

Farming Ashes

Tales of Agony and Resilience

Edited by
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Foreward

Yes, ashes can be farmed! These nine throbbing personal tales of women from northern Uganda who have lived through and survived the LRA conflict with Uganda Government for over twenty years confirm the validity of the paradox of farming ashes to generate life, if that is all one is left. Their tales of pain infused with incredible hope are personal testimonies of how life can sprout out of ashes. However riddled with contradictions the human person has capacity to rise above all forms of indignities.

I am delighted to present this collection of personal narratives that have inexorable power to draw the reader into the experiences of the protagonists. These stories assert human dignity in the face of what negates it. As we turn these pages, the line between “them” and “us” is merged, for our own capacities for resilience, love, forgiveness and solidarity are equally tested. The force of the chronicles lies in their capacity to connect us to our shared human values and dignity. What would you do when the ideals of freedom and family you so cherish are brutally snatched from you overnight? Resignation to such loss would be a negation of one’s human dignity. In assertion of their own, these protagonists struggle to be free again and to regain what they have lost. They refuse to tolerate the intolerable and seek out the slightest opportunity to break free. Their ability to survive to tell the tale resides in the realization that their pride lies in freedom and the willingness to fight for it.

When the normalcy of ordinary life with all its beautiful expectations is ruptured by the brutality of war it is easy to slump down to the posture of a victim. These stories, however, take the reader from the contours of pain to the resilience and triumph of the human spirit. There is a clear pattern in all the narratives. The reader first descends to the pit of hell as she is lead through the ordeal of the community: the graphic horrors of abduction and the despicable orgy of wanton ritual gang rapes and massacres that dehumanize both men and women; the irony of the unpredictable bush providing security better than the Internally Displaced Persons camps; the

catechism of contorted ideology to justify the erosion of their self-esteem; the fear of escape; the guilt of having betrayed the loved ones in order to save one's skin; the hopelessness of regaining one's freedom and reuniting with family; the silence that incapacitates and imprisons them into their own miseries. All these take the heroines to the direction of being reduced to ashes. The reconstruction from the ashes begins after hitting the bottom anguish. Then a flicker of the belief in their worth cannot allow them to stomach the oppression anymore. Without any certainty of success, their courage launches them forward to take the leap of faith to explore the possibility of freedom.

All the central figures have a strong survival instinct and none of the narratives leaves the reader in despair. It is incredible enough to be alive in the circumstances. But their heroism stretches the reader's capacities even further. Their fortitude and desire to reconstruct their lives from the ashes is almost transcendental. This is what turns the excruciating experiences into triumphant stories of determination that cannot be destroyed by the multiple traumas survivors of war are familiar with. This unstoppable hope that makes them pick up the pieces from where the insurgency interrupted them is what makes the reader proud of humanity. That there are, in our times, people capable of heroic acts of gratuitous self-giving keeps our hope in the grandeur of the human person alive. It is because these superwomen overcame their fears in order to assert their human dignity that we can now share in their greatness and remain challenged by it.

The act of "farming" or turning the "ashes" of their lives into "food" begins with their courage to break the silence, to give voice to the despicable in order to free themselves from the nightmares. This is the first act of reconstructing the human person. It is my hope that these stories will in turn nourish and humanize all those who read them. It is not only those who have had direct experience of the war who need reconstruction. Empathy, compassion and solidarity are what link the rest of humanity through the mediation of stories.

These women have borne the brunt of the war on our behalf. Sharing their stories leaves one with a huge desire not to allow anything of the sort happen to a human being! What occurred to them could have been our lot

as well. The things they cherished before the nightmare of abductions are the very values we hold dear. The precariousness of conflict and war makes all vulnerable. It is therefore our responsibility to take an activist position in building peace and jealously guarding it. Telling stories humanize both the narrator and the listener.

At the end of each of these narratives, one is filled with an awesome sense of gratitude for being alive. This brings out the final message that we cannot afford to take our purposeful lives for granted. I am convinced these stories will make the reader a better human being, appreciative of life, whether it is his own or others'. We are inescapably connected as human beings.

I look forward to the next project that should offer the men an opportunity to tell their stories as well, to liberate them from the burden of silence and to a create network of solidarity.

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Introduction

We all say that we hate war but wars rage all over the world, day in and day out. Wars get declared every day in the name of ending other wars. The war in northern Uganda has been on for over two decades. Children have been born and raised in a situation of armed conflict, they have gone through teenage and matured in IDP camps, and they have courted and married on the run.

While most of the time wars are started and engineered by men, it is always women and children who suffer most in armed conflict situations. It is unfortunate however that the women and children are never given the platform to share their experiences. When it comes to peace negotiations, it is the men who sit at the decision making tables while the women who are most affected are left out. In recording stories of women's experiences in armed conflict, FEMRITE sought to give women a voice, to raise awareness about the atrocities of war committed by Joseph Kony and his deadly Lord's Resistance Army.

FEMRITE's Goal is to create an enabling atmosphere for women to write, tell and publish their stories. Story telling and experience sharing is one of the ways of healing a hurting heart both for the story teller and the listener/ reader. The dehumanizing experiences of war in northern Uganda have impacted on the women and children in a way that makes one ask only one question --- Why? It is encouraging however that these women have braved it and moved on despite the ashes. Sometimes they took roads that lead no where, they talked to the wind and conversed with their shadows but they did something and that made a difference. As Barbara comments at the end of her story of the Aboke Girls where everybody sat and watched, Sr Rakelle stood up and walked and that made the difference. And we can all make a difference if we choose to.

FEMRITE hopes that these stories will contribute to the peace and reconciliation process, which at the moment seem to be eluding Uganda. When a pot has a hole, the whole pot is not well because it can no longer

hold water. These stories therefore bring to the attention of Ugandans and the rest of humanity the need to block the hole for the pot to be whole again. And to the macho men of war, fire does not put out fire. A world without war is possible if we are all committed to peaceful negotiations. The last words of Lamwaka's memoir, *The Garden of Mushrooms*, reflect what all the women of northern Uganda and all peace-loving Ugandans wish to see at the end of the day a northern Uganda without war.

It took quite sometime for the script writers to get the women to tell their painful stories. But when they finally did, they wanted the world to hear everything. They wanted the stories to get off their backs so they could walk straight again. FEMRITE is very grateful to all the women who shared their experiences but in order to protect their identities, assumed names have been used. Let us join hands to reflect on these stories and together work towards a world that cherishes and promotes peace and human dignity for all.

Farming Ashes contains nine stories of women who have seen it all and endured it all but not without action. They are stories of courage, told with a renewed energy and determination. From the ashes, they will farm. Sometimes out of the ashes grows very beautiful and succulent plants. We are glad that as we present this account of experiences, Catherine, the last of the abducted Aboke Girls has just stepped back on Ugandan soil. Will this be a new beginning?

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Hilda Twongyeirwe
Coordinator
FEMRITE

Fathomless Luck

By Apophia Agiresaasi

Women speed past me. They are riding bicycles. Children are strapped on their backs. Some women are carrying jerrycans of water while others are carrying bundles of firewood. They hum different tunes as one foot peddles on, followed by another, in unison. About a hundred metres away, in Labujje trading centre, both young and old men sit on their stools around huge pots of local brew commonly known as *lacyoi*. Each man sips from a straw that connects their souls to the pot of *lacyoi*. Some of them are already .drunk as betrayed by the drowsy look in their eyes. They are yelling vulgarities at one another and at passersby. Beer has given them that kind of boldness. I hurry past them and head to our meeting place. I do not wait for long before Lucky arrives.

“My name is Lucky. On the 19 January 1988, I was born in Paibwor parish in Labujje sub-county in Kitgum district. I am a product of a monogamous marriage. We were originally ten children. Six of us journeyed to our ancestors in infancy as a result of malaria, meningitis and measles. Despite that, we remained a relatively happy family. My father used to drink alcohol like other men but he remained a responsible man and never mistreated our mother.

“Our parents would wake up very early every morning at about 6.30 a.m. and go to the garden to dig. During holidays they would take us along with them. It is only the very young ones who were exempted from the morning digging. We would return home at about noon and my mother would prepare lunch for the family while the rest of us would share other household chores. Some would go to fetch water from the well while others would go to the bush to collect firewood. In the afternoons our father would go to do carpentry in the trading centre near home and then come back in the evening. From their work, our parents were able to provide enough food for home consumption and even pay our school fees. So I grew up a happy child until the advent of the Lord’s Resistance Army and their incursions into our villages.” Lucky bends to chase away a fly that is disturbing a wound

on her left toe before continuing with the story. "It was in 1996 that I first heard of the Lord's Resistance Army atrocities. Even then it was on Radio Uganda. The journalists had reported that the rebels were mainly in the current districts of Kitgum, Gulu, Lira and current Pader but Gulu was the epicentre of the rebellion. They also disclosed that the rebels had attacked and burnt down people's homes, raped women, cut off people's ears, looted property from homes and even abducted young children.

"Even though my district, Kitgum, had been mentioned as one of those affected by the war, to me it was still a distant possibility, a story, like one of those stories that our paternal grandmother used to tell us when we visited her. I even thought that the affected homes or individuals might have invited what had happened to them or been so sinful that God had decided to punish them that way. It never occurred to me that what had happened to them would one day be my lot.

"One day in February 2005, which was a day like any other, I woke up and performed my usual chores of babysitting my young brother, preparing breakfast and going to the garden. After digging, we decided to go to a nearby bush to collect firewood. I went with three girls from the neighbourhood, and my mother. I had already collected a substantial amount of firewood, almost enough for a big girl of my age not to be ashamed of carrying after about an hour. If one carried a bundle considered too small for their age, they would be ridiculed and regarded as lazy. I was not a lazy girl and even if I were, I would not bear being ridiculed.

"While I was tying my bundle of firewood, I saw three young men moving towards me. At the time I saw them, they were about only two metres away. One of them was in combat uniform, and the other two in civilian clothes, each with a stick the size of my arm." Lucky lifts her left arm to illustrate the size of the stick. "They looked haggard. They had long unkempt hair. If one took a photo of them it could be successfully used to launch an appeal for starved youths in Uganda. I wondered where they had come from although I was not exactly scared of them. I looked around to see where my mother and the other three girls were. It was then that I saw them running away in a different direction. They had perhaps seen the young men before me. It occurred to me then that they could be the so-called rebels that we had been hearing about. I wondered then at the

selfishness of human nature. My own mother, the woman who brought me into the world, had run for her life without alerting me! My mother had abandoned me to the rebels!" Mist clouds Lucky's eyes as she recollects the incident. "I was angrier with my mother than with the rebels. One of them hit my back with his cane, commanding me to move. They were speaking Langi I had no alternative but to dance to their tune since the companions I had come with to collect firewood had deserted me. I just moved in the direction in which they were leading me without looking back lest they continued to hit me.

"Even then, another rebel, the one who was in army uniform struck me with a bicycle chain, the one that is used for tying luggage onto a bicycle. Ripples of pain coursed through my body.

"The rebels told me that if I cried loudly I would be killed. We moved on very fast. By the time we had walked for ten miles, my feet had begun to swell because I was not used to walking long distances. Every time I said that I was tired, I was hit. They would take turns at hitting me as if to rid their hands of idleness. Occasionally I felt them hit my back, even when I was obeying their every instruction. My body received over forty strokes throughout the journey. They told me that the reason they were beating me was to make me tough like a soldier. They said that soldiers had to be battle-hardened. My back got swollen and after some time I stopped feeling anything as if I was paralysed. It felt like my body did not belong to me anymore.

"When we reached the rebel camp, I was taken to the camp commander. He had a hut which served as an office. I later learnt that his name was Ojok although it was forbidden to call him by name. The people in the camp referred to him as 'Commander'. I found him sitting, but as soon as I entered his office, he rose to his full height of about seven feet, perhaps to intimidate me. He was huge too and could not have weighed less than one hundred and twenty kilograms. I previously thought I was tall but standing next to him made me feel like a dwarf.

"The commander asked me a number of questions. He asked me where my home village was and where 'his boys', as he fondly called them, had found me. I honestly answered all the questions because I was at his mercy. He then released me and one of the boys who had captured me came and

smear and pound green leaves on my toes, a ritual, they later explained, performed to prevent me from having 'long legs' that could compel me to run away. I was then given green vegetables to eat for supper. The taste was different from that of the green vegetables I had ever eaten before. They were neither sweet nor sour. I learnt later that they were wild leaves. That was all I ate for my supper. It was a terrible night." Lucky cups her chin in her right hand as she reminisces. Her eyes look in a distance that only she can understand. "It was a dark night. The darkness was so thick that one could hardly see a few metres ahead of one. The sky was equally grey and resonated with our sombre moods.

"That same night, I met two other girls who told me that they had been abducted that same day although not from the same village as mine. The three of us were then tied together with sisal ropes. The ones used for tethering goats. We slept bound up that night. We were left on the bare cold floor without any bedding. The rebel soldiers slept next to us. They said they were watching over us to ensure that we didn't run back home. I will never forget that night. It was the first night in my life that I had spent away from home. I did not sleep. It was cold because there was no covering but I was more worried about my life than I was about the cold. The atmosphere was tense. I just pretended to be asleep.

"I noticed that the other two girls with whom we were tied were also not sleeping. We never exchanged a word despite the fact that we were awake the whole night. Each one of us was lost in our own thoughts. I was even afraid of turning from one side to sleep on the other lest I was suspected of planning to escape and was killed. We did not know what the future had in store for us. We were all scared like rabbits awaiting slaughter. It was a very long night of discomfort, tension and uncertainty. I was a little relieved when morning broke despite the fact that I was still in captivity. In the morning, the rebel soldiers untied us and ordered us not to move outside the hut in which we had spent the night. We were given a plate of *posho* and beans and told to share it.

"After we had been with the rebels for one week, they drew a picture of a large heart on the ground in front of the commander's office and divided it into three sections because we were three new abductees. They told us to bathe and to remove our blouses and remain bare-chested. They told us

to bathe there, in front of everyone, and we did. After that, we were told to stand in one of the squares. They dipped an egg in a mixture of white powder and water, and drew a heart on our chests and our backs. They also made a sign of the cross on our foreheads and across our lips. Then they poured cold urine on us. If the egg broke, it meant one was possessed with evil spirits and therefore had to be killed. To my relief, the egg passed the circle without breaking. The commander, told us to stay bare-chested for three days. He said that what they were doing was written in the Holy Bible. One of the young rebels who had abducted me told us that the humiliating and disgusting ritual was for our protection and that it was meant to protect us from the wrath of the gods and would also offer us protection from the bullets when we went to war.

“The camp commander, Ojok, had scores of wives and children and it was his family that had the exclusive privilege of eating enough. The entire time I was with the rebels, I was always hungry. This was irrespective of whether I was involved in the cooking or not. We used to drink dirty water from a well to fill up our stomachs. Sometimes there was no water since the land is a semi-desert. It was not unusual for us to drink each other’s urine. Other times we were so dehydrated that we even had no urine to pass out.

“God is a miracle worker. Somehow we survived. While in that camp I was tasked with babysitting the rebel commander’s children, fetching water, collecting firewood and was sometimes called upon to help in the kitchen. By nature I am a loner and whenever the rebels saw me sitting alone, they would shout at me, asking me why I was thinking about home. On many occasions they would threaten to kill me if I went on thinking about home. One day, they hit me brutally with a chain and logs that we used for firewood. My back got bruised. When I touched it to relieve the pain, my arm got severely hit, breaking the bone of my left arm. Life in the camp was like a swing; you never knew which direction or speed any move would throw you in.

“Every morning, the rebels would wake us up at 5:00 a.m. to pray. They believed so much in Joseph Kony and regarded him as their spiritual father. They would say that the “Holy Spirit” speaks to him. Prayers would be led by the camp commander. The rebel camp commanders were Kony’s representatives as RDCs are to Museveni, the rebels would tell us. Sometimes

they would pray like Catholics, burning incense and making the sign of the cross. We would even have Holy Communion every Monday – and it would be celebrated the Catholic way. Other times they would pray like Muslims. They would make us kneel, facing east, to pray.

“The rebels said they were preparing to overthrow Museveni’s government and that Kony would become the new President of Uganda. And that the fight would take place on a day when one of the commanders rose at dawn and saw a hand in the clouds; that would mean there were five days before the fight.

“I did not engage in any sexual relations while I was with the rebels. There were commands from Lakwena that commanders and rebels had to refrain from sex. Lakwena was Kony’s cousin. Lakwena had disappeared in the waters of River Nile for forty days and re-emerged as a prophetess, claiming to cure people of all kinds of illnesses. Many rebels truly believed in her magical powers and in her every word. I was not sure what to believe and what not to believe. Sometimes I just got confused.

“The rebels always told us that the girls under Museveni’s regime were all HIV-positive and that they could not befriend them. As far as they were concerned, we were some of the HIV-positive girls. The rebels would sing and drum it into our heads almost every day that we were HIV-positive. At some point I even started believing it although I knew I had never had any sexual encounter. I even started thinking that maybe there was a means by which HIV/AIDS could be thrown at people through the air. The rebels talked so confidently that I thought that maybe they had managed to do something to infect all the girls in Uganda.

“Fortunately I was a *mulokole* (born-again Christian) before I was abducted, so I knew how to pray. I used to pray against every schemes of Satan against my life and also pray for God to help me in everything. If you trust in God, he can see you through any situation. God is faithful. I stayed in that camp for two months before I was taken to live with some old woman who was a rebel collaborator. Her husband was a rebel soldier. I don’t know what happened to the other two girls after we separated.

“The old lady, whose name I never got to know because we referred to her as Mama, had three children. Her husband was never around. He was always going to war with other LRA soldiers. She was the camp leader. This

camp had about twenty people. As soon as I started living with her, the two older children were taken to Gulu to live with her relatives. She remained only with the young one. It was my duty to babysit her. I also used to cook, fetch water and collect firewood. I lived in the same hut with her and had the luxury of sleeping on a mattress, which was an exclusive preserve of only rebel commanders, their wives and children.

“When UPDF helicopter gunships were sighted, I would carry the old woman’s property and run with it. That was my other assignment. I did not quite like it because it slowed me down. On the other hand, this woman was nice and soft-spoken and I decided to abide by her rules.

“One day, I asked her why the rebels were killing mostly our own people, the Acholi. She told me that they had no intentions of killing the Acholi and that they were killing them because they were sympathisers of Museveni’s government and the LRA rebel movement had zero tolerance for any Musevenists whether they were Bantu or Acholi or belonged to any other tribe.

“I then asked her why they were killing people who attempted to escape from the rebels, and she said that even Jesus did not request his disciples to come with him, he just commanded them to follow him. But today Ugandans do not follow the Holy Spirit, she said, that is why they are forced or killed.

“I tried to reason with her, arguing that if they explained to the people of Uganda about the Holy Spirit Movement without coercing them, or committing the atrocities that the LRA rebels were associated with, the people would see reason and follow them willingly. This woman was a very committed rebel. She also said that the rebels would be the first to go to heaven because they were repenting their sins on a daily basis.

“In that camp, there were girls who were previously in Joseph Kony’s camp. In the night, whenever we were preparing supper, they would tell us what they had seen there. One of them, Grace, used to babysit Kony’s children. She had been to one of Kony’s huts and seen many strange animals there. She saw huge live snakes of different colours, turtles and chameleons. She ran out of the house as soon as she saw them and never got the guts to tell anyone. The night she told us, we each feared to sleep alone. We shared a bed the three of us because we were afraid that the spirits would

come and kill us but nothing happened. We were a bit surprised to wake up without a scratch.

“One evening, as we were going to the well, I suggested to the girls that we should escape. I had been thinking about this for some time and I knew it was possible. I knew it would be a life-and-death sort of thing but I hated the life I led out there. I knew I deserved better. But I did not tell the girls all these thoughts. When I told them that evening, however, only one of them agreed to come with me. Her name was Akim. Akim and I decided to move ahead of the others. But she was still full of fear. She told me that if they caught us she would report to the rebels that I was the one who initiated the idea of escaping. Then the rebels would kill me and spare her. I ignored her. I did not even get annoyed with her because we were all living in fear for our lives. The well was about five kilometres from the camp where we were living. We had walked about two kilometres and were still arguing when we heard some voices. We stopped to listen and heard them ask each other about who was talking. Then we stopped talking.

“Life had taught us not to take anything for granted so we did not wait to know who it was. We just ran in different directions. As the rebels were pursuing us, the people from the camp from which we had escaped followed suit. Perhaps the other girls had returned to the camp and told them that we intended to escape. I mustered all the energy I could and continued running until I came across long grass in which I hid. It was green grass that was about one metre high. It was getting dark and I knew they would not easily locate me in such surroundings.

“I sat still and held my breath so as not to give them any clue as to my presence there. They later came and flashed a torch around the spot where I was for about five minutes and then moved on. I heard them say they had killed my friend, Akim and if they got me, they were going to kill me too – even more brutally. A pang of guilt sliced my insides.

“I stayed in the same spot for about two hours before I crawled into a thick forest nearby. I resumed my escape journey at about 4.00 a.m. in the morning. It was a dark night like my first night as an abductee. My feet and legs were scored by scratches from the thorn bushes and tall grass. Nonetheless, they carried me on, oblivious of where I was going. I just

walked on, letting my legs decide my direction. I chose to leave everything in God's hands.

"Towards morning, I saw a small path leading to a village. I followed it. After walking for about a kilometre, I reached a home whose compound was littered with mango skins. They looked fresh, as though they had been dropped there the previous night. I thought this might as well be another dwelling place for the rebels who had eaten the mangoes and scattered the skins in the compound.

"Filled with fresh fear, I broke into a run. I ran on and on. When I had run for about two miles, I noticed on the ground marks of soldiers' boots. I decided to follow them in the hope that they might be UPDF soldiers who had come to hunt down the rebels and would probably rescue me. I followed them slowly until I reached a valley, where the marks disappeared.

"I stood around for some time, unsure whether to go on or turn back. I soon decided to turn back. After I had walked for about two hundred metres, I saw another route. I followed it without knowing that I was blissfully walking right into the line of fire. Then I heard them. I heard a voice speaking in Swahili and I turned to see who it was. I realised it was a UPDF soldier up on a tree branch. He was addressing me but I did not understand Swahili.

"Then I saw many other soldiers up in surrounding trees. They started shooting at me thinking that I was a rebel and that perhaps there were many other rebels behind me. Machine guns rattled, bullets whistled in the air and rocket grenades exploded. A bullet whizzed close behind me. I fell down flat in shock. Accidentally, a bullet aimed at me shot one of the soldiers and he fell from the tree and died. Another soldier in an adjacent tree was injured. One of the soldiers climbed down from the tree and ran near where I had fallen. I panicked as I heard him take up position above me, load the gun and pull the trigger. He wanted to shoot me at close range. As he fumbled to aim his gun at me, an energy I did not know I possessed ran through my body and I jumped up, falling at his chest. Both of us fell to the ground. He quickly disentangled himself from me and got onto his feet but he did not try to shoot at me again. He fixed his eyes upon me and I wondered what he was thinking. But he must have been thinking about what to do next. His eyes were a mixture of pity and anger.

“Sanity returned to me and I pleaded with him to spare my life. I told him that I had heard him speak Langi and I was also a Lango and that I might probably be a distant relative of his. I said so many things in the space of seconds, perhaps unconnected things too. I also explained to him that I was not a rebel but an abductee who had escaped in order to go back home. That seemed to appeal to his emotions. I was overwhelmed by relief when he led me to where the other soldiers had congregated next to the fallen soldier.

“There were about seven soldiers, including the one who had just died. Only two of them were Langi, with the rest being Bantu. The soldiers had an argument as to whether they should kill me or not. They argued about it for some time and finally decided that they would not kill me. Some of the Bantu soldiers carried the dead body and others carried the wounded soldier. The two Langi soldiers walked with me to the main road as the other soldiers walked behind us. They advised me not to run anyhow when bullets were flying. They also told me that the Bantu soldiers were full of anger since it was because of me that their friend had died and they might kill me in revenge. So the UPDF soldiers too had their little fights, I realised.

“As we walked, I told them about what I had been through and how I had escaped from the rebels and how a friend of mine with whom I escaped had been killed. They asked me where I was going and I told them that I was going to Pader. They also asked me where exactly my home was and I told them that my home district was Kitgum. They said that they were going to Pader trading centre. I continued walking with them.

“When we reached Pader, the commander in Pader ordered that a vehicle be sent to carry the dead body and the wounded soldier. The soldiers congratulated me on having survived. We had become friends, especially with the Langi soldiers because we spoke the same language. I thanked God for having put me in the hands of people I could talk to and for having spared my life, at least thus far.

“At the Pader barracks, I was handed over to a female UPDF soldier who was in charge of returnees. There I found another girl who had also just escaped from another group of rebels. The two of us spent one night in Pader.

“In the morning we were taken to Acoopii, one of the rehabilitation centres for rebel abductees.

“I stayed in Acoopii for one week and was then transferred to World Vision Pader. At World Vision, there were many other returnees. Life there reminded me of school life. We slept in big halls built like dormitories. There were double-decker beds and each one of us had a bed to ourselves. The centre was fenced and we had to seek permission before we were allowed to move out. During the day, we had many sessions; we had counselling sessions where we were taught to open up about what we had seen in the bush and what happened to us. We were also taught how to conduct ourselves when we returned home.

“The girls were taught tailoring while the boys were taught bicycle repair and carpentry. We would also have time to play, dance and sing. Our leaders would bring us firewood and food items and we would cook for ourselves. We had a duty roster. Each day three of us would be assigned to cook. The ratio was often two girls to one boy. The boys’ main task in the kitchen was to split the firewood. We ate a balanced diet – beans, greens, meat, *posho*. We would eat at least two platefuls of food each to make up for what we had missed while we were with rebels in the bush.

“A few days after I arrived at the World Vision centre, something happened. I saw my paternal uncle. When I told the people who were in charge of us that I had seen someone I knew, they did not believe me at first. But I insisted and requested to go and talk to him. At first they turned down my request but later they relented and one of them accompanied me when I went to talk to him.

“My uncle was very happy to see me but told me he had not heard from my parents for a long time. He was deployed with the mobile troops and had been transferred to Lukulu, which is close to the Sudan border. He said he would tell my sister Teddy. Teddy lives in Lukulu. He said that she would then find my parents and inform them that I was at the World Vision centre in Pader.

“One week later, while we were attending counselling classes, one of the girls came to call me. I did not know why I was being summoned. I thought that perhaps I had done something wrong and was going to be punished by the authorities. I found out, however, that it was my parents who had

come to see me. As soon as they cast their eyes on me, they started weeping. My mother cried, my father cried, and I too cried. We cried tears of joy. We then looked at one another and cried and laughed at the same time. When we were done crying, we started talking. We talked and talked. I asked them about home and they asked me about what had happened to me since the day I left home. It was a moment of fathomless joy for my parents and me. After a lot of soul-sharing, my father went back home. My mother was allowed to stay with me for one night. We shared the same bed. We almost talked throughout the night. The following day she left for home. I was not allowed to go with her because I was doing a course in tailoring. Still I was happy. Our instructors told me that I would only be allowed to go home after I had mastered the course.

“I was later transferred to KICHWA (Kitgum Children and Women’s Association). The conditions were the same as the ones at World Vision centre in Pader. After one month I was taken home in a Toyota Land Cruiser; I was accompanied by the matron. I took along a mattress, two litres of cooking oil, one bag of maize and two kilograms of sugar given to me by the centre. All my siblings were so happy to see me that they carried me shoulder high. I let my tears flow freely, mingling with their sweat. I felt complete again.

“Shortly after I got home, I started to have terrible dreams. Whenever one placed an object near me accidentally, I would jump in fear. I was scared of everything but after some time this ended.”

At this point, I remind Lucky that she has indeed been a very lucky girl to survive all this. Her determination and strength through it all is simply amazing. The power that lies in meanings behind names and their ability to determine one’s destiny gains new meaning to me. I am reminded of the biblical Jabez who asked God in his prayer to change his name, which meant pain. God indeed changed his name, blessed him with wealth and made him the most respected member of his household.

By the end of Lucky’s the story I feel I have met a friend. Maybe one day we shall meet again, I console myself. We say a prayer together and part.

Fear not, my child

*Joshua wakes up.
It's in the wee hours of the morning.
He is demanding for food, for warmth...*

*Stop crying, child!
The night will swallow you up.
Fate has come your way.
Adjust to the camp
your new home.
Fear not, my child.*

*Don't ask me until when?
The food is rotting in the gardens.
The animals are with the Karimojong.
Your blanket was burnt to ashes.
Nothing...nothing left except you, my dear!
Your father, uncles, brothers, are gone.
They are gone to visit your ancestors.
You are the only one left in the whole clan,
left to carry the lifeline.*

*Therefore,
Fear not, my child!
Life has to go on.
Keep quiet, my dear.
Let us wait for tomorrow,
for a new day.
Who knows!
Perhaps the wind.*

Margaret Ntakalimaze

72 Hours

By Barbara Oketta

It is 10th October 1996.

It is one o'clock in the morning.

It is a few hours after Independence Anniversary celebrations.

It is funny how the rebels waited for us to celebrate this day. One would think it was deliberate. But maybe it was. The other funny thing about this day is the fact that it was just after our Visitation Day. Visitation Day was very important for us boarders because it was the only time we would see our families who would be allowed to come and visit us.

I remember that on visitation day my parents had not visited me. This saddened me since those were hard days. The rebel activities were at their peak and there was a cloud of fear hanging over the school. I was saddened that even with the knowledge of the location of the school and the fact that Kony had been killing people nearby, my parents had not taken time to come and visit me – to find out how I was faring in those difficult times. A neighbour from home had come to visit her daughter and through her I had sent a letter of complaint to my parents. I remember one particular part of the letter. I remember it because it later caused quarrels and tension at home. It said, 'Why didn't you come to see me today? Don't you people want to know how I am faring? Or are you waiting until I get abducted from this place before you can come to check on me!' I must admit that was some premonition because I did not have the slightest idea how quickly my abduction would come to pass.

That day, we had slept a little bit early. There hadn't been any night prep. The school had deemed it safer not to have prep. There was general fear in the school. A teacher who used to spy for us on the whereabouts of the rebels and their activities had informed the administration that the village where our school was located had been surrounded by the rebels. He had advised us not to go and hide in the village. You see, previously we had been hiding in the nearby village in the hope that if the rebels came to

the school they would find no one there. On this particular occasion it was useless to go to the village for many reasons.

First of all, the whole village had been surrounded, so, no matter where we hid, the rebels were bound to find us and we would also be putting the lives of the villagers at risk. Secondly, Sister Rachele who used to help us hide was not around school until late in the evening, by which time it would be difficult for her to mobilise us to move to our various hiding places in the homes of the villagers where we used to hide at night. Thirdly, and most disturbing, our hiding places were already known to the rebels.

Kony is a very cunning man. A few days before the fateful day, he had sent one of his people, a young girl, to come and spy on our school. This girl came with a very clever story. She said that she was looking for a vacancy because her school in Gulu was no longer safe as rebels had attacked it. She said that she had heard that St. Mary's College, Aboke was a good school and much safer than her former school.

We should have known better than to believe her because as we reflected later, she was indeed a very strange girl. Earlier on she had refused to speak to the matron, treating her with contempt and insisting on talking to Sister Alba, who was the headmistress of the school then. Later on, the girl had been rude to the dormitory prefect and although she was a newcomer she had vowed to make the prefect's life a living hell. We all took her for an undisciplined girl and decided to ignore her.

When she finally saw Sister Alba, she was advised that since it was the middle of the term, she could not be admitted. However, she was told to return at the beginning of the following year when the school would be holding interviews for new entrants so that she could be interviewed with the rest. With the sisters in Aboke, there were no shortcuts.

Since it was late by the time she met the headmistress, the girl was advised to spend the night with us in our dormitory and return to her school the following day. That was how she easily ended up in the dormitory.

We welcomed her to the dormitory. We visited her at the bed she was going to sleep on. We gave her bathing water and made her feel comfortable in the dorm. At that time, we felt that much as she was rude, she was just a helpless girl trying to find her place. But she was not grateful for any

assistance that we gave her. She just took the water and went to bathe without saying a word!

That night, as usual, Sister Rachele took us to our hiding place in the village; alas, the girl's mission was accomplished as she hid with us! It was a wonderful discovery for her!

It was after she had left in the morning that we put two and two together! And days later when we found her in the bush it confirmed our suspicions.

I remember that everyone was rather quiet that evening. We all just got into our beds and slept. It was as if by instinct that we knew that that night would not be the same as other nights. We had had such anxieties on other nights, praying that the rebels would not come in the dead of the night, but this seemed a different night. The 'spy-teacher' had already told us that the rebels had surrounded the village. It was an exceptionally quiet night and I knew everyone was praying and I knew part of the prayer was that we would get through the night quickly so that it could be daylight again. There was always safety in light. Oh God how we all wanted it to be day again!

It was in the dead of the night that I was woken up. Everyone in the dormitory was shouting at the top of their voices, "The rebels have come, what we are going to do?!" I jumped out of my bed and exclaimed, "Oh God! Please save us!"

It was only a matter of time, and all of us knew this. Information had secretly seeped throughout the village that the rebels had now surrounded the village. There was no going out. No one was safe anywhere anymore.

I remember jumping back into bed and covering the whole of my body with my blanket and mumbling a short prayer. At first words failed me, but later on I managed to mumble, '...Lord the rebels have come... we can do nothing now. Please Lord, keep us... keep me away from these rebels. Lord, let them not rape me.' There had been a lot of talk about rape being very much a part of rebel activity. That was the first thought on my mind as soon as I realised that the rebels were already with us! I had kept myself pure and I didn't want my first experience with a man to be rape! Some rape cases had even been reported to result in death. I also remember asking the Lord to reunite me with my family safely. I silently pledged to God that if

He did those two things for me, I would live to testify to His goodness for the rest of my life. I earnestly pleaded with God to protect me.

From under the edge of my blanket, I managed to peep at what was happening outside. Because it was pitch-black, it was easy to see the electric torches that were heading towards us. I pulled the blanket over my head and wished I could vanish but that was not to happen. Soon the rebels had reached our dormitory and were banging on the door with their clubs and *pangas*; they only managed to break the louvres that were in the window. The sight of the clubs and *pangas* frightened me so much. Even in the darkness you could see that the *pangas* were very sharp. And the clubs were very big and heavy. A person could easily die if one swoop of the club landed on her head.

The dormitory door was made of steel and locked from the inside; so the rebels failed to break it and this gave us a moment of relief. Unfortunately next to the door was a small window covered by an iron sheet. The rebels easily removed the iron sheet and pushed a *kadogo* (a child rebel soldier) into the dormitory. The *kadogo* later ordered one girl at gunpoint to go and get the keys to the door. This girl had been caught off guard by the *kadogo* since on hearing the commotion outside the dormitory she had gone to a nearby window to see what was happening outside only to run into the *kadogo*.

When the rebels finally came in, they asked us to get out of our beds and form a straight line outside our dormitory. They later tied us *kandoya* (with hands at the back) using our clothes and bed sheets. All this time I could not believe what was happening around me. I could not believe that the dreaded Kony rebels were actually next to me. I could not fathom that I was actually being abducted.

In this confusion, a few courageous girls managed to escape. Most of us couldn't do the same because we knew we couldn't run very fast. And with the rebels wielding guns and machetes the last thing I wanted to do was to annoy them and face their wrath. I did not even want to look at the rebels in the eye lest it annoyed them.

The girls in the dormitory next to ours were the luckiest. On that particular day, we had spread maize on its veranda hoping to dry it. Since it had not dried, we had left it outside overnight to avoid carrying it out again the following day. That was what saved these girls. When the rebels

saw the maize spread outside the dormitory, they assumed that it was the school store. They even argued about searching the building but the majority argued that a dormitory could not look like that and so they left it alone. And left the girls alone too! The girls were dead silent and from where I was standing I could actually agree with the rebels that no person could possibly be inside that building although in my heart I was sure that none of them was asleep. They were all watching us from the corners of their eyes, helplessly. Some of them had their sisters outside with us but they knew better than to make any sound.

We were crying and begging for Sister Rachele to come to our aid. Somehow we knew that if Sister came out of her room then everything would be fine. But she didn't come out. Later we learnt that Sister Rachele could not have come out for fear of angering the rebels. In order to protect us she kept away. We also learnt later that Mother Superior had forbidden her to come out of her room. So through her window she had watched as all the events unfolded.

It had been a wet day and standing outside in the cold and in pitch darkness with our hands tied behind us made it unbearable. It reminded me of slaves in the seventeenth century being herded to the boats for shipment to foreign countries. I could hear my teeth chatter but had to restrain myself lest I was picked out of the crowd and killed for making noise. I thought of my mother and siblings back home and wondered what their reactions would be after finding out the following day that I had been abducted. I could not imagine how my mother would react. I thought of the letter I had written to my parents and a strange coldness snaked through my stomach. I had sentenced them to a life of guilt!

Before we left the school, the rebels went into our school dispensary and took all the medicine that was there. This included medicine for cough, malaria, headache and stomachache.

As we got out of the dormitories, we all had shoes and slippers on to protect our feet. We knew we were starting a very long journey. But how wrong we all were! I doubt if any of us still had slippers or shoes on by the end of the journey.

In single file, with our heads bowed, we trooped out of our sanctuary. We were approaching the school gate when suddenly the rebels asked us to

stop. They started picking some of us out of the line. Interestingly enough, when the rebels had first got into our dormitory they had asked for Athieno to come out. I don't know how the rebels knew that this girl studied in this school and that they would find her with us. It seems the rebels knew so much about the girl's family. At this time they asked her to be part of the new line that was now being formed. I wished I too could be in this new line but my wish was short-lived. Because of our crying and pleading, I had thought that the rebels had had pity on us and were now releasing the few selected ones. Most of the people in this new line were obviously very young girls; some as young as eleven years old.

There was also this girl who had a weak hand because she had been born by caesarean section and it had affected her hand. I thought they had put her in that new line because she could not even hold a gun and would therefore be useless in the bush. Nora, who was my 'neighbour' in the dormitory, got picked yet she was standing right behind me.

Immediately after the sorting exercise, this small group of about thirty girls were paraded on the church veranda and asked to strip naked. My stomach churned at the sight. I wished I was only imagining the whole scene. I wanted to kneel and pray in the hope that a miracle would happen to change the flow of events but dared not! I wanted to scream for the pain of my friends but still couldn't dare! I wanted to die instead of being a witness to this but death does not just come! I was helpless! Helpless!

Right before my very eyes, in front of the church, I saw my friends being robbed of their innocence, their pride, their very being. It was worse than any other sight I had ever witnessed before. For once I wondered why God was not intervening. We all cried silently. No one could do anything, not even Sister Rachele. Everyone was helpless. Some of the girls - very young girls - were raped by as many as four huge rough men. My heart went out to each of the girls. Psychologically, I felt the pains they felt, the pangs of pain that sliced through their innocence.

After the ugly, indescribable incident, the rebels left the girls at the church and came back to us. They never even looked back at the church grounds they had just littered with helpless humans. Our journey started in silence. We were 139 girls. We were all sombre from the incident that had just taken place. Silently I turned and looked behind at St. Mary's for the last time.

The dormitory next to ours was still silent as if indeed it was a store. How relieved they must have felt at seeing the rebels' retreat. They had escaped death by an inch of the blade! The girls outside the church were still there, ripped and degraded and all of them crying.

As we were moving outside the gate, I looked at the convent hoping to catch a glimpse of someone but nothing seemed to be moving.

Our journey was a long one. And neither the weather nor the shoes we wore made it any easier. We did not know where we were going but from what I had heard about Kony, I thought that we were headed for Sudan. The slippers and shoes we had put on became a burden and one by one we removed them and left them behind. It was better to walk barefoot. The rebels laughed at us, telling us about how we thought we were so good and untouchable. They kept mocking us and telling us that despite all our education, we now belonged to them and hence they could do anything that they pleased with us.

Mine were deeper fears though: Was I now also an abductee like the ones I had heard about? Was I going to be one of the soldiers' wives? Was school over for me?

I thought of the following day after the village learnt about our abduction. What would people do after they found out that we had been abducted? What would my father do? Could he come to look for me in the bush? And what about the government, what would it do? Everyone feared Kony. Many innocent people had already died at the hands of Kony and the government had not done much. Was it going to rescue us now that it was students who had been abducted?

I had so many questions in my mind. And each question yielded yet another question instead of an answer. The chain of the unanswered questions just hung around my neck, growing heavier with each step. All of us had somehow anticipated the coming of this fateful day. We had lived in fear of rebel activity for a long time now. I wished I had transferred from this school the previous term.

The night I left St Mary's, Aboke as an abductee was the longest night of my life. We walked and walked, endlessly. Many times I wanted to escape and run, but with my hands tied behind my back I knew I could not get far. Besides, the rebels were walking close by and they were holding guns

and freshly sharpened *pangas*. Some moments I wished I would die but, ironically, every time I looked at the glittering *pangas*, I felt an urge to live. I did not want to die by those *pangas*. We walked the whole night. One step, two, three, one thousand, countless...

Meanwhile, we later learnt that Sister Rachele, together with another teacher started following us immediately we left the school gate. The following day, when we all saw Sister Rachele catch up with us we heaved a big sigh of relief. Somehow we knew that she would solve everything. Over the years we had learnt to depend on Sister Rachele. She was a pillar of strength, someone you could always count on. And it was generally known that Kony respected white people and wanted them to believe that he was a good person. So the relief that swept over our faces when we saw Sister Rachele could not be hidden! We knew she would plead for us. We believed she would convince Kony to release us.

Immediately she arrived she talked to each one of us, encouraging us. "Take heart dear daughter, we will overcome this," she would say to one girl and then move on to the next. She would also add, "This walking will also come to an end. We can't just walk forever." Much as we were all getting weary of the unending journey, Sister's words indeed gave us strength. They gave us the hope that all was not lost after all.

The next day, during our trek one of the rebels came to me and told me to carry his heavy bag. Apparently the bag had been given to him by his superior to carry. He passed the bag on to me with the orders that he had been given. "Don't dare open this bag because the moment you do you will die."

I silently carried the bag, terrified. There were moments when I wanted to peep into it if only to see what made it so heavy but I resisted the temptation. My hands ached and later when I put the luggage on my head, the head too ached. At around one noon, *my boss* reappeared to ask me if anyone had come looking for the bag and, of course, if I had opened it. When *his boss* later came looking for the bag and picked a few eatables from it I then discovered that it contained sugar cane, maize and canned food. I wondered where they had got them from. Also inside the bag were gun parts, which accounted for the heaviness.

The rebel told me over and over not to open the bag and checked on me repeatedly. It was during one such check that I discovered his other motive for the countless inspections. "You are going to be my wife," he said to me, just like that. My heart sank to the bottom of my being. How was I supposed to respond to this madness? As if to spite me more, he came close to me and repeated, "My wife, take good care of those things."

Oh God, please save me from this monster, I prayed and begged God to keep me from being raped. That day was far from easy in any way. The UPDF (Uganda People's Defence Forces) had been deployed to follow us and they were doing so using helicopters. They kept launching bombs, which scattered us. Some brave girls escaped during this confusion. I think the logic behind the launching of the bombs was to create confusion to enable us to escape. As for me, I did not have enough courage to escape. I feared getting killed. The bombing angered the rebels so much that they started beating us and telling us that we were the cause of their suffering.

Whenever the UPDF stopped dropping bombs on us, the rebels would tell us that we were the ones showing the UPDF their location. They would tell us not to look up at anything. They also told us to keep our hands folded so as to keep them out of sight and not alert UPDF about our location.

While in the bush I had a 'daughter'. This was a Senior One student who had come to refer to me as her 'mother' since I used to take care of her. This girl was asthmatic and needed a lot of attention. She had come to depend on me. Even when we went into hiding, she always slept in the same house with me. This was so that in case she had her asthmatic attack, I would be close by to help her. She had also been abducted with us. And we had promised each other to meet as frequently as we could, much as sometimes we would be separated by the rebels for hours. Communication was difficult but from time to time we would whisper to each other when the rebels were not looking.

After the crossfire between the rebels and the UPDF, *my daughter* found me and told me how she had narrowly escaped death. "A bullet zoomed past my ear. Now I have stopped being stupid; whenever there is a bout of gunfire, I will always lie low and roll. I don't want to die in this place." We laughed lightly but I was glad that she had learnt all this by herself. She told me this as we were crossing a river.

Later on when we were walking, she found me and told me that she would not manage to go on with the journey because she had got an attack already. She said that her chest felt too heavy and that she had become too weak. Since our abduction we had not been given anything to eat and this affected her so much. I encouraged her not to give up and I held her hand as we moved. She then said that she was not going to stay with the rebels much longer. "Let us stay with these devils for only two weeks and after that we should escape." I agreed with her but cautioned her that she should not tell anyone else about our plan. If people found out, the information could easily leak to the rebel commanders who might kill us! She agreed. Two weeks became our target.

As we plunged deeper into the forests, Sister Rachele kept pleading for us with the rebel commanders. She would from time to time come to us and tell us to do whatever the rebels asked us to do. She also told us not to worry for we would soon return to school. She told the rebels that she had brought them money so that they could let us go. "We are not interested in your money but the girls. WE WANT THE GIRLS," they emphasised each syllable! However, Sister Rachele did not give up. She continued pleading.

When we reached Opit, the rebels somehow heeded Sister Rachele's plea. It was already late in the evening and they decided to stop. This was where we were going to spend our night. There was no food, however, but we were grateful for the rest. The journey had been very long. Opit is at the border between Lango and Acholi. We could now see the rebels' intention was for us to use the shortest route to Sudan. At Opit, we were at the home of a certain old man who had refused to run away to a safer place. I admired his courage. The rebels asked him why he had not run away and he said he was there to help people. "I am here to welcome everyone. Even you, I am here to welcome you. If I were not here you would probably not have rested here." He said that he was old and weak and that life was of no use to him since he had already lived long enough.

Later on we found out that the real reason we had stopped at this place was so that the rebels could sort out the girls to be freed and girls to be retained in captivity.

Early the following morning the mood was tense. You could have cut the air into two. We saw Sister Rachele talking to the rebel commanders. Because we were far we could not hear what they were saying but from the look of things it seemed like they were having the final discussion.

When at last Sister Rachele came to us, she addressed us. "Our leaders have been very generous to us," she said. "They have agreed to allow some of us to go back to school. Some of you are going to go back to school with me but some of you are going to continue the journey. Whichever side you fall on please accept it and do as you are told."

We were all terrified. Each one of us wanted to be on the side that was returning to school but it was up to the rebels to decide which side one belonged to.

When one of the rebel commanders came to address us, Sister Rachele told us to clap for him for having been kind to us. We did as we were told and apprehensively awaited his speech – the one that was going to determine our future.

"I have been sent by my superior to do what I am going to do. I know what you must be going through because I was also once like you. I used to study at St. Joseph's in Lira before I came here. This place is not that bad as some of you will come to find out. You will even come to appreciate it.

"I am going to ask you a few questions; to all the questions I will expect a brief answer. Only answer the questions and go to the side that I tell you to go."

With those words, the exercise began. He asked us to sit down and then he would pick one person at random and ask a few basic questions. The questions put to each of us varied except a few general ones like 'What is your name?', 'What is your age?', 'Where do you from' and later also about our backgrounds. The exercise took up most of the morning.

It was hard to know which criteria the rebel commander was using. However, it was an open secret that Kony liked tall, slender, brown, beautiful women. So generally a whisper went around that the group with a lot of tall girls was the one going to remain. I, however, wanted to belong to that particular group because that was where most of my friends were. My cousin Grace had also been taken to that group.

There was this girl called Jackie. Jackie was a tall, beautiful Acholi girl, the most beautiful girl in the group, I believe. Everyone knew that Jackie was going to remain. There was no way the rebels were going to let her go and so Jackie served as the determining factor to separate the chaff from the wheat. We all held our breath when Jackie's turn came. When she was finally told to go and sit on the opposite side, the girls on that side started crying. They were now certain they were going to remain. Even us on the opposite side looked at one another and secretly felt sure that we were going to return to school.

It was a very emotionally draining exercise. There was this girl whose younger sister was ushered to join the girls meant to remain behind while she was in the group meant to be released. She cried for her younger sister, begging the rebel commander to keep her instead of her sister. She was beaten and asked to keep quiet if she did not want to be killed. Since she did not care whether she was killed or not, she just continued crying and later on she became very weak and fainted.

Jackie too was pleading unceasingly to be allowed to return to school, saying she was her mother's only child: "I am an only child and my mother will surely die if you don't let me go back to her," she cried but her plea fell on deaf ears.

Sure enough, her mother lived for less than a year after Jackie's abduction. She was the first parent to die of grief. The poor woman could not live with the guilt she carried. And unfortunately, it was a guilt that was purely coincidental.

The day before we were abducted had been Visitation Day. Jackie's mother had not gone to check on her daughter. This was very unusual. It was the first Visitation that she had ever missed. However, she had sent her mother – Jackie's grandmother – to go and check on her. Jackie loved her grandmother but she was disappointed that her mother had not come. In fact she had sent a letter to her mother telling her that she had missed her. When Jackie was abducted, her mother blamed herself a lot for not having been there for her daughter. Also earlier in the term, her mother had wanted to transfer her to another school but Jackie had refused, saying that she first wanted to finish that year at St Mary's before she could be transferred. She

had not wanted to leave in the middle of term. She wished she had followed her instincts and forced Jackie to leave the school.

After the selection, Sister Rachele told us to kneel down and thank 'our leaders' for their kindness. We even clapped for them. We did everything Sister told us to do. Some girls in the group that remained behind asked Sister Rachele how she could leave them there. "Let us all stay!" they cried. "You either go with all of us or we all remain here." The girls retained by the rebels were thirty in number while those handed over to Sister Rachele were one hundred and nine.

The minutes that followed were the most terrifying. The rebels had told us that we would be returning home but we were still under their authority. What if they changed their mind? What if they decided to slaughter us or shoot us or rape us? What if all this was just a hoax? All we wanted was the opportunity to leave this place as soon as possible.

Meanwhile the man who had told me that I was going to be his wife in the bush was hovering around. As if to confirm my fears he stood next to me and muttered, "There is this girl that I had wanted to be my wife. She is not on the other side and I can't seem to see her here. She must be really lucky." My heart froze and I said a silent prayer: If you get me out of this place safely, God, I silently prayed, I promise I will never sin again. Please save me from this man, this horrible place, amen.

As if in answer to my prayer, the man moved a distance from me. He, however, continued to look for me. One of my friends whom I had told about the man whispered to me, "If he returns, look him straight in the eye. That will make him think that you are not the one." Sure enough he came back and as he approached me, I stared straight into his eyes. He looked at me several times before he gave up the hunt and walked away. I heaved a sigh of relief and my friend smiled. She knew how tense it must have been for me. I badly needed to leave the place.

Later on I went and sat under a banana plant close by intending to offer a quick prayer to God. I was still looking for the right words to say to God when the rebel commander who had been separating us appeared from behind me. I was startled by his presence and before I could say anything he remarked, "You are the luckiest of this lot because I had been instructed

to make sure you remained behind. I don't know how you escaped my eyes. But don't worry. You shall go back home today."

"Thank you," I whispered, trusting his sincerity.

"Don't thank me," he said with a sudden change of mood and walked away as if angered by my response. I was now trembling. My whole body felt weak. It occurred to me that all along, when I was congratulating myself upon escaping, the commander was aware of this and had been aware of my presence. It was now time for new worries to crop up as I watched him walk away. Was it possible that he was going to inform the other rebel who had been looking for me?

I cried out to the Lord and begged him to hide me away from these rebels. Fortunately *my husband* did not turn up again. We were tied in pairs, each one with a friend. This was because they wanted to keep track of us. The reason was that in case one person got lost it would be easy to identify her since she would have been tied to a friend, who would have accurate information about her.

Before we set off, the rebel commander addressed us. "You belong to us," he bellowed. "We have just asked Sister Rachele to take you back and keep you for us. Any time we can come back for you. It could be today, next week or next year. Any time that we feel like we will come for you. And we must find you there when we come! Have you heard?" We all nodded our heads.

The journey back was rather quiet. No one talked. We were racked by mixed feelings. We had gone through a lot and most of us could not believe that we were actually being set free. At the same time, we could not believe that we were leaving our friends, sisters, cousins, and schoolmates behind in the bush. Some girls cried for a long time after we had been released.

We just walked on like zombies. We walked straight ahead but no one knew where exactly we were headed. We reached some village at around 9.00 p.m. A teacher who had followed us with Sister sensed that we were being followed. From time to time he would leave us and run backwards to see if the rebels were following us. This time, I think because of the darkness, he had been able to see the rebels' torches, which were always too bright. He had also been able to discover that the rebels had made a semi-circle

around us. It was as if they were aiming at surrounding us before attacking us! Something had to be done and fast!

We were in shock. The new twist of events was unbelievable. Just when we thought that we were safe and close to villages where we could get help! We were past tears. We looked for salvation from Sister. All of us hoped she would save our lives even at this time when her own life was also in danger. She decided that we should continue walking and wait for whatever would come.

Finally, as we pressed on, we saw a small hut that had one door and no windows. The teacher whom we had been moving with told us to enter it. As I said earlier, we were one hundred and nine girls. But all of us entered that hut. Sister Rachele got in as well. The teacher went out to find help. We did not lock the door in case the rebels suspected the presence of people inside and set the hut on fire.

The idea behind hiding in the hut was that if the rebels failed to track us down in the course of their search for us they would abandon the search and go back. Only then would we come out and continue our journey. However, the conditions inside the hut were terrible. There was no standing room for all of us, forcing us to lean on one another for support. I remember I used my toes to support the whole of my body. It was very hard but I was not the only one in such discomfort. People started fainting inside the hut. Within a short time, five people had fainted. I remember one particular girl who called out to Sister Rachele that she was going to die before she fainted. Sister broke down and wept, making all of us cry. She then told us to get out for some fresh air because it was clear that eventually everyone was going to faint.

While outside the hut, we unbuttoned our blouses and helped the girls who had fainted. They came to. Afterwards we had to go back into the hut, but this time left the door wide open. It was past midnight when the teacher returned. He had three other men with him. He told us he had located the home of an LC (Local Council official) of the area and they were taking us there.

Together we walked towards the LC official's home. It was a two-hour journey. As a result, by the time we reached there we were exhausted, and by the time we were shown where we were going to sleep some girls

were already sleeping on the veranda, with a few of them dreaming and screaming in their sleep.

When the day broke, we discovered that we were in Otwal village. People had by now found out about our abduction and some parents had come out to look for their children. They did not know that some of us were already on our way back. My sister bypassed us. She was using a car and we never met.

The girls who had escaped during the exchange of fire with the UPDF had already reached home and spread the news of what had happened. In the course of looking for us, some of our parents were caught by the rebels and made to share the fate of their children. Others were raped along with their children, and some even killed. It was terrible. Back at school, a list of the abducted children had been made. Anyone who returned had her name ticked off.

As we were walking back to school from Otwal, our school chaplain met us. The priest had survived narrowly because he was the rebels' number one target. The rebels had sworn that they would kill and cook him for the girls to eat. This was because he would spy on them and report on their activities, especially when they were nearby.

The priest had come in a car. This became handy as he carried the very weak girls back to school and came back for more. Some girls had not yet overcome the grief of having left their sisters behind. They had cried all the way and now they were too weak to walk. Some girls were big in size and the friction between their thighs was making it difficult for them to move. Other girls were still in shock and were feared to be getting insane.

The priest also had a list on which he was marking those students who had escaped and those who had remained behind with the rebels. It was after I got back to school that I realised that we had been on the move for three days. And in that time, we had not eaten a single morsel of food. We were ravenously hungry but were happy to have escaped from hell's mouth.

But none of the things that had happened to us in the bush had prepared us for what we were going to face at school. To me that was the hardest moment of all. From far off, we could see that the school was crowded. We were the object of interest. When the parents saw us, all of them came

running to us. "Where is Grace?" my aunt asked me. "Have you left her behind? Is she coming?"

Grace had asked to me to tell her mother that she was fine. But how could she be fine? She had asked me to tell her mother that a day would come when she would return home. I did tell her mother any of that. I just said that she had remained behind.

And then there was Jackie, who had told me to go and greet her mother. I did not know what to do. I wished I was not there to see so many mothers crying, so many fathers crying, so much pain. The place was wet with tears. I asked myself what was so special about me that I should be here and not my friends. I know that that was the same question that most of the parents who had lost their daughters must have been asking themselves. I thanked God that I had survived the ordeal and I prayed to him to keep safely those who had remained behind in the bush. I prayed that they too would one day be able to come back to us. And indeed most of them did come back!

When I finally saw Jackie's mum, I was speechless. Everyone knew that she was going to die that day. She was leaping up high and hitting the ground repeatedly with her body. She wailed and asked God to kill her there and then. She asked God why he was punishing her daughter for the crimes she had committed. She wondered why God had not punished her directly.

Jackie's mum ran mad and died of depression shortly after. Before her death, I would frequently visit her, especially during the holidays. Every Sunday after church I would pass by her home just to talk to her. I would encourage her to believe that Jackie would one day come back. She would then smile and tell me that even if Jackie did not come back, it was kind of me to talk to her and reassure her about her daughter's safety. She said that seeing me in a way made her feel like she was seeing her own daughter.

Although she was my friend's mother, in time I came to regard her as my friend too. I was very sad when she died, and sadder still when Jackie arrived to find only her grave. I had been looking forward to the day I would say to her, "See, I told you Jackie would come back and here she is". I felt very sad indeed that both of us had been robbed of this opportunity by death.

Jackie returned after spending eight years in the bush. She had a beautiful daughter with her when she came back. She told us of the gunfight between

the UPDF and the rebels, and how she had hidden in a nearby bush to wait for the gunfire to stop. She said she had waited for the first group of rebels to move on and the final group, which always came back to ensure that no one had escaped, to go back. She told us that after that she had run with her daughter strapped on her back and had not stopped for kilometres on end. Then she related how she had finally come across a group of men by a road, who took pity on her and helped her get to Lira town.

In Lira, she was taken to a radio station called Radio Wa which used to air a programme called *Karibu*. Miraculously, her grandmother happened to be listening to that programme that day when Jackie was put on air. Her grandmother could not believe her ears; she could not believe that her granddaughter whom she had not seen for eight years had come back. The old woman gathered all her neighbours to listen to the news with her to confirm if she was hearing right. A big party was prepared for Jackie and when she finally arrived at her grandmother's home, she found a big number of people waiting for her. Jackie was very lucky to return home to loving people.

The beauty about Jackie's return was that her home once again had three people. Once it had been her grandmother, her mother and Jackie. Now it was her grandmother, her daughter and herself. The old woman, who had resorted to living in the local church, now came back home. The Almighty God had answered her prayer. She could now eat and smile again.

But the warm reception accorded Jackie was not typical of the way other returnees were received. When we had just come back, we had been treated as outcasts in our villages. No one had wanted to associate with us, and called us moving corpses, meaning that we were already infected with HIV. We had been so stigmatised that most of us who had been abducted went back to St. Mary's College, Aboke because other schools would not take us. Nowadays things have changed; the abductees are regarded with sympathy. People are no longer harsh to them. Ours was a different story.

When I visited my friend and desk-mate Janet upon her return, I found her sitting outside her home. She looked very thin and the oversized flowered dress that her sister had given her made her look even worse. She had black spots and rashes all over her body. It was funny how people in

the bush knew about what was happening back home. Janet had known that I had been very ill immediately I reached home. I think the amount of walking I had done and lack of food had taken its toll on me. I was moved to tears when she said that they used to pray for my recovery. Jackie had also known about her mother's death soon after it occurred.

Another peculiar thing was that I used to frequently dream of Janet after I returned from abduction. In my dreams, I would be running with Janet home only for her to disappear. She would then reappear and I would warn her not to disappear again. This dream kept recurring until she came back home. She told me that she too used to dream about me and that she always hoped that one day she would come back and we would meet again. It has been a life of dreams and dreams.

Janet had been a very bright girl. She had been very good at mathematics and had hoped to become an engineer. She had had her goals set. Looking at me, she felt that she had lost out in life, but after she had received counselling and encouragement, she re-embarked on her journey of becoming an engineer and I knew she has what it takes to become one.

Life has to go on...

Cecelia looks at me with a nod of the head as she concludes her story. She is a strong woman.

*As I listen to Cecelia's story
My heart reaches out to Sister Rachele
A Sister with a heart of gold
She treaded where everyone dared not.
She showed that the Kony war could be won.
Where people sat and wept,
Sister Rachele stood and walked.
And that made all the difference.*

I had a dream

*I had a dream,
But I won't talk about it.*

*He came,
he gathered us,
issued us a new contract.
We extended our hands to receive,
he stretched his too.
But his was not there.
I saw it but it was not it.
My lips parted to speak, a spell bound them tight,
"Take back your hand...take back your hand,"
a voice in the wind urged.
A horn mourned in the distance.
It was a death tune.*

*Then I saw it.
Kony's spirit.
A fire sprang from his palms,
dry leaves of Garamba fed the fire,
yellow tongues licked the contract.
All gathered scattered!*

*But please don't talk.
It's a world of spirits.*

*Hilda Twongyeirwe
2008*

Guilty of Surviving

By Rosey Sembatya

*Look,
Look at what remains of myself
My strength, my people
The tragic sight of loss
Loss of the norms that made us
What are we to write home about?*

The huts that make up Latek-Odong camp can be seen at a distance as a beautiful assembly of dry grass. After miles of thicket, the sight of children carrying small jerrycans to the borehole is such a relief from the uniform vegetation cover as one nears the camp.

Santa tells me her story as we sit by the veranda of the Camp leader's office – a relatively small but nice-looking building painted white. Her posture speaks volumes but I would rather she tells me. She slouches and leans her whole self upon her left arm with both legs stretched out in front of her in complete resignation. In front of us is an expanse of land with predominantly grass and a sprinkling of short trees. Adjacent to the camp leader's office is another building painted white that lies uninhabited. Santa tells me it is the health centre. In the background is a group of children – some naked, others with torn trousers, and two of them dressed in oversized T-shirts, on one of which is inscribed the word *Philadelphia*.

Santa's response to my greeting demoralises me – it's heavy and carries tonnes of grief. A prolonged "*Kooooopeeeeeee*" as though she is about to faint. Unlike other women I have met who disguise their misery on seeing a stranger, Santa's face is grave, with creases that have permanently sought refuge there.

"I wish I had been abducted..." rang throughout my conversation with Santa. When a people's whole existence is eroded by circumstances beyond their control, what is a person to do? That is Santa's story.

Santa is a traditional birth attendant and a dance troupe leader in Latek-Odong camp. The former passionate dancer has lost everything. As she walks towards me, downcast, I can't help but watch her barefooted steps labouring to get to the Latek-Odong camp leader's veranda where I am seated on a three-legged stool.

"Santa, is everything fine?" I ask

Santa tells me she is recovering from a week-long malaria attack but would be fine soon. I had all along planned to ask her to do a traditional gig for me like in the olden days but I change my mind, for, I tell myself, what energy would a recuperating patient have? I instead ask about her dancing passion.

"My bones are now weak but even then, who would dance when everyone around is being abducted?" Being a dance troupe leader among a people robbed of their dancing passion by the war and its effects, she is burdened by grief. "*Orak, Giteke and Apiti... not any more, not any more...*" she laments.

Having encountered people who mock fate by laughing at their misfortune, I fail to catch a stealthy grin from Santa during the conversation. She has no kind words for this fatal happening but only gloom - in heaps.

Latek-Odong camp is a satellite camp in Amuru district. People are resettled here, close to their original homes, so that they can get the feel of home before they are eventually fully repatriated. Santa's original home is not far from this camp.

"Life in my home was characterised by laughter and fun. It was a homestead where my husband's family lived. It was a real home, unlike this camp," she says, pointing at the collection of huts that make up Latek-Odong. This collection of huts is separated from the camp leader's office by a narrow murrum road. "Mine was a real home where each one was guided by traditional social conventions. In the mornings, the girls would wake up and do the morning chores without being told or coerced. The boys would also do their own chores like hunting, riding and mending bicycles. After the chores, the girls would then take a bath, oil themselves liberally, adorn their necks and arms with brightly coloured beads and go to the village arena to

dance with their age-mates. The homesteads had hens running around, goats tethered to the trees in the compound and cows out in the fields grazing. Everything was well organised and aplenty and everyone related well with everyone else. The village shared both its joys and sorrows.

“I am now here at Latek-Odong because it is close to the home in which I lived before the war stampeded me to other places. What started out as a search for a safe place for me and my family has instead become a haunting memory. What disturbed the peace of my family and homestead was the abductions and killings that characterise this place. Before we left home, we would hear about rebel activity in the villages far from ours. So I thought it would take a while before it eventually reached us. I still hoped that the rebels would be intercepted by government soldiers before they reached us. How wrong I was!

“It didn’t even take two weeks before we heard that the rebels had abducted children from the neighbouring villages. That was the beginning of our trouble. My children refused to sleep in the house at all. At that time, I had five young people living with me. They preferred the bush because it seemed safer. Every day at about 6 p.m. we ate the evening meal and the children picked up their beddings and hurried away to the bushes. The family routine of fireside stories ceased! It hurt me so much to see children braving the night cold. Children as young as five years old! I knew they were doing this for their own safety but I didn’t like the fact that they were sleeping in the bush. I didn’t even know which bushes they went to every night because they did not stay in one bush. Every time they left home was a moment of torture because I had no idea how I would locate them in case something happened. My husband and I were both afraid of staying in the house too but we still stayed because we wanted to encourage the children to come back home.

“In the morning, they would trot back and life would go on as if everything was normal. But each evening, they put on all their clothes for warmth and left home. After some time, my husband and I decided to relocate to Bardege barracks for safety and to save the children from sleeping in the bush. Before we relocated, however, and as the war intensified, we decided to send the other children back to their parents. We stayed with

only our little son, Samuel, and my little cousin because she had lost both her parents.

“The decision to leave home for Bardege was not an easy one to take. Survival takes one places yet home gives you a sense of security that you can’t find elsewhere. The allure of the government 4th Division barracks at Bardege was so irresistible, especially since we wanted to ensure protection for our children. We went and settled at Bardege. This was not difficult because many people had already come to the area. We joined them and built ourselves a small hut in which we stayed with the children. It is only then that we heaved a sigh of relief in the belief that our children’s lives would get back to normal.

“Ironically, however, it was while living in protected Bardege in 1990 that calamity struck. We didn’t even know where the rebels came from or how they came. Being late in the night, we did not see anything or receive any warning. We just heard screams from different huts and when we moved out, we saw people running in all directions for dear life. Three people were abducted from my family alone that night. That was my husband, my son and my cousin. More people would have been taken from the camp had it not been for the soldiers at Bardege barracks who started firing at the rebels. We all dispersed but the rebels were keen on taking their loot and captives.

“All the people who were not abducted were dispersed into the night. Like other camp dwellers, I did not come back until morning. When I returned in the wee hours of the morning, I stealthily walked to my hut amid wailing from those who had realised that their loved ones had been abducted. Other people had already started packing their few belongings for some other unknown destinations. I searched our hut but found no one inside. Perhaps they are still hiding somewhere, I kept thinking.

“After over an hour of fruitless searching, I was choking with rage. I walked around the camp asking everyone I met but none had any information about my family. When I had gone round the camp several times and had not seen them, I knew they were gone, and so I joined the chorus of wails at Bardege. I cried not just for the abduction of my people but for the guilt I felt. I wished I had held the children’s arms as I fled. I wished I had gone in the same direction as them. I wished I had been abducted too.

“Soon after the Bardege incident, I knew I had reached the end of my tether. I was all alone and with a burning guilt about not having protected my family well enough. I kept blaming myself for the abduction of my husband, my son Samuel and my cousin. Had I not pressured my husband into relocating to the ‘protected area’, had we stayed in our home and slept in the bushes, my family would not have been abducted, I kept thinking.

“I and the other displaced persons started gathering at different locations for the night. We would sleep at Lacor Hospital for a week, Negri School for three days and Caritas Centre for a week. All this we did because we felt that somehow the rebels were looking for us and could easily get us if we stayed in one location for long.

“As we moved from place to place, the guilt of having survived abduction hit me hard. I felt that it would have been a lot easier if I had been abducted along with my family. As we lived on, oblivious of what the future might bring, we slowly lost touch with reality, passing each day in a zombie-like state.”

The setting of the sun in its bright orange hue as it skims the horizon plunges many into a romantic mood. For Santa, every time the sun sets, it occasions fear and invokes sad memories.

“I knew that the abducted people were going through a very difficult time wherever they were, with nothing to eat. I always imagined them dead and surely knew that they would be feasted upon by the vultures if they died. I kept asking myself why I had survived while my son was taken. At least I was in a better position to handle the inhumanity of abduction rather than my baby. As a parent, one must be able to protect one’s children but how could one do that in such a situation? What does a parent do? What was I supposed to do in order to protect my children?”

Santa looks straight across the expanse of barren land that stretches in front of us. Taking Santa’s hands into mine, I almost start consoling her but then I see a flicker of implacable wrath in her eyes. Slowly I swallow back the words forming on my tongue and I just look at her. I gaze at her for several seconds. She is of a dark, pale complexion. Her watery white eyes stand out of her dark face. She is relatively tall and very thin. She is wearing a multi-coloured dress that has more green than any other colour. She is barefoot and when her feet slap the dry mango leaves they make

that attention-grabbing rustling sound. Her hair is clumsily wrapped in a head scarf whose tails hang on the sides of her ears. The beauty that should have been washed away by the storms of her life still shines through the wrinkles. It is obvious why she had been selected as the lead dancer of the now silent troupes.

“Guilt has a way of eating one up slowly but surely and in the long run, guilt piles inexorably up. My family had just begun to enjoy life together. Samuel, my son, was in primary school. He always came home happy after learning new things from his school. Now, seeing other children of his age group makes life very difficult for me. Every time I see them, I think about Samuel.

“After leaving Bardege, the place from which my family was abducted, I found it difficult to settle at any one centre. I always felt insecure in one place and would hear voices calling me every night. The strongest of those voices was my son’s voice. It was unmistakably Samuel’s voice. These voices came when I started spending my nights at Lacor. There were many other women and children, all sprawled on the hospital veranda and all over the dusty quadrangle. There were very few men at the centre. The few men there were old men who would sleep a little away from the women and children. My sleeping pattern also changed and I couldn’t sleep for long. I kept waking up, especially to the voice of Samuel calling me ‘Mamina...Mamina’. Whenever Samuel started calling me, I would not sleep again until the next morning. In the morning, I would wake up very early, fold my mat and return home. I dreaded the nights! I dreaded the mornings!

“Going back to my home was traumatising. Every morning, I dreaded going home to Latek-Odong yet I had no choice about where to go. We used to sleep at those safe centres at night and go back to our respective homes early in the morning.

“Back at home, I would try to be busy cleaning up a house that would already be clean because there was no one to make it dirty. It also took me some time before I could go to the garden. I was still afraid that a rebel could be hiding somewhere and pounce on me. But now I try to survive. I have a small garden that I go to.

“My home area has lost its life. Unlike in the past when one would greet others across the roadside, today it is different. People talk in whispers.

Friendliness does not exist any more. Everyone walks enveloped in their own thoughts. There is no more fun at all. In the olden days, if you had a big chunk of land, friends in the neighbourhood would come and help you till it. Things have now changed. Everybody is afraid of being recognised. Nobody wants others to know that they are still alive lest they confide in the rebels. There is utter mistrust among my people.

“After my cleaning chores, I used to walk down the road to Lacor past empty homes, dry plantations and lifeless people. I would leave as early as 3:00 pm. The cackling of the hens was no more. The bleating of the goats was gone. Our lives had become a mess.

“At Lacor Hospital where I spent most of my nights, people would start converging in the stony, dusty yard as early as 2:00 p.m. Some had chosen to seek permanent refuge there because their homes were not safe even during the day. I would get to Lacor, spread my mat on the ground, or sometimes on the concrete veranda near the hospital wards. Many times, those concrete places were taken first because they were more comfortable and were shielded from the rain and free of creeping creatures. I would put my mat anywhere I found space then sit and ponder. Women and men alike would do the same. At that time, there was nothing like it being unmanly to stretch your legs in front of you, lean your head against the wall and stare at nothing in particular. We all did it, both men and women.

“Our gods do not forget. One day, my husband came back home. It was exactly two years after his abduction. He never wants to talk about his experience in the bush. We live together and we are trying to patch our lives together. We live in Latek-Odong camp. My husband found me on the verge of breaking down. I kept wishing I had been abducted too. I was living in torment every day of my life. The situation kept getting more and more helpless by the day. Some girls who had escaped from captivity had brought me the dress in which my cousin had been abducted. This meant only one thing. I didn’t have to ask. They didn’t have to say anything. Although I had failed to accept it, I knew that a non-compassionate batch of people couldn’t do much – they thirst for blood. They seek amusement in other people’s suffering.” Santa’s eyes take on a watery look. She rubs her hands together and stares at them.

“My husband’s homecoming made life a little more bearable. He found me in Latek-Odong camp. I remember he came in the night and didn’t want me to say a word. He said he was tired and wanted some quiet. I made him some porridge which he gladly drank as I held his hand and looked at him intently. I held his hand tight. I did not want to let go. It was like a dream and I needed to hold on to it to reassure myself that it was real. I couldn’t believe he was back – back to me! I just held his hand all the time. He has never told me the story about how he escaped but that does not matter. What matters is that I have him with me. My husband rarely talks about what happened in captivity. When he does, it is in one line like, ‘I used to eat these in the bush’, pointing at some leaves by the roadside.

“My husband said nothing about Samuel because after their abduction, they had been taken to two different camps under two different commanders. But one day as we sat home silently, Samuel walked in. This was five years after the fateful evening of his abduction. But Samuel was not the same. My son, who used to be very jolly and so full of life, was now a distant piece of wood. Like his father, Samuel never talked much. But his presence made a difference and I have let him be! Perhaps I would have understood their new selves better if I, too, had been abducted with them. Although we are a family, we are not quite a family. We’ve been robbed of the essence of family, which lies in sharing, the sharing of everything.

“My people are so deprived that we don’t have the simple things like hens that characterise a proper homestead. All of this disappeared with Kony’s war. We have lost the things that used to define our lives. Nowadays, children don’t respect their elders. Their lives are only patches of what it used to be. The only talk on their tongues is about ‘our rights’. They have not been told that rights go with responsibilities. Bathing is not a necessity for them anymore because they are preoccupied with survival in the bush. They are lost children because they are not nurtured. Their parents are either abducted or they sleep in the bushes. All the children who could have continued with the dancing legacy are abducted. Those who live in camps are preoccupied with survival rather than dance...”

*Pasts of pain
Pasts so dark
Mourn in our lives
Till the day breaks
Then we know we shall live.*

The plea

*Sky roars from the south-north ends
Successive streaks split the darkening sky
Deafening explosions triply bang
Mountains tremble,
The earth quakes
Hanging calabashes fall with a clang
Squeaking rats hide in rafters in the huts
The little child whispers, "Maama, I want to pee"
Couples spend sleepless nights and postpone love
Waiting uneasily for calm to come.*

Linda Niwenyesiga

The Garden of Mushrooms

Beatrice Lamwaka

I was born and raised in a family where it was important to call everyone by their names. I called my mother, Rosa and my father, Zakeo until he was old enough to be called Mzee. I was born at the beginning of the year and my name automatically became Lamwaka - beginning of the year. The Acholi name babies according to the circumstance around their birth. For example, the name Aya is given to a girl child among boys. Everyone called me Lamwaka even when I was baptized Beatrice in the Alokolum Church. Rosa never called me Beatrice. Probably she didn't even know how to pronounce it. My elder sister who had studied at Sacred Heart School had imposed on me Beatrice, a name that no one had heard of in the whole of Alokolum village.

My family had enough food and many animals. My father made sure that we went to school and that every Sunday we went to Alokolum Seminary Church. He would give us the young ones money for offertory which sometimes used to pay for sweets instead. My father was well known; everyone in Alokolum Village called him Doktor when he was only a medical assistant. He treated people who came from as far as Anaka village. My home was more like a health centre. Patients came in the morning before he left home and other came in the afternoon to wait for him to return.

Zakeo had loved trees and fruits. He planted every tree or fruit he found. We had *labolo* (bananas), *fene* (jack fruits), avocados and *pull munu*. Our ten acre home was energetic with loads of food and activities.

I don't remember much about my childhood. I'm amazed when I hear people talk about what they did as four year olds. For me, I began to realise that I was alive and could remember something about my life when I was around nine years old, perhaps because that was an important mark in my life. I remember clearly as Rosa sat my younger sister Akech and me down.

She told us that there was a war and that the war turned out to be a *coup-de-tat* that saw Yoweri Museveni as president of Uganda and that all Acholi were going to be killed. This was in 1986. I didn't know anything about wars and I was not sure of what relevance that was to us. Rosa explained that there were men with guns. I hadn't even seen guns before, but I had seen soldiers because one of my sisters was married to one. I couldn't imagine who would want to kill me or any member of my family.

Before I could ask her questions she said she would send the two of us to my aunt Aya's village- aunt Aya's fingers and toes were eaten by leprosy and she lives in a designated Aleler Village where lepers live. She said that aunt Aya was on medication and her disease wouldn't affect us. I wasn't worried about that. I had eaten with aunt Aya in the same bowl and she had not infected me with her disease. She had children who were not infected either. Rosa said we would be safe there. She said the war was in Kampala but in a few days it would reach Gulu District. I didn't want Rosa to be killed and so I wanted to ask her to come with us to aunt Aya's place but I just nodded my head instead.

At home it was more of a celebration; goats and chicken were being slaughtered as we prepared to leave home. My brother, Nyeko was excited he had found himself a place in the bush where he would sleep at the night. He was happy about so much meat. He roasted some meat which he shared with me. I didn't know why my father had allowed all this slaughtering to happen. He was very strict when it came to his goats, chicken and sheep. We only killed some during Christmas and Independence Day. I heard my brothers say that we would rather eat them ourselves than watch them driven away by strangers. But I felt no fear. I was not even thinking about death. I somehow knew that this would pass. Rosa dug a hole in the maize garden where she buried her *atabo*, very beautiful bowls from Sudan, saucepans, and yellow and green *gomesis* which she used to wear on special occasions.

Akech, who was six then and I walked for a whole day to Aleler village. I was tired. Akech cried a lot. There were other children walking along the road with small bundles on their heads. This made walking more interesting although I never spoke to any of the children. I just wanted to keep up with them. We had carried roasted sweet potatoes and water which we helped

ourselves to when we felt angry. I had already been to Aleler on foot before so I knew my way. Rosa had insisted we keep going straight and should not branch to any other road. She said that her instincts would let her know when we reached. Aya's home was close to the main road and so I didn't find much trouble finding it.

To our surprise by the time we reached Aya's home, it was already filled with other children of all ages. Aya busied herself making sure that they got water to drink. When she saw us she muttered 'Mama, you have arrived?' I nodded. Aya and Rosa are very light skinned compared to most Acholi. I one time heard a neighbour say that when Zakeo married Rosa, he told whoever cared to listen that he had the most beautiful woman in the whole village. Aya is Rosa's elder sister. In spite of the missing fingers and toes, she is a beautiful woman. She was the only relative of Rosa that I knew, and that endeared me to her.

Aya's compound was buzzing with children. Some sat under the mango tree that stood at the end of the compound. Some younger ones – about four years, were crying and asking for their mothers. It took me a long time to realise that Aunt Aya wasn't my aunt alone but also an aunt to a bunch of other children. Her two huts were occupied by children I had heard about but never seen before.

Later in the night, Aya asked me to sleep with her outside in the compound. I guess she didn't want to tell me that there was no space in the house for the two of us. I was at first afraid, thinking that somebody could sneak into the compound and kill us. Other older children came out saying it was hot inside. I remember that I was happy when they came out because I thought that if we all got killed it would be fair because all parents would be affected. It would have been unfair dying alone with aunt Aya. I stayed awake most of time wondering whether Rosa was fine. The moon was bright and I could see the shape of aunt Aya sleeping.

I worried every now and then about what had become of Rosa, Zakeo and my siblings. For days we waited for news from home but there was nothing. There were no phone calls or letters. We only waited for word of mouth. Every day I waited for Nyeko to walk in and tell us that they were all well, but he never did. No one came. It was not long before Aunt Aya's huts run out of salt, *odii* (peanut butter), cooking oil, soap and sugar.

We had to eat saltless *lapena*. *Lapena* itself is tasteless and without *odii* and salt, it was almost inedible but that was all there was. We all ate from one bowl and the amount of food one could eat depended on how fast they could get it to their mouth. Every child bolted as much food as they could and afterwards we would drink water to feel fuller. Akec didn't complain about the little food she ate. Perhaps she had learnt that there was no way of having more.

One day, we heard the sound of the train and we knew that all was well. Aya had saved some money for our journey by train to Alokolum. The journey was fast, although the train stop was two kilometers from Alokolum. The walk back home was exciting but what I found made my heart sink - Lugul, the village mad man had been killed by the new government soldiers because they thought he was a spy. He had gone to town and as usual was sweeping compounds and writing things he alone understood on the ground. The rest was business as usual. *Orere* had killed most chicken. Nyeko never missed an opportunity to tell me how he was now tired of eating chicken and meat. I couldn't bring myself to tell him of the salt-less *lapena*.

I was so sad about Lugul's death that I refused to speak to people for a while. Nyeko however kept saying that I was sad because my chicken had been killed. Yes, I was sad about that too, but Lugul's death hurt me so much. He was this guy who never spoke much. He would sweep our compound when he found dry leaves. The men in my family swept the compound in the morning but by the time that Lugul came in the afternoon avocado leaves would have littered the compound again. He even waited for rubbish as Rosa peeled sweet potatoes. I don't even know why we called him mad because he was not violent like the other madmen I knew around our village. I did not know where he came from but everyone knew he always walked from Bwobo Manam, about three kilometers from our home.

A few months later, I went back to school. The new government had not killed us. Zakeo went back to work and the train kept moving in the morning, passing by at about five o'clock. I would always run to see it pass and wave to the passengers I didn't know. Most people in my village knew that the train never caused accidents except when people knocked against it themselves and died. There was a rumour that if one placed a needle in

the train track, the train would slide off. And we all believed it. But I could never understand how such a powerful machine could be weakened by such a small thing. Sometimes I wished I could put the needle on the railway line, not because I wanted to cause an accident but because I wanted to prove the theory. I never got the courage anyway.

One evening, strange men with guns slung on their shoulders came home asking Rosa for goats and chicken. I had never seen Rosa or Zakeo give out chicken or goats to whoever asked. We could see that these men were trying really hard to be so nice to Rosa. Rosa untied one of the goats and gave it to them. Suddenly they turned and warned – *ci lil* go tell them we were here! I later learnt that the ‘*them*’ they referred to were government soldiers. Soon the villagers referred to the men with guns as *ci lil*. I didn’t know then that was the beginning of a war that would see the death of over 200,000 people, and abduction of thousands of children. I had no idea that our home would eventually become an Internally Displaced People’s (IDP) Camp. People came one-by-one. Families came-one-by one and within no time it had become an IDP Camp.

One day, a relative of my stepmother also arrived at our home (*now turned camp*) with his group. Another team of *ci lil*. We welcomed them and gave them food to eat and goats to take with them wherever they were going. We now had very few goats left. And they even asked my father for medicine and he gave it to them knowing that he would get more when he went back to work. Our neighbours were going through the same - *ci lil* all the time, *ci lil* all the time! But no one complained publicly. You could hear people talk but when you got near them you were met with silence. Perhaps nobody trusted anybody else anymore.

I don’t know how Rosa reacted to all this because she remained very composed. She always handed chicken or goats to the *ci lil* with a smile. I heard her complain about how costly the ropes they used to tie the goats were. My father, however, received some more goats and chicken from his patients who couldn’t pay him in monetary terms. They complained that it was now harder to get money from the new government but some promised to pay when they got some money.

One evening, my family was busy cooking the evening meal and I was taking care of my nephew Oring when about six men with guns on their

shoulders arrived home. We were already used to having them come every now and then and the only thing we knew they looked for were goats. Shortly after their arrival however, it was clear that they had not come for goats.

‘Everybody, sit down! *Ka chin*’, they ordered.

Zakeo who was sitting on his *rwot onino* chair was forced to sit on the dusty ground too.

Ci lil with their guns cocked walked in circles around my family. I was so afraid that slowly by slowly I managed to sneak away when their attention was on my father. I hid in the maize garden for a short a while but the thought of my whole family being murdered while I hid made me sneak back. I kept murmuring prayers and asking God to hear me out.

‘You have a gun and that girl has it hidden somewhere,’ they said pointing at Flo my elder sister. She sat frozen. I guess she had not imagined that the sit down business and guns cocked was her doing.

‘I don’t have a gun,’ Flo said softly

‘Liar,’ one of the *ci lil* hissed

I had not seen a gun in our home and didn’t even know how Flo would have got one. The only guns I had seen were the guns slung on the *ci lil*’s shoulders.

I didn’t know what to do but be very afraid. Zakeo insisted that there was no gun in his home and that we didn’t need one. They threatened to shoot everyone. I couldn’t believe that these were the same people who had taken our goats and chicken. Finally, after almost an hour of threatening and pleading the *ci lil* left. But they left with another goat and chicken.

Later I heard Rosa say that, ‘you should not trust anybody’. I didn’t even ask why. I guessed that perhaps someone could have told *ci lil* a lie that brought them to torture my family. After that experience I was so afraid of *ci lil* and prayed that they could disappear as mysteriously as they had come.

Shortly after that incident, gunshots would erupt everywhere every now and then. I don’t remember how it all started but every time we heard the shots we would run into the Alokolum Seminary that was a few metres away from our home. There, we hoped to be safe.

Then, slowly by slowly the men in our home started disappearing and we would not ask them wherever they were going.

I was glad when my elder sister, Acayo requested that my family send me to Matany Hospital in Moroto where she was working. When I got there, she sent me to Kangole Boarding Primary School. I had very troubled moments while in Kangole. I worried so much about what was happening at home. I prayed that my family would be safe. My prayers did not seem to have an effect on God because I later learnt that my brother Nyeko was abducted. He went missing for two months and there was a rumour that he had been killed. I wished I was home to wait for Nyeko with the rest of the family. I knew this would devastate Rosa because she loved him a lot. The rest of us felt that Nyeko was Rosa's favourite child.

One day however, Nyeko arrived at Acayo's home! He was alive. He stayed there for weeks and was meant to study in Kangole Boys School but he refused. He said that he missed Rosa very much and wanted to go back home. He came to visit me once in school and I didn't ask him what had happened to him when he was abducted by the rebels. By that time, I must have already learnt that those were details not to talk about. It was enough to just know that we still had each other. Even today, I don't ask my brothers and sisters what has happened to them during active conflict. Maybe one day we will find the tongue to share our stories; for now what we see is all we get.

I didn't know that it was the last time I was seeing Nyeko. If I had known, I would have told him that time we were together, that I loved him very much. I would have told him very positive things because he was indeed a very good young man.

I didn't see Nyeko for years, and the news of his death was hard hitting. When people live apart for so long, many things happen. I was not prepared. I guess I had thought my family was invincible, and that the war would not take any of us. When Acayo returned from the funeral she said that Rosa closed herself in herself. You needed to ask her the same question more than three times before she could respond. I wished I was there to bury him. Later when I got home and saw his grave I let all the tears I had been holding for such a long time flow freely. Life...

The night of his death, my brother had complained that he did not feel well. Then he vomited and diarrhoeated but no one could dare take him to hospital in the night. None could dare move out of their hiding places late in the night. May be if the men in my family had not all left home in the war, they would have taken Nyeko to hospital. Maybe Zakeo should have had stronger medicine to give him. Maybe he would have lived. I guess all I can do now is just wish and wish and wish.

Later as I studied at Makerere University, I could never bring myself to date a man from another tribe. Not because I'm this tribalistic girl but because I knew that I was coming from an area that made people ask too many hurtful questions. 'How has the war affected you?' they would ask as if saying 'How are you today?' How would I answer them in the same tone? Could I in the same tone tell them that my beloved brother was abducted and later died because of the war? I had nightmares of how I would explain to my date that my father's home had become an IDP camp. I didn't know how to tell anyone that the wide path that led to my home was a heap of thousands of huts with thousands of people in need of food, medical attention and clothing. Every time a young man asked me which tribe I belong to, I had a ready answer. Their thoughts became my thoughts. *'He doesn't want come close to someone whose relatives kill each other, chop each others lips and noses off and cook each other in pots'*. The daily newspapers were reporting everything that was happening in northern Uganda.

I felt embarrassed and I didn't want to be answerable for what people were saying and what people were doing. I would ignore comments like 'eee Kony has killed them again', 'they supported him now see what he is doing to his own people'. The world felt cruel all around me.

Later when I was tired of the remarks, I begun to introduce myself as Kony's sister. That spared me; 'oh you are from Kony's land. Is he your relative?' I became one with him. It felt safer. I played the tune even to the boys that approached me for friendship. I did not want to date a man who didn't know what was happening to my people. Who did not feel what my people felt. I did not want to show him an aerial picture of our home in the Monitor newspaper and have him ask me whether that was a garden of mushrooms. I wanted an Acholi man whose father's farm had

been destroyed in the war. I was sure that he would know the difference between a garden of mushrooms and camp huts. That way, I would not have to explain that there is a mad man abducting children and forcing people to kill, maim and rape. I wanted a man who knew my story and whose story I knew. I wanted a man who would sit with me under the remaining mango trees and dream with me of a Northern Uganda without war.

My Father's Home

*I am in Laguri camp
swallowed by huts
cooking malakwang
my father eager to see his son-in-law
ashamed of his once-beautiful house
now surrounded by thousands of huts.*

*You come close to the camp
you hold your nose as naked children play
you spit as you jump goats' droppings
you didn't mind, you said
love will bring you home.*

*I see you
you turn and walk away
then I know
I know love won't bring you home.*

Beatrice Lamwaka

The White Coat

By Margaret Aduto

One of the most horrific massacres that shocked the world took place on Saturday 21 February 2004 in Barlonyo village, Ogur sub-county in Lira district. A terrorist group led by Odhiambo, one of the most feared LRA commanders, attacked an *Amuka* detachment in Barlonyo. *Amuka* was a militia comprising men from the local communities mobilised to fight Kony alongside the national army. Unfortunately, by that time, an internally displaced people's camp had sprouted up around the detachment that had been established in that otherwise deserted area to monitor the movements of the terrorists. Kony unleashed terror on the soft civilian targets without remorse and, despite the fragile peace that existed since mid-2006, the wounds of the victims continue festering.

Aketch and I meet at Barlonyo camp in her improvised shack with rattling tins for a roof – a place she now calls home. I can see the steady pain in her eyes even as she signals me to sit on a wooden stool by her side. She starts to narrate her story while firmly gazing into space as if searching for answers to her endless questions.

“That evening is still fresh in my mind. Unlike the other days when I would wake up haunted by the fact that I wasn't going to school any more, the twenty-first of February 2004 started out well. I remember the day as if it was imprinted on my life. Come to think of it, indeed it was. I have had many nightmares since then and they may never end but I hope that as I share my story, it will help me make sense of some of them.

“I got out of my papyrus-mat bed looking forward to a new day. For some reason, I felt more aware of my surroundings than usual. The birds sang and I was struck afresh by the beauty of their voices. The wind blew through the trees, sending a breeze of comfort to the earth. The huge camp that I had lived in for the past seven years seemed more like my home now. All the hatred that I had felt for the war and the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) didn't seem to matter that day. It was a beautiful day and I didn't want to spoil it.

“I hurried to the borehole to fetch water. I wanted to get there early before it became too crowded. We didn’t have much water in the house and I knew that when Grandma woke up she would want to make breakfast and take a bath like she always did.

Grandma is a strange woman; most people in the camp don’t understand her love for cleanliness. She is one of those people who would wash a cup five times before using it. She is always wiping and cleaning. She is fifty-two years old but she looks a lot younger than most women in the camp in their early twenties. Most people here claim that the war has robbed them of their youth, that that is why they look older than Grandma. Maybe now I understand why Grandma can’t stop yearning for the good old days – the days before the war.

“When I reached the borehole, Aciro and Akot were already there with six jerrycans each. They usually did that and most people hated fetching water after those two. I smiled at them as I placed my jerrycans behind theirs. I was in a good mood and wasn’t about to let Aciro and Akot with their twelve jerrycans spoil it. I only wished they had delayed a little so that I could have got there before them. I wanted to ask them to let me fill my two jerrycans first but I knew they would just sneer at me. I didn’t want them to see the envy in my eyes as the two best friends filled their cans with water before me.

“Aciro and Akot had been friends for as long as I could remember, possibly from when they were very young. They did everything together and even seemed to think alike. They had both decided not to get married. Some people said that maybe the two were so much in love with each other that if it were possible, they would have got married to each other. But we all know that a Langi can’t do such things; those things of the *bazungu*.

“I have always tried to find a friend who would always be there for me, by my side but my friendships with most girls never last long. The longest friendship I have ever had was with Apio. I very much wanted Apio and I to become the Akot and Aciro of the camp but Apio loved to gossip and her interest in academics was very limited. She wanted a husband and children while I wanted to become a doctor. Ever since I saw Marco, the Italian doctor, walk in the corridors of Lira Hospital in his white coat, I knew that I wanted to be a doctor too. I don’t know how many times I dreamt about

myself walking in the hospital corridors in a white coat. But these were just dreams. The reality was that seeing Akot and Aciro giggle as if they were young girls made me angry. ‘They are almost twenty. They should act their age,’ I thought with disgust.

“After Akot and Aciro had filled their containers with water, I filled mine too. The handle of the borehole pump is usually very hard for me to lift up and push down but with the new energy I felt that day, I did this quite easily.

“The twenty-first of February was a special day, I thought. For some reason I can’t put a finger to, I felt I would have a breakthrough with my education. I had sat my O level and passed in second grade. I wasn’t happy with that. I knew that I would have to study harder when I joined HSC. My dream school was St Mary’s College, Aboke. If you are a girl and you come from my district, Aboke is the only school you can dream about. All that I could do was dream, dream and dream. I knew that reality was quite different. I might never live to see the inside of a classroom again. Grandma might never afford to pay my fees. Her vegetable stall in the market could never yield the kind of money required for my school fees.

“My mother and father had been burnt alive in our home before I moved to the camp. I ran away from home and came to live in Barlonyo with my grandmother. When she saw me, she simply said, ‘They have killed them, haven’t they?’ It was more of a statement than a question. The reality of it all was written on my tear-stained face. I nodded and that was enough for her to understand what had happened. She gave me food to eat and never asked another question.

“I know that some day, when the time is right, I will tell her that I watched from a distance as Mama and Papa and my siblings were dragged into the house. I will tell her that the one who set the house on fire was a boy not much older than me. Virtually all LRA recruits are abducted children who are brainwashed through fear and forced to commit atrocities such as shooting, hacking, burning people alive – men, women and children. The abducted male children are often made to join LRA ranks as fighters while the girls are turned into sex slaves. But I will not tell her how my bowels gave way as I watched the house burn to ashes. I will not tell her how I helplessly heard the screams of my people from inside a burning house. I know she

knows a lot because on several occasions she has heard me scream in my sleep. Several times I have woken up to find her seated on my bed, telling me that all will be well. But I know deep down in my heart that nothing will ever be the same again. We have to live each day at a time.

“I was still at the market when evening fell. I was waiting to see the beauty of the sunset. I had taken long without watching the sunset. Many people were still going about their daily chores, young mothers with their babies strapped to their backs, buying *boo* vegetables so that their children would not go to bed hungry. Men were drinking *kongo ting* brew.

“The market was so small that I knew almost every person who came there. It was a place that brought together those who had something to sell and those who wanted to buy. I personally frequented it because I always found something to sell; be it second-hand clothes, food ... anything that I could lay my hands on. When I had nothing to sell, I would go to the swamp to look for wild vegetables and I would sell those.

“I watched the sun setting and lingered around for a while. As the evening grew darker, there was a sudden loud noise that took everybody unawares. Immediately we knew they were gunshots. First I thought it was the government soldiers doing their evening patrols but as the gunmen approached, talking loudly, the urgency in their voices and the varying ages of most of them made me realise these could not be soldiers on their routine patrols! They were strange! They were Kony rebels! These were the very people who had destroyed my family! I knew my turn had come and there was no escape. Fate had indeed caught up with me.

“‘All of you come here!’ one of them shouted. He held his gun pointed towards the sky perhaps to show us that if we delayed he would point it at us. He was just a boy. His oversized uniform hung shapelessly on his body.

“By then I had already learnt to follow orders. Many of the stories I had heard from people had made me realise that it is always wise to do exactly what the rebels wanted and child commanders were reputed to be especially merciless. Maybe owing to what they went through themselves. The fighting had worsened the brutality of the young abductees who had been made to lose all reason. How else could one explain the senseless killings that cost a once-vibrant region a substantial number of its population? How

could the executions, the amputations, the mutilations and the violations be explained?

“When all the people in the market had gathered together, the rebels told some of the men to disappear because they were contaminating them with their alcoholic blood. The men quickly disappeared between huts. I heard one of them let out a loud fart. Many more rebels appeared from nowhere, tied the remaining men into groups of four, each with ropes knotted at their backs. They were led away, and only the females were left behind. The rebels then picked out elderly women and women with babies strapped to their backs and ordered them to go back to the camp. They warned the women against saying anything to the soldiers otherwise all the girls would be killed. How I wished I had borrowed a child earlier or was at least carrying someone’s baby when the rebels attacked!

“After what seemed like a sorting exercise, there was a group of rebels that was given the responsibility to loot while the rest watched over us just in case we were tempted to escape. They kept on picking and bringing whatever they could lay their hands on, especially the foodstuffs. It never even occurred to me that we would have to carry those heavy loads. At one point I even nursed the hope that they would tell us girls to go.

“I scanned the girls to see if I could recognise any; Aciro sat next to Akot. I also saw Apio seated alone. I was glad that at least the girls I knew were here and perhaps later we could plan our escape together – and maybe I would become Aciro and Akot’s friend. I managed to count how many we were; we were thirty-five girls all together. We watched as the rebels packed their loot. They never asked any of us to help them.

“When they were finished with looting, we were shocked to see one of them pull out one of the girls, push her down and then lie wriggling on top of her. The rest of the rebels started doing the same to the rest of us. I watched everything as if it was a horror movie unfolding right before my eyes. I had never imagined that something like that could happen to me, not in such a public place as a market. I had escaped getting burnt with my whole family only to end up like this. I watched through my mind’s eye as my body landed on the ground with a thud. I saw my beautiful dress roughened and my white panties pulled off my womanhood. The greatest betrayal was that this act was neither swift nor painless. Each move was

calculated to ensure that the pictures would be imprinted on your mind and would haunt you for life. I was glad that the sun had disappeared and was not witnessing what was going on.

“I don’t know what exactly happened later but I know I suddenly found myself carrying this huge piece of luggage. Perhaps after all the girls had been raped and the rebels were satisfied they wanted to take us with them. I swear I don’t think I heard anyone talk until we were on our way.

“We started walking, walking away from the camp. We were made to carry heavy loads of foodstuffs and to walk for a very long distance. Those who got tired were automatically ‘helped’ by those who were still strong. We were gripped by fear and many of us pleaded with our creator to take us home for the pain was unbearable. The torture, the trauma, the humiliation, it was more than one could bear.

“At such a time even the sound of gunshots was welcome in the desolate hope that it could be government soldiers trying to rescue us. But there was no sound except that of crickets in their holes and frogs in the swamp.

“We walked through forests that I had only heard about before and I was not sure what would happen next. We walked on and on. I prayed and hoped that the government soldiers would follow us. I knew that if the soldiers followed us, some people would get killed during the rescue operation but much as I was afraid that I might be one of those who would die, at least I wouldn’t have died at the hands of those who had killed my whole family.

“We continued walking with the heavy loads on our heads. I could see that the distance between the camp and us had become huge. I thought of escaping but the many stories that I had heard told about the rebels hacking to death those who tried to escape stopped me from giving it a second thought. I also prayed that none of the abductees would attempt to escape to make the commander order one of us to kill her.

“The rebels stopped in the middle of a dense thorny thicket, where we spent the night. I didn’t know where we were or where we were headed. At least I was glad that we could rest but I knew that it wouldn’t be easy to carry the luggage on my head again and walk some more without breaking down.

“The rebels checked what were carrying cooked in less than twenty

minutes and ate their food. We were not given any. I was hungry but I guessed that it would be a while before we ate anything. The night was very long. My feet hurt so badly because of the bruises that I had got on the way. I held my body tightly and hoped that I wouldn't feel cold. It was a warm night and I was glad that there was no sign of rain. I knew that God wanted us to survive that night and perhaps many more to come. Yet we – the abductees – all failed to sleep properly as a result of hunger, isolation and fear.

“I was suddenly jerked awake. I don't know what happened, perhaps I had a nightmare or maybe it was my God alerting me to what was about to happen. I saw the rebels who had gathered us return from a bush situated a distance from where we were. One of them had a scar running down his chin. His eyes were as red as *lakwal* seeds.

“To the rebels, the break of day meant we had served our purpose! They started cutting the girls who were still sleeping with their machetes. First were Aciro, then Akot, Apio, then the next...and the next...and the next... I tried to run but they had blocked our exit. The knowledge that the end was at hand paralysed many. There was nowhere to run; it appeared that our captors were everywhere.

“I noticed the circle that the rebels had formed. It seemed impossible that any of us could get away. I was deeply afraid of the fate that awaited me. I imagined that perhaps this was the kind of helplessness that my family had felt when our house was set on fire. I tried to pray but no words came from my mouth. I kept saying 'Jesus, Jesus'. I couldn't make any sentence. I knew that there was no way I was going to escape being killed. I tried to numb myself, tried to pretend that I was already dead but it didn't work. I had to wait for my fate. I imagined myself being hit by the *machete*; I imagined the pain and what it meant to be dead. Each time the rebels pulled an innocent girl and slashed her to death, the shrieks of another ebbing life shredded the air as body and soul separated in anguish. One by one the girls became silent as blood covered the earth. It might have been the end of the world.

“I died the death of each of those girls. When the machete finally hit me, the cries of the other girls were still reverberating in the air. The rebels grabbed me and dumped me on the heap of dead bodies. I was battered with clubs and left on that mangled heap. Our blood mingled with one

another's before it seeped into the ground. I could hardly tell the difference between day and night. My face was damaged and my eyelids could no longer support my eyes. I had become practically blind, even to my very own existence. The brutes had done the one thing that breaks any human being; they had killed my hope. It's a miracle that I survived at all.

"I don't know how long I stayed there. Up to this day I can't tell whether I died and resurrected or not. I can't remember. Maybe one day I will; I will remember how long I stayed on top of the corpses. For now I only know what they tell me.

"I was told that three days later, while on routine patrol, a UPDF unit was welcomed by a stench and a heavy swarm of flies that led them to a pile of already decomposing bodies. What they found was most disturbing. They searched the heap to see if there were people still alive with the butt of their guns and their mouths covered with dirty handkerchiefs. They found me still clinging to life, perhaps still dreaming of walking in the hospital corridors in a white coat.

"I am told that the soldiers carried me to safety using a stretcher made with tree branches. I was taken to their base and later transferred to Lira Main Hospital where I was admitted. I don't know how long I stayed in hospital or what transpired after my discovery but I know from Grandma that the doctor almost gave up on me. They didn't see the reason why I still breathed when all the girls I was abducted with were dead. They told Grandma to take me home and wait as I was sure to slip away in my sleep. Grandma said she never gave up on me; she prayed that the God who had brought me back to her would keep me going. She said that I had come back to her twice and this time I would live as well.

"God must have heard Grandma's prayers because I am still alive. Of course I am. I remember the stupid question I asked a teacher once when he told us that a huge snake had bitten him. I asked him if he had died. I guess if he were to ask me the same question now I wouldn't have an answer for him.

"Many people have advised me that I should test for HIV/AIDS since different girls' blood may have entered my open wounds and also because of the rape but I think that's not important. I survived when thirty-four girls were hacked to death; nothing can be worse than that. I have cheated death

a number of times! The God who saved me will determine my tomorrow.

“For now, I live each day as it comes because I know that I survived for a reason. I see the beauty in everything. I used to be scared of birds singing in the morning because I thought they were warning me that the rebels were coming back for me, but now I have overcome that. I think the birds will continue to sing long after I’m gone. I’m twenty years now and I still hope that I will go to school and that one day I will wear the white coat and walk in the corridors of Lira Hospital. I may have been dreaming my dream but I’m sure one day my dream will become a reality.”

I extend my hand to meet Aketch’s. Our fingers lock with a timid squeeze. She turns and gives me a confused look. I smile back at her and this does the job that my words spoken loud would have only attempted to do.

*We are one people,
Our beauty knows no bounds.
We are one people,
Proud of our lineage and history.
We are one people,
We take our place in the circle of life.
We are one people created with desires
Higher than the calling many of us have accepted.
We are one people,
Strong and rooted in the earth.
We are one people,
We cherish the very lives that we live.
We are one people,
Destiny is our life force.
We are one people,
Never to be broken, our spirits are our lives.*

My son Nok

*You turn your head away
'He is my son,' I say
'He was taken out of my grip,' I say
He learnt how to shoot with a gun.*

*He shot from village to village
Enemies we all became
Lapena leaves couldn't hide us
We were handed blankets, beans and posho
Internally displaced we became.*

*Then I heard he was dead.
'He is my son,' I mourned
'He was taken out of my grip.'*

*'He is my son;
he was taken out of my grip.'*

Beatrice Lamwaka

Bitter Escape

By Apophia Agiresaasi

John, the Local Council Chairman of Pagen parish, offered to take me around the camp as I waited for my appointment with Pamela. The compound at the sub-county headquarters was swept spotlessly clean but as we walked around the camp, I discovered that some details revealed the poor sanitation in the camp. For instance, it was evident that some children either did not know how to use toilets or did not have toilets. When John noticed my discomfort, he disclosed that camp dwellers used mobile toilets. Each toilet, he said, was shared by about five homes and in some homes there were about twenty people, most of whom were children. He further explained that the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel attacks that had lasted over two decades had left many children orphaned as some of their parents were killed and others abducted by the rebels. This left many children unattended.

Determined to make me understand why too many children were a main feature of camp life, he explained that many people were idle since they could not go to the fields to dig for fear of rebels. He also said that since there was lack of varied entertainment, most people resorted to sex as the main source of leisure at their disposal. This resulted in the birth of several unplanned-for children. This analysis was substantiated by the number of women carrying children. Every woman we met in the reproductive age group was either carrying a child in her stomach or on her back or both.

"The HIV prevalence rate resulting from the rapes, polygamy, and the breakdown in the health system has also claimed many adult lives. It is much higher than the national average. HIV/AIDS here kills more people than the bullet does. This is because the school dropout rates are high, leading adolescents to seek pleasure in premarital sex. Condom use in the camp is low due to lack of sensitisation and almost every man in the camp has more than one legitimate wife," he added.

Coincidentally, we met Hakim, who was coming from a meeting. Hakim is about four and a half feet tall. She was wearing a faded black T-shirt and

a green-and-red striped *lesu* was wrapped around her waist. The bulge in her lower abdomen indicated that she was pregnant.

We walked together to her home. She offered me a wooden dining chair on which I parked my tired bones. She then brought a mat for herself and sat next to me. She smiled at me, revealing her black gums and set of milk-white teeth. Hers was a story to tell, a story to listen to.

“My name is Hakim Pamela. My home district is Gulu,” she disclosed. “I am the first born in a family of nine children. I have three brothers and five sisters and both my parents are still alive.

“I was abducted in 1996 from Sacred Heart Secondary School. The rebels came to our school at about eight in the night, entered our dormitory which was still open and ordered us to follow them. All of us in that dormitory followed them. We were about fifty-five Senior Ones and Senior Fours who used to sleep in that dormitory. I was in Senior One myself. Other students in the school survived the abduction because their dormitories were closed.

“The Lord’s Resistance Army soldiers who abducted us were all armed with grenades. ‘Move fast’, they ordered us.

“We moved quickly, with others running towards the school gate. They then made us walk to Sir Samuel Baker Secondary School in Gulu, but when we reached the gate they stopped us there and about five of them took positions to guard us. We remained at the school gate while other soldiers went in to abduct more students from that school. As we waited at the gate and knew what was about to happen to Sir Samuel Baker, we felt so sorry that we could not alert them.

“A few minutes later, the soldiers joined us with about fifty students of Sir Samuel Baker Secondary School. Some daring boys managed to run and jump over the school fence and escape. The rebels were not yet done that night. We then moved to St. Mary’s, Aboke. Again they left us outside the gate and entered the school. Some minutes later they joined us again with more girls. We were over 150 students who started the long journey with the LRA rebels that night.

“The rebels did not tell us where we were going. We walked long distances through bushes. Many of the students were killed because they could not walk any further. They were stabbed with bayonets in their chests

and heads. The rebels would first pray over their souls then kill them. Sometimes they would do the killing themselves but most of the time they ordered us to do it. They would tell about five of us to hit them with clubs until they breathed their last. Then we would leave their bodies lying in the bush. It was so horrible; I felt that I was going crazy. I felt dizzy and my head was spinning most of the time. Those who got tired or whose feet got swollen were also killed. Some of them had their feet chopped off with machetes when they failed to walk. They would then be left to bleed to death. Then the rebels would tell us that the chopping of our friend's feet was to train the rest of us to walk faster and properly. Indeed this worked because after our friends had been chopped and killed, we tried as much as we could to walk faster in order not to get killed.

"We walked on for several days till we reached Sudan. In Sudan, we were taken to the Nan Kamdule Brigade headed by Vincent Otti, who was then deputy to LRA rebel leader Joseph Kony. In that camp, there were about one thousand seven hundred people. Like all newcomers, they said we had to be anointed so as to be blessed by the 'Holy Spirit'. We were anointed with oil from the shea-nut tree. The rebels then smeared a sign of the cross on our foreheads, our shoulders and chests. 'Now you are soldiers of the Movement. You can now eat with us,' they told us. The camp was being supplied with food by Sudanese Muslims. They would supply the food twice a month, on the fifteenth and on the thirtieth of each month. They seemed to have an agreement with either Kony or Vincent. The supplies would include sorghum, cowpeas and other small flat seeds grown in Sudan.

"The day after we arrived in Nan Kamdule each of us was assigned a husband. The camp commander first chose the girls he wanted and then the rest of us were distributed to other men. The men were told to place their shirts in a line and we were ordered to go and pick a shirt each. We were then told that the owners of the shirts we had picked would be our husbands. Those men came and picked their shirts from us and we followed them to their huts where our womanhood journey started.

"None of us could refuse any of these newly acquired husbands! It was a must to submit to them. If one refused, one would be killed. Refusal was a sign that you were in love with the UPDF soldiers. We had been warned beforehand.

“The man I was given to already had twenty-five wives. I was the twenty-sixth. I felt just like another pair of underwear added to his toilet bag – taken because I was available. As wives, we had a timetable. Each one of us had a day on which we would spend a night in his hut. The nights I spent in his hut were the worst nights of my captivity. I hated him with a passion that only I could understand.” The furrows on Hakim’s forehead sink deeper as she recounts her hatred of her ‘husband’. Her eyes weigh tons of disgust. “If love were to be measured in sacks or kilos, I would not even raise a grain of love for him. Whatever took place in that hut whenever my turn came was just a ritual I had to perform in order to survive. I was lucky I did not bear any child with that monster. I got pregnant once then had a spontaneous abortion perhaps because of the hard labour we were subjected to. Maybe it was God’s plan not to bless the hateful situation with a child.

“We were expected to remain faithful to our husbands, even if you were in Juba and they were deployed in Uganda. Our feelings did not matter at all. If your husband died, the camp commander would give you to another man or any other man who was interested in you would take over. There was no one who was single in my camp except those very young girls and boys who were below twelve years.

“The young girls were working as babysitters but even then they had assigned them husbands who would take them up later. The boys were treated as slaves. They were first trained to raid homes and steal food and abduct fellow children, and later on they were trained to go to war. The boys would go to the villages, abduct young girls and bring them to the commanders who would give them wives after they considered them grown up enough. All marriage unions were polygamous. Marriage was like a sport to them.

“The wives never harassed each other because we all understood that we were victims of the same fate. The rebel soldiers would even threaten us that if we quarrelled they would kill us. We would eat together, sleep together and share our challenges. Our fate bound us together.

“We would cut grass from the bush and pile it together, and then the rebel leaders would give us long black polythene bags which we would place on top to make mattresses. It was not so bad; each one of us had a bed sheet.

“Each day in captivity was its own story. One time, for example, I participated in killing a person. A student with whom we had been abducted tried to escape and was caught. We were ordered to kill her with a pestle used for pounding. The rebel soldiers pointed their guns at us and ordered us to kill her. We stood in a line and the first person went and hit her hard on the back and gave the piece of wood to the next person, who also did the same. The rest of us followed suit – silent, tearless. By the time the last person hit her, she seemed dead already but her body was still shaking. She had died a senseless death and I had taken part in it. I knew it would take me long to forgive myself. I knew I would never forget. When my turn came, I was shivering and I felt my legs trembling. The idea of hitting her repelled me but I still hit her.

“That night, I had terrible dreams. I saw the spirit of the dead girl asking me why I had killed her.” A distant look plays on Hakim’s face and she does not rest her eyes on anything in particular. She holds her hands together and squeezes them hard before resuming her narration. “I also got wounded by a bullet while in the bush. We were armed and sent to fight the Dinka so as to steal food and property from them. The Dinka are a people who live mainly in Southern Sudan and they are the lot that have mainly suffered in the Southern Sudan war. As we struck at them to steal, they opened fire at us and one bullet hit me in my left leg while the other hit my back. I collapsed.”

Hakim shows me a large scar on her ankle and also rubs her back to show where the other bullet had hit. “My colleagues carried me back to the camp and treated my wounds with hot water. Every morning and evening they would fill a twenty litre jerrycan with hot water and use it to press my rotting back and leg. They also got short sticks, which they tied on my leg to keep the broken leg in position. They kept doing that until I got healed. I went through a lot of pain as they pressed the heavy jerrycan of hot water on my leg and back but I had to bear the pain because there was no medicine, no painkiller; there was no other treatment. Some people died of wounds. I was so lucky I healed.

“I lived with the Lord’s Resistance Army rebels for six years. It was believed that Joseph Kony was a spiritual leader, and had supernatural powers that could easily detect those who wanted to escape. Whenever he

addressed a gathering, someone would record his speech because it was believed that he himself did not know what he was saying. It was believed it was the spirit speaking through him. This could have been true. Whenever the Uganda government was planning to attack the LRA rebels, his spirit would warn him and he would take precautions. Kony himself was tall, dark and handsome.

“One time my group was sent to Aweno Oluoluyi to ambush vehicles. We came back at around noon and found Kony addressing a gathering. According to the LRA rebel rules, no one was supposed to go near Kony with a gun. So since we were still carrying our guns, we kept our distance and instead listened to the radio.

“We were listening to a programme in which a former LRA commander known as Onekomon Kozor was addressing people on MEGA FM, a popular radio station in Gulu. He was talking about his escape and encouraging rebels and other abductees to come back home. As we were listening to Kozor’s speech on the radio, we did not know that our colleagues – the rebels – were spying on us. In a few seconds, they had us surrounded.

“They immediately ordered us to remove our clothes and descended on us with canes and logs. They hit us everywhere and anywhere as if they were hitting an already dead python to ensure it remained dead! They beat and kicked us viciously and jumped on top of us with gumboots. I curled myself up trying to avert the blows with my hands and arms. Once in a while some people would cry out and plead but all this died down and was replaced with silence. After a while, one victim after another breathed their last. When the soldiers were sure that we were all dead, they left. I too thought I was dead. I regained consciousness at around 4.00 a.m. in the morning. My head was spinning and my feet had become numb. But I was sure of one thing: God had given me another opportunity to live. This gave me the determination to escape. I hated the idea of dying in the bush and my body being left on the battlefield riddled with bullets, a prey to the vultures like my colleagues.

“When I got up to start my journey, I never looked about me. I just looked ahead and started moving, hoping and praying that I was heading for Uganda. Eventually I realised that the group of survivors was actually big.

Of the twenty that had been clobbered – ten men and ten women – four of us had survived. I was the only female who survived. The rest were male.

“We walked together from Juba in Sudan to Uganda. Some of us who were too weak collapsed and died on the way. Whenever one got tired, some would rest and others would move on. We had long learnt that everyone had their own destiny. It was a painful journey as we left their bodies on the road and walked on towards our freedom and our prison of guilt.

“After some time, I realised I was walking alone. I had lost everybody again. I just walked on without knowing where I was going. When I reached the main road I saw a vehicle coming towards my direction. It was a Toyota double cabin pickup with the words ‘Pader Mission’ inscribed on its body. When I saw the vehicle, I made to dive into the bush again but I noticed that the driver had already seen me. I moved backwards slowly and about ten metres away, I stopped. The vehicle also stopped. I first stood rooted in one spot before I noticed that the driver had a white collar and a large rosary around his neck. There was silence as we both stared at each other. Then he spoke, asking me whether I had just escaped from the LRA rebels. There seemed to be an unmistakable indication of the abductees escaping.

“Slowly I walked towards the vehicle and responded positively. He also asked me where my home was and I told him that it was in Gulu. Then he offered me a lift.

“I hastily grabbed the opportunity like one stranded on an island would with a rescue team. Of course I had no idea where he was going to take me. But I was sure it was not back to the ruthless arms of Kony! He drove to the Padibe mission hospital where I was immediately admitted for treatment. Remember, I had been beaten and left for dead!

“I had no idea what a sorry state I was in till I reached Padibe where I saw more human beings. My body was covered with sores from the beatings and my feet were swollen because of trekking the long distance. I had not eaten for about three days. I survived on wild leaves and raw cassava that I uprooted from people’s gardens throughout my journey from Sudan to Kitgum. I was so thin that a gust of wind could easily have blown me down. I was just skin and bones and my eyes were popping out of the sockets. Mine was indeed a narrow escape.”

I look at Pamela and we share a silent moment. Then she gets up and

enters her hut. She returns shortly with a photograph.

“Today I am okay. I have put on weight. Here, look. I took that photo when I was in hospital in Padibe.”

The picture she gives me is of a totally different person from the one talking to me. The girl in the photograph looks more like a ten-year-old – emaciated. Her skin colour is blue black and the blank stare in her eyes speaks volumes about untold sufferings. “You have changed a lot,” I tell her.

“Yes, I am much better now. If that man who picked me up had not been a religious and humble person, he wouldn’t have allowed me to enter his vehicle. I was quite a sight. As soon as I arrived at the hospital, I was given a new dress so I got relieved of my lice-infested rags. I had not even had my monthly periods for about six months and I was worried that I could be pregnant. I confided in an elderly female nurse who advised me to take a pregnancy test. I was very glad when it turned out to be negative. She explained to me that it was stress and long periods of starvation that had caused a halt in my periods. I also took an HIV and syphilis tests. The HIV test was negative but the syphilis test was positive. I was given medication to treat it.

“The Reverend Father who had picked me up kept on coming to check on me until I got well. He would bring me new clothes, sweets, tinned milk, sugar, fruits and many other food items. When I recovered fully, I was transferred to World Vision Gulu, where I stayed for seven months.

“While at the World Vision Rehabilitation Centre in Gulu, we were counselled and told how to resettle in our communities. We were also encouraged to open up about what we saw and what happened to us while with the rebels. They told us that sharing our experiences would help us recover from the trauma much faster. But I could not bring myself to open up to anybody. I did not trust anybody. Each one of us had a counsellor assigned to us.

“I found it hard to tell my counsellor what I had gone through. She then told me to draw pictures of what I had seen. She assured me that whatever I told her was going to remain a secret between us and if she ever disclosed it to anyone I had the right to report her to higher authorities. That was when I started trusting her. By the time I left the rehabilitation centre, we were

good friends and I could share with her many things. I felt human again.

“We were also encouraged to play. We used to play volleyball, netball, skipping, hide-and-seek and all sorts of other games.

“When it was time for me to go back home to my people, I was taken in a pickup truck. The matron at the centre accompanied me. I was given a mattress, a blanket, shoes and World Vision also gave me seeds for planting.

“Everyone at home was glad to see me. My parents and siblings screamed when they realised it was me. They surrounded me as the things were being offloaded from the vehicle. No one seemed to notice the matron. I later introduced her to them as one who was caring for us escapees at the Gulu World Vision Centre. She greeted them and left shortly after. My siblings were very excited about having me back. For about a month, my young sisters took turns sleeping next to me.

“After some time, some of my friends, who were also returnees, wanted to go back to school and were taken back. At the time I was not interested in going back to school. I went back to school much later because my parents insisted that education was the only way to a prosperous future. I went back to Senior One. When I got to Senior Three I got pregnant and I decided to get married to my boyfriend. He was a fellow student. That is why I am now staying in Kitgum. It is my husband’s home district. I am expecting our first child.

“I am still interested in continuing with school but I no longer have support from home. If I go back to ask for help from my parents, they will say that they cannot pay school fees for a married woman. But I hope to manage and go back somehow. I hope to cross that bridge when I get there.

“Thinking about the ongoing peace talks, I highly doubt that Kony will turn up to sign the peace deal because he has been elusive since time immemorial. People in the camp are still living in crowded conditions. They do not feel safe enough to go back to the villages to dig, save for a few brave ones. So they depend on handouts from World Food Programme and other NGOs. They are willing to go back home but as long as Kony is still at large, they feel threatened.

“But some day, I strongly believe that God will rescue Northern Uganda. Some day we shall be whole again.”

This time tomorrow

*Yesterday, I woke up here
Today, I wake up here
Tugging at my sagging tummy
Listening to the old tune, asking myself,
Will it be the same, this time tomorrow?*

*When they came
You said they would go
You said they were insects
You laughed at them
You said they would not be here this time today.*

*Today, their thunderous guns rock us to sleep
The burning camps soothe our chopped lips and noses
Crying babies rest their lips on nipple-less breasts.
You still blow on our wounds –
Like a rat and its prey.*

*You gave them days, we waited.
Months,
Now it's years
We wait,
Will it be the same this time tomorrow?*

Hilda Twongyeirwe

Ruins

By Beatrice Lamwaka

My name is Helen. I am twenty four years old. I live in Kalongo camp. Before I moved here, I used to live with my grandmother, who I call Dada, in a village called Ocoyo Lamero. Whenever we heard rumours that the rebels were around our village we would go and sleep in the bush. We knew that other families also slept close to us or that if you searched you would find others, but people had learnt that you should never tell anyone where you were going to sleep because they could betray you. In a war situation, trust ceases to exist. We knew that my uncle, Mr Okello, and his family usually changed the locations where they slept but I knew the forest wasn't that big and that we could easily find each other if we needed to.

We used to hide most of our valuables underground in the compound and sometimes in the bush. We once hid Dada's *gomesi* underground but when we dug it up after a while, we found that termites had destroyed it. From then on, we would only hide utensils underground. We didn't have much to take to the bush with us except our beddings.

One night, we had gone to sleep in our usual spot, but when we saw some clouds and lightning in the distance we knew that it would rain. For a while, we had not heard of incidents of rebel attacks in villages close to ours so we thought it would be safe to go home and at least spend one night without worrying about sleeping under heavy clouds. Dada was very sceptical about our safety but in the end she agreed that one night at home would probably not hurt.

We had been asleep for almost an hour when it began to rain heavily. This, I believed, rendered the situation safer since even the rebels would fear rain and would find shelter into some empty house. I wasn't far wrong because, indeed, they must have come and slept somewhere in the village. We were woken up early in the morning at about 5 a.m. by a group of boys who had very powerful torches. The torches were so bright that one could find a needle with its light. They simply pushed open our door. The door

was made of pieces of old oil tins. I did not know that our door was that weak; for me as long as it was closed it provided the protection I needed.

“My friends get out of bed!” one of them ordered. I swiftly got up from my papyrus bed and sat upright.

“Where is the rest of the family?”

“We are the only two,” Dada answered.

“Don’t fool around with me. I know that there are young boys and girls here. They must come and fight.”

We kept quiet as we listened to them. I was afraid that if I opened my mouth, I might say something that would jeopardise our safety. These rebels would do whatever they wanted to people. So keeping quiet unless a straight answer was demanded was the best option.

“This young girl can fight, can’t she?” he asked, poking Dada with the tip of his gun.

“How old are you?” he asked, pushing me with the butt of his gun.

“Twelve years,” Dada answered

“That’s all right. She’s old enough.”

I counted the number of rebels; twelve in total. We hardly had space to move. Our hut is one room, just about three metres wide. While one of them spoke, the rest seemed to be sleeping on their feet. There was one girl among them. She must have been a bit older than me because while I had no breasts, I could see hers bulging under the T-shirt that she was wearing.

The leader walked out for a short while and then came back and said it was time for us to go and get the rest of the family. He said he knew that they slept in the bush and we knew the exact spot where they slept and we should take them there.

I tried to say I didn’t know but he hit me hard with the butt of his gun. He became very rough. You would never have believed he was the same person who had spoken kindly to us when we were inside our hut. One of the rebels offered the leader a *panga* to use on me if I still resisted, but when I saw its shining blade I quickly agreed to take them to the bush. I knew we would find at least one family to save me. The rebel leader assured me that if I did anything to alert the people he would run back and shoot Dada. He must have known how I adored Dada. Dada had been asked to stay in the compound with five rebels, not much older than me, guarding her.

I walked through the cassava garden with the rebels at my back. The sun hadn't yet risen but we could see the shapes of people if they moved. I was so afraid that Dada would be killed if I didn't find anybody soon.

"Call out their names," he ordered me.

At that moment I wished that I had agreed with my uncle what name to use in order to warn them that the rebels were looking for them. But I knew it was too late now.

"Call your uncle Okello," one of the rebels said. I turned to look at him and that was when I realised that it was Akera, the son of our neighbour who had been abducted two years earlier. He had been reported dead. His family had mourned him and even buried his *tipu* – or soul – so that he wouldn't blame them for not burying him.

"Call your uncle," he repeated.

I felt a stick hit me. My throat was dry. I wanted to run away. For a moment I had forgotten about Dada.

"Uncle," I blubbered. I was hit so hard that I ran for a short distance and the rebels surrounded me. I knew that I could not escape. I shouted my uncle's name without the aid of another command.

"What's wrong?" my uncle shouted back. I was happy that he had responded.

"Say that your grandmother has been bitten by a snake and he should come home quickly," one of the rebels whispered.

"Dada is very ill," I said.

The rebels ran in the direction of my uncle's voice, leaving one of them behind to guard me. They gathered my uncle's family and then led us back home. I was shivering. I did not say anything to them as they filed out of their hiding place. I kept saying under my breath, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." I don't know if my uncle or any of my cousins heard.

We found that other people had also been brought to our home. There were also loads and loads of food packed in sacks.

I think the overall commander ordered the other rebels to go to Ojara's home. Everyone called Ojara *doctor* because he worked in Kalongo Hospital and brought drugs home to treat the people in the village.

I sat close to Dada. I tried communicating with my uncle using my

eyes. He looked away every time he saw me look in his direction. His three children sat next to him. Soon the rebels were back with what seemed to be drugs. They told the older people, including Dada, to start doing their usual chores and then warned them that if they showed the government soldiers the direction they had taken they would kill all the children.

I was given a huge load to carry. A black bag that was as heavy as the stump of a *lawiwiyo* tree. When we reached some place in the forest we found a deserted village and the rebels caught some goats and slaughtered them. We were then ordered to cook the meat very quickly. The leaders ate the good parts and the rest of us ate offal. We continued walking for days on end.

One day, as we walked, my cousin Oloya decided to drop his luggage and started running. Unfortunately he tripped up against the root of a huge tree. About five rebels hit him with their *pangas*. He cried out his mother's name. The rebels continued to cut him silently. I couldn't watch. I had become numb. All the abductees stood speechless. The incident reminded me of the way cows are slaughtered in the village market.

When Oloya stopped moaning the rebels walked away and left him drenched in blood. The way he looked can never be erased from my mind. I blamed myself for his death. If I hadn't returned home from the bush, the rebels wouldn't have found me. I would never have led them to my uncle. His family would never have been abducted. We all would never have been abducted.

The leader of the rebels, whose name I later learnt was Opoka, decided to distribute the girls among some of the older rebels. We were around ten girls and the boys may have been twenty. The rebels themselves were around thirty. I was given to a man who I think was in his thirties. He tried to be very nice to me. He told me that it wasn't my fault that this war was going on and that we should not blame ourselves for whatever was happening to us. I was beginning to feel a bit comfortable with this stranger.

When night fell, however, he took me away from the rest of the people. I thought he was going to remain as kind as he had pretended to be but as soon as we were alone he pushed his manhood inside me. He did not listen to my pleas at all. I had not hated him before but after he did that to

me I had no more respect for him. I had hoped that to please his friends he would take me aside but pretend that he had done it while he had not. He had made me believe that he understood. He had told me that the war was not my fault. So how could he do this to me?

But this was just the beginning, because the following night there was redistribution and I was given to someone else. He too did the same thing and did not even pretend to make me feel better like the first one had done. This one just tore into me, making me hate everything that was happening. I wanted to escape even though I knew that that wasn't the best option. I had heard stories of people who were killed trying to escape and I had seen my cousin being cut into pieces. But even if I was foolhardy to risk it, after the continued sexual assault, I could hardly walk, let alone, run.

When we finally got to Sudan I was told that I had syphilis. I didn't even know what the word 'syphilis' meant. When they explained it to me, I did not understand because I felt no pain in my private parts. But I guess the rebels who had slept with me knew better what they had given me. They told me that they wanted to give me treatment, but I refused. I did not trust them and I thought that they might try to hurt me again instead. Because I had syphilis, I was not given to another man. Instead I was kept separate and guarded because they thought I would give the sickness to others. They kept saying that they had run short of medicine.

While we were in Sudan, we were told that we would meet Kony and that we should prepare ourselves. I had heard so many stories about Kony and I wondered if the stories were true. I had heard that he could smell out people who wanted to escape and he would order them to be killed. He could also smell out people who thought of betraying him. When they talked of betrayal, I remembered what I did to my uncle and I felt very guilty. Sometimes, I told myself that it wasn't my fault. Sometimes I thought that perhaps I should have run away and maybe the rebels would have failed to shoot me in the back. Every time I saw Achan I would pretend not to have seen her and walk in the opposite direction. The camp wasn't that big and I couldn't run away from her forever.

The day that we met Kony, we stood in a queue and watched him as he walked up with some rebels. He stood on a raised platform and addressed us. I had thought that I would see someone who looked sickly since he was

possessed by spirits but he looked normal. A little taller than my father, he wore a grey Kaunda suit. He began to speak immediately. I noticed that his dialect was different from mine. He kept repeating that we wanted to go back to Uganda to overthrow the Museveni's government. "We should liberate the Acholi," he insisted. He warned us against having relationships with boys and that if we tried to escape we would get killed. He spoke for hours, repeating himself most of the time. I was glad that at least his spirit did not pick out any of the new recruits to be blamed for something or the other.

We were taken into a field and taught how to fight. One of the rebels, who I later learnt was called Commander Flex, said we did not need much training. He distributed AK47s to us and said that we would learn to fight anyway. He said that every time we went to fight he would make sure we were at the front so that we would kill as many of our enemies as possible. Later, a mixture of something which smelled like it contained urine was smeared on us. Commander Flex promised that bullets would never hit us unless we doubted the strength of the mixture.

Flex told me that I had to carry the AK47 I was given at all times. It was so heavy. By then, I think I was four feet; if I were taller maybe it would have been easier for me to carry it. Flex told us the AK47 was our new brother and we had to take very good care of it.

I spent days carrying my gun. I had to fetch water with it, in a twenty-litre jerrycan. I don't know how I did it, but somehow I managed to carry it. It was one of the hardest things, though. So many times, I was tempted to hide my gun, fetch water and take it to the camp, then pick up my gun later and go back. But I feared to do that because I had heard that if you lost your gun you would be killed or tortured to death. I didn't want to die that way; so each day I struggled with my gun and a twenty-litre jerrycan of water.

On the day we had to travel to Uganda on a mission, we woke up very early. I was happy to be getting back to Uganda. I wondered if I would be able to escape or if we would be able to pass by my village. I wondered if Dada had stopped praying for me or if she thought that I had died. Sometimes people who escaped got back home and reported all deaths and

sometimes simply reported hearsay that turned out to be untrue. When such stories travelled, the bereaved family would mourn and bury the 'dead' person's *tipu*. Sometimes when such people showed up later, the family would be very scared of them thinking they were ghosts. I didn't want that to happen to me. Then I thought of what I should do while I was still with the rebels: make myself visible to most of the rebels. I didn't know how but I thought that somehow I would volunteer to take part in most of the activities and, perhaps, be at the forefront during fights.

I don't know exactly where we were when we fell into an ambush. There were gunshots from everywhere. I don't think I had ever been in such a spot before. I had heard gunshots before but from a distance. People began to run in different directions. I lay down for a while and then I aimed my gun in the air and fired a few shots. Then I realised that the shooting was not going to help me. Instead, I dropped my gun and started running. I didn't care which direction I ran in. I just wanted to get away from all this.

Suddenly, I heard a plane approaching and I lay under a tree, half-waiting for it to pass and half-waiting for a bullet to slit open my neck. Air attacks were the most dreaded by rebels. Fortunately, the plane dropped a few bombs and flew away. I got up and began running again. I jumped over several bodies; I decided not to look at them closely. I did not want to recognise any of them. I didn't want to be the one to inform mothers of the deaths of their children. Also I knew that some of those who looked dead were just wounded and would eventually survive the wounds and return home.

So I just continued running. I ran on and fell into water. I thought I would not make it. At the age of about ten I had tried to swim in a swamp near my home but I had almost drowned. Since then I had never tried to swim again. I saw many bodies in the water. I heard someone crying out for help. He was in the deeper part of the swamp. A bag was slung over his shoulders. I wanted to help him but I couldn't go further into the deep waters. When I tried to move further out my feet got stuck in the muddy end of the water. I decided to get out and run. I left the crying person still in the water. I hope that he or she also managed to come out.

I continued to run without looking behind me. Farther on I came across a place where people had been cooking and thought I was now safe. But

when I looked closely I could see that it was a fire that had been made by the rebels. I could tell because the rebels don't use stones for cooking as, according to them, spirits tell them not to use stones. If they do, the stones will burst like bombs and kill the person who lit the fire. Also they are forbidden by spirits to smoke cigarettes whereas government soldiers smoke heavily, leaving cigarette butts around the fires.

After many days of running, of thirst and of hunger, I came across a village where I saw two women. They were washing their hands to eat. I asked them, "What is the name of this place?" They told me to enter their home, and they told me to wash my hands and eat. They asked me if I had escaped from the rebels and I told them that I had. Somehow, almost the whole village came out to see the rebel girl. The women took me inside their house, bathed me and gave me a bed. In the morning they said to me, "You cannot stay here because if you do, government soldiers will harm us if they find out that we are keeping a rebel girl here."

So they took me to the barracks nearby. I wasn't afraid of the soldiers because I thought I would be safe with them. They asked about the whereabouts of the rebels and I told them that I knew where they were but I didn't know the name of the places. I stayed there for a week getting medical treatment. I also told them that I had syphilis. I was tested for syphilis but they told me that I didn't have it. I was confused but I thought that maybe it was Dada's prayers that had helped me to heal. I was later taken back to my family in Kalongo.

I found Dada alive and well. She told me that she had been told of the death of Oloya. She also told me that my uncle had said that he had forgiven me because he knew that I was forced into revealing their hiding place. I was very happy to hear that. I thanked God for saving me. Shortly after I arrived back home, we relocated to Kalongo camp where most people had lived for over a decade. But the memory of how I got my uncle and his family from their hiding place has never left me. But I am glad that he sent a message absolving me of betraying him and his family.

Home

Once a bubbly home.
Now a vacant expanse.
Holy fire sparks to cleanse the land,
once pure and calm.
Now hell by the Lord's man.
Kony-
Helper.

Now I miss the fruit gathering.
I miss my husband gone to war.
I miss the cattle –
the laughter of women coming from the well.
I miss home.

Grace Atuhaire

Pages of My Life

By Rosey Sembatya

I have searched for this story like a nomad searches for green pasture. I wanted something new, something unique. Amuru district is my destination. I am looking for the untold story from the new Amuru district. Amuru neighbours Gulu district.

I awoke up on a Wednesday morning to a bright sun without a particular camp in mind but an array of story themes that fit my project description – something new, something untold, a story of a woman’s experiences of armed conflict.

A lot of what is now Amuru is predominantly a camp surrounded by trees, shrubs and thickets. On the many murram roads I rode, I couldn’t help getting nostalgic about my own village – the quiet, unadulterated land with a few men on their bicycles and women carrying baskets on their heads.

With no itinerary in mind, I chanced on Lii camp, a relatively small satellite camp with over 40 grass-thatched huts. Surrounded by small gardens of maize and beans and overgrown sorghum crops, two hens while away the mid-morning pecking at the ground. Looking through the neatly swept separate compounds of the huts is a group of girls close to seven years old huddled together, concentrating on some cans that one of them was holding. I am standing right beside a stony murram road that takes away and returns gardeners and residents of Lii camp. In front of the camp there is a big, tall tree that stares straight into the huts that make up Lii. Under the tree sits a goat bleating like it is taking part in a competition of sorts – on and on and on...

Gong, gong, gong, echoes the tyre rim that was used as a bell. From different corners of the camp, the residents file in the direction of the gong. There is a village meeting. All the women slouch to the meeting venue under another tree opposite the tree with the goat in twos and threes. Women call each other from their gardens but a lone woman remains in her garden. No other woman goes out to call her. This intrigues me. The lone figure did not come back to the camp until the meeting was over. But before the meeting

start, I ask the two women next to me why they have not called her and why after she saw others gather she did not join them. Their response tickles me. "She kills all her men," one of the women says.

I meet Susan in the late December heat that burns bare feet to the sinews. Its fiery shine makes my eyes ache. Susan approaches with a bundle of millet balanced on her head.

Putting down her burden, she extends her hand in greeting. "*Afooyo*," she says.

"*Afooya ba*," I respond, taking her hand in mine.

Susan and I sit by the tree at the far end of the camp. The wind blows in earnest but the pain in her eyes is so strong that the wind does not trigger a response to counter the heaviness there. She folds her arms across her chest and looks at me intently. Then in response to my question as to why nobody called her for the meeting, she says, "I have no female friends." She then looks across at the array of grass-thatched roofs. "They are afraid of me. They say that I have a chest that kills men."

Before I can find my tongue she looks at me piercingly, perhaps asking for my response. Her arms fall to her sides, and I pick on that cue and manage a sigh.

"My first husband and I met in Palenga. I was about 14 years old. I fell in love with him and wanted to get married to him and start a family. He too was interested and our families knew each other because we stayed in the same area. He used to go to the forest with his friends, cut down trees and burn them for charcoal. He would then take the charcoal to Gulu town and sell it. My mother and I were involved in farming so I was very skilled at tending gardens. I knew that we would manage to be a happy family through my supplementing his business with my farming abilities.

"My mother liked the young man and didn't mind me getting married to him because I was ready. My first husband went ahead to visit my family and express his desire to marry me. My family agreed and he paid the traditional bride price to my mother for my hand in marriage. Then we started living together.

"After paying bride price we started a family. Then I lost him in a flash. Although I hate being reminded of it, I would rather I get it off my chest.

“One evening the Kony rebels attacked our village camp in Palenga. We never knew that they were coming so it was a complete surprise when they did. Wielding machetes, guns and wearing mean faces, they abducted many of us. During abductions, it is survival of the fittest, so each person has to run to save their lives. At that time my husband and I already had three children. During the abduction my children were at my mother’s hut, but in the same camp - Palenga. My husband and I separated at the time of the attack. I was fleeing to safety, or so I thought, when I found myself in the hands of the rebels. I have no idea how they guessed that the tall shadow running across the grassland was not one of their own but one that should be abducted. I was thus made to join those who had been captured. At this point, I didn’t even know where my husband or my children were. With machete-wielding rebels, there is very little that one can do but to accept one’s fate.

“Rebel attacks set off wails and helplessness. After the abduction, I, together with other women was made to carry the rebels’ loot from our huts. We carried many things, including mats and beans. As we traipsed to our places of suffering, another fierce encounter occurred with the government soldiers and everyone had to flee once again. I had never before encountered such a deafening spate of bullets. We had only walked for about five hundred metres from Palenga when the government soldiers struck. The rebel who was leading us told us to lie down to avoid bullets but everybody just ran in different directions. In my mind, I said that I would rather be shot running to safety than lie down with rebels.

“At that time I was not thinking about my husband. The only thought on my mind was about my children because, apart from knowing that they were supposed to be with my mother, I didn’t know whether they were alive or dead.

“As torrents of gunshots echoed through the area, I abandoned my luggage – a saucepan of beans covered with an old piece of cloth. I didn’t even know where I was running to but I just ran on, hoping to find a hiding place. A few metres away, without even knowing whether that was safe enough, I fell down under a nearby tree and covered my ears with my hands.

“I stayed in this place patiently but fearing that any moment might bring a gum-booted foot down on my head. After a long time of hiding, with my heart pounding wildly all the while, I found other escapees and we retraced our footsteps to Palenga. We all ran to our compounds to look for our kin. A few government soldiers were still around patrolling the camp. Thoughts about my husband and children concurrently crossed my mind with each step I took.

“We got to Palenga as wails of loss enveloped the area, each survivor fervently searching for their relations. My eyes were smarting with apprehension, tears threatening to break free, but I had to remain strong and look for my people. I half-walked and half-ran to my mother’s hut. There was no sign of life there, apart from abandoned bits of cloth. Everyone else kept turning things about in their huts to find out what had been left of them. As I approached my own hut, two bodies lay sprawled on the ground and a few people stood around it. I could see from a distance that they were men because they were wearing trousers.

“As I got closer to the small crowd, they all turned their eyes on me and then quickly looked away. Then I knew my household had been touched. I knew that I had lost him. But I kept hoping it was somebody else, at least some old man who had already seen more of life. I hoped it was someone else I knew as an acquaintance or a distant relation or a neighbour. I had somehow hoped that my husband would live. When I finally realised that it was indeed him, I was at first too angry to cry. I was angry with him for having left me, angry with the government soldiers for failing to save him and angry with myself for having run away without him. As seconds ticked by, tears broke loose and streamed down my face uncontrollably.

“Many others, upon finding their own dead, wailed uncontrollably. It is a very trying moment because upon finding one’s own, one would lose all strength and painfully accept that they were gone and move on to their next source of hope. My next step was to search for my children. My husband’s body meant that anything could have happened to my children as well! I had no strength to continue with the search but I had to. I kept asking everyone I bumped into if they had seen my children. Either nobody knew anything about their fate or they were too engrossed in their own miseries

to pay me any attention. I walked back to my mother's hut and this time I found her there.

"Mamina, where are the children?" I asked. She looked at me intently and led me to her hut where I found them snug and in deep sleep. We didn't get into details of where they had hidden or escaped from the attack. I just uncovered my children and touched them to make sure that they were still alive. Upon confirming that, I let them sleep and turned back to the painful reality of the loss of my husband. He was gone and I had to fend for our three young children alone.

"A few months passed as I pondered my next move. I wanted to get another man to help me bring up the children and also to help me ease my misery. I met Jacob some months after losing my first husband. The circumstances under which I met him were quite normal if one is to be sincere. It was difficult to live alone. Living in these war times, one needs to heal and find some solace in something. I couldn't find solace in my digging, or in my mother or in my children. Granted, all those occupied a special part inside me but I needed a man in my life. I needed someone to talk to in the night, someone to hold and comfort me when I was in the grip of nightmares. From the time of the attack, I had never been able to sleep peacefully. A recurrence of vivid memories of my first husband – shirtless, lifeless and surrounded by the crowd – disturbed me. Other times, I imagined someone trying to kill me, Mamina and my children.

"Jacob too had lost his relatives but had never had a wife. He was lonely too and afraid of living alone in his hut. He pitied me and I think I also pitied him. After sometime Jacob started wooing me. He wooed me for about one month then he suggested that we start living together. I didn't hesitate even one bit because I really wanted to live with someone – my hut was so empty. My heart was empty too. But I think it would have been a little easier if Jacob and I had decided to relocate to another area. A widow living in the same area with another man is considered very disrespectful to the soul of her late husband.

"It started with my mother who didn't agree that Jacob and I should be living together. Her reason was that I was a widow. In my opinion, that wasn't strong enough to keep me away from Jacob or even stop us from living together. I explained my aches and the loneliness I felt to my mother. She

still insisted that it was very wrong. My mother was a little understanding but everyone else in the village accused me of robbing Jacob of his youth. They kept saying that through being a widow, I was too contaminated for a young man that had never had a wife and too old at that. I was told to stay home and raise my first husband's children. But I did not see the point in that because I could look after them just about anywhere.

"I was supposed to leave Jacob's hut and go to my late husband's hut but I adamantly refused. In the midst of a raging war, a culture can't retain its purity and a bit of stubbornness makes everyone leave you alone. I refused to go back to my late husband's hut because I had found a good man in Jacob and wanted to keep him. I found all I desired in Jacob and he understood what I had gone through so well. I did not feel any guilt because I had not seduced him. He had wooed and taken me to his hut. So what was their problem? And come to think of it, when men lose their wives don't they remarry when they feel like it?

"From the day we started staying together everyone seemed to avoid me but Jacob knew about my late husband and he accepted me – and that was all that mattered. I lived with Jacob very happily and we even had one child together. Jacob, like my first husband, was a charcoal seller. From Palenga, he would come all the way to Lii to burn trees and sell charcoal. He maintained us on the profits from his charcoal business.

"One fateful day, he awoke like he always did, only this time earlier than usual. I never made him any breakfast on other days, but on that day I did because he was leaving home very early and I insisted that he take something. So I warmed some *posho* for him and made a cup of tea, using the fireplace in the hut. He had to go to Lii with four other friends. The three friends were already at our door so he had to do everything in a hurry.

"The area where Lii camp is located is very far from any community and not inhabited at all. It was also said to be a haven for rebels and once there, one was exposed to rebel attacks. On the other hand, however, it was famous for its trees and many charcoal sellers would flock to the area because of this. On this day, none of the four friends came back to tell us the story. We just heard that the four charcoal burners had been abducted and butchered. When Jacob and his friends did not return at the expected time, we did not need to say much or to ask any questions.

“It was a pity that Jacob, who had risked his life to be able to maintain us, was butchered as he tried to look for a livelihood. And even more unfortunate is the fact that we did not bury him. All that remains of him are memories, fond memories of him. That was my second misfortune. I had been so optimistic that we would stay together and raise our children jointly. It was so sad because we had been married for barely five years. And we loved each other.

“This bad luck that has enveloped me like a plague must have been passed on by association. When two people get married and start living together, their closeness robs them of their individuality, merging them into one. Maybe this misfortune came from my first husband. His family was characterised by tragic deaths – many brutal.

“My first husband’s mother had been brutally murdered by rebels and soon after many of his family members followed suit. I don’t blame them for my misfortunes but neither do I blame myself for getting married to my first husband because he was a good man. But I must have caught this curse from him. I remember my third husband’s mother was brought to my house one morning. She was ill with a terrible cough, back and neck pain plus an ache in her legs. These are common ailments and there was nothing to be worried about. She wasn’t so badly off because she had started showing signs of recovery. She had started having her meals regularly and was even able to bathe herself. But that very day, after having her evening meal, she passed away in my home. It has been a life of one misfortune after another ever since.”

Perplexed by the story, I ask Susan what her current husband thinks about her past and whether he is worried that he might be next in line. Susan proceeds to tell me about her third husband.

“I met Charles a month after the death of Jacob. I was distraught, with no one to talk to. No one wanted to associate with me because everyone thought I had a spell or some sort of bad luck on my head. Right from the beginning, Charles knew about me since he had lived in Palenga. Maybe it was my misfortunes that attracted him to me. When he expressed his interest in me I left my children to come to Lii camp to live with him. Right from the time I met him, we have never discussed my past. We live as if it doesn’t exist.

“Leaving Palenga for Lii camp was like a hide-and-seek game between my children and me. I just escaped from them. I escaped when they were asleep, very early one morning. Charles had left Palenga a few days before to prepare our new home. When the morning came, I escaped from my children. I had no choice – something indescribable was gnawing at my very being. I had to go.

“Charles has made it easier for me because he actually ignores my past. Unfortunately, however, this includes my children as well. He does not want my four children from my previous marriages to live with us or even visit us. They live with my mother in Palenga. I think he doesn’t want to accept that I had a past and therefore shuts it completely out of our lives. He has chosen to give me a fresh beginning but I miss my children and that is a barrier between us because I am not ready to forget them.

“I have no child with him and I plan to stay with him temporarily. He didn’t even pay any bride price to my mother. I have no obligation to stay with a man whose aim is to separate me from my children so as to block out my past. My past is part of me. I keep lying to my children about what I am doing in Lii camp. I keep telling them that I farm here because there isn’t much farmland in Palenga. With each passing day, I feel so guilty. Charles does not even want me to go and see them in Palenga and neither does he allow me to let them visit us. When I want to see them, I pretend that I am going either to the field or somewhere else. I also don’t want them to know that apart from doing some digging in Lii, I have another man. How will I be able to explain these lies to them? I take them some food once in a while without my husband’s knowledge.

“Fortunately, all my children have no relatives who visit them otherwise they would have told them the truth! Apart from the school to which they go, Palenga is the only place they know. All the relations I knew have died in the war. My children are now mine. My heritage is their heritage.”

Susan smiles contentedly as she says that. Wondering about the new man in her life, I ask her whether she thinks that he loves her.

“I think Charles loves me because he has never beaten me and he always tries to provide for me as much as he can. He is trying to give me a fresh start but there can never be a fresh start that does not include children from

my previous marriages. Charles has completely refused to accept them into our lives. For me the only new beginning can only be with my children. I will go home to my children soon.”

Susan’s determined stare draws me into her slit eyes that seem to say, ‘*I have what it takes*’. Having been born 30 years ago, her life is characterised by a cycle of acceptance, denials and resignations and, strangely enough, resilience. Susan so vividly reminds me of Ihuoma in Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine*, so very ignorant of the grudge she has to settle with fate.

*I am a floating messenger of the gods
They take and kill my friends as they will
They let me live
Where is the happiness in carrying death on your shoulders?*

Oh! My Beloved

*The river roared
the sky laughed
I stood still.
The sirens cried
the earth shook
only I
was immobile.*

*There is chaos in my country
torture in my village
humiliation in my house
there is pain in me.
Death is here.*

*The lake has gone mad
her strong arms grabbing all
strangling out life
squeezing out breath
burying, floating.
The lake is mad,
murderous.*

*There is chaos in my land,
brutality,
destruction.
The homestead in disarray.
There is pain in me.
Death is here.*

*The forest is angry.
War is here.
War is on.*

Jemeo Nanyonjo

The Family of Three

By Beatrice Lamwaka

It did not take me too long to find a child-headed household in Laguri camp in Pader district. Pader district has been at the front for the war between the Lord's Resistance Army rebels and the Uganda government in northern Uganda since 1986. It is the scene where people have been boiled in pots, where bodies have been mutilated and where massive abductions have occurred. The rebels used the district as their exit point from Uganda into southern Sudan; in addition, the traditional Karimojong cattle raids continued to affect the people living there. As a result of increased rebel activity and the growing number of deaths from HIV/AIDS, there are many families that are headed by children. People barely have the time to listen to these children and so I went out with the intention of giving such children a voice.

Laguri camp looks like a forest of mushrooms from a distance. I am not sure an aerial view would be different. Huts are built on both sides of the main road that leads to either Gulu or Kitgum town, depending on which end of the road you are looking from. Huts are built close to each other, so that once one hut is set on fire virtually the whole camp can burn down with ease. The newspaper accounts that I have read about such fires attest to this. Children in tattered clothes play with one another. Men sit in circles drinking *lacoji* beer, using straws dipped in pots of the beverage.

I am told by a young girl to look for the camp commander before I can speak to anyone. I find him eating his breakfast. He tells me his name is Komakec. I tell him I want to talk to a member of a child-headed family. He calls one of his children and tells him to go around the camp and tell some of the girls that they will have a visitor soon and they should get prepared. I don't know what he means when he says they should get prepared but I don't ask. I had not imagined that I would be assisted that fast. I wonder whether I should give him something in appreciation. I place my hand on my bag as I ponder my next move but I remember what I have been told by people who work for the organisations that deal with them on a daily

basis: "Do not give them money because they will begin to demand money for whatever they do and we can't allow that."

"Let's go," Komakec says as he leads the way. "We'll start with Amito who lives close by."

For close to an hour I move from one hut to another. I am glad that the huts are not far from one another. I speak to a number of girls, who fail to say anything except their names. I begin to think that perhaps their stories are too traumatising for them to want to relate, making them unwilling to say much. I respect their silence and refrain from asking further questions. Komakec realises my dilemma but he leads me on to the next home, and the next. In one of the huts, Laker tells me that she is attending a UNICEF-sponsored primary school. She says that no particular level has been allotted to her class, that it has people of all ages and that it is only after they have passed tests that they are promoted to Primary Four. Maybe they are all in Primary Three then. That is all she says.

"Let's go to the next home," Komakec says.

"I want to speak to someone who can tell her story," I explain to him

"Don't worry, we will find you one," he says. We walk past more huts. They seem unending. People seated in front of their huts watch us as we go by. They mumble greetings and Komakec responds warmly.

We walk further into the camp. Komakec slows down as we come near a certain hut. I know that this family has been told about my arrival. He tells me this is a family of three children: Latua, 13; Layet, 10, and the youngest, Okeny, 8 years old. I know that they don't have to tell me their stories but I hope that they will be able to talk to me so that I can relay their stories for people to know what the children are going through in northern Uganda, in the hope that something can be done to help them.

Latua's compound is about six square metres and is freshly swept. Her small grass-thatched hut stands in the middle of the camp like a dry weed in a forest. Some of the grass from the roof has been plucked away, probably to light fires for cooking. She stands with an *otok* broom in her hands. When the children who have been playing in front of their hut see us, they scatter like millet spilling from a winnowing tray. Her younger brother and sister come forward, leaving the other children behind. I recognise them immediately from their close resemblance; they are dark and tall, with big, bright eyes.

They stand close together as if they are positioning themselves for a picture. I take out my cyber-shot camera from my bag. Latua and her siblings smile as I take their picture. Komakec joins them and I take more pictures. They stand close to each other but none of them touches the other.

When I am done taking their pictures, I look around; firewood has been neatly placed in the compound, a sign that Latua has just returned from collecting it in the forest.

“Let’s get into the house,” Komakec says. I follow Komakec as he bends and enters the hut. I follow suit. I find a mat on the floor. I sit at the far end. Komakec finds himself a stool. The three – Latua, Layet and Okeny – follow each other like red ants. They sit opposite Komakec and me. Latua is in the middle, with Layet and Okeny on either side. Komakec knows his way around. This is his village.

Latua has rearranged the hut that has seen her mother and her grandmother breathe their last, she would later tell me. Her sister and brother stay close to her as if to guard her.

Latua’s hut is small, with a grass roof and a wall like all the huts in camps in northern Uganda. I don’t see anything luxurious inside. It is a very small hut for Latua and her siblings. I think about my small bedroom, which I think is triple the size of their hut. I glance at the dirty and torn mosquito net hanging on a string in the centre of the hut. I know that it has been provided by an NGO. I wonder if they will share it in the night or only Latua uses it. The fireplace looks like it has been abandoned; perhaps they haven’t cooked in days. Huge saucepans blackened by smoke are arranged near the fireplace. I scan the hut to see if there is any food stored anywhere. An old winnower holds dry cassava tubers that have almost turned yellow. The cassava looks almost inedible. I wonder if Latua will be able to cook that for her family after I have left. I fail to see any other food. From what I have seen I assume that Latua and her siblings have not eaten in days and may not be eating the next meal soon or that whatever they will find may be the only food available to them. I know that whatever is in the hut is all that they have.

Then Latua tells me her story:

“My name is Sunday Latua. I study in Laguri Primary School. I’m in Primary Three. I was born in Laguri camp. I hear that the camp has more than ten thousand people. My mother, before she died, told me that I was born on 26 December 1994. She studied up to Primary Six. She was one of the most educated in her family. She used to write and read letters for the villagers. I have not seen my birth certificate. I believe I have to remember my siblings’ birthdays so that I can tell them in future. My sister, Layet, was born on 12 January 1997 and my brother Okeny in 1999. Ma couldn’t remember the date and month because the disease that killed her had already started eating away her brain.

“I hear women say behind my back that Ma was killed by *slim*, that’s why she was very thin when she died. They say that the three of us may have the disease. I feel all right. I hardly fall sick so I don’t know what the women are talking about. I know that she was sick for such a long time. She had a cough...a very bad cough. She always complained that she felt very cold most of the time.

“We never took her to hospital. She stayed in this house until she died. On the night that she passed away, the three of us were sleeping. She called out to me to cover her. I gathered the blankets that she had thrown away and covered her. She later called out to me again and said that she was cold. I looked around for something else to cover her with. We hardly had anything else, so I covered her with the blanket that I shared with Okeny and Layet. She later called out to me yet again to cover her. This time I had nothing and I ignored her further calls. I somehow slept because I didn’t hear her call my name again. When I woke up, I went to tell Komakec that Ma’s condition had worsened. He came over and checked her. He told my siblings to get out of the house. That is when I knew that she had died. She was buried on that very day, I guess, because we wouldn’t have had any room to sleep.

“Ma was buried at our real home. So have many of the members of my family. That’s the home that I will move back to when we leave the camp. We have already been told to go home and start farming our land. I’m afraid to go there though. The houses were burnt down many years ago by

the rebels when they killed most of my family. Some people say that our home has got to be cleansed because my people were killed there in such a terrible way. I wouldn't know what to do. And they said that the cleansing needs cows, goats and chickens, which we don't have. I'm also afraid that the rebels will come back and then we will have to run to the camp again. So it's useless going back now.

"I know that maybe our neighbours are already farming back home. I hope that they won't encroach on our land. I don't even know where the boundary stones are located. The local council said that they would assist me in getting the portion of the land that belongs to us. I'm relying on their help. I can't do much by myself."

Latua stops talking and pats Okeny's head tenderly. I sense a special bond between her and the little boy, maybe because he is the youngest in the family. Latua notices that I am looking at the two with curiosity and resumes her story: "One day, Okeny was very hot and complained that he was cold. I took him to Laguri Medical Centre but the nurses told me to go back home and get my parents. I told them my parents were both dead. The nurse said she wasn't joking. She insisted that I needed to get my parents to provide more information about Okeny's history. I told them I had all the information they needed. I was told to leave anyway. I had hoped to see someone who knew my family so that they could help but nobody came to my rescue. We came back home and Okeny got well somehow. Sometimes I worry that he may become as sick as Ma was and die.

"Many people tell me that my sister, Layet has a mental illness. I don't know what that means because the mad people that I see in the camp walk about naked talking to themselves. Layet doesn't do that; she is like any normal child that I know. Layet goes to school and is learning how to read and write just like I am. I know that sometimes she watches movies through the cracks in the shelters but most children do that. Is this madness? What can I do to stop people saying such things? How can I stop my sister acting like a mad person? She is all I have got.

"At school the teachers never ask me to bring my parents like they ask other pupils. I wish I had someone to come over to school to check our performance. One time I asked my English teacher why the parents of other

pupils come to school. We have cultural days at school and parents come to watch their children perform. I always remind Layet and Okeny that we have each other. I'm their mother as much as they are my father. We always stick together, but sometimes Layet doesn't listen. She wants to play with the other children instead of doing her chores. She knows very well that we have to go to school and we have to do our chores and also be able to find food. But sometimes she is stubborn.

"The World Food Programme gives us food. We belong to the category called the vulnerable; this group consists of the elderly, those suffering from HIV/AIDS and the orphans. The food is never enough. That is why I have to dig for other people in order to get more food. The food that the World Food Programme gives us is usually *posho*, cooking oil and beans. We can't eat that all the time. So I have to work to supplement this food.

"My little brother, Okeny, is eight years old. He always asks me when Ma is coming back. I don't know how to tell him that Ma will never come back. I don't know what to say, or how to explain to him that Ma died. I wish I could understand the world more so that I could teach and protect my brother and sister.

"I worry all the time that the war may intensify again. How will I protect Layet and Okeny? What if they get abducted? Will I be able to cleanse them with *opobo*?

"When I was about eight years old and Ma was very ill and we didn't have enough food to eat, Ma sat me down and told me, 'We don't have food any more and you are now the head of this family'. I thought she was going to tell me that she was about to die. I heard some women whisper behind my back that my mother was going to die soon and I would have to take care of my siblings. 'You are a strong girl. Go back home and get the vegetables you find growing in the ruins,' Ma instructed.

"I picked the basket that Ma usually used when she went out to look for food. 'Make sure nobody sees you,' she shouted weakly as I left. I didn't know exactly what that meant since she usually told me not to go to places where there were no people. But in the camp there is no single place that doesn't have people at any one time.

"I hurried to a home that I didn't know much about. All I knew was that Baba and Ma had lived here before the war and that this was the place

where Baba was buried and where Ma would also be buried when she died. All the houses in the compound had been burnt down by either the rebels or government soldiers and the grass had overgrown almost everywhere. *Akeyo* and *obuga* vegetables had grown where the rubbish dump might have been.

"The vegetables looked really good and I wanted to get as much as I could. We had spent many days without eating proper food – only millet porridge. I was so excited you should have seen me. I plucked the vegetables like an expert and put them in the basket. The basket was almost full when suddenly I heard someone walking towards me. I froze. It was too late to duck and hide. I waited for whoever it was to come up. I hoped that it was one of the villagers looking for food.

"I saw a girl not much older than me approaching. She wore oversized army fatigues. I knew that she was a rebel. She had a gun slung over her shoulder. The stories I had heard came back to my mind. I remembered Ma's story about how some members of my family had been boiled in pots because the rebels accused them of betraying them.

"Leave whatever you are doing and follow me,' the girl ordered. I dropped the *obuga* I had in my hands and followed her like a dog. Many years of war had taught me to follow orders without question. So I just followed her. We reached another ruined home and found people of all ages seated. They were being guarded by rebels. The girl pushed me down in a sitting position without saying a word.

"I heard one of the rebels say, 'She's very young but we can't let her go right now. You know how these children are; she will run straight to the UPDF barracks'.

"A lot of things were brought. I heard people walking all over the place but I remained still, not looking at the rebels. I feared that if they saw me looking at them, they might attack me with their machetes.

"Young girl, leave now,' I heard an order and felt a hand poking at me. 'Run and don't look back. If you do I will shoot you. And don't say anything about what you've seen,' he warned sternly. I jumped up and ran without looking back. I don't even know if the rebels pointed their guns at me. I ran till I got to the camp. When I entered the house, looking exhausted from

running, Ma looked at me and asked quietly, 'They found you?' I nodded my head. Later I heard that the older men who had been captured were hacked to death and the girls and boys abducted. I can't explain my luck but I was glad I was spared so that I was able to take care of Ma, Layet and Okeny."

At this point, I feel drained by the story of the family of three. I know that I have drained them as well. I know that I will be able to write their story, but will I be able to portray their lives as they would have wanted me to? Questions crowd my mind as I walk away. My stomach growling with hunger, I know that my hunger can never compare with theirs. I remember my school days when I was taught that the head of the family is the man. I wonder if the school syllabus has been changed to cater for the young girls in northern Uganda who head families mainly composed of fellow children or helpless adults.

I point the gun at myself

*Dancing to the gunshots –
Swimming through the blood.
Singing to the tune of the dying cries
Laughing at the pitiful pleas,
Wishing with the wasted
Hoping with the hopeless.*

*I point the gun at myself.
I die.
I pull the trigger again and I die again.*

*Opening my eyes to the bodies strewn,
I laugh. How many times did I die?
One, two, three ...too many to count.*

*I kiss the gun with my sore black lips
I look at my reflection through
The shiny gun with shiny bullets.*

*I point the gun at myself
Too dead to die.*

Beverley Nambozo Nsengiyunva

Notes on Scriptwriters

APOPHIA AGIRESAASI holds a Bachelors degree in Social Sciences and a Master of Science Degree in Population and Reproductive health both from Makerere University. She is currently the General Secretary for Uganda Women Writers Association (FEMRITE). She has published a children's book; *Victor* (Macmillan Publishers 2008) and three short stories; *Living on Edge*, on the IRIN website and in *Today You Will Understand* (2008). She has written book reviews for the weekly observer and news paper articles for Uganda's leading dailies *The New Vision* and *The Monitor*. She is currently a MUSPH-CDC HIV/AIDS Fellow at the Parliament of Uganda.

BARBARA OKETTA holds a diploma in Education and is pursuing a degree in Guidance and Counseling at Kyambogo University. She is currently a Teacher of Literature and English at Kira Secondary School, Mukono. Barbara's poem is published in *Painted Voices Vol I*. She also has two short stories published in both audio and printed form in *Today you Will Understand* (2008) and on the IRIN Website. Her children's book in Kiswahili will be published later this year. Barbara is also a freelance Kiswahili Editor with Fountain Publishers.

BEATRICE LAMWAKA is finalist for the PEN/Studzinski Literary Award 2009, and a fellow for the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation/Africa Institute of South Africa Young Scholars programme 2009. She is the author of *Anena's Victory* (2007), one of Fountain Junior HIV/AIDS Series, a supplementary reader in primary schools in Uganda. Her published short stories have appeared in Gowanus Books, *Women's World* website, *Wordwrite-FEMRITE Literary Journal*, as well as anthologies such as *Words From a Granary*, *Today You Will Understand*, *Aloud: Illuminating Creative Voices* and *Michael's Eyes; The War Against the Ugandan Child*. She was one of the pioneers of a British Council writing scheme that links Ugandan writers with established writers in the UK, and she is a member of Uganda Women Writers' Association (FEMRITE). She is currently working on her first novel and a number of short stories.

MARGIE ADUTO holds a degree in Social Works and Social Administration. Her poems are published in *Painted Voices Vol. I & II*. She is a member of FEMRITE and her stories of women's experiences in armed conflict were published in audio form on IRIN website and in printed form in *Today You Will Understand* (2008). Margie is currently a development worker, managing a regional empowerment programme in Northern and Eastern Uganda.

ROSEY SEMBATYA is a teacher by profession but she is currently a Customer Adviser with the banking sector. Rosey is a member of FEMRITE and her poems are published in *Painted Voices Vol.1 & II*. Her stories of women's experiences in armed conflict were published in audio form on IRIN website and in printed form in *Today You Will Understand* (2008).

Other FEMRITE members contributed poetry:

Beverley Nambozo S	Published writer of short stories and poetry
Grace Atuhaire	Upcoming writer
Hilda Twongyeirwe	Published writer of short stories, poetry & children's books
Jemeo Nanjonjo	Published poet
Linda Ntwenyesiga	Upcoming writer
Margaret Ntakalimaze	Published writer of short stories and poetry

Coming out Soon!!!

An anthology of women's voices on Female Genital Mutilation

An anthology of stories and poems from the 1st Regional Women Writers Residence November 2008