Beyond the Beads

Dragging your feet into the house, summoning up the last bit of energy that remained to make your grand entrance, you take in a scent a little too much like a sick cow, and find a nearly bald woman hunched over a mortar and pestle ferociously beating a clumped, muddy looking slosh the color of death. Smells like it, too. Hearing your weary feet coming closer, she looks up, wipes a bead of sweat off her forehead, and flashes a tired smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Wel-con tu Maasai,” she says slowly in broken English.  “Ples comb ein,” she adds, in what you can only assume means “Please come in.” The woman wipes her hands on her red wrap and comes to a full standing position. “Ah, well-con. You es white boy, eh?” The woman says with a heavy, almost uninterpretable accent. She chuckles to herself. What other white boys are showing up on her doorstep?

You nod docilely.

“I is Nnamorro. Sit sit. Food be ready soon.” The woman says while motioning to a mound of hard-packed dirt with a flimsy sheet of fabric atop it-as if the fabric suddenly turns dirt into a luxurious seat. You wearily sit on the mound as Nnamorro (your host-mother) goes back to pounding the mush.

A little while later, you find yourself sitting down in a circle along-side people staring at you with the same chocolate skin tone as Nnamorro.

“What is *this?”* you ask, certainly hoping the clumpy green-brown mixture is paint for these heinous walls and not something these people expect you to put in your *mouth*. Ugh. You shiver at the thought of even coming close to that. Did you just see it move?

“This es food,” your host-mother says in broken English as she scoops up a bit with her hands and spoons it into her mouth.

Hearing your stomach growl once again, you sigh. You scoop up a bit of the mush, ignoring the grainy, clumpy texture. You take a deep breath, hold it, and open wide. Not even bothering to chew, you swallow it whole and try not to wince as the glob slides down your throat. You think it might have started crawling back up but you order your dinner to stay put.

“You like?” the host-mother asks, grinning proudly as if to say, *“Of course he likes it. I made it.”*

All you can muster is a weak half-smile as you try not to pass out. *It’s not so bad* you tell yourself. *It tastes just like chicken and rice. Just swallow and smile, swallow and smile…*

Later that night, you find yourself resting on a worn animal skin. Spiders and flying insects the size of your palm move around you, on you, under you. They tickle your skin in the most disturbing way and seem to multiply by the minute. They swarm the walls, making it seem like water is trickling down the uneven wall. The sun went down hours ago, and you haven’t heard signs of human life since. *Why did I have to come here?* You think. *I get a surprise vacation from my parents and they chose here? Do my parents hate me?*

As soon as the sun begins to rise and you finally start to feel drowsy, your host family begins chatting and rustling around, oblivious some people might still be sleeping. For people supposedly known to be very hospitable, they aren’t very good at it. You roll over as if to say ‘don’t bother me.’

“Oh good, white boy up,” a voice says. You groan and roll over on the rough skin. *It’s going to be a long day.*

After breakfast, you are handed off to a boy no older than ten and told to lead the cattle to the watering hole. A herd of 50 cattle are set up in a seemingly random order (but apparently not random at all), by the young boy, Imamu, and you begin the journey to the water. Half an hour into the trip, Imamu hands you a sharp stick. It is heavy and solid in your hand. You give him a quizzical look and begin to use it as a walking stick. *That’s what it’s for, right?* You hear laughter behind you, and you turn to see Imamu clutching his stomach and laughing heartily. A little flame ignites inside you and sparks a bit of anger.

“What?” you spit. Imamu eventually composes himself and walks towards you. He says something in Maa while making throwing motions with his hands. *Oh! It’s a spear! I’m supposed to throw it! At what?* You wonder. As if reading your mind, Imamu points into the distance, forms his hands into a claw-like gesture, and growls. *A bear? A lion? I guess it doesn’t matter as long as I throw it.* Imamu chuckles again and heads back to his spot corralling the cows. You hold the spear with shaking hands, ready to launch. *Am I supposed to throw it or run and stab something? How do I even throw it? This thing is heavy!* A million thoughts flood your head, and you begin to panic. Your knees weaken and your body goes cold, even under this 80 degree heat. You shake off all discouraging thoughts and focus on the path ahead. *How much longer could this trip be?*One shaky step at a time, you continue along the path, speared posed and ready to launch. You hear more laughter from behind you.

Four hours and ten false alarms later, the watering hole is within sight and all bodies are still intact.

“Oh thank goodness,” you mutter under your breath as your mouth begins to water at the sight of semi-clear water.

Once you get back to the *boma* from the watering hole, your stomach reminds you that it has been grumbling for a while now. Your feet feel like you’ve been dragging small goats around the *boma,* and your hands remain clenched as if still holding a spear. Just glad you hadn’t passed out from dehydration, you collapse in a heap at the doorway of the dung hut. *Never do that again, ever,* you promise yourself.

Throughout the weeks, you get used to the early dawn wake-up calls and the chewy, bloody-nose taste of cow heart. You begin to laugh at miscommunications like when you asked for the bathroom and they handed you tea, or when you asked for some tea and they showed you the bathroom. You get used to the creepy crawlies joining you at night, and you even name a certain three-legged spider Joey.  The trek to the watering hole begins to seem like a breeze, and the fecal smell of the *boma* slowly becomes comforting.

After yet another long day keeping the cattle in order, learning how to bead with Nnamorro, and ritually suffocating a goat for dinner, you unfortunately remember you have a scheduled meeting in Nairobi with the other study-abroad students. Slightly frustrated, you rush out to the ‘barn’ to find Mosi, your host-brother wrangling a small goat. A few minutes and several crazy arm gestures later, you and Mosi are back at the hut getting ready to head to Nairobi.

“Alright Mosi, let’s go,” you begin, “Where do we catch a ride?” He starts laughing. “Come on I’m serious! Let’s go!”

Mosi shakes his head.

“You lazy. We walk,” he replies. *Fantastic. Could this day get any worse?*

After walking until your feet are completely numb and stinging and tingling, you catch a ride on a *matatu* and ride the rest of the way into the city on the open bus.

You arrive in Nairobi at about dinner time, and your stomach feels like a hollow pit. You are even craving the clumpy green mush Nnamorro serves. Mosi finds the study-abroad sign hanging above a red tent and points you towards the entrance. You spot a group sticking out like a two-headed chicken and instantly realize it’s your group!You fill up with energy like a balloon filling up with helium. Running over to the group, you don’t even notice the sting coming from your blistered feet or the other groups under the tent staring at you.

“You guys, I missed you!” You joyfully say while enveloping them in a group bear-hug. The group laughs and nods knowingly.

“Alright. Now that our final member has made their grand entrance, we can begin.” Your leader, Jeff, announces.

“In two days we will be returning to the-” He starts when suddenly a group of natives huddled around a small battery radio burst into a loud commotion.

A gravelly American voice begins to speak. “Breaking News: Terrorist attack on United States-Twin Towers are down. Nearly 3,000 people have been killed and many are injured,” the male voice proclaims.

The news continues, repeating the same stories of terror, panic, and loss, but you comprehend none of it. A ringing ensues in your ears. You feel like gravity is pushing down on your shoulders. You are out of breath. Your lungs seem frozen. A tingling starts in your toes and slowly slithers up your body. Your face goes blank and a silence falls over the group. You feel moisture on your cheek. *What in the-* then you realize you’re crying. You angrily wipe away the tears, and anger starts to bubble up inside of you. All of a sudden you have an urge to punch something, someone, anything. *Why would anyone do this?* Your mouth suddenly goes dry, and salty tears pour out of you, falling to the uneven ground as you shake your head in disbelief.

A few feet away, a group of Muslims stare strangely at you, and then huddle together. Starting to hyperventilate, you ignore their stares and wipe more hot tears away. You can feel your skin begin to go raw from clawing away tears and let them fall freely. The group comes over, a tall man maybe in his thirties leading the way.

Speaking in slow, accented English, he says gently, “Calm down. Peace be with you.”

“Allah understands your anger. Allah understands your sadness.” The tall leader says.

“Ar-are you Allah?” you ask between sobs. *Why would he speak in third person?* The leader chuckles and shakes his head, placing a comforting hand on your shoulder.

“No no, friend. Allah is God. Allah in all of us,” he says evenly.

The group suddenly starts singing. They close their eyes and raise their hands above their heads. You have no idea what they’re saying, but you don’t feel like you need to. People join in from other groups, and even a soloist begins. It is then that you realize Mosi is part of the ever-expanding group. As shock continues to emanate from your face, Mosi beams at you and returns to singing.

So much to take in through such a short time. You heads feels light and your knees feel weak as you fall to a heap on the floor. A hand falls lightly on your shoulder, and you lift your head. It’s Mosi. His eyes show concern and you can see his mouth moving, but your ears are numb. No, your whole body is numb.

Mosi slips his hands under your armpits, helping you up.

“You need rest; I help back to *boma*,” he says. As you leave, Jeff sets a light hand on your shoulder and you look up through wet eyelashes.

“Meet back here in three days. Hopefully the airplanes will be up and running again and we can catch the first one back. See you soon.”

With that said, Jeff heads back to the table to console the many shaking shoulders of the remaining members of the group. Mosi guides you outside and you both begin the long journey back. You feel small and insignificant, but better. You never feel Mosi’s comforting arms leave you.

The next few days catch you living under a shadow of gloom and depression. You pass through each day saying little and eating even less. The daily march to the watering hole becomes a careless endeavor where, if not for Imamu’s presence, cattle would be well on their way to Tanzania and you wouldn’t even blink an eye.

Finally, three days pass and you find yourself on your final trip back from the watering hole, just hours away from boarding a plane and returning to the states. Your hands molded around the wood spear as you round the final curve back to the *bomas*, you see a sight that could very well be just one of your dreams. Deep beats of drums and unrecognizable instruments fill your ears. A group of Maasai dance and jump in front of you. When they spot you, a louder commotion arises and the red-clad group come towards you. They are carrying jewelry and your luggage. Food wrapped in cloth is forced into your hands, and you see all familiar Maasai faces. Imamu places an extravagant beaded headpiece on your head. It digs into your scalp but you couldn’t care less.

Imamu says, “Spear on head for spear in hand,” and touches a spear-shaped piece dangling between your still wet eyes. You both think back to your first watering hole escapade and smile a relieved smile.

The host father engulfs your hands in his and says, “Go to home. Thank you.” You look at Nnamorro and she nods a sad, small, smile.

“You good” she says, and pats your back in a reassuring manner.

After boarding the plane heading home, you undo a cloth package revealing a still warm section of mush covered liver. A smile forming on your lips, you scoop up a clump and think *I might just miss this place.*