder, Alice connected and united what seemed like disparate threads of a colorful rug.

Letter

Alice thanked the last group of students who had milled about to talk with her.

She gathered her notebook and bag. She felt satisfied, and enlivened.

That was so nice, she thought to herself. *They asked so many questions, they were very, very interested.*

Walking across the prim landscaped gardens of the college landscape in San Diego, she realized that for the first time she was not rushing around ridiculously. She noticed her pace, almost leisurely. Then the sweet aroma of lavender. She could see adolescent pomegranates ballooning on small bushes and a tree cascading in vibrant and delicate flame-orange flowers.

Making her way along the length of a reflecting pool, she stopped to sit on a stone bench that looked out across to a sandy island in the middle of Mission Bay on the horizon, so sparse and unadorned with vegetation that it seemed unfinished in some obvious yet puzzling way. The contrast between it and the cornucopian garden in which she rested reminded her of the stark difference between the north and "down Kenya."

Alice sighed deeply. She recalled the students' questions and, as was her way, she critically reviewed her answers to each one. From the young woman with the springy brown hair and her jumpy way of talking — so that each word seemed to bounce out of her mouth and into the air as if launching from a trampoline — "What made you want to do this work? Like, when was it that … when did you really know that this was something you wanted to do?"

Alice had been stumped at first. It was something she just did, she wasn't sure quite how she got there. She talked about the north and how it had captured her interest from her early days when she was working in the prison system. One day her natural curiosity had led her to a room where she discovered decades of annual reports from all over the country. She became a frequent visitor, sitting for hours in the small musty room, lit only by a single bulb and surrounded by piles of musty archives sitting neglected on dusty, grey, metal shelves. She discovered the state of prisons in the north — the number of deaths, illnesses, lack of uniforms and accommodation conditions — and how they had been neglected by each successive government.

Then she went on to recount her days as a journalist when she had had to convince her hard-nosed, chain-smoking editor that the north was worth writing about. She was sent all over the country to write stories, and yet again and again her stories about deaths, poverty and hunger in the north would be ignored.

"If I write a story about 10 Kenyans who have just died in Samburu, it doesn't even make it to the front pages of the paper — if it makes it to the paper at all," she had said to the editor one day. "Yet, when four Kenyans die in the heart of Nairobi, the police commissioner himself goes to the site. It's front-page news for a long, long time. I'm struggling with that. I really am struggling with that."

Her editor looked up, an eyebrow arched and two fingers tapping on the desk as if they were waiting impatiently for their next cigarette. "Look, Alice, the first rule of journalism is that it's news when a

man bites a dog but it's not news when a dog bites a man. The stories of Kenyans up there dying is the story of a dog bites a man."

"We came back with this story yesterday," Alice replied, "of the mother who had hidden for years her child because he was lame. Everyone was outraged, 'How could she do that? How can she hide a child simply because it is lame?' they cried. You know something? We are also hiding our lame child. We have a lame child."

Looking back, Alice remembered it was the beginning of a new level of consciousness about her country, tinged with woe, like watching dawn break in an overcast sky: Alice realized there were two Kenyas, and that she must do something to make the north matter.

As the months passed in her work at the Nation Media House, Alice told the audience in San Diego, her original intention to work on human rights issues for prisons paled while her passion for the north intensified. "I saw that prisons were so little compared to what I and Kenyans needed to deal with. So my entry into this kind of work started from there, really."

But now sitting alone she realized there was something else. A song floated into her consciousness — *Woy, woy, woy* — and with it arrived an image of herself in those glasses. *My goodness!* she exclaimed with a soft and silent chuckle. *Those days.* And then out of the blue, astonished that she had not remembered until now:

The letter! That was the start!

•

Squawk!

The chicken was tracking in circles while Pat looked on eagerly from behind the coop.

Alice giggled. Crouched behind and peering between his legs, she was enjoying watching her brother, eternally ravenous, stalk a chicken readying to lay an egg. Eight years old and home from school on holidays, she had endless days with her brothers climbing trees, catching tadpoles and running amok.

Alice saw Pat's fingers massaging the spoon in his pocket, where he kept it permanently on hand for eating at any moment. Pat and his spoon shared a notorious reputation among the family. At dinnertime all the children would sit around a big platter of *pilau*, eating by finger-full. All but Pat. Instead, he would draw his spoon from his pocket and scoop the rice into his mouth as fast as he could.

"Pat, I'm going to tell mum. You're not supposed to do that," Alice said with a cheeky smile.

Pat looked over his shoulder. "So you can see me from there, Alice. The glasses must be working."

Alice's smile disappeared. She knew what was coming. Pat had been teasing her mercilessly since she arrived home from the optometrist last week. Her new glasses — green, big and thick — occupied half her face and magnified her almond-shaped eyes to unnatural proportions.

After suffering the initial wave of humiliation served by her brothers, Alice's mother insisted on taking measures to protect the glasses from damage. She heated a knitting needle in the fire, pierced a hole through each plastic arm and through the holes she threaded a string of stray wool from an old grey sweater. Alice's indignity was complete.

"They have bought you glasses so you don't have to wash your face. Nobody will see if you don't wash your face," taunted Pat.

The shame rendering her temporarily mute, Alice merely glowered and looked away.

Pat returned to the chicken who had still not laid its egg. "Come, chicken. I can't wait all day now, lay your egg," urged Pat like a pushy midwife.

The chicken paused in its circular track, jerked its claw up, then continued again with another squawk.

"Enough of this!" Pat exclaimed, finally losing his patience. He rushed in, grabbed the chicken around its belly while craning his neck away from flailing wings, and squeezed hard.

With his right hand hovering below the chicken, he caught an egg that plopped out, and with its shell still soft, popped it in his mouth.

Alice was doubled over laughing. Pat grinned mischievously while chomping and swallowing at the same time. Wiping his sleeve across his mouth he motioned his head toward the house. Off they ran, leaving the chicken still squawking and tufts of feathers floating in the air.

They found Nderitu lounging on his back beneath outstretched branches, his head resting in the cup of his hands. Alice climbed nimbly up the tree, swung her legs on either side of a thick branch and leaned back against the trunk. After throwing himself on the ground next to his brother, Pat looked up at the whisper-thin clouds trailing across the sky. Nderitu began to hum absentmindedly for a few minutes until Alice filled in the words.

"Woy, woy, woy …"

"Woy woy JM Kariuki," the boys joined in.

"You were loved by children and everyone."

"What are the questions we must ask about your death?"

"Woy, woy …"

"Children! Stop singing that song!" I've told you a hundred times!" yelled their mother from the kitchen.

Alice, Pat and Nderitu darted looks at each other. They sat in silence staring at the clouds for a few minutes until someone started humming again. They all joined in, though softer this time, and just the opening line.

"Woy, woy, woy …"

"Woy, woy, woy …"

"Dinner!" their mother called. Unsure if they'd been heard, they rushed obediently to try and placate her just in case.

•

"You're going to boarding school because you have to become a girl. You have to stop being like a boy and climbing trees and all manner of things and catching tadpoles," lectured Alice's mother.

Alice rolled her eyes. They were safe from her mother's view, who was behind Alice braiding cornrows into her hair. Sitting between her mother's knees, with her legs spread-eagled in front of her, Alice's head rested to one side on her mother's right thigh. She'd been like that since they'd finished washing the breakfast dishes, and she was beginning to fidget from boredom.

"Sit still, Alice Wairimu!" her mother reprimanded, gently slapping her face to let her know it was time to turn her head to the other side.

Outside the window a grey mist hung lecherously over the trees. Beside Alice and her mother, swollen droplets assembled at the top of the window sill where fragments of weathered wood with chipped white paint speared into each other. The concrete floor felt cool and damp through Alice's cotton dress. A small shiver ran through her legs, up her spine and across her shoulders. Alice burrowed her fists into her lap to try and cozy herself. From where she was sitting she could see the fire was dulling to ash and needed stoking, but she dare not ask her mother.

"You know you need to be like a girl. Sit up straight, stop slouching. And look at you now with your legs like that as if you were a boy in shorts. Pull them together Alice!"

Inwardly, Alice sighed. She was so tired of hearing the constant critique. Her eyes searched outside for something to divert her attention from her mother's lecture. With nowhere to go, she thought to change the topic.

Alice wondered whether she should ask her mother about the conversation she overheard yesterday when the visitors were sitting in the living room. Her brothers and she had started crawling into the ceiling so they could listen to adult conversations. For Alice, listening to the discussions, always hushed, was like trying to hear underwater. The words bubbled up from mouths and sometimes she could grasp their meaning; other times it was completely unintelligible.

Like yesterday, with the woman in the green dress and the man who wore his pants too short so you could see a band of his leg above his brown socks when he sat down.

"Oh, the country is tense, people aren't free to talk, people have been detained," the woman said loudly enough for Alice and her brothers to hear.

Then the man spoke with the corners of his mouth turned down so far they almost touched his chin. "What's happening to this country? I mean, JM was right when he said 'Kenya has become a nation of 10 millionaires and 10 million beggars.' The powerful are in charge, and look at the rest."

The woman shook her head from side to side and lowered her voice to a loud whisper. "A lot of people are being thrown into prison. I mean, even famous writers, for goodness' sake. What have they done? It doesn't matter which community they're from; even people from the president's community are being thrown in — this country is crazy right now."

"You know," her father started, "the government must know who killed JM. The man just didn't kill himself!"

"Hmm," her mother agreed.

Alice's ears pricked up then. She sat up so quickly she almost fell off the beam and down into the living room. "But, she's not telling him to be quiet," she thought. Late at night when her father returned home intoxicated and insisted Alice and her brothers get up and eat with him, he would slur about the government. Her mother had always hushed him. "Stop saying those things. You're going to be put in prison," she would chide sternly. But now she was agreeing. Alice couldn't work it out.

"The man used to be a minister in the government, for goodness' sake!" Alice's father continued. "They had him assassinated — for what? Can there be no room for criticism in our Kenya today?

"And look how they left him. In a thicket in Ngong Hills, found by a wandering Maasai herdsmen. I mean, really, this is not right." He leaned back in his chair, looking exhausted.

Since then, Alice's curiousness about JM had filled her mind like the itch of jiggers in her feet. Who was JM? Why can we not speak of him? She wanted to know but she knew she wasn't supposed to ask.

While still braiding her hair, Alice's mother's voice drifted in again. "And you need to concentrate in class, Alice. 52 out of 53 last term. I know you can do better. Hopefully the glasses will help. You'll be able to see the blackboard."

"Mum," Alice started tentatively.

"Hhmmm."

"Uncle was here yesterday"

"Yes?"

"He said JM was killed. But we don't talk about it because we might be killed. Is that why you don't want us to sing that song?"

"Hush, Alice. What do you think you're doing? That's none of your business. Don't listen to your Uncle." Alice's mother stopped for a moment gathering hair and thoughts at the same time. "But

you must not sing that song." With that her mother gave a short sharp twist of her hair, and Alice knew she had crossed the line.

•

Alice wanted her school term to go well. She had failed terribly for the first half of the year and she yearned to make her parents proud. At the same time, she desperately wished for an escape from what she saw as an impending catastrophe. Her shyness was unbearable at the best of times, and now her glasses branded her so remarkably that hiding from success, failure or anything at all would be impossible.

It took only a matter of days for the truth of Alice's premonition to manifest. On the first day she confirmed what she suspected: She was the only student wearing glasses. From that point on she heard the teasing of her classmates — *macho nne. macho nne,* "four eyes, four eyes" — following her like a shadow. She saw the glasses as a curse. She had no friends. She was no good at sports. Even her math teacher picked on her, "So macho nne, you're so smart, wearing glasses like that, tell us …" When she failed to answer correctly, he smirked as he announced to the class, "Oh, guess who has failed, the macho nne with all her knowledge, with her glasses."

Alice was ready to return to the world of indistinct shapes and fuzzy lines. The only thing that saved her was her hunger for learning. For the first time in her school life, she was able to decipher the previously unrecognizable letters on the blackboard. And in the subjects she liked — English, history and religious education — this was a blessing.

But above all, what saved her most was Miss Wakesho. Miss Wakesho was to Alice and her classmates the most beautiful teacher at Madaraka Primary School. She had afro hair and wore blue high-heeled shoes. But what Alice liked most about Miss Wakesho was her affirmations.

"Kalunde, that was an excellent description."

"Atieno, thank you so much for sharing that story of your family's holiday with us, it was so rich."

Alice noticed that Miss Wakesho even said nice things about Wanjiku and Sarah, who were troublemakers in almost every other class. Miss Wakesho had a way of making every single student feel good about themselves.

Her smooth strong voice undulated and lulled them into willing subservience, even when she was correcting them. "Sit up straight," she would repeat throughout the class. "Don't ever use the word 'stupid' in a sentence. Even if you think somebody is stupid, don't say it. I don't even want to hear you say, 'I'm feeling so stupid.' Or 'I'm feeling so foolish.' Those words do not get used in this class. You must never describe yourselves negatively."

And so the Class Four students of Madaraka Primary School reveled in the positive attention so much so that it became a communal effort to try and impress her. She was such an unconventional presence among the nuns and other teachers, who preferred a sterner and certainly less fashionable approach, that Alice often wondered from where on earth they had found her.

One afternoon, after geography during which Alice had played with the exotic names of Canadian provinces — Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta — Class Four found Miss Wakesho leaning lightly against the front of her desk in a blue wraparound skirt which matched her favorite blue heels. She smiled widely, but Alice saw a tightness in her brow, the same way her mother looked when her aunt came back from her work in Muranga and brandished around opinions about Kenya's politics.

"Good afternoon, Class Four."

"Good afternoon, Miss Wakesho," the students sung back with toothy grins.

"Today we'll be discussing South Africa. Who knows about South Africa?"

A few timid hands snuck above a gaggle of heads.

"Yes, Atieno."

"It's where a man called Nelson Mandela has been put in prison because he's black."

Jenny Ngotho, with her tight neat plaits, was lurching forward now with an upright arm and shimmying fingers.

"Yes, Jenny."

"The blacks and whites are separate there. They're not allowed to live in the same places together or to sit on the same bus or go to school or beaches or parks together. They don't even use the same toilets."

"That's right," their teacher affirmed. "In South Africa black and white people are not treated equally. Those in power, the white people, have taken away homes and jobs from black people. If you are a black person in South Africa, you are required to carry an identification book with your name, address and fingerprints. If a policeman stops you and you do not have it, you will be put into prison. They have introduced the white South African's language, Afrikaans, into the schools. Yet there are children your age who have tried to oppose this. They have been shot and some have been killed."

Alice watched Miss Wakesho stop talking and look down at her blue shoes. On either side of her hips, her fingers drummed heavily on the scratched wooden desk. Then Miss Wakesho let out a deep breath and looked up again.

"There are many others who are in prison for offenses they did not commit. The government is taking people off the streets for no reason. In prison they are eating nothing but pap — boiled water and flour — the conditions are very harsh and the prisoners are mistreated."

Alice saw her brow tighten again for a moment. Then Miss Wakesho's voice shifted to a higher note and her eyebrows lifted slightly.

"So today we have a special project. We will be writing letters to those prisoners in South Africa. If you know somebody who had been jailed for an offense he didn't commit, that he had been jailed just because he is a human being, what would you tell that person?"

Alice opened her thin exercise book to a blank page and checked her pen. It was still half full with blue ink. A soft little "phew" blew through her lips as she realized she wouldn't have to fill it today. The task always risked a beating for spilling the ink, which she was known to do. Now she would just have to make sure she didn't stain her fingers while she wrote. Alice wrote slowly and carefully.

Dear Sir,

She had never met a prisoner before or been to a prison. She hesitated, not knowing what to write.

I can't believe schoolchildren have been shot dead because they didn't want to learn another language. What if that was me or my brothers?

Alice wondered astonished that such a thing was possible. And she thought of how horrible it would be to eat plain pap every day with no vegetables or anything.

For many minutes she searched through her mind for what she could write. Then three short words found their way from her heart to the page.

I'm so sorry.

The school bell rang as she was punctuating her brief sentence.

"Thank you, Class Four," Miss Wakesho announced. "Keep working on your letters, you'll be handing them in two weeks from today."

Each school day for the next 13 days, Alice waited eagerly for the final bell of the day. As soon as she heard it, she would gather her exercise book and pen and rush out, squinting into the glare of the open sky and schoolyard before bolting across to the giant avocado tree. Once there she would settle under clusters of shiny hard green fruit and diligently compose her letter. With each new afternoon came enthusiastic reassurances,

I know your family will wait for you and one day you will come out.

and passionate sentiments,

Don't give in.

etched so deeply into the page that ink spots bled through to the other side. Horizontal blue scratches would erase the words Alice felt untrue or inadequate.

The afternoon before it was due, she finished as the bell pealed for dinner. She signed off,

Yours sincerely,

Alice Wairimu, Standard Four, Madaraka Primary School

•

"Alice Wairimu, come to the front."

Alice heard her name and cringed. *What have I done now?* she groaned to herself. She scrunched up her face willing for the moment to pass.

"Alice Wairimu, where are you? Do you expect the entire assembly to stand here waiting?"

Realizing the futility of resisting, Alice inched her body out from the line and reluctantly began her procession to the front.

"You cannot drag your feet like that. You must walk. Walking is not just a matter of putting one foot in front of the other, you have to walk properly."

Alice thought of the sting of the stick against her hand. She dropped the corner of her blue tunic which she had been holding in her right ink-stained hand and began massaging her left palm as if to soothe it.

Is it because of the ink on my hands from writing again? Alice wondered as she racked her mind for a plausible reason. *Or did they see me climbing the avocado tree again last week? Well, they can go ahead and beat me. I've had it before, they won't break my spirit,* she thought defiantly as she reached the front of the assembly.

"Stand here," instructed the headmistress, pointing to a spot beside her shiny black shoes, lightly powdered in red dirt. Sister Muli, in her crisply starched white habit, was severe at the best of times, and Alice was quite certain this was not one of those times. Standing in front of the school with her big green glasses, Alice's defiance whimpered and her shyness took over. She sunk her head into her red sailor tie sewn onto her blue tunic and hid her hands behind her back.

Hail holy queen, mother of mercy, hail our life, our sweetness and our hope, to thee do we cry poor banished children of Eve, Alice began reciting to herself.

"Students," Sister Muli began abruptly, her Kamba-language tongue warped her English in a way that grated on Alice's ears. "Class Four has been writing letters to political prisoners in South Africa. Alice has written a very good letter."

To thee do we send up our sighs mourning and weeping in this veil of tears, turn them most gracious advocate, your eyes of mercy toward us and after this our exile, Alice continued fervently.

Sister Muli surveyed the students and began to read:

"Dear Sir,"

What? Did I hear that right? My letter?"

She could hear Sister Muli's voice in the background enunciating each word crisply to the entire school. The thought of punishment had dissolved. Now the shyness boiled inside her as she realized the entire school of students and teachers were listening to her innermost thoughts.

She saw the math teacher smirking at her from under the tree and she shrunk further into her skin, wishing she could take off her glasses and hide them behind her back.

Then she heard Sister Muli's voice pitching.

"Don't give in, whatever they do to you in there. You must not give in. You cannot be jailed for just being human. You must have done something wrong to be jailed. If you haven't done anything wrong, don't let your spirits be broken because if you leave the prison and you come out, you'll be very strong for us. You'll be a good example for us as children to follow you. The children who have been killed, they have been killed but you are alive. There is a reason why you are living and the children have been killed, so that you can be able to teach as many people as possible what took you into the prison so we can learn from you."

Alice dared not look at the assembly, at the queues of her students. Certain they would be mocking her, she looked down instead at Sister Muli's shoes and studied the dust again.

"Thank you, Alice. You may return to the class line."

It was over. Alice rushed back to her place as fast as she could without running, and stood with her eyes fixed to the dirt in front of her for the remainder of the assembly.

When Sister Muli dismissed the school and students broke off into clumps walking to their classrooms, Alice followed alone, head down. Once she made it past the office, she noticed a shadow walking beside hers. Alice took a sideways glance and saw Jenny Ngotho.

"I liked your letter," Jenny said smiling.

Unaccustomed to spontaneous cordialities from her peers, Alice looked at her uncertainly.

"Helen and I are forming a singing group. Would you like to join?"

"Yes, maybe," said Alice, in disbelief, still unsure of whether it was a joke.

"Tomorrow afternoon, after school, behind the library. See you then," Jenny said before skipping off to class.

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Alice felt her stomach churn with nervousness on the day her mother came to collect her. From across the yard she saw her talking to Sister Muli. *What will she think of all this? She's always telling dad not to talk about what's going on, and now I've had my letter about prisoners read to the whole school.* As Alice approached nearer, she overheard Sister Muli.

"Your daughter, she doesn't feel the pain of spanking … but she's a very intelligent girl. She came first in her class this term. In fact she wrote a beautiful letter, a beautiful composition. It was read to the school. I think your daughter is going to be somebody. She's really going to be somebody."

Alice couldn't believe what she was hearing. *Sister Muli praising me? It's not possible?* Just then Sister Muli saw Alice and changed her tone to its usual severity.

"Your daughter has demonstrated that she has the capacity to lead, so we've made her the class prefect but she's very defiant. You need to work on her defiance. She needs to be more accepting of mistakes when she makes them."

Alice watched her mother nodding and caught her eyes flash a warm glint at her. After saying goodbye, her mother motioned with her eyes and a tilt of her head toward the gate, signaling they should make their leave.

They walked for a minute or so in silence, Alice watching her mother's stiff flared pants swish as she walked. Then she felt her mother's hand take hers. Alice looked up and saw her mother smiling down at her. Their hands began to swing together. Their feet tapped along a wide red dirt road that ran down a hill and through an enormous coffee plantation that embellished the land all around. The ruby red ripe coffee beans dotted the path for miles.

"You see, Alice, you're leading your class. You're first in your class because you're wearing glasses. You shouldn't hate them. I know your brothers tease you, but they're good and they help you to see," Alice's mother said with her pride shining openly.

A few minutes passed with Alice savoring the warm sunshine and the feeling of her mother's happy attention.

She looked up at her mother's long straight hair swaying as she walked, and then at her soft smooth face.

"What about JM Kariuiki? My letter, to the prisoner in South Africa — will the government know it's about JM too?"

The words tumbled out of Alice before she realized she was not supposed to be talking about such things. Her mother would be angry now and the lovely moment with her shattered. Her question surprised her, too. Until that moment she had not fully realized the meaning of her letter.

"Why are you afraid?" Alice's mother looked bemused, as though the thought had not occurred to her at all. And then trying to reassure her daughter, she said, "It's OK, Alice. It's OK. It's a good letter, don't worry."

Discovering her mother was willing to talk, Alice pressed forward cautiously.

"Why are adults … why are they afraid about this JM story?"

"Oh, the country is now OK, don't worry. We will be OK, we will be fine," Alice's mother said looking ahead.

Alice appraised her mother's answer with skepticism. *Has that much changed since I was last home?* she wondered.

"Tell me about political assassinations," Alice quizzed, her confidence growing with her mother's placidity.

Alice's mother stopped in her tracks, released Alice's hand, and turned to look at her square in the eye. "Goodness me, Alice!" as though she was seeing her daughter for the very first time. She sized her up, scanning her face intently. "Hmmmm," she murmured just before she resumed walking. Alice's mother glanced over each shoulder and then started.

"OK. Political assassinations are when a government …" she paused. "Well, hmmm …" she said again, leaving her sentence lingering indecisively and Alice feeling impatient.

"Who is the government? When you and dad say people have been killed by the government, who is it?"

"OK," Alice's mother tried to order her thoughts. "We have a president, we have a vice-president, we have members of Parliament and we have all those kinds of people."

"Is it the members of Parliament who killed JM or is it … who killed JM?"

"Well, there are police too. And you see, there are some police who don't wear uniforms …"

The more her mother spoke, the more confused Alice felt. It was like listening to the din of crazed cicadas on a hot afternoon. "Why would they not wear uniforms?" she asked.

"Look, it's difficult Alice," her mother said with a tightened brow as they arrived at the matatu stop. Several matatus were lined up blaring horns and music while people climbed aboard, stacking on top of each other like carefully arranged herrings in a tin.

As they waited in the queue to board, Alice's mother leaned down, her hair falling over her shoulders, and whispered in Alice's ear, "You know those things we've talked about today, about the government, don't discuss it with anyone." Alice looked up into her mother's eyes and saw a gentle firmness. "You don't know who else can pick this up and do something bad to your father, myself or somebody. So don't tell anyone — not at school or anywhere. Do you understand, Alice? Don't tell anyone what we were talking about today."

"I promise, I won't tell anyone," Alice whispered back as she reached for her mother's hand again.

Accord

Buzz. Buzz. Buzzzzz.

The vibration of her phone startled Alice into the present. She looked at her cellphone joggling on the stone bench and recognized the number.

"Dad, hi."

"Alice, how are you? What's happening over there?"

"Good. Everything is good, Dad. How about you?"

"Fine, fine. How is Mark?"

"He came first in his composition class."

"That's great. Just like you, Alice. Remember how smart you were? I used to sit you on my lap and you'd read the newspapers to all my friends? And you were only 4!"

They chuckled together, the distance shrinking between Kenya and the U.S.

"I'm very proud of you, Alice. You've become what I hoped you would be."

"Oh, but I didn't go to Harvard," she joked, reminding him of his long-ago ambition for his eldest daughter.

"Your whole life is a Harvard, you know. You've done so much already, so many great things. You were the first girl from the Yaanga District to get a university degree. You've always had it, Alice." She could hear his broad smile reaching across his face. "Now you just need to slow down and focus on one thing. It's time to settle down and stop stretching yourself."

"OK, Dad. I've been thinking about it. I'll think about it some more."

They said their goodbyes, and Alice, basking in her father's praise, began walking back to her room. What her father said meant so much to her. She looked at her life, at her accomplishments that he had seen with warmth and approval.

She came to her recent victory: brokering peace between the Kikuyu and the Kalenjin in the Rift Valley. *My goodness, sometimes I still can't believe we pulled that off. I mean, Professor Wangari Maathai tried to broker peace, former President Moi tried himself. But we, the NCIC, did it. It's so nice to think about it like that. … I just hope it lasts.*

She finished her thought abruptly, as memories of the Rift Valley from the 2007-8 post-election period jolted into her mind. The church in Kiambaa, Mr. Ndiege's house in Naivasha — both burnt. She felt her skin prickle. The church had been set ablaze while still full of Kikuyu men, women and children. And in Naivasha, 19 Luo family members perished in smoke and flames.

Alice saw the bodies again in her mind. They had stuck together as if they had been doused with deadly molasses. Jutting limbs charred and bright burnt skin, cracking and taut from the flames. *Why were some clothed and some naked? At what point did they undress themselves? To protect their faces from the heat and smoke?* she had asked herself.

And she had seen the mattresses. *No matter what, they carry those with them*, she whispered, shaking her head, mystified. *It was their only possession, I suppose.*

The Rift Valley was the region hit worst by the election violence, and the media had played its part, inciting the rampage. Alice had despised them for it. But it was ultimately through them that she would find a way to get the Kikuyu and the Kalenjin to consider peace.

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It was the day before the suspects at the International Criminal Court (ICC) were to be announced in Kenya — two years after the post-election violence. Alice, along with two colleagues, were preparing local media for how to deal with the ICC naming.

In the depth of their discussion, someone had ventured, "Will there ever be peace in the Rift Valley?" An influential radio presenter responded, "If the Kikuyu and Kalenjin can agree, there will be peace."

Alice was shocked to hear this man, who had shown little interest in peace at all, voice its possibility. She left the workshop that day holding, delicately, a tiny seed of hope.

The seed stayed inside her, nascent, alive, until she felt time ripening its belly: The ICC suspects had been named and the country was wondering what to do with itself.

Alice called the radio presenter: "Do you still think the Kikuyu and Kalenjin can sit together?" she asked. Waiting for his words, she realized in those long seconds how much the answer meant.

"Yeah, they can still speak," he said nonchalantly.

Alice's chest dropped with silent exhalation.

"Even after the ICC suspects have been named?" she questioned further.

"It's even better now," he replied.

She approached her superior first. "Right now, they are weak. They're vulnerable. Let's hit them now. Let's get them now to sit together. Because once we have solved the problems in down Kenya, the violence — they're the ones that'll help us prevent the violence. Let's sit together."

Then she spoke to a fellow commissioner and trusted mentor. "Margaret,* you are influential among both senior Kikuyu and Kalenjin commissioners. You know former President Moi very well. You know the current president very well. You have to help me."

"I've been wondering where this was going, Alice," said Margaret affectionately.

Alice continued, "I think we need to get the Kalenjin and Kikuyus to sit together."

"At what level?" Margaret asked, seemingly unperturbed by the extravagance of the proposition laid before her.

"At the highest level."

Margaret pondered Alice's request for a minute. In her characteristic cool thoughtfulness, she replied, "Maybe you need to re-think that."

She looked at Alice with a gentle ridge forming across her high, smooth forehead. "At the highest level they're still sitting together," continued Margaret. "If the most senior Kalenjin and the most senior Kikuyu sit together, they will tell you things that they tell Kofi Annan: *Oh yes, we will sit together, we will work together*. But they won't. You probably need to move to another level."

Afterward, Alice went to S.K., whom she worked with on Uwiano. "I've come to see you because we need to get the Kalenjin and Kikuyu to sit together," Alice told him forthrightly.

She noted the quick blink of his eyes as her words registered, and then without missing a beat she asked, "How can we do that?"

"I'll think about it." S.K. replied, his brevity leaving Alice unconcerned. She knew he would deliver.

Finally she approached Oliver*, another of her fellow commissioners.

"You mean, like, forgive each other? Can they do that?" he had pondered aloud.

"No, no, not forgiveness, Oliver. I mean talk to each other. Forgiveness maybe can come later," Alice replied. "Look, if we approach it from a forgiveness perspective, they'll be so fake, like they fake in church every Sunday. They'll sit side by side and pray together. They leave everything at the door of the church and continue hating."

A few days later S.K. called. "Let's talk," he said to Alice over the phone. Alice made her way across Nairobi to hear his plan. "I've spoken to the provincial commissioner in Nakuru. He identified two very strong people in Nakuru. One is called Dr. Wanguru. The other one is called Yatich. Wanguru is Kikuyu and Yatich is Kalenjin. These two will coordinate a group of elders, both Kikuyu and Kalenjin."

Alice beamed. "S.K., Thank you, you've really delivered. These elders, they're the most respected people. They decide who will be members of Parliament. They're responsible for the most important decisions."

As Alice left the office that day she felt a bud of anticipation unfurling. *If we can pull this off, this is going to be something incredible.*

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Sunday, April 10, 2011 — Eel Hotel, Elburgon

A pale blue sky rested, cloudless and still. In a beige conference room of the chalet-style Eel hotel, all nine districts of Nakuru were represented by the Kikuyu elders. Rows of serious faces in crisp shirts and dark blazers faced S.K., the chairperson and Alice as they presented their agenda.

"We will meet the Kikuyu and Kalenjin separately and then bring you all together to discuss peace. NCIC is here as a response to the post-election violence, and the National Steering Committee's formation is a response to the 'traditional conflicts' of northern Kenya," the chair addressed the group, his face and tone reciprocating the elder's solemnity.

"Alice Nderitu is here as one of the commissioners in charge of the Nakuru peace process and as chair of the session," he said as his open hand drifted unnecessarily toward Alice; she was the only woman in the room.

Alice's spine tightened as she felt, more than saw, a ripple travel through the elders. She knew that Kikuyu elders did not allow women in their midst when discussing peace or war. *Ndukanaiye na mutumia na kihii* — "If you want to keep a secret do not share it with a woman or uncircumcised boy" — was a Kikuyu proverb she had heard growing up. It was men's business. She felt her heart pacing. Countering her body's impulse, Alice moved slowly as she stood, reached behind her and pulled her chair away and out from her.

She looked out to the elders and began in a smooth, supple, strong voice, flowing like the river after rainfall. "We are here because you own the war," she said. "And because you own the war," she paused now, making sure she had their attention, "therefore, you own the peace." It was her signature introduction, words that awakened because they were as dramatic as they were true.

Alice scanned the room looking for reactions. She saw nodding heads and knew that her message had reached at least some of the group. A warm feeling of satisfaction flickered lightly inside but she kept it hidden from her face. As she turned sideways to reach for her chair and sit, she heard a low gravelly voice. "This peace agreement you speak of, is it useful?"

Alice looked around and saw a portly man in a navy blazer and red checkered shirt leaning forward in the third row. A bright light above him shone down, illuminating the bald patch on the top of his head and the stubble of his white hair arching back from his forehead.

"The Kikuyu have always been the ones on the receiving end of the violence," he continued in a voice that seemed to even out as it climbed in intensity. "We fought on land we bought legally. We are sending you to the Kalenjin. Tell them to hold on to what they have taken from us because they will never kill another Kikuyu again. Tell them we shall not move to tents as IDPs anymore, we shall fight to the death here. Never again shall we be beaten or killed." Sounds of agreement rumbled within the beige walls.

As Alice scrawled notes of what had been said — it helped her remain cool in the heated discussion and she wanted the elders to know they were being heard — another in the group voiced his opinion.

"You've made us look bad. We don't want to hear what you have to say!"

Alice stopped writing and lifted her eyes from the page. The man was addressing her.

"You did those ethnic audits and you said the Kikuyu have taken most of the jobs in the public service. During the post-election violence we were the victims. We were the ones targeted. We were the ones killed. Everywhere in the country we were hounded, our businesses were burnt down. So how can you now start issuing statements, reckless statements, making people hate us even more, saying that we've taken all the jobs? You have no right to talk to us. You're a woman, we don't want to hear from you."

She sat up, alert and watchful, a leopard in the tall grass. Alice wanted to let them know she was not intimidated. It was not in her interest for them to see her react; they would see her as a woman for certain then. She also knew she should not provoke them.

Then a voice from the back of the room broke the silent seconds of arrest. "Oh, shhh," came an impatient voice. "Just listen to her."

"Yes," another prompted. "Let her talk."

A few other echoing voices joined in. Emboldened by the support, she stood again to speak. "We have to go through this peace process. You know why? Because this country is a wound. We're a wound that was stitched without cleaning. As a commission, it's our work to undo that wound and clean it and stitch it back again. We are doing what should've been done in 1963. It's bad enough that it is happening now, but you need to know that this wound has to be cleaned, and if it has to be cleaned we have to clean it. It's our duty as commissioners to clean it and to stitch it. You will have to feel pain as we're doing that. It's painful, so you have to feel it."

Alice sat down, her expression unflinching, her eyes traveling over the elders' faces. The room, Alice noticed, felt dense and taut, like the onset of a thunderstorm.

"What are we doing at the ICC when we were defending ourselves?" someone yelled in fury.

S.K., the chairperson and Alice exchanged glances. The chairperson stood and, with the vigor of a priest on Sunday morning, he raised his voice. "I'm going to speak to you as somebody from a minority community. You need to be told as Kikuyus that you are the firstborn of this country. Imagine a family, but you, the Kikuyu, are the firstborn. When you're the firstborn in your own home, you know you have to look out for your younger siblings," he preached. "When you get food you have to share it with your younger siblings. What I'm telling you, Kikuyu in this room, you are the firstborn who ate the last born's food."

The chairperson paused, giving the elders a moment to digest his words. With the unwelcome truths, the elders stayed quiet. Alice could sense the depth of their shame.

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In the afternoon the Kalenjin elders, wearing their Sunday best, had gathered at the Rift Valley Sports Club. Alice stood on the shaded terrace of the 1920s English Tudor building, stealing some time alone. Looking out at the squat box hedges and the flat, shaved lawns, thoughts of what the afternoon would bring preoccupied her.

"Tell us what you can't stand about the Kalenjin," they had told the Kikuyu that morning. Their approach was to provoke the elders into discussion. The chairperson had struck them with a disarming offensive: "Why are the Kikuyu the most targeted for attack by virtually all the Kenyan communities? Why are you hated? Why, when Moi was president, did he ensure that the coffee and tea growing industry — largely run by the Kikuyu — was brought to its knees? And now that Kibaki is president, why are the majority of the people in the IDP camps Kikuyu?"

He continued challenging them, "How can you as the Kikuyu community, living in Nakuru, rise from the ashes like the Japanese did after the Second World War, from the devastation of your businesses, without obsessing on revenge?"

For hours Alice and her colleagues listened to the elders vent their anger about the Kalenjin. They intended the same treatment for the Kalenjin.

In 2008 every Kikuyu who was here was killed, Alice thought, remembering the torment of a few years earlier. *If I had shown up here in 2008 these guys would've killed me. They wouldn't have cared. And now I'm about to speak to them.* A chill ran through her body.

This is not the time for such thoughts, she told herself as she walked away, abandoning them on the terrace. Heaving the solid glass door open, she walked inside to the conference room and left it to swing slowly closed behind her.

"*Mtoto akinawa mkono anakula na wazee* — if a child washes his hands he can eat with the elders," the chairperson told the group of elders, acknowledging his delegation's position as younger Kenyans in the group. "We have washed our hands by having been appointed to work on building both peace and community cohesion." The chairperson encouraged the Kalenjin elders to share their feelings and thoughts about the Kikuyu.

The elders appeared pleased with the humility. But their satisfaction was cut short when the chairperson fired an onslaught of questions at them. "Why do the Kalenjin fight everyone? Why is it that there is no single community that neighbors the Kalenjin — the Kikuyu, Maasai, Luo, Abaluhyia, Gusii — that the Kalenjin have not attacked? Why are the Kalenjin so war-like? What exactly is your problem? Do you want to create a Kalenjin state?"

He had ignited the room. To Alice it felt as if the elders flinched in unison. The voices came thick and fast. Some voiced peace, many more spoke of their deep mistrust of the Kikuyu, fears of marginalization, lack of political representation and historical grievances over land distribution.

Then an elder shouted from the back of the room. "In Rongai, the difference of the vote is usually in the range of 2,000. Now 9,000 Kikuyu have been brought to Rongai in the IDP resettlement program. Rongai has gone to Kikuyu." Heads and torsos swiveled to see the owner of the roaring voice. "If you remember in Transmara during the last election, the Maasai refused to accept that a Kalenjin had won in their homeland. The Maasai burnt all the ballot boxes. That will be the same scenario here. We shall burn the ballot boxes if a Kikuyu wins."

Alice wasn't sure whether he was yelling because he was angry or because he wanted to be heard from his position behind everyone. She stretched her neck hoping to get a better view. "In the new county arrangement, Nakuru has six constituencies: Nakuru town, Molo, Kuresoi, Rongai, Naivasha,

Kuresoi," he continued loudly. "In all these constituencies, we have been left with only two with a clear Kalenjin majority: Rongai and Kuresoi. Do you understand what it means for the Kikuyu IDPs to be brought here to Rongai? It means that Nakuru County will become another Central Province. The Kikuyu are already planning on how to take over the seats."

Then the former town mayor of Nakuru stood up, turned stiffly from left to right, looking at his peers and cleared his throat with a rough cough.

"We know the Kikuyu are the majority and that they have the capacity to take all the seats in this county. But we want you to tell the Kikuyu that they can take all the seats from senator to the messenger positions, but we shall ensure there will be no peace in Nakuru. Let them rule but we shall fight them to the end."

After their morning discussion with the Kikuyu, Alice guessed the ICC was on everyone's minds. *I should bring it out*, she decided. *This time I will not feel self-conscious because I am a woman among all these men. In fact, I will speak to them from a woman's perspective*. When a lull graced the room, like a zephyr from Lake Naivasha, Alice began.

"Look at where you are," she started softly. "Your sons are at the ICC, you and the Kikuyu. You are very well represented in the ICC. Our sons are up there. And I'm speaking to you as a mother. I don't want any more sons to go up there."

The elders were all listening. From their stony expressions she was at a loss to interpret their reaction. Despite her best intentions, nerves flew around in her belly — yet she went on, drawing from one of her favorite folk tales.

"Do you know the story of the butterfly?" Alice asked the elders, knowing she would not receive an answer. "There was this old man. He was very wise. Everyone knew he was very wise. There was this young boy who knew that everyone thought that this man was very wise, and the young boy wanted to test how wise the old man was. He got hold of a butterfly in his hand and he told the man, 'You know you are very wise. I want you to tell me whether the butterfly in my hand is alive or dead.' The plan of the young boy was that if the old man says it's alive he crushes it. If the old man says it's dead, he lets it go. So the old man told him, 'young man, whether the butterfly is dead or alive depends on you. It's all in your hands."

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April 16, 2011 — Nakuru County Elders Consultative Forum, Waterbuck Hotel, Nakuru

"We must make both groups feel the other is 100 percent committed to the process, so that anyone wishing to abandon the process will feel guilty." S.K. had suggested.

Six days later, Alice, the chairperson, S.K. and two additional colleagues — Oliver from NCIC and Wekesa from NSC — had arrived at the Waterbuck Hotel in Nakuru.

"Agreed," said the chairperson. "But I think we need to share with them what they have said about each other."

It was a risky strategy. Both the Kalenjin and Kikuyu had spoken to them in confidence. They would be divulging secrets to the enemy.

"We must do it," Alice said after giving it some careful thought. "It might help build trust. The danger is they could walk out in anger but there is also potential for building bridges."

Entering the room they found the Kalenjin and Kikuyu huddled separately in their ethnic groups whispering conspiratorially, like sporting teams on the day of the final game. The stakes were higher though — and their past more brutal.

After all had found their seats, each ethnic group sitting opposite each other, the elders on both sides postured both caution and confrontation with glaring eyes and palpable anger. They looked ready to pounce.

"We have met with both of you, and we can tell you that the Kikuyu and the Kalenjin are ready for peace," announced the chair.

Shock and disbelief catapulted around the room. Murmurings, bemused eyes, small huddles and creased brows spread like contagion.

Alice knew that neither had expected capitulation. The Kalenjin had assumed the Kikuyu would not come to the table because they had a numerical advantage to ensure a victory for Kikuyu leadership. While the Kikuyu, who were still nursing anguish from the post-election violence which led to thousands of their own fleeing to IDP camps, had believed the Kalenjin would refuse peace because they had the means to wage war.

After the furor settled, Alice and her colleagues set about chiseling the first block of consensus among the elders. They agreed that Nakuru was the heartbeat of the conflict in the Rift Valley — and that if peace grew there, then the whole country would begin to heal. "*Pahali kuna wazee hapaharibiki* — where elders are gathered, nothing can go wrong," they reminded the men.

Then it was time. Alice, like all her colleagues, was unsure of what to expect of the elders when they heard the other group's true feelings. They were stepping on to a precipice.

"You have to be elders because this is the moment of truth," said the chairperson authoritatively.

Unprompted, the elders began organizing themselves into small groups, whispering about who would represent their group and speak first.

"I don't think that either of you will speak," the chairperson stated. Commissioner Alice will now read what you have told us."

He nodded to Alice. *I have to read about how much they hate each other?* she thought. She looked down at her hands, trembling under the table.

She began reciting the prayer of her childhood which she reverted to in times of challenge: *Hail holy queen, mother of mercy, hail our life, our sweetness and our hope, to thee do we cry poor banished children of Eve …* The words whisked through her mind with fervor. *To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in*

this veil of tears. Turn them, most gracious advocate, your eyes of mercy toward us and after this our exile … goodness, what comes next? I've missed the last bit.

Her hands still trembling, she tried another tactic. *Oh God, please help me, please help me. I am a mother. I have given life to a human being. I'm a powerful woman. Help me.*

She stood, the document in her hand with all of the Kikuyu and Kalenjin anger and hurt recorded on it, and pressed her toes into her shoes, as if to anchor her to the earth.

Let me really give it to them, she thought, feeling finally a spirit of courage.

"This country is a wound that was stitched together during independence and it's full of pus. You know more than me — many of you were born then. I wasn't. The National Cohesion and Integration Commission has been set up to clean this wound and wipe out all the pus and re-stitch it again. We are not yet even cleaning the wound. This meeting is about undoing the stitches that were stitched in 1963. It's going to be painful. Get ready for it."

Then she began to read, deliberately and methodically. Looking at the Kalenjin, Alice repeated a statement full of vitriol from the Kikuyu. "Land grabbers, all of them." Then alternating, she turned to the Kalenjin and served up bitterness from the Kikuyu. "They are nothing but thieves." She went on and on, turning pages like a dispassionate newsreader, with nothing but her voice vibrating through the four walls. It seemed as if every soul in the room was holding their breath.

Alice couldn't quite believe what was happening. When she had thought about possible reactions, she had envisaged noise — disapproving clicks of the tongue, fists hitting tables, yelling. She had prepared herself for fury and anger. But she had not imagined intense quiet.

When she finished reading, Alice sat down. Stoking cinders, the chairperson asked the elders to react. The room stayed thick with silence. For nearly five minutes, nobody moved, nobody spoke. The feeling of apprehension among Alice and her colleagues was palpable. They looked at each other sideways, wondering together in the emptiness if they had gone too far.

Then a voice: "Who would have thought that a day would come that the Kalenjin and Kikuyu would sit together?" It was a very old Kikuyu man, hollow-cheeked and toothless. "Who would have thought that it would happen in my lifetime? Who would have thought …" he drifted off, as if lost in a strange new world.

Another Kikuyu elder spoke: "This is the real test of eldership, and I want us to rise up and be counted as elders. You Kikuyu and Kalenjin, all eyes in Kenya are watching you. Kenya expects you to go to war again. Yet you have so much in common. An earthquake has recently devastated Japan. If the earthquake had hit Nakuru, it would not have chosen Kikuyu or Kalenjin. The Kalenjin and Kikuyu own all the big hotels in Nakuru. We need peace to safeguard what we have."

A Kalenjin joined the discussion. "We agree with Alice. What she has read is what we agreed on as Kalenjin elders. We have come here to clean this wound. We cannot sit and watch this country burn again. If our youth know that we have sat and agreed, they will end the violence. I have lived with the Kikuyu and my brothers have Kikuyu wives. What exactly is the problem between us that cannot be solved?"

The comments flowed and a desire for peace sounded out from both camps. For the remaining hours the elders discussed the issues affecting their communities and the Rift Valley. At one point Alice leaned over to the chairperson and spoke in a hushed tone, "Now I understand why they are called elders."

A communal weariness and a sense of great accomplishment closed the meeting. The Kikuyu and the Kalenjin were walking together toward peace.

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Lake Naivasha: bright blue sky with the thinnest of clouds floating aimlessly across it. Flutters of tiny excited birds calling sweetly to each other. Exuberant green foliage embellished with vivid flowers. A parade of giraffes ambling like graceful patricians. Waterbucks everywhere, knee deep in water, milling casually. The atmosphere at Lake Naivaisha was serene.

Alice was outside the hotel banquet room where lunch was due to be served. She was busily scrolling through text messages in her phone when she heard a voice from behind.

"It's beautiful here, isn't it?"

Alice turned to see Andrew Ladley, a mediator from the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue,[30] who had come to help draft the peace agreement. He was a slight, middle-aged man with pale skin, thin brown hair and glasses. Dressed in a black suit, white shirt and a red and yellow paisley tie, he gazed out to the lake.

"Andrew," Alice greeted him warmly, "how are you? When did you arrive?"

"Late last night, just in time for our first day of negotiations on the draft agreement," he said smiling back. "It's amazing here, coming from New Zealand — the air is so crisp," Andrew observed. "I feel as if, if I breathe in too hard it will cut my nostrils. Anyway," he said moving on, "how are the elders going so far?"

For weeks Alice had been feeling anxious about what might happen over the next three days of negotiating.

"I just arrived myself. I'm not sure yet but they're probably fine. It's me that keeps worrying!" she said, mixing jest with truth. "We've worked together for months now so they're accustomed to me. You know what they told me last time we met? They said, 'Commissioner, you need to let go of some things. You worry too much about smaller details. You shouldn't hold on to everything and worry about it."

Andrew gave a soft chuckle and moved toward the door. "Shall we go in?"

Alice entered the room and took her place at a table full of elders. Months had passed since the Kalenjin and Kikuyu first met at the Waterbuck Hotel, belligerently eyeing each other from opposite ends of the room. Alice listened to them now, chatting, telling jokes and laughing easily over the large round table. She could hardly believe it was the same people. *This is really it,* she thought, smiling to herself.

Just then from the table next to her, Alice heard three Kalenjin and Kikuyu elders bantering.

"Oh, I need to sell you a car," exclaimed the Kikuyu elder as though he'd remembered something extremely important. "Your car is funny," he laughed. "I have this great '96 Toyota Corolla."

"Come on, that's not the type of car I need. Besides, can you give me a good deal?" the Kalenjin man said slapping the Kikuyu on the back while chortling along.

"Hey, you have to help me to get my child into that school. I think it's a good one and somebody from your community is running it."

Watching these interactions, Alice chided herself for worrying so much. She knew the elders were right. She told herself, not for the first time, that she should learn to take their advice. Listening to their friendly exchanges today and seeing the camaraderie between them, Alice allowed herself to believe, if only in that moment, that everything would be fine — that the peace agreement would go ahead.

They needed me as a bridge initially but they don't need me anymore, she reflected. *My work is done. My work here is truly done.*

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Citizen News
Thursday, 07 June 2012, 13:59
"Kalenjin, Kikuyu Elders Sign Peace Accord"

Elders from the Kalenjin and Kikuyu communities living in Nakuru have signed a peace agreement brokered by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission committing to peace and reconciliation ahead of the general election. The accord is a culmination of a 14-month program that also includes other communities in peace building efforts from the greater Nakuru County.[31]

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The morning of the signing, as Alice was getting dressed she was thinking of Mary Onyango, the vice chair of the commission. *I wonder whether Mary would approve?* she had joked with herself. Mary had been battling cancer for 15 years, but she would show up at the office impeccably dressed, even if she had just come from a chemotherapy session. She had recently given Alice a long talk full of womanly advice: "Wear some beautiful clothes. Put your money into clothes. Don't worry about how much it costs, my dear. Just get nice clothes. Never show the world that the issues we are trying to solve in the NCIC take time away from your grooming. And Alice, you must learn to wear make-up. Once you look beautiful and you look confident, then you'll be OK."

Surrounded by suited elders behind her, Alice sat at an azure table, a pen gripped between forefinger and thumb. Beside her was Meredith Preston McGhie, regional director of Africa for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. It looked as though they had devised to appear a complementary and contrasting pair: Alice looking elegantly bold in a perfectly pressed dark navy Ghanaian kaftan, with diamond-shaped red plaid earrings; Meredith, fair and sophisticated, in a camel and cream-silk scarf

draped across her chest and shoulders, with a touch of gold jewelry adorning her ears, neck and fingers.

Elders from both the Kalenjin and Kikuyu communities had signed first, while everybody looked on silent and steady. Next were the chairmen of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission and the National Cohesion and Integration Commission.

Now Alice. She squeezed the pen, took a quick breath, and signed while Meredith looked on beside her with a small delicate smile.

After her, a squad of signees took turns in twos. Elders from the Meru, Kisii, Kamba, Abaluhyia, Luo, Giriama, Maasai and Turkana communities signed as witnesses. A pair would sit and sign, then stand and leave. Before their seats had cooled, two replacements would be there, poised. There was a show of shifting and shuffling papers, and a flourish of signatures.

Then, it was done. Handshakes and back slaps spread through the room. Alice stepped aside to observe the jubilance. The energy felt robust and warm.

After some time, the energy began to dissipate as elders left the room, taking their mighty spirits with them. Andrew walked toward Alice with a sympathetic expression that seemed out of step with the morning's events.

"Alice, I'm so sorry," he paused. "I didn't know your vice chair had died, Mary Onyango."

"Dear, dear Mary. How she would have loved to have been here for the signing," Alice mused. "You know, Andrew, she was my sounding board. She was hard, harder than my other colleagues. Mary would speak to me like this," she said snapping her fingers three times. "She would give it to me head on."

Surrendering herself to a wash of memories, Alice remembered with subdued, sad humor the first time they sat across the boardroom table at NCIC, appraising each other like arch rivals: the lioness and the leopard. Alice had noted Mary's long painted nails, magnificently tied headscarves, impeccable dress, and compared it to her more reserved style.

"She always looked so regal," she said to Andrew. "And goodness she could talk."

Mary had been working at the policy level for years while Alice had been working at the frontline on programs. "She used to dish out instructions like I was a junior," recalled Alice lightly.

"The beauty of my relationship with Mary," said Alice out loud, reminiscing, "is that we started off not being friends. When I joined the commission, she saw me as a Kikuyu and I saw her as a Luo. So we would sit there and eyeball each other from that perspective. Very strong-headed women, both of us. The day we connected was the day when things began to move in that commission."

"You know," said Andrew interrupting her thoughts, "After we left the planning meeting for the peace negotiations, we were so struck by her elegance. How clear she was and her clarity of thought."

Andrew's comment stirred giant swells of emotion in Alice. She remembered clearly the day they prepared for an evening meeting with their Humanitarian Dialogue partners. Alice had called Mary in a panic asking for help. "Mary, HD are coming, I don't think the chair can make the meeting."

"This is what we are going to do," Mary had said in her commanding way. "After I'm done with chemo …"

"Mary! Mary!" Alice interjected. "You're supposed to be resting," she scolded tenderly.

"No, no. It takes away the pain when I'm speaking to you. So," she continued, "after I'm done with chemo I'll come to the office and I will meet those people with you. Don't worry. Go and prepare, get the documents ready, everything will be OK."

During the meeting Mary had supported Alice, speaking in her indomitable way, so concisely and powerfully. "I'm a Luo, but I'm telling you if the Kikuyu and Kalenjin are at peace, the Luo will be at peace. These two are really the problem in this country."

Throughout the discussion Mary kept her hands below the table. Alice knew it was because she didn't want them to see her raw and open wounds from chemotherapy.

Alice looked back at Andrew. "Mary didn't tell you, Andrew, but she'd come from chemotherapy that day. And the following day she checked into more chemotherapy."

Andrew shook his head in disbelief. *That's my Mary*, Alice thought, her admiration and sorrow cresting.

Sensing Alice's need for a change of topic, Andrew allowed for an appropriate interval, then guided them into the present. "Well, congratulations are in order, Alice. The NCIC has brought these guys a long way," he said, motioning to the few remaining elders in the room.

"You know what my biggest challenge is, Andrew? In all these places I broker peace, like in Nakuru, I want the community to own their peace. I want for them not to need me. I want to step away. I keep saying in meetings, 'You know, you people of Nakuru, we are sure you're reading the newspapers. We are sure you know what's happening in Tana River. We want to go away. We want to leave you to hold your peace. Please, you must let us go away.'

"But they don't want to let us go away."

Return

Alice arrived at Gate 34 and checked her boarding pass once again. She turned her wrist to see the time. Not too long to wait.

Looking around, she spotted a vacant seat on the other side of the lounge. As she made her way to it, towing her carry-on luggage behind her, she maneuvered past a menagerie of passengers. There were the weary and dazed, slumped and buckled from too many hours in transit; the electrified young ones preparing for an adventure of their lives; the bored and meandering staring into space; and the down-to-business types jabbing away at laptops and smartphones.

She sat down on the blue, molded-plastic chair, and exhaled. So much had changed these past weeks, in Kenya and in herself. Alice remembered the anger and fear she had carried with her when she arrived — and knew they no longer gripped her in the same way.

The distance from her country had helped her view it from new angles. She saw it now as a country not so broken that it could not be restored. She no longer wanted to escape Kenya and its problems. Her anger had melted a path to acceptance. "A work in progress" was how Alice now thought of her homeland.

She also felt something far less definite inside her. An uncertainty whispering at her like a little girl with a secret to tell. It was a loud softness, clear and muffled at the same time. What would she be returning to? A Kenya priming itself for another election in a matter of months. Political allegiances were shifting into shapes, awesome and unexpected. The country felt troubled, and Alice worried more than ever about what could be done to ensure a peaceful election. *What about Mark's generation? Many of them have already been involved in the violence of 2008. What can we do to support them to choose peace?"*

As she asked these questions, Alice noticed a difference in the way she was walking toward her work. There was a gentle pull, balancing her: *I'm going to work smarter from now on. I can't continue working in a way that leaves no space for my family and people who love me. I need to delegate more, take one project at time. I'll do my bit but I realize now it's not within my power to save the whole of Kenya.*

When the announcement came that her flight was ready to board, Alice was thinking of the gulf of darkness and grief she had traversed, and how she had sat in wrenching moments of vulnerability. She felt uncertainty whispering.

She walked to the front desk and presented her boarding pass. As Alice entered the illuminated passageway leading to the humming plane, the leopard from her childhood slipped into her thoughts.

She remembered again how she had jumped over its tail.

Postscript

"Alice, Stephanie is a good woman. She will tell your story, and she will do right by you. Trust me, you will not go wrong with Stephanie. Thank you for allowing her into your life."

— Sean Hobbs

CONVERSATION WITH ALICE NDERITU

This is an edited transcript of an interview conducted by IPJ Program Officer Jennifer Freeman on October 9, 2012, in the Peace & Justice Theatre at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

Q: There is often conflict between human rights advocates and peacebuilding advocates, who might look at different forms of justice: retributive versus transformative. You have held positions in both worlds. How did you become a child of those two worlds? Will you give us an example of one of your first entries into human rights?

A: I got into the human rights world by accident, and the peacebuilding world by accident. It wasn't by design. When I left the University of Nairobi we had mandatory interviews through the public service and they posted me to work in prisons, which came as a great shock to me because I had an image of what I would be when I left the university.

It was at a time when the prisons were completely closed to the public. I remember the UN Special Rapporteur coming to Kenya to inspect the prisons, and the prisons' boss, my boss, said no.

Now I've always been curious. My life is defined by curiosity. I thought about what I wanted out of that particular situation that I found myself in. I had grown up hearing about a lot of people who had been imprisoned for the wrong reasons — who had been detained without trial, who had been put behind bars because of political positions they held. And I began to think of how I could connect the people in there to the people out there, and the easiest way was through human rights. Human rights people are the ones who are complaining most consistently about the people who are inside the prisons. I began to get into the world of human rights that way.

Q: You were inside the prisons, and the human rights advocates were looking at the prisons from an external perspective, criticizing them. Did you think about leaving the prison system to become a human rights activist?

A: No. Initially I did not think about getting out to become a human rights activist because the human rights world would not have me. They would not trust me, thinking that I am on the other side. But my mother was always, always talking to me. She told me, "God sent you there for a reason. You must get out of there with something. You must be able to help people who are in there."

I began to do quite a bit of reading on human rights work. What helped, in a very sad way, was the death of six prisoners in a prison called King'ong'o in Nyeri. At that time, because I was one of the few people in the Prisons Department to have a degree and was personal assistant to the commissioner, I had a lot of access to information which would have been useful to the human rights world. But their doors were so closed.

But when those prisoners were killed, I was among the team that was supposed to go and investigate the killings. Because I was trusted by the prison officers, they spoke openly: "This is what we did, this is how we did it here, this is how we killed them." From that moment, I thought this is my make-or-break point.

I started walking to human rights offices with my folder with my information. A lot of doors were closed in my face. Now when I speak to those people, they can't believe what kind of opportunity they missed. I had a folder with the information and I was telling them, "Look here, this is what happened."

The one who finally listened to me turned out to be somebody who became influential in my life, because he became my mentor in a sense. He became my referee. He's somebody who I began to touch base with on human rights. And he was leading the foremost human rights NGO at that time. He recently became the chief justice of Kenya. A lot of people heard me, but he listened.

When this incident happened there was international outrage. Amnesty International was writing letters — you know how Amnesty has a method that they get their members to bombard you with letters from all over the world. It was my work to respond to those letters. They would come in and I would be thinking, "Somebody, somewhere in the Philippines, somebody, somewhere in India, cares about these people, and we ourselves are doing nothing about it." That was the moment when my spirit completely broke with the Prisons Department, and I knew that something needed to be done.

The incident was so bad it actually led to the commissioner being removed, who was my boss, and then a new commissioner came in and I continued to be the personal assistant. When he came in, there was a women's prison in a place called Mombasa Shimo la Tewa, and the boss of that prison was a woman who had been stood over for promotions so many times that she didn't care anymore. She ran the prison according to her rules.

She told me, "The only thing that separates us from these women, the only difference between them and us is the color of our uniform, so really we will treat them that way." She opened the doors to the Red Cross and others, but without official knowledge or permission. She said, "Don't write anything. If they write to you and ask you if they can come, don't respond because you don't want to leave a paper trail. Just leave the doors open. Let people come in."

Q: She was a human rights model for the prisons.

A: Yes, she was a human rights model, but I didn't know it was human rights then. I knew that it was different. And I knew that her prison was very different — in terms of cleanliness, in terms of health — from the men's prison that was across. My house was next to the dispensary and I would watch the men walking past in various stages of dying. There would be, how do I put it? They would be walking and you would see that they had urinated on themselves; they would be walking and you would see the sand, the way the feet would leave … they would walk heavily. I don't know how to describe how they would stumble along. They would get into the dispensary that was opposite and then the police van would come and take away the dead bodies.

Now I had a model in my head that when you open up prisons, things work. When the new commissioner came, we were talking about how we could do it differently. We were talking about the first speech that the commissioner was going to make because everybody was waiting. "This is a new guy and the old one is gone and he was so much against the prison service." I told them, "We need to open up the prisons."

They said, "Oh, so how does that work?" and I explained to them. The prison I had come from had been classified as the best in Kenya in terms of low death rates and in terms of health and in terms of cleanliness, so they listened.

Just before I left, that woman who was in charge [of the women's prison], her daughter died in an accident and she lost one leg. I took charge, and she told me, "Just go on with what I have taught you."

So in that speech, we said that this is a new dispensation — that we are going to bring on board a human rights approach to how we run things.

Q: You have told some of us a fantastic story about a leopard's tail, and walking as a child with your grandmother as the leopard walked with you. Will you tell that story? You have also spoken of how being the only woman at a table of negotiations is often a lonely place. Will you speak to that as well?

A: The leopard story — which by the way I didn't think was important until I came here — relates to when we were young. My home is near the Aberdare Range. There has been a huge campaign in the last few years to build an electric fence around it to stop animals coming on to farmland: lions, leopards, elephants. It's now succeeded; there is now an electric fence.

But when I was growing up there wasn't any. My grandmother lived with us, and she had her own house some distance away. She would come to our house in the evening and she would tell us a lot of stories, very scary stories, about wild animals including leopards. Then we would walk her to her house. She would lead the way. She walked with a stoop and she would move the grass away from the path.

There was a leopard that used to escort us on the way to her house. Fresh from her giving us scary stories, we would be walking and would be so scared. She would tell us, "You don't have to fear leopards. Don't get into their space because they won't get into yours."

And she would tell us, "But the leopard will attack you if you provoke it. The leopard will put its tail on the path. She wants you to step on it so you provoke her and then she can attack you."

You have to watch out for that tail. A lot of times, in the kind of work that we do, you have to see what has been put on the path. You have to know when to jump over that tail. And you have to know that if you step on that tail, you really can get attacked. You also have to be as wise as my grandmother: She knew that leopard. She'd studied that leopard. She knew its methods. She knew what it could do and what it could not do.

When I think of that leopard story now, I see it as shaping my life. I see it in rooms where we discuss issues to do with peace. We discuss it with the elders. Why? Because elders are the custodians of the narrative of the people of Africa, mainly where I came from. And elders are men. Elders are not women. We zeroed in on elders because the youth will attack. The women will goad the men maybe to go out and do all these things. The ultimate decision makers are the elders who decide whether the violence will happen or whether it will not happen. So we sit with them.

When I started working at the commission, I and two of my colleagues were assigned to the most difficult conflicts because we had quite a bit of background on that area. When we go to those places and you're sitting with the elders, you have to be as a woman: You have to be invisible but you have to be visible at the same time — so, like that leopard, because we could see. If you looked you could see its eyes. They were very shiny in the dark but the rest of the leopard was completely invisible because it was very, very dark.

So you're sitting in that room, and you know that you stand out because you're a woman. I try so hard to fit in, including with my dress. I think very, very hard in advance what I'm going to wear when I'm going to that meeting. When I sit in that meeting, my colleagues, the two men, they tell me, "When you stand there, men respect authority. Speak with authority, don't begin to look like you're afraid of anything."

The other thing we do when we get in there, the men — especially the chairman — will say something like, "Of course, you all know me, I'm the chair of the commission. Alice is the chair of this meeting." So the men can't ask me to leave because I'm the chair.

I'll have done my research. I'll read up, and then the evening before I'll sit with the women. That came from a conversation with one of the men in a place called Isiolo where I asked him, "Why don't you sit with women in the meetings?" He said, "You know, in my community there's a proverb that says before you go for any meeting with a man you must consult your wife. I'm sitting here because I'm representing my wife, I have her opinion." I took it in a positive way that he's sitting there because his wife had advice to give him, not because he doesn't think his wife is worthy enough to be sitting there.

I sit with the women and ask them for the advice that they're giving to the men, that the men are bringing to that table. Then I'm able to bring their perspective, from my perspective as a woman, to that table. When you're speaking to the men and asking them, "Why do you want this violence to end?" The elders say things like, "My business shut down because of this violence. You know we have not been able to do this or that."

But the women will speak about very basic things that matter to them. They say, "You know since the violence started we're not able to reach the hospital, we're not able to reach the marketplace, we're not able to reach the water point." And it's not even about getting the water. Going to the river is a social ritual: You walk to the river, you pick up on gossip with everyone, there's a whole conversation going to the river. It's not really about water. So women talk about that. You pick those kind of things and then you're able to bring them to the table.

It's lonely being there. Sometimes you sit there with all that authority and you have all that information, you can feel the respect in the room. People become so comfortable with you that they say things about women that are so demeaning. You are sitting in a room and the men are saying, "You know, women are too stupid to understand those things." And I'm sitting there. I was so hurt.

After we leave the room, I asked my colleagues, "Did you just hear that? You know, I don't know whether to celebrate, because I just got admitted to the men's club. Men can sit there and say that women are stupid in my presence. What am I supposed to do?"

They told me, "Relax, what's wrong with you? We say those things about women all the time when you're not there, so can you relax and just get back in there and do your job?" It's lonely because they never quite admit you, in that sense that you really are now one of us. However hard you try. But they listen to you if you have something useful to say.

The loneliness is the same as when I felt I was between the two worlds — the prisons and the human rights world. And the loneliness is also the one that I feel right now, very powerfully. For example, we were on TV not so long ago with some elders we'd brokered peace with in Kenya's Rift Valley. One of the elders was notorious for some of the things that he did. Everyone knew that he was a warlord. People were calling me from the human rights worlds and they were telling me, "You really have lost it. Those men deserve to be in jail."

That nexus between peace and justice really works out for me. I'm sitting in a room and I'm hearing the things people are saying and I'm thinking, *If I'd met you in 2006, 2007, you would be in jail. But I need you now. I need you because you are the one brokering the violence, so you are the only one who can broker the peace.*

Q: Are refugees in Nairobi presenting any issues or conflicts for the government and the people? Are refugees marginalized in Kenya?

A: I talked earlier about Kenya being that hub of peace. When it wasn't dealing with its own issues but those of everyone else, we got in quite a number of refugees. We have two huge refugee camps in Kenya: Kakuma and Dadaab. Dadaab is near the Somali border; Kakuma is near the South Sudan border that has all these refugees. But then there are also huge, huge communities within Nairobi, many of them within informal settlements.

When they were coming in — when Kenya wasn't at war with itself or when the issues hadn't come out into the open — there weren't many issues around them. In fact, the South Sudanese community did so much work from inside the country. The Somali community did quite a lot of work inside Kenya also.

There are really a lot of urban refugees. But when the issues to do with Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabab began, our commission started working on it: issues to do with discrimination against urban refugees, especially those from Somalia, with people seeing them as being the agents of Al-Shabab within the country. We've had quite a number of bombs going off in churches, a number of grenades going off in shopping malls, especially in places where Christians would be found. Rather, let me put it this way, in places where Muslims would not be found: bombs in churches, bombs in bars where people are drinking alcohol.

It has changed people's perception of refugees, so increasingly you hear people saying, "Oh, the Somalis should go back to where they came from." And the tragedy of that is that people cannot differentiate. You can't differentiate between a Kenyan Somali and a Somali Somali. They look the same, speak the same language, and there is a lot of discrimination then against the Kenyan Somalis in that sense. It's something that we are grappling with now because these issues have begun to become stronger in the last six or so months.

We are trying to find a way of getting Kenyans to go back to their old way of encouraging refugees to come on board. For example, the Ethiopian community is a very strong urban refugee community in Kenya. Right now, because there is no issues between Ethiopia and Kenya, people

still feel comfortable with them. People are so wired right now toward finding their space, because they found they could find their space through violence and it would be dangerous for us to just ignore it as an issue. So it's one of the issues that we're really dealing with on the commission.

BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER — STEPHANIE CHIU

Stephanie Chiu holds an MA in peace and conflict studies from the University of Sydney, where her thesis explored violence among the Bosnian diaspora in southwestern Sydney and the potential of restorative justice to advance reconciliation. For several years, Chiu has been a facilitator and manager of a restorative justice program for victims and offenders of crime, and has witnessed firsthand the power of dialogue to transform conflict and relationships. She also believes in the power of stories of inspirational individuals to nurture ideas about what is possible and provide a catalyst for change. Chiu has traveled to Pakistan and Afghanistan to work with Afghan refugee women on education, health and livelihood programs and to help establish a network of independent community radio stations serving women throughout Afghanistan. In Australia her work has included supporting homeless people, implementing humanitarian responses for refugee youth and managing campaigns to address global poverty.

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE
at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ), based at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies, is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the university to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice.

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives in places like Nepal and Kenya, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute is home to the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series and WorldLink Program, and produces several publications in the fields of peace and justice.

ENDNOTES

[1] A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article "'Women Cannot Cry Anymore': Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict," by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

[2] See Human Rights Watch, *Ballots to Bullets: Organized Political Violence and Kenya's Crisis of Governance*, March 2008, http://www.hrw.org/reports/2008/03/16/ballots-bullets; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Report from OHCHR Fact Finding Mission to Kenya 28 February 2008, Geneva.

[3] Human Rights Watch, *Ballots to Bullets: Organized Political Violence and Kenya's Crisis of Governance*.

[4] Humanitarian Policy Group, *Crisis in Kenya: land, displacement and the search for 'durable solutions'*

[5] Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence (CIPEV), "Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence," October 16, 2008, http://reliefweb.int/report/kenya/kenya-commission-inquiry-post-election-violencecipev-final-report accessed January 25 2013.

[6] See Human Rights Watch, *Divide and Rule: State Sponsored Ethnic Violence in Kenya*, 1993, pp. 28-32; Z. Ochieng, "Stunning Revelations", News From Africa, March 2003, http://www.newsfromafrica.org/newsfromafrica/articles/art_1282.html accessed 11 November 2013; Republic of Kenya, "Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee to Investigate Ethnic Clashes in Western and Other Parts of Kenya", Nairobi: 1992, pp 24 -26

[7] Humanitarian Policy Group, *Crisis in Kenya: land, displacement and the search for' durable solutions,* p 4.

[8] The Kipsigis are one of nine distinct subgroups of the Kalenjin people group. Each of the Kalenjin peoples is distinct, with distinct languages, but they do share some cultural roots.

[9] Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, *On the Brink of the Precipice: A Human Rights Account of Kenya's Post-2007 Election Violence*, p 24.

[10] Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence (CIPEV), "Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence" p 25.

[11] Republic of Kenya, "Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee to Investigate Ethnic Clashes in Western and Other Parts of Kenya" p 25.

[12] For example: Ibid; Republic of Kenya, "Report of the Judicial Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Tribal Clashes in Kenya", Nairobi: 1999.

[13] Amnesty International, "Fear for safety / Impunity" Amnesty International 18 December 2002 AFR 32/026/2002, http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR32/026/2002/en, accessed 11 November 2012.

[14] Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, *On the Brink of the Precipice: A Human Rights Account of Kenya's Post-2007 Election Violence*, p22.

[15] Ibid. See Republic of Kenya, Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Illegal and/or Irregular Allocation of Public Land, 2004.

[16] For example, see Human Rights Watch, *Ballots to Bullets: Organized Political Violence and Kenya's Crisis of Governance.*

[17] The announcement was carried out at a secret location to prevent a live TV showdown when it became known that ODM planned to contend the results, which added to a perception that vote rigging had occurred. International Crisis Group, "Kenya: Impact of the ICC Proceedings", Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°84, 9 January 2012, p 4.

[18] See International Crisis Group, "Kenya in Crisis", pp. 6-9 which provides further detail on the rigging of the presidential elections. See also, The Independent Review Commission (IREC), "Report of the Independent Review Commission on the general elections held in Kenya", 17 September 2008, which investigates the elections and offers recommendations on to prevent further electoral crises.

[19] The agreement would prove to be lacking in a clear delineation of power and responsibility, resulting in bureaucratic and protocol uncertainties.

[20] See International Crisis Group, "Kenya's 2013 Elections", Crisis Group Africa Report N°197, 17 January 2013 for more detail on the efforts of NCIC in this area. See also, A Nderitu, "Taming the Demon of Kenya's Election Violence. A strategy for the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC)", IJR policy brief no 4, December 2011.

[21] Commonly referred to as the Waki Report. Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence (CIPEV), "Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence".

[22] For further reading see International Crisis Group, "The Kenyan Military Intervention in Somalia", Crisis Group Africa Report N°184, 15 February 2012.

[23] Human Rights Watch, *High Stakes Political Violence and the 2013 Elections in Kenya*, p 17.

[24] A form of public transportation in Kenya.

[25] For security, many of the names throughout these stories have been changed.

[26] Dedan Kimathi led an armed military struggle known as the Mau Mau uprising against the British colonial government in Kenya in the 1950s. Kenya celebrates him as a hero, and there is a university and a street named after him.

[27] Rogo was a fierce critic of Kenya's decision to send troops to Somalia in 2011 to fight the militant Islamist group al-Shabab. He was also known for preaching hate and intolerance of other religious groups.

[28] "mouth mouth." In the lead-up to the election, it was an inflammatory term that meant "the rubbish you speak, stop your nonsense".

[29] http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/aug/03/kenyans-polls-constitutional-reforms

[30] The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue provided the technical support for drafting the Nakuru peace accord. They had also done the same for Kofi Annan when he was drafting the 2008 peace agreement for Kenya.

[31] http://www.citizennews.co.ke/citizen-features/item/1853-kalenjin-kikuyu-elders-sign-peace-accord