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Ugali Bora

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The bumpy cement floor of my bedroom is littered with my belongings: old tennis shoes, Chaco sandals faded from dark blue to a dull bluish-gray by two months of constant travel and a thin film of reddish dust, six plain colored t-shirts and a pair of mud-stained khaki pants heaped in a disheveled mound near my backpack, an industrial sized Ziploc bulging with medicine bottles with long names and unknown uses, fingernail clippers, a headlamp, and a toothbrush. I glance up from the rubble to find Mama Faraji observing silently in the doorway. The mutually gloomy looks on our usually cheerful faces delineate the impending conclusion of my wholly enjoyable and wonderfully strange stay in her house, which is home to herself, her husband and his aging father, ten orphaned girls and boys from 6 to 18-years-old, and, for the past month, me. After a moment of somber reflection at the door she decides seriously: “Tomorrow you leave us. Tonight, we drink beer.”

I abandon my packing without hesitation (it can wait until morning) and follow her down an unlit aqua-blue hall into the small living/dining room. A moment later, Felix struggles in through the heavy brown door, carrying something bulky and awkward in his scrawny arms. His dark, round, acne-spotted face is noticeably strained, though he attempts a smile. The crate he heaves onto the wobbly coffee table in front of me is filled to capacity with the best of Tanzania: *Safari Lager, Tusker, Kilimanjaro, Serengeti Premium, The Kick*.

Mama Faraji grins and gently gestures, “Help yourself.” Her glance sweeps fine particles of memory, collected over the past month, into my eyes, nose, and ears: Sitting daily in this living room, on this little couch, eating my meals, goofing around with new-found friends, and observing the strange new world around me. The first bottle opens with a swishing pop.

“You will eat *ugali*?”

I chuckled. *Sure, sounds great.*

I had just finished setting up what was to be my room for the coming weeks (i.e. set my bag in the corner and briefly considered unpacking it), and, unsure of my next move, decided to follow my stomach to the kitchen. Jesca, the house’s gracious and often-giddy twenty-year-old chef, lifted a cabbage-covered hand to her reddening

cheeks, searching for words and giggling. She turned to the three older boys in the kitchen as they eagerly plopped dinner onto their plates and asked them to translate her giggly *Kiswahili* for me.

“She says our *ugali* is not clean like the *ugali* that you know.”

I wondered whether or not I should inform them that my knowledge about the thick, white corn-flour mush was, in fact, rather limited. *Oh, no really, it will be fine!* I convinced myself and threw a confident two thumbs-up. Jesca shrugged, scooped a rather generous spoonful onto my plastic dish, and showed me to the little wooden couch in the living room, where fruit and tea were already set out for me.

Four days and eight straight meals of *ugali* and cabbage later, I received a special surprise. Alongside the tasteless mush and greens at lunch, Jesca proudly placed two rank, scaly little fish. Her smile was too heartfelt for me to protest. I quickly returned a compulsory grin and simultaneously threw a silent curse at the squishy, glossed brown eyes staring up from my plate.

I forced down the oily little things, picking clumsily around each tiny bone as I went. Eating the stinky little fish, apparently (obviously), meant that I loved them; Jesca served me at least two fish a day for the rest of my month long stay.

A stroke of luck befell me, though, some days later, when Ceiling Cat (the most fitting name, in my mind, for the sleek black and white feline that chased rats in the ceiling until ungodly hours of the morning) slinked her way into dinner: lucky cat. She scarfed down five fish without hesitation. The great savior, Ceiling Cat.

That night, however, the savior turned martyr. Slowed, no doubt, after eating her body weight in shit-fish, she was heretically mauled to death by the neighborhood street dogs.

Finishing a third *Safari Lager*, I listen for those dogs. They’re never too far from these metal-grate windows, noisily rummaging through bushes for scraps or lounging in dust and mud, lazily shaking flies away from their scabby ears. I try to imagine my two floppy, longhaired golden-retrievers at home snarling viciously at each other over a raw cowhide or walking around nonchalantly with an open puncture wound from God knows what; it doesn’t work. I know they’re curled up, comfy and smug, on our living room couch without a fly or animal carcass in sight. Victims of comfort.

The kids who live in Mama Faraji's house sense revelry and join us in the living room. I feed the older girls shillings to run for Cokes at the lean-to corner store a block from our compound. The wooden couches lining the walls of the room, with their blue and gold jungle-floral patterns, are quickly filling with curious neighbors: Maria and her baby Erik, the older ladies who sell vegetables at a stand just outside, a few guys who are building a house nearby—nothing out of the ordinary. Mama Faraji asks to see the pictures on my camera, and I happily oblige, which quickly draws everyone in the room around me to get a peek. They cheer boisterously for the subject of each picture.

Jonas, my faithful eight-year-old sidekick, can't handle the excitement; he crashes on the spongy, overstuffed cushions to my left, wrapped tightly in a thin gold-weave blanket. Empty glass bottles are packed on the shaky coffee table. I've finished with the slideshow now, and conversations in *Kiswahili* bounce merrily around the room. I understand few words, but it doesn't really matter; my mind is elsewhere, concentrated on the memories bubbling forward as I watch Jonas sleeping calmly in the midst of growing commotion.

Jonas poked his head through the big wooden door behind me, and Mama Faraji ushered him in. I turned to watch him slide across the floor in floppy, over-sized socks and plop down on the couch next to Jesca and Emmanuel, who had been rambling jovially. I put down my plastic plateful of *ugali* and what I think was goat stew and turned to listen as Jonas began eagerly recounting his day, though I only caught a few words. He seemed to be wrapping up the story when everyone suddenly burst into a maniacal fit of laughter. When the dust finally settled I looked dazedly at Mama Faraji for some clarification and, with tears streaming around her reddened, puffy cheeks, and her chest still heaving with laughter, she explained in English: "Today at school, Jonas was fat!"

Uh?

I did a quick double take of my young friend's belly and wondered how much his loose green Brazil Soccer t-shirt could be hiding. Fat? Really?

But that was it. As mysterious today as it ever was. July 13, 2009: Jonas was fat.

The next week, I sat cross-legged on the cold, painted, concrete living room floor, my morning cup of *chai bora* in hand. Steady rain slapped the tin roof above; a consistent rumbling that had become a

familiar and soothing sound over the previous few rainy weeks. I slid my index finger across the plastic poster featuring a toddler with each body part labeled in English, lying beside me on the floor. “This,” I commanded indifferently.

Jonas responded with a half-question: “Stuh-much.” He glanced at me for approval. I almost didn’t correct him—I liked his version better. His eyes whipped upward toward me, returning the challenge: “In Kiswahili!”

“Tumbo!” I retorted proudly with my preschool-knowledge of the language. He giggled against the couch, bearing a brilliant white smile of just-grown-in adult teeth.

It’s getting late and now I’m smiling ecstatically, giggling like Jonas. The older kids bounce around the room, dancing cheerfully and singing Swahili songs. I glance at Mama Faraji, who’s watching me with soft, motherly eyes. The air has cooled off and it will probably rain in the morning. I’ll have to finish packing and get a taxi into town. Two days of cramped, rickety buses and spotless clean airplane seats will return me to the Midwest, to my own living room, and I’ll sit in front of the TV eating cheesy pasta, or ice cream, or maybe a sandwich, and drink cold beer from an aluminum can. Downing a last gulp of Kilimanjaro Lager, I sink warmly into the familiar cushions and wonder if anyone has ever been this content in my living room.