

Blur

by Alexanne Madison

Lindsay says, “I think it’s time for my mom to get a new car. Hers just isn’t that cute anymore.” We weave through the mall parking lot and finally stumble upon my dented Honda. I grimace at the passenger-side dents that I don’t see very often. My car isn’t that cute anymore, either.

We pluck a dog-eared textbook out of a disorganized cardboard box and choose a random page from which to teach “form three” English to ten-year-olds. Languages roll and bounce off the concrete Kenyan orphanage school walls like the kids’ worn gray basketball: Kiswahili punctuated by Kikuyu and more formal Swahili though I can’t tell the difference and my stay is too short to make it worth learning. But we expect them to learn and speak English. A visiting American teacher copies a sentence, scrawling long chalk-powdery letters across the blackboard: “We park the car in the garage.” Which is the noun? Which is the verb? The children look at her blankly, a few girls giggle, one boy sighs: deliberate, ragged, irritated. One girl asks the more relevant question, what is a garage? Even more relevant might be, why do we care? They stare out a barred, un-paned window at the view of Kayole, gazing at dirt-packed streets built mostly for feet and Matatu minibuses, waiting for the “lesson” to end.

Jessie warns me, alarmed, “Watch out! A po’.” I hit the brakes, getting back down to 45, my heart rate a little elevated as I realize how much I’m speeding. Thank God the police officer doesn’t pull behind me. Several months later I report my stolen car to a twenty-something cocky campus cop and complain about the experience to friends, “They’re all on power trips. You have to watch out sometimes.”

My cousin Courtney and I crowd onto a seat next to Tony, the son of our host parents who chivalrously escorts us from Buru Buru to Kayole and back again every day. We need the protection of his street-smart sassy mouth and dark skin as we wear our whiteness like a scorching torch of American affluence. Screeching to a rough

Alexanne
Madison is a
sophomore
English
Creative
Writing and
Comparative
History of
Ideas major.
She traveled
through
Kenya and
volunteered in
Kayole, Kenya
during July of
2005.

halt, the Matatu doors fling open and a man with a long rifle bursts onto the bus, yanking the driver out the door by his shirt collar, shouting in Kiswahili as we all sit stationary and stare. I remember the tall signs scattered throughout Nairobi, near every line of taxis: What to do if you are hijacked?

“What did he say?” my cousin hisses at Tony, who sits in stiff silence for a few moments. “I don’t exactly know. Something that the driver did. He got pulled over.” I gaze out the window at the angry shine of the rifle barrel carried by a man wearing khakis and a button-up shirt like anyone on the street. “That guy’s a police officer?” I ask. Tony nods and I feel myself relax like a slowly-deflating balloon. Much later, after we have ridden safely home on another Matatu, Tony laughs at me. “I saw how you got calm after I told you he was a police officer,” he says, shaking his head. “You just don’t know how the police officers are. The only reason they acted so nice is probably because they saw you and Courtney, and they couldn’t act bad in front of you. But you can’t trust a police officer. My sister carries money with her all the time in case she ever needs help, so she can bribe them. Otherwise she knows she will have to trade for help in sexual favors.”

We sit outside a fortress of textbooks and notebooks, pretending to study as we chat about the world. I sip a soy latte, annoyed that heat escapes too quickly through ceramic so that I must suffer through lukewarm milk. I tell Ryan about the sour stench of feces that filled the orphanage halls as perpetually as air and how I never stopped noticing it. He looks outside at the clean streets and says “I wonder if the kids notice the smell of the absence of shit.” Breathing in coffee-and-cookie breaths, I can’t decide whether it’s sadder that they would or that they might not.

The kids and staff use a toilet inside an elevated hallway closet. The door doesn’t close all the way and sometimes the bright blue toilet paper squares cling to their hands and float through the halls. I never use the bathroom during the days at the orphanage, and I avoid that end of the hallway as if the smell could actually hurt me. With each breath, I consider it a personal failure that numberless hours can’t accustom me to the wet human fumes gathering beneath that toilet, decaying slowly like a fruit-pile in summer sun.

We chat through long drunken hours graying into morning, and too much wine draws memories slowed by tears. Nick points at the wall and says, “See that sliver of light? Even when there’s nothing to hold onto, we still have things like that light. We all have that same beauty sitting in a house in Seattle or a Masaai hut.” Crying over ugliness, I believe for a lucid moment that beauty deserves the same number of tears.

Courtney, Tony and I wait on a Kayole street-side as colorfully-painted Matatu after Matatu stops in front of us and Tony waves them on. He

carefully examines the décor of the buses, waiting for that special one that will blare the good rap artists instead of that Reggae-rasta crap. His wide, white grin with the reminder, “No hurry in Africa,” makes watching the backs of each “unworthy” Matatu a bit more bearable as their colors blur into dusty distance. When Tony finally chooses, we climb aboard and ride adventurously down perilous, unlined roads, passing tall gray buildings with long balconies framing the floors. Above each stretch of balcony, laundry hangs in flowing strips, countless functional rainbows.

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