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Prologue from *Dust*

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DUST



Dust

YVONNE ADHIAMBO OWUOR



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Jacket design by Linda Huang

Manufactured in the United States of America
First Edition



First, this book is dedicated to you,
La Caridad.

¶

*Beautiful, beautiful, beloved Tom Diju Owuor
(Couldn't you tarry,
Just a little bit, Daddy?)*

1936–2012

¶

*My dazzling, adored, life-hope-beauty-breathing mama,
Mary Sero Owuor*

¶

*For you my cherished siblings,
Vivian Awiti, Caroline Alango, Genevieve Audi,
Joanne Achieng, Alison Ojany, Chris Ganda, and Patrick Laja;
Joseph Alaro, François Delaroque, Rob de Vries,
and John Primrose. The next generation angels,
Karla, Angelina, Taya, Nyla.
For those gone ahead, for the ones still to come.
Thank you*



*“You will hear the voice of my memories
stronger than the voice of my death—that is, if death ever had a voice.”*

—JUAN RULFO, *Pedro Páramo*

*Follow my tracks in the sand that lead
Beyond thought and space.*

—HAFEZ

Chon gi lala . . .

IUO STORY BEGINNINGS



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PROLOGUE

HE LEAPS OVER TWO FIRE-PAINTED BLOSSOMS RESTING ON THE stark cracked city pavement. Roused, these unfurl into late-Christmas-season orange-and-black butterflies that flutter into the violet shade of a smog-encrusted roadside jacaranda tree. A thrum becomes a hum becomes thumping footsteps, and soon he is entangled in a thicket of jeers and tossed gray, black, and brown stones as he flees toward a still-distant night. It is said that in combat some soldiers shoot over their enemies' heads in order to avoid killing them. Some don't even fire at all. Moses Ebewesit Odidi Oganda's fingers tremble on the trigger of an old, shiny AK-47. He hurls the gun away with an "*Urgh!*" The weapon spills across the road—a low-pitched, guttural noise.

From behind Odidi, a wail, "*Odi, man! Cover!*"

Other chords of voices echo:

Hao! There they are.

Waue! Kill them.

Wezi! Thieves.

Odidi runs.

Three weeks ago the rifle was in the hands of a minor Somali warlord turned Eastleigh-based vendor of off-season Turkish designer women's wear. The ex-warlord had given Odidi the weapon as compensation for camel water songs, which Odidi had sung inside the trader's shop

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while he was picking up lacy feminine things for Justina, his girl. Odidi's music caused wistful chirping sounds to come out of the refugee—lamentations for lost, happy pastoral yesterdays.

The taciturn man had approached Odidi. "You sing as if you know water," he had said.

"I do," Odidi answered.

"These were *our* old songs. . . . How did they find you?"

"A visiting man."

"He has a name?"

Odidi paused. *That* name came with a torrent of buried history. A curt reply: "Ali Dida Hada."

"Degodia," concluded the warlord, naming a clan.

"No. No." Odidi frowned at yellow, pink, black, and red panties and brassieres, his mind struggling. Then he said, "No! A stranger of too many lands." *And faces.*

The trader leaned forward. "You know the song of Kormamaddo, the sky camel?"

Odidi had winked before whistling an overture. The man had pounced on nostalgia's lyrics and belted them out. They had then ventured into and mangled other water songs.

"Desert ghost of yesteryear/Dredge the dunes /Draw sweet truth out."

An hour later, as Odidi was paying half-price for Justina's fripperies, the ex-warlord had muttered, "Wait." He leaned down, hefted up a canvas-and-newspaper-wrapped, hard, four-part object and closed Odidi's hand over it. "From my heart. Open it alone. God shield your songs and your wife." He dabbed tears off his face, partly of relief because he had also offloaded a problem.

Now.

"Waue!" The pursuing Nairobi mob howls.

Odidi runs.

Not feeling the ground. Soaring.

Swish, zip, pop, rattle.

Bullets.

Grunt, *thud*. A man falls.

Ratatatata . . . Screams.

Odidi runs.

Tears flood. Terror-rage-love fuse.

The fallen ones are his men.

Guilt. Fury. Sorrow.

“*Urgh!*” The sound a captain makes when he falters and loses the team. Still, Odidi does not go for the pistol strapped to his chest. Odidi runs. Strength in his arms, his legs pistons, he sprints down Haile Selassie Avenue, jumps over prone, cowering citizens, pities them, the bullets aimed at him raining down upon them. He runs through the stench of decay, the perfume of earth hoping for rain, habits and dreams of Nairobi’s people: smoke, rot, trade, worry, residues of laughter, and overbrewed Ketepa tea. Odidi runs.

Incantation: *Justina! Justina!*

Shelter of faith.

The mob screams, “*Hawa!*”

Justina! Faith into sorrow into longing: *I need to go home.*

“*Wau!*” The answer.

Memory’s tricks. Odidi soars into the desiccated terrains of Wuoth Ogik, the home he had abandoned: his people reaching out for him, cowbells, bleating goats, sheep, and far mountains. He sees Kormamaddo, the grumpy family camel, dashing home from pasture. The sky of home, that endless dome. Flood tide in his blood. *I want to go home.* Odidi lifts his feet higher, trying to fly. Odidi runs.

Random humans in this slippery city of ephemeral doings crave his death. *Ua!* Something flutters and falls within Odidi like a startled, broken songbird. *What have I ever done to them?* He just wants to go home.

Justina!

Oasis.

He will cross spiderweb black roads to touch her.

Odidi runs.

He turns down Jogoo Road and glances upward, childhood habit born when Galgalu, the family herdsman, had told him that God was Akuj—Eternity Revealed as Sky. Up there now, orange dusk light’s bateleur eagles. Like marabou storks, they are prophet birds. Water in his eyes. Odidi blinks away Nairobi’s late-day drizzle. And the earth shivers behind him. A pitiful bellow, a goat protesting the injustice of a butcher’s knife. Death stinks of cold emptiness. Omosh: the last of his men. Odidi gulps down vomit. Tastes salt. Tears in his mouth, sticky, wet of hands, as if he has dipped them into blood. Was this the destination of all their wars?

Shadow and regret.

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Stumbling.

He must move.

But the city, his city, has all of a sudden changed its shape and turned against him. Roads slither into hard walls; blocks of shadow scurry away to expose his next step to ravenous, carnivorous urban trolls. Faster, Odidi runs.

A whisper from his remote past like a brushstroke on his bare back: *You can't live in the songs of people who don't know your name.* . . . Odidi grabs at his throat, suffocating in a burst-of-fire clarity. *What have I done?* Odidi runs.

Glimpse of his fleeting shadow's reflection on darkened glass panes. What had he done? Odidi runs. Louder: *You can't live in the songs of people who don't know your name.* He understands now that he must protect his family. Odidi runs. He *must* reach a stranger; stop him from boarding a flight from Heathrow to Nairobi. First, he *must* find the labyrinthine alleyways, his escape routes. Pounding steps behind him, sundown's cool breeze on his arm and face. A moan within his throat—*let me go home.* Odidi runs. Damp-fisted hands propel him forward, and the city's twilight rain saturates his skin at the same time that he hears a phone melody from within his coat pocket. Cesária Évora's "Um Pincelada." His sister's calling tune.

Grim grin. Only Arabel Ajany Oganda would phone at a time like this. If he were to answer, he predicts her first words would be "Odi . . . what's wrong?" He would have to say, "Nothing, I'm taking care of it," as she expected him to, and he always did. And he was. Odidi runs. "Um Pincelada" plays. If he could, he would say, *Hello, silly.* After more than ten years of nothing, today he could tell her: *I'm going home.* She would laugh, and he with her. The music stops. *Hello, silly.*

They were chance offspring of northern-Kenya drylands. Growing up, Odidi and Ajany had been hemmed in by arid land geographies and essences. Freed from history, and the interference of Nairobi's government, they had marveled at Anam Ka'alakol, the desert lake that swallowed three rivers—the Omo, Turkwel, and Kerio. They learned the memories of another river—the Ewaso Nyiro—four moody winds, the secret things of parents' fears, throbbing shades of pasts, met assorted transient souls, and painted their existence on a massive canvas of



glowing, rocky, heated earth upon which anything could and did happen. They mapped their earth with portions of wind, fire, sky, water, and nothingness, with light, piecing tales from stones, counting footsteps etched into rocks, peering into crevices to spy on the house of red rain. They lived in the absence of elders afflicted with persistent memories: no one to tell the children how *it* had been, what *it* meant, how *it* must be seen, or even what *it* was. Because of this, they re-created myths of beginnings. “The first Oganda was spoken into existence by flame,” Odidi once told Ajany. She believed him. His sister trusted everything he said. Glimmer of a smile.

“*Hawa!*”

He had forgotten where he was.

Odidi runs.

He jumps over mud-stained, crumpled election posters entangled in rotting foliage that show the bright face and pure-white teeth of one of the presidential candidates. *Teeth do not rot in the grave.* Where had he read that? To his left, a plastic-choked alleyway. He ducks into it. Song in his heart, a psalm of glee. This is *his* territory.

Justina!

A glance finds her among a seething mass. He knows most of them—gang associates. Justina is draped in her yellow muumuu with its ridiculous giant pink carnations. He adores that dress on her. He adores her. Her eyes are unusually large, luminous, and hollow. Her howl fragments his heart—Who has wounded her? *Whom must he kill?*—and then flames flare from his heart’s soul and engulf him, and after he screams out, he can no longer see Justina.

Odidi limps.

He grips his shattered right shoulder. Protrusion of bone. Blood trail. Trickle from his mouth. It is said that in the throes of battle dying men cry out for their mothers. *Akai-ma*, Odidi groans. She wards off ghouls and bad night entities, wrestles God, casts ancient devils into hell before their time, and kicks aside sea waves so her son will pass unhindered. *Akai-ma*. Throb in the back of Odidi’s left leg. Searing that eats the base of his spine. Damp from his chest. And even though his leg is heavier than a tree trunk, he tries to carry it home. He grapples with a thought that keeps sliding away. He seizes it. *Justina!*

The finish line. He will make it because he is Shifta the Winger, rugby finisher, and scorer. His forwards and backs have thrown him the



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ball. Although they have fallen out of play, they depend on him to end the game. He is the quickest, the trickiest, the best Shifta the Winger, dancing through adversaries. Before Jonah Lomu made it right to have large wingers, there was Shifta the Kenyan Winger, who carried the game into the face of opponents, and who scored try after try after try while crowds chanted *Shifta! Thump, thump! Winger! Thump! Thump!* And later, when he heard the Kenyan national anthem, felt it resound in his spirit, he had wept tears that traveled past his lips and reached the earth.

Shifta! Thump!

Winger! Thump!

Odidi hobbles to the center of a pathway, his twisted leg dragging. Warm liquid runs down, stains his trousers, leaving a visible patch. Piss. Out of his control. *Akai-ma!* She fixes everything. Retrieves those who belong to her. Dim shadows, like bateleur eagles surveying grassy plains, circle in. They herd him into a trap.

A succinct *ratata*.

Odidi's good knee gives out.

He crumbles.

Exhales on a gurgle.

It is said.

That when a person begins to die, all his life races past him in spaceless time and timeless space, and he can feel again, only much faster, and with sunlike light, all he has felt before. On the tarmac, Odidi Oganda's knuckles scrape hot stone. His left leg faces the opposite direction. A single spurt of sound becomes a blaze that cuts through Odidi's middle, and his entire existence spirals down a hole that becomes smaller and smaller. His body jerks backward and then forward. He sighs, exhausted now, fingers folding into themselves.

Music.

A replay of Cesária Évora.

Ajany.

His sister.

Words congeal, become blocks of thought. Heart-speak. *Poor 'Jany*. He must warn her. *Poor 'Jany*. Music. *Akai-ma* will be mad. Flicker of laughter. She *was* mad. *Akai-ma*. Galgalu will be waiting for him. He had said he would watch the sky for signs of Odidi's homecoming. Later, they would travel with the cows to the Chalbi Desert salts and debate life, its loves and crevices.

Music.
 Cesária Évora.
 Ajany.
 His sister.

Once upon a time, long, long ago, when he was only four years old, Odidi, carrying Ajany, had screamed at his mother: *This is my baby!* She was, for he had wandered a long, long way to bring her back home, having, with Galgalu the herdsman, retrieved her from the fixed gaze of five waiting vultures.

Odidi savors the ringing.
 It tastes of ordinary things.
 Like presence.
 He listens.
 And listens.
 The music stops.
 No, he thinks, *No, 'Jany, continue.*

The drone of a million flies now buzzing in his ear. What'll he tell his sister? He'll say, "The land woke up at dusk and said to itself, 'Today I'll be Arabel Ajany. And the lake looked at the land that was Ajany and said, 'Today I'll be Odidi Ebewesit.' That is why we roam. Because sometimes we are places, not people." She would believe him. She always did. He would say . . .

Anonymous murmurs.
 Someone moves close to him, kicks at a numbing portion of his body.
 "Ameaga?" Is he dead?
 "Bado." Not yet.

They arrange objects around Odidi that *ping* when they fall. He squints through an overwhelming dark-red veil at the moving misshapen shapes.

Simpler needs: *Help me.*
 Foot on his numb body.
 Smaller longings: *Touch me.*
 Minuscule hope: *Stay with me.*
 Murmurs.
Stay. Odidi hiccups.

Ache becomes pining, every straggling breath now consecrated to presence, a single word bursting through—Baba! The sound dissolves

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resistance. Baba! Misery pouring out of Odidi's mouth is the color of rotting blood. It stains his coat and T-shirt. Red tears. Streaks make his face a grotesque duo-toned mask.

Odd memory.

Old music.

Fela Kuti.

Moses Odidi Oganda was eighteen years old, a first-year University of Nairobi engineering student, when, in a room full of books and silences in his coral-hued desert home, Wuoth Ogik, he had dived into a story of machines and found, tucked into inner pages, an alien painted vision. He had ripped it from a page that age had glued it into, his breathing all of a sudden disgruntled, pained, and potholed. Before he could further contemplate what the image meant, he heard the hard tread on stone of his father's footsteps. He had returned the piece to its mute page and walked out with the book.

Later, at university, he found Fela Kuti's songs—their compacted rage: *Aye, aye, aye . . . I no go agree make my brother hungry, make I no talk . . .*

He had also appointed himself Thomas Sankara's heir and wore nonprescription lenses shaped like those Patrice Lumumba had once worn.

Three semesters later, Odidi traveled home to Wuoth Ogik. In their third evening as a family, Odidi Oganda brought in the AK-47 that Nyipir, his father, had given him five years ago. He took it apart, then threw the pieces at Nyipir's feet, chanting: *Aye, aye, aye . . . I no go agree make my brother hungry, make I no talk . . .*

Stillness.

Then Nyipir had stooped over the pieces.

Stillness.

Afterward, in the interlude of strokes from a hippo-leather whip that tore at Odidi's body, Nyipir implored, "The only . . . war you fight . . . is for what belongs to you. You can't live the songs of people who don't know your name."

Odidi had tried to shield his body, waiting to execute a rugby side-tackle, forgetting Baba was a seasoned military man. They wrestled across the floor. *Crack*. The breaking of Odidi's left arm, his rugby ellipse-carrying arm. In Odidi's stifled sorrow, the dying of grand rugby hopes



that he realized right then he had nourished. He remembers Ajany waving her arms above her head, struggling to scream: “Stop!” Stuttering *Stttttttt* over and over. Akai-ma cursed in Ngaturkana, summoning God and Catholic saints to witness the madness. She also offered to strip and show them her bare behind. A curse. But Galgalu struck the ground between father and son with a long, thick, herdsman’s stick. *Thup!*

Then there was silence.

Much, much later.

A father’s whispered entreaty to a fleeing son: *Stay. Stay, please.*

The son left.

Never bothered with an answer or even a backward look.

Now, years later, from a bitumen-smelling potholed backstreet, Odidi’s heart bleeds out his answer: *Coming home. Wait for me.*

Scent of return.

Burnt acacia-resin incense. Desert essences—dung, salt, milk, smoke, herbs, and ghee, the yearning for rain. Akai-ma said good smells melted bad spirits. *We’ll meet our cows at sunset*, Odidi promises. *Home* is the cream of hot milk of their animals, gulped down when Galgalu the herdsman was not looking, chewed-grass, slime-layered goat tongues on skin as they licked the stolen salt he and Ajany fed them with. Small Odidi watches Baba shave, his angular face lost in soft white lather, experiences again the wonder of Baba’s smooth-faced re-emergence. Baba winks. He is stretched out on his large, peeling tan leather armchair, head leaning back, a whiff of Old Spice, filled with big laughter. Just when Odidi would have thrown himself into Nyipir’s arms, a chill shadow crashes into him, stabbing into his body.

Now.

It stretches over him.

Odidi croaks, *You!*

It stares back, empty-socketed, and as noiseless as when they had first met. *What do you want?* Hollow hunger. Perpetual thirst. *Here I am.* The thing smiles. Odidi understands. *If you touch her . . .* Odidi shivers. *Leave her alone.* Cold tears. If it did not burn to do so, his teeth would chatter. *Please.* The shape watches Odidi’s seeping shadow flow into a twisted, dark-red cave, its den. *Not her fault*, Odidi pleads. *I’m here.*



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Odidi and his sister Ajany's December school holiday. Odidi, plotter of adventures, had decreed they should visit the forbidden, damask-stone cave to find the source of a stream they could hear but not see.

"No!" Ajany had stammered. "There's bad in there."

"How do you know?" Odidi scoffed.

"Akai-ma says . . ."

"We'll find water at the base." He had interrupted her. His words had separated and bounced back. *Wa . . . Bassssssss . . . Ter . . . Wa . . . Ssssss . . .*

So Ajany had placed her hand in his and followed him to the cave entrance that opened into a hollowed-out higgledy-piggledy grotto haunted by "God's dazzling darkness" and seeping water. Damp pockets, points of light, and thick shadows that clung. Odidi had squashed his shoulders through trough-like passageways. Ajany followed. Tiny for her age, she could have strolled through. In two places they walked upright. Mostly they slithered on the hard, cold ground, dark skin tones blending in, inching forward on knees and hands. Abrupt left turn into a twisted chamber, into a triangle of light on jutting walls, which revealed yellow-and-red-shaded signs of bleeding spoor and giant footprints heading upward. *There*. The imprint of the world's first record of laughter—open-mouthed toothiness carved into ancient rock. Pictograms. Space shimmering in between icons. They had whirled before the cave wall. "Mhhhhh," Odidi had said, understanding where secrets are born. The too-muchness of experiencing, why silence is the language of last resort. They had laughed and laughed, peals of joy bouncing in the chamber. Ajany had skipped up and down before stumbling backward and falling on her bottom.

Crack! Ajany picked up what had been broken.

Odidi looked at what she carried and saw a white human finger bone, pointing at him. Ajany flung it away from herself. It had struck Odidi on his forehead. And when he had turned his face away, he had spotted the rest of the skeleton. The skull stained, grinning, and missing some teeth. Its sunken sockets stared at him then, as they did now.

"Where has its face gone?" Ajany had wailed, hand facing upward, her feet jumping, crashing down on the thing's left hand. Odidi had stretched forward and picked Ajany up.

She gripped his neck, hiccupping. "It's Obarogo! Odidi, Obarogo!"

And even as his life now leaks out, from the tarmac, Odidi chortles, *He-he!* Bubbles in his gullet. *Obarogo!* His sister consumed every story he fed her. Obarogo, the blind bogeyman born out of Odidi's desire to hear his sister scream. Obarogo, who took life from the wool of darkness. Obarogo, who needed eyes in order to see in the dark and who sought out little girls whose eyes were open when they should have been asleep. Obarogo, of course, avoided boys.

They had raced away from the red cave, he half lifting, half shoving his sister ahead of him. Days after, Ajany, sucking on her two fingers, had dogged Odidi's steps as they pastured livestock. She had yanked at his shorts. "Didi, I dream of . . . of . . . Obaro . . . Oba . . ."

"Stop it!" Odidi had hissed, and whistled at the herding dogs. When he had looked back, he saw Ajany stabbing the earth with a twig. He shouted, "Soon we go back to school!"

Ajany had looked up at him with large, afraid-of-school eyes. The twig had fallen from her hands.

"We'll go Far Away," Odidi had whispered. Just as he had promised, "We're going to *real* Kenya," when he had learned of Baba's decision to send them down-country to a boarding school south of the Ewaso Nyiro River.

Odidi and Ajany's first vision of the school had been as a space demarcated from the rest of the universe by a massive black gate and an overgrown, almost dark-violet kai-apple fence that covered a thick wall. It was a misshapen world of gray stone edifices, a piteous tribute to an obscure English public school.

The headmistress, Mrs. Karai, M.Ed. Calabash-shaped. Stumpy. Stern. Ice. Yellow-brown, thin legs, faux-pearl necklace, and horn-rimmed spectacles. After her New Year new-student assembly speech, on the morning of their second day, she summoned Odidi and Ajany to her office.

"Stand."

They stood.

"No fighting, no stealing, no politics. Do you know how to use a toilet?"

No answer.

"I take that to mean 'no.' Matron will show you. I warn you. I smell trouble—you'll see. You'll know who I am, you hear?"

Touch and instinct were missing from Mrs. Karai's words. Was reason also a sense? Odidi had gathered every fury that possessed him, had

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heard his sister grinding her teeth, knew she was unconscious of what she was doing. If he exploded, she might crash. So he had swallowed down rage and touched Ajany's shoulder.

"Dismissed," Mrs. Karai snarled.

They had left the office hand in hand. They had dodged each other's eyes. Later, they focused on study. Ajany learned to paint, covered shame with vivid colors. Books revealed destinations. Huskies in Alaska, pumpkins that become footmen, genteel princes, knights of round tables, and agreeable kings who oversaw holy order. Atlases were a favorite; anything could be imagined to happen between the lines and curves of a journey.

Odidi became a grade-three piano student within a year.

"Come. Listen. Listen. Ajany!"

Music and painting bandaged soul-holes.

They forgot teachers whose lip-curling mouths asked, "*Ati*, from where? Is it on the map?" Drowned out classmates: "You people cook dust to eat." Music and painting canceled memories of annual February humiliations when news stories of northern land famines arrived with portraits of emaciated, breast-baring, adorned citizens, and skeletons of livestock. They suffered a flurry of "School Walks" and "Give Your Change, Save a Life" and "Help the Poor Starving People of Northern Kenya" picnics. Ajany, being a useful facsimile for the occasion—reed-thin, small, dark, bushy-haired, with large slanted eyes—was thrust to the school stage to slump over one end of a massive cardboard of a bank check for newsletter photo shoots. Odidi would sit in the audience with eyes shut, dreaming about end of term, when the blessed migration from this Kenya to theirs, via Nairobi, occurred. Nairobi was the oasis where he and Ajany boarded a dilapidated green holiday bus shaped like a triangular loaf and shuttled along ramshackle roads to the trading center. Sometimes they walked; most of the time they got a ride close to Wuoth Ogik, where they purged school from their hearts.

After the red cave, life at school for Odidi and Ajany changed. Odidi acquired bulk, merged it with fury, and, after joining the rugby team, transformed the school's game. In the second season, when the opponents' defense tried to take the ball from him, he broke three sets of teeth and converted twelve tries. Their school, former perennial failures, became School Rugby Cup contenders. In the created songs of worship for their new hero—*Shifta! The Winger!*—Odidi found belonging, and Ajany, reflecting Odidi's glory, was at last left in peace.

Years later, Odidi would command Ajany, “Choose.” She did. She left Kenya. He had stayed. To live out a belonging to which he had become accustomed.

Lying on the tarmac, Odidi connects meaning to sounds he hears: a tire squeal, a slammed door, cut-off words, ricochet shouts of once-alive friends. They are where they are because of a green Toyota Prado of which they had tried to relieve its current owner. Wasn’t stealing. It had been Odidi’s car. He’d bought it, cash. It had been swiped from him. He was just taking it back. He and the car’s current driver had once been friends. Schoolmates, business partners, drinking and whoring buddies who had chosen the green car for Odidi to celebrate a life-changing deal gone through. The friend had opted for a brown Jaguar. A few years later, contracts shattered, he was driving Odidi’s car. This job was supposed to be easy: stealing from a thief.

When Odidi had told Justina that he was going to take his green car back and give it to her, Justina had begged, “Odi-Ebe, please—why not buy another one?”

He had snapped, “This one’s mine.”

Justina had placed both her hands over her bulging stomach. “I’m scared.”

He had laughed at her, seized her, and lifted her up. She had looked down at him. He had watched her until she managed a smile, the way she always did. “A *kawaida* job like this?” he had whispered as he lowered her. “It’s Odidi.” And finally she had giggled. This last job was supposed to have been easy.

After this he would marry Justina.

Restart destiny.

He would also find the courage to climb into an airplane. It was time to visit his sister in Brazil. There was so much to say and do. This job should have been so easy. Except, after Odidi and his team had struck, and he had been about to drive off in the car, a police execution squad was waiting for them.

Voices.

More cars.

Whirring of a camera.

Bright light.

Murmurs.

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Then.

Five, four, three, two, one, action! A voice, gravelly, pompous, and familiar: “Our *mbrave mboys* returned fire for fire. Two of our men are wounded. The gang leader *mocked* us. Threw abuse. Our *mbrave mboys* gave chase. The criminals *fred* on foot. We persisted. We *forrowed* for two *kirometers*. . . .”

Odidi listens.

“The *climinals* moved with the *plecision* of *rocusts*. They *swarmed* their targets. They have been *stearing*, *conning*, and *dismantring* vehicles. Have executed bank *rombberies*, *mundered poricemen*, and escaped with ninety *mirrion shirrings*.”

Shit!

Odidi understood.

A setup.

The Officer Commanding Police Division, whom they paid every month to look away, and who on three occasions had hired out his gun to the gang, had just sacrificed them.

Sorrow is a universe.

Guilt.

Shame at being fooled. It contains fear because there is no one who will hear what he needs to say.

Such is loneliness.

Tears.

Electric chill-pain.

Odidi shivers.

Blood.

What’s happening to me?

Then.

Someone is breathing over him.

Warmth. A voice: “I’ve looked for you, boy.”

Odidi opens his mouth. *Baba?* No sound.

The voice: “I’m here.”

Odidi tries to shift toward the presence.

Wants to say, *Didn’t rob any bank*.

Attempts a grin. *Knew you’d find me*.

But it is simpler to allow life its rolling sensations.

Above Odidi, the night. Blurred intimacy of twinkling white stars; watching Kormamaddo, the bull camel of the waters.

What’s happening to me?

A voice says, "Close your eyes, boy. Go to sleep."
Odidi coughs three times.
Red bubbles spatter.
The voice says, "I'm here."
Odidi breathes in.
Doesn't breathe out.
Becomes still.

The six-foot-tall, professorial, gray-haired, bespectacled man, a high-level plainclothes policeman wearing a nondescript, now bloodied black suit and black shoes, will wait nine minutes to retrieve the pistol strapped to Odidi's chest and a bullet-pierced cell phone. With a tiny, delicate movement, he will pocket these. A squashed scarlet Sportsman cigarette packet with two cigarettes rustles in his shirt pocket. He reaches for one, reconsiders. He can endure, and has endured, the cocktail of stench: blood, shit, gun smoke, and rotten water from a nearby open drain. Eyes empty, he hunkers down. Hand to cheek, he thinks of Nyipir Oganda, the boy's father, while his stained fingers dislodge his bifocals, which then rest crooked on his large nose. He stares into nothing.