

Before the Storm | Clarissa Romano

On the day of the great hailstorm, Colige Njita tried to kill his wife. He awoke as she left the shamba to prepare breakfast. Then he rose, lifted high the club used for beating the flesh of dead cattle, and stood by the door. As he waited for his wife to return, he watched a termite ascend the mud wall. It had almost reached the ceiling when he hit her once over the head. She let out a guttural moan and fell to the floor, the breakfast tray she carried crashing with her. He began to beat her on the back, between the shoulder blades. With each strike he felt the heavy shock as it moved through the club upon impact. He moved down her arms and legs, cracking bones. At one point she wrenched free, dragging her broken body across the floor, through the spilled tea and *chapati*, pulling things down as she went. He watched her cower against the wall, her body convulsing, slick with blood and sweat and tears. Pausing to readjust his grip on the club, he crossed to where she lay, and gave her head a final, back-handed blow.

It was Sunday, a sleepy day in the village. The heat of the sun bent the stalks of maize corn in the fields. The sky burned a hot blue. Colige's sister found her first. She screamed like one possessed and ran from the shamba, her bare feet thudding over the path that wound down from the compound. She did not stop until she reached the market. There she stood and cried out her news, her head thrown back. The village women, who had been laying their vegetables and cooked meats on bright *kangas*, rolled onto their backs and shouted out the name of Allah. They were horrified, but they were not surprised.

Rukia's mother was one of these women. She had left that morning without her change-purse, so once breakfast had been eaten, Rukia was sent to the market to return it to her. At the age of ten, Rukia was the oldest child at the compound, the one with the most responsibilities, and rarely was she able to escape her morning chores. She walked slowly, savoring the stillness of the village, the way even the breeze sounded quieter on a Sunday. With each step she brushed her feet over the silky top layer of the path beneath her, watching as it burst into the air like red smoke.

As she approached the market, her pace slowed to a halt. The scene before her was like a rite of hysteria, the women trembling in expressions of despair. There were cries of anguish, arms thrown upwards in prayer. Those who were speaking did so with such frenzy that their words were indecipherable. Rukia stood at a distance for some time, afraid to know, a taste like sour milk forming in her mouth. Finally, her mother noticed her, recognition drawing her forward like a

spell. She pulled the purse from her daughter's hands and whispered in her ear that Colige Njita had killed his wife. Rukia doubled over at the words, whether from the pain in her stomach or the weakness of her knees she didn't know. She gasped free of her mother's arms, aching for air. The voices of the women scratched at her brain like nails on metal and she ran from them, gulping air in thirsty lung-fulls. She ran as if to safety, but ran blindly, unsure of where to stop. In the end, her body decided for her. She fell to her knees in the shelter of a cornfield, her fingers fisting the loose earth as she vomited first her breakfast, then the dry retches of her guilt.

Rukia had a secret. It had begun weeks ago, long before the day of the great hailstorm. At first she had been certain that everyone could tell, that if they only looked close enough, they'd be able to guess her secret. But that was at the beginning. As time wore on it became familiar, and she took refuge in it. She allowed herself to believe that it marked her as someone special, and that it could keep her safe. It became a source of pride for her, something which set her apart from everyone else. But it always remained a secret.

It began the day Rukia's uncle took her into Mumias to pick up the mail. Half an hour away by car, Mumias was the nearest town in the region. It excited Rukia to enter a world of unfamiliar faces and honking cars. Standing in line at the post office, she grew so restless that her uncle sent her to wait outside. She stuck close to the post office walls, one hand dragging along its chalky exterior as she circled the building. The back formed one of the four borders of a square. Rukia pressed herself against the wall, her eyes open extra wide to take it all in. Vendors dragged carts laden with fruit and packaged goods. Women with baskets of grain on their heads paused to negotiate the price of kangas and *kikois*. A man was trying to sell his car; he stood on its hood, shouting its attributes into the crowd. A group of school children in maroon uniforms, younger than Rukia, flocked close to their teacher while she tried to steer them as one through the bustling square. As she followed their progression, Rukia's gaze snagged on a different kind of commotion, one that surprised her out of her awe. A white man stood in black robes, his head tilted towards the sky. A circle had formed around him, and Rukia had to crane her neck to get a better look. He was murmuring something. She saw that the people around him were interested in his appearance; they stared and pointed at the whiteness of his skin and his fine hair, but Rukia wanted to know what he was saying. Something special, she could feel that. His words

were like a spring which spilled over his chin, down his arms and into his cupped and open palms. Despite the heat, he looked cool. Despite the commotion, he appeared calm. Rukia hardly noticed when she parted with the safety of the building and began to move closer, her eyes fastened to the rapid motion of his lips. Up close, she could see he was smiling.

After a few minutes, the man completed his sermon and began to walk toward the church at the edge of the square. Rukia followed. She thought fleetingly of her uncle, still held up in the post office lines, and then she followed him, the white man, out of the square and up to the doors of the church. She'd never been this close to a church before. She knew the men in her village wouldn't approve, but something was calling to her. She had never before felt the world had anything special to offer her, but she felt that way now. Warily, she entered. The man did not send her away as she feared he might; he did not send her away at all. His name was Father Cassidy, and her secret began that day, as he began to reveal to her the meaning of his words.

In the week that followed, the characters from Father Cassidy's stories appeared to Rukia throughout her day. She saw them collecting water at the well, strolling through the fields of sugar cane, bathing in the river at the day's end. Everything appeared the same on the outside, the days ticked by as usual, but Rukia was now home to these characters and their stories, and she held them close, so no one could see.

Nighttime, after the kitchen had been cleaned and the goats and cattle put to bed, was the time for Rukia to retell the stories. She would lie awake in her shamba, her eyes closed, but delicately so, as if to provide a screen for her visions. Then she let spool the words of Father Cassidy, wound so tight in her mind all day long, tucked away so as not to be glimpsed by those who would disapprove. She'd known the stories of Abraham and Sarah, and Father Cassidy had been impressed at her familiarity with the tales. His began much later, with the birth of a boy from the purest of mothers, a special boy born in a hut like the one where Rukia lived, a boy so special that the wise men sensed his arrival, and began their search.

Father Cassidy explained to Rukia that the boy's mother had been chosen by God, and that he'd placed the baby in her belly without the help of her husband. Rukia had blushed at this, but she understood. Secretly, she liked that part of the story. She'd heard the men make cat-calls at the market where they drank their beers. She'd heard the women make comments they thought Rukia couldn't understand as they

sat and sifted rice, tossing aside the stones. Other things, too. Recently, Rukia had begun to be aware of threats that lurked even among the things most familiar to her. There were no words for these yet, no clear understanding to be reached, but the purity which Father Cassidy spoke about flashed before Rukia like a raft on an ever-widening river, and she clung to it.

She returned the following Sunday. The family down the road was expecting a package and had offered to pay for her ride in the *matatu* if she would go to Mumias in their stead. Having collected their package, Rukia was half-way up the steps of the church when she stopped. All week long she'd been planning her return, but now that she was here, a feeling of guilt like a bad omen rooted her to the spot. She understood that she was not to go inside. In addition to replaying the stories about purity and unconditional love, Rukia had also had time to consider the consequences of seeking further counsel from Father Cassidy. She had scattered a few questions across the week, as casually as she could muster, and the responses she gathered confirmed her hunch. Rukia and her family were Muslims, and Christianity was not for them. If the men in her village knew she would be punished. She didn't know how, exactly, but she knew better than to try and imagine it. Rukia stalled, feeling the sun beat against her head like a gavel, like judgment waiting to fall. She considered turning back, putting all this behind her. But she could not. She didn't want to. She inhaled deeply as she took the final steps to the entrance of the church. It would have to be a secret, hers and Father Cassidy's.

One Sunday, a few months after the secret began, Rukia's mother was unexpectedly summoned to assist in the delivery of a baby. Instead of being free to go to Mumias, Rukia was made to stay at home and watch her little brothers. She worried that Father Cassidy would wonder about her, and this worry grew to be so large that she made plans the following day to go see him. She arrived at the church feeling dirty and grubby in her school clothes, brushing dust off her skin even as she walked up the steps. The church was empty. Rukia hummed softly as she walked down the aisle, bouncing her hand against the backs of the pews. She enjoyed being alone in the church; it gave her a mysterious sense of power. At the foot of the altar she turned slowly, her eyes searching for signs of life. The door to the right of the altar was ajar. She pushed it open and slipped into a small garden in back.

She noticed him leaning against a tree, his back to her, and she called to him. "Father Cassidy?" It was only when she spoke his name

that she became aware he was not alone. The wife of Colige Njita was pressed against him. She had seen an embrace like this before, once, in the shamba of one of her friends from school. She had burst in and discovered her lying on her back beneath an older man. Rukia was haunted still by the loamy smell of their bodies in the room, the needful sound of their breathing, thick and coarse.

She did not want to believe it. Not of him. Not of Father Cassidy, father to her secret. Not of the man who told her stories of love and goodness. *Not you, not you.* She felt heat blossom in tiny prickles on her face. He was walking towards her, reaching out his hands, moving his lips without speaking.

She heard her name pierce the sky like an arrow. It rang in her head as she ran around the church and onto the main road. She walked for an hour before allowing herself to be picked up by a matatu.

On the day of the great hailstorm, Colige Njita tried to kill his wife, but did not succeed. He left her for dead, dropping the club by the door and walking boldly into the bright day. When his sister came by after breakfast, she screamed like one possessed and left her for dead as well. But Auma was not dead. The scream woke her from her sleep, dark heavy sleep thick with blood and pain. She knew what had transpired; the pain was an indisputable reminder. She could not open her eyes, she could not move. She let out a moan, weakly, just to hear her voice. It sounded strange and unfamiliar. Perhaps she was dying. *So be it.* She would regret nothing. She had known happiness. She knew she had no right to have known such happiness.

Something black and heavy was pulling her back into unconsciousness, and as she followed it, she pictured Nicholas's face. If she were to die, she would never see him again. A sudden strength stormed through her, setting off bolts of pain. How had this come to pass? That she would suffer this life to be in the same world as he? She knew that she would not die; her will would not allow it. She watched a pool of her own blood form on the floor and waited.

Colige Njita had more money than most of the men in the village. It was for this reason that his wife could do her shopping in Mumias. She would go each Monday, rising early, bathing in the damp hour behind the shamba, walking along the main road until a matatu came by to pick her up. Even before she had met Nicholas, she had looked forward to Mondays.

Auma had been raised in Nairobi, the most industrial of all the

cities in Kenya. She was proud of her knowledge of bustling city life, and even though as a child she had hated the growl of engines, the buzz of broken street lamps, and the chaos of a crowded street, she found herself missing those very things in the peaceful solitude of the village.

She met him in line at the market. He was arguing with the cashier over the cost of his items. She interjected with the correct amount. She was pleased with herself for outdoing two men in her knowledge of arithmetic. He was impressed as well. He waited for her outside the market and walked her back to the matatus.

She was apprehensive, of course, for he was not only a man but a white man, and not only a white man but a Christian. Still, she felt free in Mumias, far from the oppressive gaze of her husband and the other villagers. She was intrigued by him, and he flattered her with his attention. He asked her questions about Nairobi, about her schooling. Since she had arrived in the village, no man had asked her questions about herself.

It was for all of these reasons that when they reached the matatus she turned to him and said, "So perhaps when I come back next week I'll see you?"

And it had begun. They grew to know each other quickly, exercising the freedom allowed strangers, even when they were no longer strangers. They would sit in the garden behind the church, talking and touching until the sun reached the horizon. "When the sun is as low as the market, then I will go," she would say, resting her head on his shoulder. And then, moments later, "Do you see that fence on the hill? Once it reaches that fence, I really must go."

One Monday she waited too long. It was dark when she returned. Colige was sitting in their hut. No lamps were lit.

"The lamps aren't lit."

"There was no one here to light them."

He sat in his chair without moving, watching as she struck one match, then a second ...

"You were gone too long."

"Yes, it took longer than I expected."

"Never again."

"I am sorry."

He stood up and struck the side of her face with his heavy ringed hand.

"Never again."

“My husband is suspicious,” she told Nicholas the following week. She was standing beneath a tree, carefully shredding a leaf into thin strips. “If he discovers us he will kill me.”

“Don’t say that.”

She looked up, met his gaze. “Nothing can protect me. I belong to him.”

“You belong to God, Auma.”

“I *belong*,” she said slowly, “to Colige Njita.”

“What if we go away?”

“Where would we be welcome, a wicked couple like us? Who would follow a priest who travels with another man’s wife? You love me, Nicholas, but you wouldn’t leave this for me.”

“How can you say that?”

She went to him slowly, a precision in her gaze. “Would you? Would you leave your faith for me?”

A sadness grew in him that had no words. Instead he reached out and touched the side of her face. She wilted against him, half in forgiveness, half in despair. He wrapped his arms around her, pressing his lips to her temple, breathing in the smoky scent of her hair and skin.

“Father Cassidy?”

He wheeled around in time to see Rukia’s face turn to stone. He took a step toward her. He reached out a hand. He wanted to say something, to explain, that she might understand, but she was gone as fast as she had arrived. He spun around helplessly, palms open. He called her name. The sky was as blue as a sapphire. Auma sank down against the tree, stunned into silence.

On the day Colige Njita tried to kill his wife, Rukia hunched over and vomited until her stomach was empty. When she was done, she wiped her lips on a leaf and began to walk.

Rukia believed that Father Cassidy had a right to know that Auma was dead. She had not seen him since that day in the garden, had not wanted to see him, but now she found herself headed toward Mumias. He had a right to know that Colige Njita had discovered their secret. Perhaps Colige would go after Father Cassidy next. Rukia’s pace quickened. She fastened her eyes to the ground, praying she wouldn’t run into anyone she knew. When at last she did look up, she was surprised to see a thick black cloud rolling up from the horizon. Rain. She would have to take a matatu. The car was crowded, tight with bodies. She twisted her neck to look out the window.

Rukia blamed everyone. She blamed the women of the village for their jealousy and hysteria. She knew without proof that they were responsible. All it took was one woman, one pair of eyes, to see Auma Njita disappear behind the church with the white priest. From there, rumors would circulate, passed from hand to hand like a love letter until the ink faded, until the paper crumbled, until there was no truth left. Yes, the women were to blame. So was Islamic law, as resolute as an iron fist, crashing down among them with God on its side. A law which allowed a man to own his wife. A law which allowed him to kill her.

But she mostly blamed Father Cassidy. He had told her stories which he did not believe, and instead asked Rukia to believe them for him. He had offered her a perfect world, a world where love and goodness reigned and promises were fulfilled. With his words he had carved a path for her to follow, and assured her that this place would await her at the end of the journey. All this he had promised her, and then he'd destroyed it all in a single moment in the garden. And now the wife of Colige Njita was dead.

The matatu dropped her off in the square. The clouds spread a thick canopy, black as night, across the sky. The last people on the streets scurried away, casting fearful glances as they slipped around corners.

Rukia walked to the church, and stood before it. She felt the first drops of rain fall heavy and cold on her head. And suddenly she knew. There was going to be a storm. One bigger than anyone had ever seen. This imperfect world, stripped of its higher associations, would be helpless against it. It would flood the village, soak the earth, drown the animals. Houses would slide, roofs would cave in, whole fields would be left in ruin. What could prevent it from carrying out its purpose? It would sweep across the plains like the heavy hand of God, pulling things down as it went.