

RED SHIRT

Isaka Rwanyabuto does not like the look of the house on Hughes. He re-checks the address against the work order on his clipboard. The stucco is pitted and the house sags as if melting into the hot South Central asphalt. There are grilles on the windows and door and the dirt yard is full of rocks. No, not rocks, he sees, but lumps of dried excrement. The size and quantity suggest a very large dog or maybe several. The yard says the animals are not cared for. The block is taken up by rusted cars, so Isaka parks his truck around the corner and walks back with his toolbox.

He'd be more wary of this situation but he's distracted by his shirt. The Phone Company manual states technicians must wear the uniform on all calls. Each night before bedtime, Odetta presses his khaki uniform shirt and leaves it on a hanger in the kitchen, along with the ruffled red shirt for his night job at the restaurant. Americans are odd in many ways but their need that a shirt speak for

them he finds childish and superstitious. In Rwanda, a man might own two shirts, perhaps three, and these he wears according to when they are washed and until they can no longer be mended. Here there are separate shirts for each thing. The shirts are allowed voices and they speak. A few weeks ago Isaka brought home a T-Shirt for Samuel which made his small son weep. Odetta explained the shirt had colors belonging to the Florencia Trey Crips and Samuel would be beaten if he wore it to school. Isaka doesn't fully understand a country where thugs can own a color, but he has experienced thugs and takes no chances. The next day he exchanged the shirt for a yellow one with a picture of a footed sponge.

The red ruffled shirt is wrong with his uniform pants. What it speaks about him is lies. He is not shiny or loud and doesn't call attention to himself. In the daytime, this shirt brags of a slick carelessness that is false. He wears it now only because his uniform shirt ripped from neck to waist on his previous call, snagged on the metal foot-peg of a pole he was descending. He cannot make his final call dressed only in an undershirt. Such a shirt would speak of him as indolent and savage. In his native tongue there is only one word for shirt, "ishati"; here the shirts have individual names and this one is called "wife-beater", a brutish, shameful thing to be concealed beneath something else. So he has put on the ruffled red shirt that buttons low on his chest. He's unhappy with the loose, floppy sleeves and the open collar that leaves his throat exposed.

The door to the house is opened by two young black men with rags tied around their heads and the huge pants that seem strapped to their knees. The shorter of the men looks at Isaka and laughs.

“Yo Cheez, lookahere, they done sent us “Scarface” Phone Man! Nigger be all Tony’d up. Pro’ly go out clubbin’ in that shirt, waste him some muthafuckers coming home.” He mimes shooting an automatic weapon, while executing a complex dance step with his feet. “Nigger,” he says in a mocking voice, “that shirt is tight.”

Isaka doesn’t care for the word “nigger” and doesn’t understand why black men here use it to greet each other. Even worse is the boy’s reference to clubbing, the suggestion that Isaka might possess such a weapon. He realizes the shirt has made him a figure of ridicule and lawlessness and the boy believes he chooses to look like this, as if to spit on his job.

The one named Cheez doesn’t smile. He studies Isaka’s scar then points down a narrow hallway to a door that leads to the basement. The inside of the house smells of dog and rotted food and a chemical tang that sticks in the back of Isaka’s throat. From behind a closed door comes the thumping bass of a rap song and the sound of too many people in a small space.

Cheez watches Isaka all the way down the hall then turns back to stare out the grille of the door. Isaka sees the outline of a gun in the boy’s back pocket where his pants have slipped below his knees.

The basement is dark and suffocating. Isaka switches on his flashlight. The phone box has no cover and the wires have been chewed through. Rat droppings are everywhere. From above him he hears laughter and a new song that sounds identical to the previous one, the same slow thump, thump thump, of a heartbeat on life support.

Isaka realizes he should call his supervisor, relay his location and get out of this filthy house, past the unsmiling boy with the gun upstairs. He reaches for his handset unit then remembers it's in the pocket of his uniform shirt, which is a block away in the truck. The detestable red shirt of slick polyester and no pockets that sticks to his chest with sweat now mocks him. At night, in the air-conditioned restaurant he has loved this shirt, loved how it slides against his skin like silk. Carrying fragrant plates of curried goat and plantains through the tight spaces between the tables has felt like dancing. In the restaurant, what this shirt says about him is that he is elegant and pleasing. Here, in this underground rodent hole, it snickers he is foolish. He climbs back up the stairs.

As he opens the basement door he hears running footsteps and shouting and the sound of gunfire. Boys pour out of a room on his left like roaches when a light comes on. Everyone is yelling and shooting through the walls. The only word he can make out is "muthafucker!" which is screamed by so many people at once it forms a chant and sounds like prayer.

Isaka shuts the door and descends the stairs. He squats in the dark on the filthy floor. He has been here before but it was in another country and not so

loud. When the masu strikes human flesh the sound is wet, like cutting fruit, then a soft crack as the nail-studded club meets and shatters bone. A sharpened machete makes barely a whisper. To kill manually at close quarters requires force in the blow. The loudest sound there is the exhalation of the man who swings the knife.

Isaka closes his eyes and covers his ears against the sound of gunfire. He tries to imagine himself some place cool and silent and far away. Samuel has memorized a poem for the speech contest, one about a man who stops by the woods on a night when it's snowing. Isaka has never seen snow and isn't sure he believes in it. It's difficult for him to summon the feeling of cold, but he tries because to do so requires concentration. The scar on his face beats with blood like a drum.

After a time, Isaka becomes aware the gun sounds have stopped. He hears voices yell "Clear!" and footsteps above his head walking now, rather than running. With eyes closed he has imagined himself in a dark forest but changed the color of the snow to black, the better to conceal himself. He has imagined Odetta and Samuel near enough to touch, nestled against his body with the snow pulled over them all like a blanket. It is nothing like Kigali, with Samuel's cries and Odetta's screams coming from another room. Isaka still cannot recall the words of Samuel's poem, only their rhythms and his son's small face concentrating to remember them. Isaka thinks the poem is about regret.

He climbs the stairs and cracks open the basement door. Down the hallway he sees the boy named Cheez who's been shot in the leg and is crying. A pitbull laps at the blood that pools around him. A policeman is speaking into a walkie-talkie on his vest and other policemen are pulling handcuffed boys out of the house.

Isaka steps into the hall and is knocked to the floor. He feels a knee in his back and his arms are wrenched behind him and tied together with a plastic cuff. A man is calling him "asshole" and telling him he has the right to remain silent though he hasn't said a word. He tries to explain he's with the phone company.

"Yeah, and I'm with Avon," says the policeman, pulling Isaka to his feet by the cuff. "Ding-Dong, chucklehead."

Isaka doesn't understand what the policeman means. He explains his I.D. is in his truck. The policeman calls him a joker and takes him out to the sidewalk with the other handcuffed black men.

They're loaded into a van and driven to the 77th Street police station. In the van, a boy with a red bandana asks who Isaka is, and Cheez' friend says he's the phone guy. The red bandana laughs.

"Bad timing for you, dog. Maybe we tell the po-lice *you* the O.G. muthafucker run that house. We just doin' what you say cause we young'uns all scared of you and shit."

Cheez' friend says, "Careful, D., brother didn't get that face stripe at no phone company."

“Yeah, got him a jealous old lady, must think player’s doing her dirty.”

The rest of the boys howl like it’s a party in the van and bump shoulders because their fists are cuffed behind their backs.

At the police station Isaka is photographed in his red shirt. He’s fingerprinted and checked for outstanding warrants then put in a cell with the others. The boys from the house are joking about giving the police fake monikers to confuse the gang databases. They tell Isaka his AKA is “Scarface” and they take turns doing impressions from a movie where someone repeatedly says hello to a little friend. They act tough till Cheez’ friend is told his mother’s upstairs. When he comes back to the cell after fifteen minutes he doesn’t meet anyone’s eyes. The other boys grow silent.

Isaka is allowed one phone call. The jail phone has been vandalized. He could repair it if they gave back his tools, but he’s tired of being laughed at when he mentions the phone company. Prisoners are taken upstairs one at a time to make their calls in Booking and the process is slow. Fifteen people are ahead of him so it’s several hours before Isaka is able to call his supervisor.

When he finally makes his call it’s after business hours and he’s forwarded to an automated system. A recorded voice asks him to press endless numbers and he’s transferred from one digital place to the next without ever speaking to a human. He begins to understand why people hate the phone company. When he’s exhausted all options for finding a person to help him, Isaka hangs up.

He's led back down to the cells and given a baloney sandwich for dinner. Odetta will soon collect Samuel from the neighbor's apartment where he stays till she comes home from cleaning office buildings. Soon, the two of them will sit over bowls of stew at the little table Isaka salvaged from an empty lot. In Kigali, such a table with its shiny legs and speckled top would be a prize men might fight over or even kill for.

When Isaka walks Samuel to school in the mornings, they make a game to count the abandoned pieces of furniture left on the sidewalks. Most common are sofas, with broken backs and missing arms, scarred with cigarette burns like the victims of an interrogation. Damaged, but a man may claim one without a fight if he has the strength to carry it home; may perceive a gift in the gutter if his eyes are open to what is marvelous.

Isaka leans his head back against the wall and prepares to sleep. Next to him on the bench there's an old man who shakes like a kicked dog and whispers to someone who isn't there. Isaka suspects he's a drug-taker or perhaps crazy, but the rhythms of his speech are like a lullaby.

The cell is warm. Lights are on. Odetta is safe at home. She doesn't expect him back from the restaurant till after midnight. She'll wait up for him in their tiny kitchen, heating the iron to press his shirts for tomorrow. She won't panic when he doesn't come. People don't disappear here.

He looks up when the cell door opens. A policeman uncuffs a Mexican boy with tattooed arms and neck and guides him through the door.

“Play nice,” says the policeman.

The boys from the house give the Mexican boy hard looks.

“Where you from?” asks Cheez’ friend.

The Mexican boy doesn’t say anything.

“He banging Rolling 60’s,” says red bandana, pushing off the wall. “I seen him with that big cholo Gordo, the one done juvie with T’Shawn.”

The Mexican boy puts his back to the wall and holds his arms loose at his sides.

“Not your lucky day, ese,” says Cheez’ friend.

Isaka notices a familiar odor in the cell. One he recognizes. It is feral and dizzying, like spoor or civet. It warns of what’s to come the way the metallic scent of lightning presages a storm.

Three of the boys from the house roll off the wall towards the Mexican boy.

Isaka knows this smell. Not from the cells in Kigali where he lay with his slashed and bleeding face, but months after, in Kibeho, with the masu swinging in his hand. In Kibeho, where he was ridden by a demon. The smell he recognizes is fear and its ecstatic release. A thing assuaged only by blood. No sane man stands in its way.

The crazy man next to Isaka is still talking. “I sure would like to know why that woman done me so,” he says, “Yes I would. I would do a dog better than she done me. I would.”

Woods, thinks Isaka, recalling Samuel's poem. A man on horseback, peering into the darkness, only the promise of home keeping him on the road. '*The woods are snowy, dark and deep,*' he remembers. And then thinks, *but that doesn't mean we won't go in there.*

