

One does not simply explain how it feels standing atop that van holding the machine gun. You would have to squeeze that trigger yourself, rotate it, and feel its kickback vibrations as it spits out bullets in a rhythm. What one can simply explain is the need to silence the screams of your mothers and sisters in your head as they begged for their lives, the need to forget the bold look on the faces of your fathers as they received bullets in the head and in the chest. The sounds that follow are not loud enough to drown the thumping of your chest. You scream. You see blood red like palm oil spurt out as bullets spat meet bodies. You see them fall. And this makes you happy. These men who fall from your bullets are part of the marauding group that cause you to violently remember every time you close your eyes at night. Maybe not that particular group but they all wear the same uniforms and say the same thing in the same language before they blow themselves up. You can explain your need to squeeze that trigger; all you need is to, by memory, see the faces of slit skulls and throats of those no more. So even if one does not simply explain how it feels, one can explain why you have to do it. And that is enough to squeeze harder.

BBBBRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRTTTTTTTTTTTT.

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My name is Al'amin Aliyu, and I have known the weight of an AK-47 since I was 15. Before this, I only knew the weight of my *gyada's* tray from hawking. When my heart wasn't with my tray, it would be thinking of the weight of mangoes from that old church, the only one in Ruga Juli. Then I started thinking of swimming and what it would be like to feel the weight of water against my skin. The joy of fruits and water, as I remember, came from the shared thrill of being with my friends. I don't repeat much from this time anymore, all I can do is remember. So each time I put my heart to that thrill, I am transported to moments before the weight of a gun, before 15.

With our clothes already off, we are racing each other to the river: Yasin and Salim and Khalif and Gambo and me. Yasin is bigger than us all but a slow runner. He uses his strength to fall anyone on his way to get to the water first. I do not like to struggle so I let him pass me. Gambo is the fastest amongst us and Yasin cannot overtake him. So he kicks his legs against each other and Gambo falls terribly. There is blood coming out of the side of his face. I see Gambo's eyes red with tears. He doesn't even dust the sand off the bruises at the back of his arms and elbow and bloody face. He stands, wishing death on Yasin with his eyes. But we cannot complain. We cannot tell on Yasin, because then we would have to explain what we were doing at the river when Khalif and Gambo are meant to be attending their Quranic classes, when I'm meant to be hawking my groundnuts. We are here now and there is nothing to do other than quietly hate Yasin and try to enjoy the water.

Yasin is dark, very dark. His face is stiff and scary because one eye has a scar over it and so it is always twitching and never as open as the other eye. His ears are like they are about to leave the sides of his head. He is bulky and has an amulet wrapped around his arm. The scars on his body tell stories about violence that none of us have ever seen. They do not look like the wounds one gets from falling off a tree while hunting for fruits, or even from stumbling on something while running. He doesn't like to talk about them so we never pushed hard when we used to ask. Sometimes we hate Yasin, sometimes we like him. He is always slapping us. No one ever complained in front of him. He once slapped me for licking mango wrongly. His palm is like sandpaper. Still, we never complained. Maybe it's because he beat up anyone who beats or tries to bully any of us.

The water is refreshing as always. It was here I had my first swim. I splash and blow bubbles all around but I never go far into the river. My arms and legs are moving in funny directions but I do not care. This is my way of flying as the birds do.

After a while, I move to the sand to sit and watch the bigger boys perform acrobatic moves. I sit with Gambo who can no longer go into the water today because of the wound across his jaw. It looks so fresh now after washing the sand off of it. It looks painful, too. It would surely leave a mark. I wonder what he would have to tell his mother when she asks him this evening when we return. He looks at me and the anger is still there. I just want to sit in peace and watch the bigger boys perform their moves. So, I look away.

There's this lanky boy whose moves always make everyone stop and watch. His arms are long and he walks like he is sixty-five years old, his back all bent. He goes into the water chest first and goes quiet. Next, he comes out and does a somersault. He does a backstroke and other maneuvers I enjoy but cannot fully describe. You need to be there to see it and fall in love. I look at him with envy. I will be this good someday, I promise myself. He attempts a backflip and goes into the water with finesse. We all grow silent waiting for his return. It takes longer than usual. Everyone is standing and watching and waiting. My heart is beating fast in a bad way. Nothing. No more whooshing sounds. Peace is returning to the river now. Someone brave enough goes after him. I watch as he is dragged out of the water. He isn't moving and his neck is dangling like it doesn't want to be part of his body again. There is someone else smaller in form than him standing at the river bank screaming what I think is his name.

“Sani!”

“Sani!”

“Sani!”

I catch Sani's eyes. He's looking at me and there is no expression in it, his eyes are clear and peaceful. I try to swallow saliva and it's difficult. My stomach twists in knots. It is

becoming hard to breathe. I want to scream. I turn to see Yasin and Gambo and Salim running. Khalif is beside me. We glance at each other and his eyes do all the talking. We forget about our clothes and run as we have never run before.

It's evening, and I just got to the mosque. I grab my plastic kettle. The water is cold. I pour it over my face and grit my teeth as I feel a chill run from my head through my body. My mind returns to Sani. I close my eyes again and I see him: his neck and lifeless body. I hear his name running through my head. I want to scream. I wish I never heard his name because now he would be harder to forget. Thoughts are speeding through my mind and I am getting dizzy. I wonder what it feels like dying. Alfa says everyone has a road to go on after death. I am thinking of good and evil. And about me and death and Sani and on which road he would be on. I wonder if he attended all his Quranic lessons or if he skipped them like me. I wonder if he did well before his life left him, if he stood well with Allah, if he fasted or performed salat. I hope he wasn't like those big boys in the motor park that smoked *wee-wee* and drank haram. Even if he did out of ignorance, Allah would know and show mercy. Allah knows the intentions of the heart, and that's all He judges.

The muezzin calls for prayers.

"Allāhu 'akbar . . . lā 'ilāha 'illā -llāh . . ."

I quickly do my ablution and run to the front row.

We walk quietly as we have been doing for the past three weeks. The sun is at its peak. We walk past the river, and, as if it was planned, we all stop to stare. The sun is shining over the water. I do not know what the other boys are thinking but I want to run and jump and make whooshing sounds in this cold, shimmering beauty. I want to feel its chill all over my skin once more. I inhale deeply. It still has that calm and sweet smell. The breeze is sweet.

There are goosebumps all over my arms. I smile. My heart is beating fast. I want to run. I glance at Khalif and Salim and their faces are saying things that I like. Gambo's smile makes the dried scar across his jaw stretch. We all turn to look at Yasin with our talking eyes as if we were asking him for permission. He stares back. Slowly, his eyes widen and we see a half-smile growing on that dark face. At that moment, we do not remember the dead boy. Yasin's smile is the only thing we see, the only thing that floods our minds. We forget we still have our clothes on and we are rushing to the water, running and laughing and running.

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Now, you wonder what would have happened if, midway on your trip back home, you had not turned back to the river to go fetch your tray. You wonder if by now, you would have still been with Yasin and Salim and Khalif and Gambo. That was the last time you ever saw them. The last anyone ever saw them. Dauda, the farmer with the largest stretch of land in Ruga Juli which is at the edge of the village and trails down to the river path, said he saw trucks filled with young boys and men with guns pass sometime just before the sun went dark. You wonder if they are still alive, or if they are with Sani. And like Sani, you are still unsure. None of you smoked *wee-wee* except for Yasin. But you all had done haram things: the swimming without permission and the lies to cover it up; the mangoes which were not yours for plucking; the hands of girls you all had held the day you wanted to show them just how high you could climb those trees by the river. You pray: Allah would know, at least for yourself, what was in the heart that day. You just wanted Ummi to see that you were better than the other boys at something, at climbing trees. Allah would know that the main reason you reached for her hand was that the path was filled with uneven rocks and you did not want her to fall as you did on your first time. Allah knows the intentions of the heart, and even though that was not the only reason you held her hands, He knows that was the main reason.

He knows you had no plans for *iskanchi*. You do not think anyone had those plans. Nothing happened that day. He knows. And that's what truly matters.

The shooting is over. As you rummage through the charred human remains for survivors, you dig your machete into the few missed by your bullets. When you aim for the abdomen and not the chest, you don't hit a bone and the machete goes in with the same ease as Sani dived into the water back then.

There's this slim, middle-aged man with a sharp nose and protruding cheekbones. His breathing is violent and he is grabbing sand into his left palm. You can tell he is wishing to be the one holding your machete. He is choking on his blood and his eyes are glassy with intent. You can tell who a man is by the look in his eyes, you can know if he wants to kill you or if he has to. You do not hurry to dig your machete into him. Instead, you drop the machete and take out the small dagger Commander Yohanna gave to you when you first got here. You tear this man's camouflage jacket and begin to make careful incisions on his hairless chest. You are trying to spell your sister's name but the blood comes out too quickly and you start all over again. The blood doesn't give you time to finish the name. You get tired of restarting and with one drive, send your machete into him. You are sad that his body did not get to squirm even a little. His palm loses its grip and opens to show the sand moulded in it.

There are corpses around from both sides but few are yours. There are screams and a lot of jumping around. This is the most the Task Force has killed since you joined 18 months ago. The boys are shooting into the air and celebrating, all with reasons for being here. You see Yusuf with whom you joined the Force with also smiling but not jumping. He has a patch over his left eye from the last operation where a grenade exploded, taking his eye. We had finished a raid and had not checked the pile of bodies for any survivors. One saw this chance and used a grenade. Yusuf wasn't in the blast range strong enough to kill him but the

explosion coming from behind rippled enough to cause a fall that sent his head to a rock. Sometimes, when I see him sleeping, the patch slightly aside, I remember how he slowly tried to stand up repeatedly, eye covered with both sand-stained hands that had blood trickling down. He was screaming his mother's name. Maybe that is his reason for squeezing the trigger too, for being here. He didn't leave after that fall even though Commander Yohanna told him he could.

You raise your head to a pile away from you to notice eyes watching you underneath a heap of bodies. There is no movement, just open eyes, and so you make your way to the pile slowly. You are in no rush. As you pull off the bodies on top, you see this body still makes no attempt to move or play dead. It just lies there still looking at you, pleading with his eyes that you return the bodies and forget you saw him. You stand over him, your dagger in hand, unsure of what to do. You look around and no one seems to be paying attention to you. You are staring at him. Letting him live is an insult to Yusuf's left eye, to your sister and her torn wrapper and the blood you found between her thighs, to mama, to baba, to Yasin and Salim and Khalif and Gambo.

But he has eyes of just a boy. Familiar eyes. And so does that scar across his jaw. It reminds you of a similar scar, of a similar boy you played with by the river and stole fruits with. You grit your teeth as you go down on your knees. You hate this middle, this complexity of the grey. You place your palm over his eyes, hoping it will be easier to do it without truth staring at you. You stop your dagger midway to his body. You hate that you are hesitating, this newfound weakness. Still, you want to damn the impending consequences of leaving him alive, maybe just this once, so you wait. You wait and wait and wait until you don't anymore. You dive in. And as you return your dagger back to its sheath after wiping his blood off of it, you understand that these things have to happen and one does not simply explain them.