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The Road to Gulu

By

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Father John lay motionless along the banks of Lake Kyoga. The ground was uncomfortably wet and small biting ants crawled onto his hands and legs. He could still hear the whining of the bullets as they passed overhead and occasionally one would smack into the soil next to him. He wondered if it were soldiers of the Uganda People's Defense Force or L.R.A. rebels who were shooting at him. It didn't really matter to him since he would be just as dead if struck by a bullet from Sudan as one from Kampala.

In a short time that seemed to be a long time, the shooting ceased. The young priest rose to brush the red clay from his black clothing. He pushed through the heavy brush that only moments before he had been running through, and stepped back out onto the empty and open road to Gulu. The heat was oppressive with only the slightest of breezes to bend the savanna grasses. As he walked along the burning road he recalled his dreams of a pristine Africa. 'I have been so naïve', he thought. The dreams had been replaced by visions of fields poached free of game, and the sight of whole villages laying dead, the children rotting alongside their elders. The horror of it all was at times more than he could bare. Only his faith sustained him. At times, it was his faith that troubled him most.

The road to Gulu began to wind down into a wooded valley and the sounds of birds could be heard for the first time in a long time. The canopy of the acacia trees offered the first shade of the long day. He began to quicken his pace until he rounded the

bend in the forest road and found the soldiers in front of him. For a moment he stood motionless as his eyes met with the emotionless gaze of the soldiers. There was nowhere for him to go but forward. He stepped toward them, into an uncertain future. He felt fear well up inside of him and prayed a silent wish for deliverance.

“Jambo,” offered the young priest, forcing a smile onto his face.

A large black man in olive drab stepped forward.

“What are you doing here father?” he asked.

The priest noticed a small cross of Jesus suspended from the soldier’s neck.

“My car broke down about five miles back on the road from Kampala,” he replied.

“Where are you going? Don’t you know that this is a war zone?”

“I’m on the road to Gulu. I’m planning to start a school there,” said the priest.

The other soldiers began to laugh amongst themselves and spoke quickly to each other in Swahili.

“You’re too late,” said the big soldier.

“What do you mean, too late?”

“They’re all dead in Gulu,” replied the soldier. *“There is no one left for you to teach father.”*

“That’s not possible,” said the priest. *“I was just in Gulu only a month ago.”*

“A month can be an eternity in Africa,” said the big soldier.

“The rebels entered Gulu two days ago. They killed over one hundred of our troops. When they were done they had shot all the men of Gulu

and killed the others with pistols and pangas. There is no one alive in Gulu.

Not even the livestock were spared.”

Father John turned his face up toward the African skies that lay just beyond the forest canopy. He fought back the tears from his eyes and the memories of children playing in the streets of Gulu. He remembered the sounds of young men laughing over dark coffee, and of women sifting grain in the morning sun. It was all gone now. Suddenly, brutally, needlessly, it was all gone.

“I am sorry father,” said the soldier. *“I am Colonel Akhahenda of the People’s army.”* The big man shifted his AK-47 rifle to one side and thrust out his hand. *“May I help you get home father?”* said the colonel.

“I have no home”, replied the priest. *“I have made Africa my home. I have no other.”*

“It is not safe for you to remain here. I will drive you back to Kampala.”

“There’s nothing in Kampala,” said the priest.

“You can’t stay here father. The L.R.A. rebels have crossed over at Nimule. President Museveni has ordered us to defend the area of Lake Kyoga.”

“You have your job to do Colonel Akhahenda, and so do I,” replied the priest. *“You risk your life for your people, could I do any less for*

my God?”

“The children of this area are all in Lira,” said Akhahenda.

“I can drive you to Lira if you wish.”

“I would be most grateful,” replied the young priest. He had become stronger and his mind was clear of the visions of before.

The two men walked together toward the colonel’s vehicle. It was a small truck that had been hand painted with splashes of brown and green paint. The top had been cut away leaving it and its occupants exposed to the African skies. As they pulled away from the outpost and onto the road to Gulu, the young priest looked back toward the soldiers whom he had feared only a moment before. They were children. One of them who was wearing a Rhodesian camouflage jacket and blue jeans could not be over twelve years old. He carried an AK-47 rifle and the stains of dried blood were flecked across his jeans.

“They’re so young,” said the priest. *“Do they know why they are fighting?”*

“They fight for many reasons”, replied Akhahenda. *“They fight because their tribes are from the South. They fight because they would rather kill than be killed. They fight for President Museveni. Most of all, they fight for survival.”*

The priest looked toward Akhahenda who had been looking down the road to Gulu as they drove.

“How about you Colonel Akhahenda? Why do you fight?”

The soldier did not reply immediately. His face grew solid and stone-like. He turned from the road they had been traveling and onto another which led on to Lira where the children had been taken. As they pulled away from the road to Gulu the young priest noticed a marker post at the junction. On top of the post a human skull had been placed

as a macabre warning from the L.R.A. rebels. The colonel stopped the vehicle at the marker. A cloud of road dust drifted over them as the vehicle halted. It drifted passed the marker and over the road to Gulu. The two men sat with eyes fixed toward the skull capped marker.

“That is why I fight”, said the colonel. “I fight because this is the only home I know. I fight because I don’t want this to be the Africa of forever.”

“Is there any hope for Africa?”, asked the priest aloud, yet to himself.

The soldier turned toward Father John and placed a large hand on his shoulder.

“Father,” he said. “Don’t you know that Africa is full of hope?” “We are Africa’s hope, father. Her future lies in our hearts, our memories, and our dreams.”

“I pray that you are right,” the priest said. He was feeling somewhat better. He felt stronger. He was thinking of the children ahead in Lira, and of the broad smiles they would have when he arrived.

They lurched forward up the rutted road through fields that shimmered golden in the late half-light. Ahead lay Lira and the children. The road to Gulu seemed, so very far away.