

Andrew Rice

The Book of Wilson

HIS FATHER called him Sunday, for the day he was born. But he hated the name, thought it churchy and effeminate, and as soon as he was old enough, he became someone else. That was his way. At the time when we were friends, before distance and hardship and repulsion intervened, he called himself Wilson Obote. He had spent most of the first half of his life in combat, as a fighter of shifting allegiances—sometimes a government soldier, sometimes a rebel—in his country's civil wars. "I grew up knowing that fighting, torturing, and killing is what proves the might of a man," he said. In his view, the world was divided between people with guns and people who did their bidding, and he was proud to say he'd lived his life accordingly. Wilson intrigued me as someone who seemed to personify Uganda's legacy of violence, and also the country's potential to reclaim itself from the abyss. In civilian life, he had become a schoolteacher and a performing artist: a musician, a dancer, and above all, an actor. It was on the stage and the screen—through his talent for impersonation and self-dramatization—that he'd come as close as he thought



Wilson Obote, Kampala, Uganda, 2004.

possible to finding peace and satisfaction. Then, in October of 2002, teenage fighters from the Lord's Resistance Army, a cultish rebel force that terrorizes northern Uganda, kidnapped Wilson's two oldest sons. "Things were getting out of hand," Wilson said, "so I decided to handle the gun again."

When we met, at a hotel bar in Kampala, Wilson introduced himself as an army lieutenant. This rank was a bit of make-believe—an embellishment,

like the garish suit he wore, a tie-dyed topcoat and matching trousers that, he announced proudly, he had designed himself. In fact, Wilson had joined a government intelligence agency, the Internal Security Organization, and was working as a reconnaissance scout in the badlands of the north, leaving written messages for his sons wherever he went—at wells, in mango groves, anywhere he thought they might stop for a moment's rest. Wilson cut a striking figure: tall and sinewy, with his oblong head shaven, a look that drew attention to his protruding ears and cheekbones. His arms were thick and powerful, his eyes narrow and mistrustful. "I think I must have done something to make God angry," he said. "Bad things have been happening to me ever since I was young." He handed me a computer disk on which he told me I would find his autobiography, and he asked if I knew any Hollywood directors.

WILSON'S BOOK, "Born in the Barracks," ran to eighty-three digression-filled, syntactically twisted single-spaced pages, and it was unfinished. As a self-portrait, it is as self-deceiving as it is revealing, and yet it offers an extraordinary account of a childhood in wartime Uganda: he commits his first killing at five (braining a playmate with the metal wheel of a wheelbarrow), runs off to live with a band of cattle thieves, becomes a street hustler, burns down his mother's house, is thrown in a prison cell with a decaying corpse, flees to the big city, enlists in the army at fourteen, butchers civilians, takes a child bride, runs for his life when the government is overthrown, joins a rebellion, deflowers a nun, becomes a vagabond, and is imprisoned again.

At times, as he recounts his exploits, Wilson seems to glory in his faults, carrying his confessional tone to operatic extremes. Early on, for instance, he adopts his mother's voice to describe his own birth: "So my son, I labored all this time for this kind of reward? If I knew you would be this kind of brute, I would have squeezed your bloody head between my thighs and suffocated you to death during your birth." Although Wilson swore to me that every word he wrote was true, it was obvious that there was plenty of exaggeration, and even much outright fiction. But so much of his story checked out that it was impossible to take comfort in one's disbelief.

Uganda is cut roughly in two by the Nile, and the divide is as much political as it is geographical. Antagonism between the north and south, which was fostered under British colonial rule, turned bloody after the country

gained independence in 1962, when northern tribes seized control of the state. For the next twenty-five years, Uganda was dominated by a succession of dictators from the north. Wilson was born in 1966, the year that army tanks attacked the palace of Uganda's first president, a southerner, consolidating power in the hands of the prime minister, Milton Obote. Obote was a member of Wilson's tribe, the Langi, and five years later, when General Idi Amin ousted him, Wilson's father was one of many Langi military officers who were publicly executed. Wilson says that he was in the audience, and in his book he describes in minute detail how his father and several other officers were tied, naked and hooded, to poles in the yard of their barracks and then shot by a firing squad:

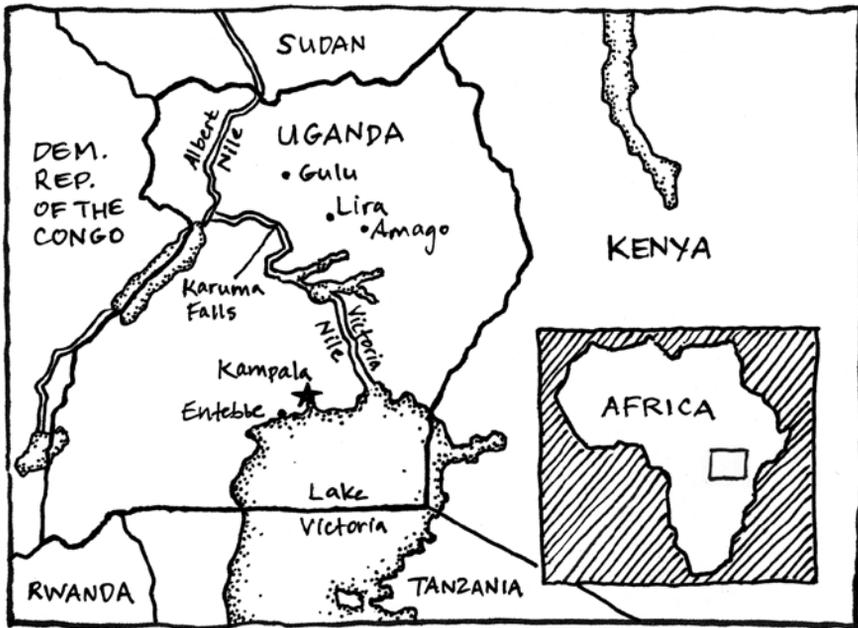
Within very few minutes, I saw pa drop his head on his chest. . . . I did not know how many bullets struck him. But when he was roughly untied and left to fall down, one would not wish to see the holes the bullets created. It was just like smashed beef mixed with shit.

No one was allowed to cry, women, men swallowed their tears in their heads. Within no minutes the bodies were piled in a standby lorry, and off to the destination none of pa's relatives, including me, knows. Moroto barracks is situated just adjacent to Matheniko Game Reserve, from which at night stray hyenas and even lions came into the barracks from the northern side.

So the last night we spent in the barracks had no roaring of the lion. Neither did the hyenas complain. This therefore gave a clear testimony that the beast had a fair fill of their tummies from pa's fatty flesh, and his friends'.

AFTER THAT, Wilson writes, "Human life became chicken life to me. . . . I would do whatever it means with my gun to the satisfaction of my vengeance." He became "a brute who loved to swim in human blood," and he claims to have killed at least ten people.

In 1986, when Yoweri Museveni, a guerilla leader from the south, led his army into Kampala and installed himself as president, Wilson fled back across the Nile and became a rebel, marauding around the northern countryside, until he was captured by government troops and sent to a political reeducation camp. Wilson emerged a changed man, determined to create a civilian life for himself. He married, started a family, moved to Kampala, and drifted into artistic circles. He joined a theater and dance troupe, where he sang tenor,



played a traditional harp, and performed the intricate knee-pumping steps of the northern tribes. The troupe's director cast Wilson as an army commander in one of his plays, and his performance was so convincing that the director sponsored Wilson's enrollment in a teacher's college. On one occasion, when he was at school, Wilson suffered a nervous breakdown. He chased off his roommate and marched military-style around the campus compound with a stick, until an uncle, a real army officer, came and had him tied up and taken away. There were many smaller outbursts, but they gradually subsided. Wilson landed a job as a primary-school instructor, began writing his memoirs, and was cast in leading roles in several Ugandan plays and movies.

Wilson's progress was very much in keeping with the country's. Museveni was an autocrat, but a saner, more benevolent one than Uganda had ever known, and under his eloquent, often enlightened rule, the country steadily recovered from its self-destruction. By 2002, when I arrived, Uganda's economy was thriving and Kampala was a boomtown, as a new generation came of age without any direct experience of political violence. I had come to see this rare phenomenon: an African success story. But it didn't take long to notice that the peace and prosperity stopped at the southern bank of the Nile. In the north—a swath of the country the size of Belgium—the war had never ended.

WILSON LOVED KAMPALA and his life there, but in Uganda a man doesn't count for much until he has some property of his own, a piece of land that he can cultivate and use as a retreat, and which, one day, can serve as his burial ground. So Wilson built himself a house in his ancestral village of Amugo, a collection of tumbledown shops and mud-wattle huts along a derelict railway line in the north. Wilson's wife Josephine and four of their children were staying there, visiting his mother, when the rebels attacked. They crept in early on an October morning in 2002, about a dozen youths in ragtag clothes, carrying axes, machetes, and machine guns. A neighbor who spotted the beams of their flashlights screamed and scrambled for the hut where Josephine and the children were sleeping. "We are all dead," she shouted hysterically, and the shooting began.

A rebel appeared in the hut's doorway. He wore gumboots, a trench coat, and a baseball cap. He was a boy, really, no older than fifteen. "Where are yours?" he barked at Josephine. She wailed and the boy called for a rope. He and a comrade then tied her eldest sons together at the waist—Jimmy, who was fourteen, and Oscar, a year younger—and marched them into the bush.

Wilson was asleep in Kampala, and he didn't hear of the attack until later that morning when he was at school, teaching. He left immediately and headed north. Wilson was no family man. He talked to me unabashedly about his many women—hardly remarkable in polygamous Uganda—and he boasted of fathering fifteen children, counting the illegitimate ones that he knew of. But Josephine was his "official" wife, and he loved the big messy family they'd made together. He took enormous pride in Jimmy and Oscar, who were promising, well-educated boys, and as he left Kampala he told his friends that he was going to find his boys. It seemed a febrile plan, but he could not be dissuaded. "We could see the violence in him," one friend recalled. "There was a change in him," said another. "He was heartbroken. . . . He had that self-blame." Any father might have such feelings at the loss of his children. Wilson had something else, too, when he thought of his sons' ordeal: he had been there himself.

During his last years as a bush fighter, in the late eighties, Wilson had fallen in for a time with the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces, a rebel army that sprung up in the north during the first years of Museveni's rule, led by a young, Bible-quoting soothsayer named Alice Auma, who preached both rebellion and religious revival. Auma claimed to be channeling a local warrior

spirit named Lakwena—the word means “messenger of God”—and to be in communion with animals, mountains, and waterfalls. The north’s malady, she said, was spiritual, and if only northern fighters were cleansed of sin they could easily defeat Museveni. Auma’s message drew thousands of recruits, whom she commanded from a thatch-roofed temple. She enforced a strict code of conduct—no drinking, no fornication—and instructed her soldiers to anoint themselves with a holy oil that, she promised, would make them invulnerable to enemy fire. Wilson, who was not disposed to blind belief, quickly soured on Auma’s crusade. To declare your forces bulletproof, he felt, was pure suicide. Sure enough, the Holy Spirit army was soon defeated and Auma fled into exile, but a young cousin of hers, Joseph Kony, claimed that Lakwena’s powers had passed into him, and he started his own rebellion, which he called the Lord’s Resistance Army.

Kony had been born around the same time as Wilson, in nearly the same place, and as a young man he had found power in cultivating a reputation as a sorcerer. He was a lanky, dreadlocked former altar boy who wore white robes and purported to be inhabited by warrior spirits and imbued with gifts of prophecy and healing. He had a mesmerizing voice and messianic pretensions, and when he began the LRA in the late eighties, he drew support from some of the renegade forces of the old dictatorships who regarded Museveni as a usurper. But most northerners declined to follow him, and Kony, enraged, turned harshly against his own people. He declared that if fathers would not rise up with him he would take their sons, and kidnapping became the LRA’s primary means of recruiting. It was a fiendishly effective tactic. Children made malleable, disposable troops, well-suited for the campaigns of murder and mutilation by which Kony gained an international reputation in the nineties. Eighty percent of his army of abductees were believed to be between seven and seventeen years old—and for the most part he sent them to attack not an enemy army, but their own brothers and sisters.

A Ugandan clergyman who served as a government intermediary during a short-lived attempt at peace talks with the LRA once described to me a summit meeting with Kony in a remote northern meadow. The rebel arrived wearing military fatigues and aviator sunglasses, escorted by a cadre of children who poured holy water from calabashes before his feet. He raised a Kalashnikov above his head and told the peace negotiators: “Look at the gun. I have fought with this gun for seven years, and the government has also fought with the gun—and yet they have not defeated us.”

In fact, defying defeat was Kony's signal accomplishment. Nobody could say for sure what else the LRA stood for. Kony claimed his orders came directly from God and that he planned to rule Uganda according to the Ten Commandments. But the religion on which the LRA based its holy war was entirely invented—a muddle of animist superstition, Biblical fundamentalism, and shamanism—and its politics were even less coherent. Because Kony's victims are overwhelmingly from the north, his war has been called an "auto-genocide." Still, many northerners blame Museveni equally for their continued suffering. They are convinced he could squelch the LRA anytime he likes, but that he prefers to let the fighting continue in order to keep the north crippled. "I don't believe in turning the other cheek," Museveni has said, explaining why he refuses to engage in serious peace talks with Kony's rebels. "We are killing them."

When Wilson reached Amugo the day after the attack he found his house burned to the ground. Josephine was gone; she'd fled to her mother's village, which was some distance away. Wilson kept going north, following the path the rebels had taken out of town. At first he hired bicycle taxis. But the bicyclists were only willing to go so far. LRA troops often kill the riders they encounter, or hack off their legs, because the rebels believe them to be government spies. So Wilson walked.

He walked for days, passing through the flatlands around Amugo and the malarial swamps where the rebels collected water, then crossed the Moroto River, and traveled on to rockier terrain. This land was barren, depopulated. When Wilson did encounter people, they fled in terror at the sight of him. In this area, any stranger was assumed to be a threat. He also encountered some children who'd escaped the LRA, and they gave him bits of intelligence.

Following one such tip, Wilson left the road and headed west. He came to a clearing where he found the remains of an encampment. Several makeshift crosses stood planted in the ground amid small plots of soybeans and sorghum. Wilson found four children's bodies there. They had been bludgeoned to death. The children appeared to Wilson to have been eleven or twelve years old. He knew that the LRA often executed abductees who were slow, or injured, or who simply cried for their parents. These killings served as a lesson to those who were allowed to live.

The rebels had abandoned the encampment a few days before, and the bodies had already begun to decompose in the tropical heat. Wilson was drawn to one of the children, who lay facedown, his head atop a log, as if he

had been forced to the ground and clubbed from behind. The dead boy wore blue, just as his son Oscar had been wearing when he was taken. Then Wilson noticed the belt. It was white and bore a crocodile insignia, just like Oscar's. He tried to study the features of the corpse. "They had beaten him with a lot of canes so the body was swollen," Wilson told me later. "The whole face had already been eaten by maggots. Even though he was my son, I couldn't recognize him." But Wilson was certain: Oscar was dead.

SHORTLY BEFORE I BEGAN seeing a lot of Wilson, in January of 2004, President Museveni had announced in his yearly holiday address: "The Kony terror in the northeast has been defeated decisively." But it was just his usual bluster. Out on the street corners, hawkers flogged newspapers that told a different story. The front pages were covered in gruesome photos and alarming headlines. At times, the daily toll of nameless battles and repetitive atrocities—"LRA KILL 3 ON XMAS EVE"; "KONY AIDE SHOT DEAD"—could lend this bizarre war a lulling sense of normalcy, and in the cosmopolitan remove of comfortable Kampala the news from the north seemed to come from a foreign country.

So, on a Sunday morning at the end of February, when the radio reported an attack on a refugee camp up north, I didn't pay much attention. Squeezed from their homes by the LRA and the Ugandan army, more than a million northerners were living, more or less permanently, in wretched camps, and Kony's raiders attacked them all the time. In one incident just a few weeks before, the rebels had killed roughly fifty civilians, and no one outside Uganda had noticed. But this attack, in a place called Barlonyo, proved to be different. Over the course of the day, the death toll rose, ticking past one hundred and continuing steadily until it passed two hundred. Somewhere along the way, the Barlonyo massacre crossed the nebulous threshold that separates a routine African horror from an international news event. CNN aired video footage of the smoldering ruins of the camp. Many of the victims had been hacked to death or burned alive inside their huts. The Nairobi-based foreign press corps hastened to Lira, the nearest town.

I left before dawn the next morning, driving north in my jeep on a two-lane highway. I wound through hills outside the city as sunrise swirled the sky purple and orange. The mists clung briefly to the rolling terrain, then dissipated, revealing an expanse of grassy pastures and green banana groves. Uganda flattened as the road neared the Nile. Greenery gave way to savannas,

empty except for the occasional anthill or thorny acacia or giant cactuslike euphorbia, standing alone against the voided landscape. The last town before the bridge, a dusty stretch of beer shacks and trucker motels, had the air of a border post. I passed through a military checkpoint and crossed the bridge over Karuma Falls that links the south to the north.

On the other side, the road was overgrown and deserted save for a family of baboons. I pressed hard on the accelerator. The sky turned overcast and it started to rain. A signpost said that Lira was thirty kilometers away. I noticed a pickup truck ahead. It was in my lane, and it was slowing down. It had no brake lights. I stomped hard on my brakes and skidded on the wet road. The crash came with a low, hollow crunch. The hood of my jeep crumpled before my eyes. My glasses flew off as the seat belt jerked me back. I twisted the wheel, trying to stay on the road. Finally, after a long split second, the car came to rest, teetering at a thirty degree angle on the edge of a steep ravine.

I touched my face, wiggled my fingers and toes. Everything moved. I climbed out of the car, grateful to be alive. Then, with a rush, the fear came. I was outside and alone in the north. A passing soldier stopped to tell me there wasn't much danger from the rebels; they hadn't been through in some time. The mob of villagers that had rushed to the accident scene was another matter. The pickup, which had come to rest in a clearing across the way, belonged to the pastor of the local Catholic church. He'd been rushed to the hospital, and there were angry murmurs that I'd killed him. The soldier suggested I stay close—he had a gun.

Hours later, I was still there, sitting crouched on my haunches in the midday sun. It turned out the priest was fine, but I wasn't so sure about myself. A group of young villagers I'd hired to hoist my jeep back onto the road were arguing wildly about how to do it. The village madman was dancing around the wreckage. A potbellied cop stopped by. He told me not to worry, which seemed like a bad sign. I was trying hard to keep my eyes off the papyrus-choked marsh that surrounded us. I knew the rebels lurked in swamps.

Then a bus bound for Lira screeched to a halt beside me. Its door opened, and out stepped Wilson. I had never been so glad to see anyone. He wore military fatigues, and his olive beret was twisted at a jaunty angle. He seemed pleased to play the savior, and pleased by my surprise. He marched over and ran his hand along my car's twisted front end. "Sorry," he said. He told me

he'd been rushing to Lira—the government was mounting a counteroffensive following the camp massacre—and when he recognized my car from the bus, he ordered the driver to stop. He said I was lucky. He said we were safe. He could protect me. Wilson's position with the Internal Security Organization allowed him to wear army clothes when he traveled. The uniform made him more feared than admired, but he was happy to accept the respect—and, on this day, out on the road, I was happy to be his friend.

As the sun fell toward the horizon, a truck towed us into Lira. The sprawling town, officially home to ninety thousand people, was bursting with thousands more war refugees who were crowded into tent villages and dismal shanties on its outskirts. The massacre had only underscored what everyone already knew: the army couldn't protect the countryside. At night, the slightest rumor of rebel movements or rustle in the bush would bring those who still lived in the surrounding villages rushing into the city center—men and women of all ages, children laden with book bags and sleeping mats. They came with their cattle, with their belongings heaped on bicycles, and set up camp beneath hand-painted business signs that seemed to speak for them: GOOD HOPE STORE, GOD PROVIDES LOUNGE, JOBLESS BARBER SALON.

The Lira Hotel, which offered cheap, cramped rooms around a courtyard bar that served warm beer and plates of beans and goat, was crowded with foreign correspondents. Earlier that day they'd visited a refugee camp with President Museveni's military convoy. The locals had given the president a chilly greeting of slow claps and perfunctory ululation.

The people were furious, and not just with Museveni. In Lira, which is a city dominated by the Langi tribe, the radio waves were crackling with anger directed against Kony and his tribe, the Acholi. The two peoples lived side by side, spoke the same language, and shared the same grievances against the south. But they also harbored considerable hatred for each other, as neighbors often do. Some said the feud went back to ancient times. Others said it dated from the 1980s, when an Acholi dictator overthrew a Langi dictator. But Kony's war had driven the tension to a violent extreme. In Lira, the LRA was seen as an Acholi army, and this latest offensive, which had cut a destructive path through Langi lands, was considered an attack on their people.

That night, seeking to calm tempers, some local politicians went on the radio to announce that in the morning Lira would rally for peace at the town soccer pitch, an open field of patchy grass situated next to the police station. I went there after breakfast. Thousands of people were carrying

leafy branches, a traditional symbol of mourning, and there were signs that read: STOP KILLING LANGI and THE UN MUST INTERVENE. I'd attended a similar event in Lira a year before, where priests offered prayers for peace and everyone joined in a rendition of "We Shall Overcome." But this time Lira didn't want prayers. It wanted revenge.

As the rally began, I saw a group of about a hundred young men streaming away from the larger crowd, chasing a solitary, terrified boy. He barely escaped his pursuers, jumping a wall into the safety of the police station's grounds. I asked someone what was happening.

"They are beating Acholis," he replied.

Suddenly, another scrum developed. Beneath a banner reading PEACE, the mob massed around a wraithlike figure and beat it with fists, sticks, and shoes. Somehow, the victim—a man—managed to break free. He ran for his life, through a stand of trees and down a dirt road to a primary school, dashing through an open metal gate. By the time I got there, men were hoisting each other over a high brick wall onto the school's grounds.

Inside, against the wall, the mob had cornered its quarry. Dozens surrounded him in an impenetrable semicircle. All I could hear was a sickening rhythm of dull thuds. A man in an orange shirt turned to me and gave a gleeful cackle. "He is killed now," he said.

I walked back outside, dazed, wondering whom to alert. A thin, neatly-dressed man called out to me: "The killing is not intentional, Mr. Journalist. We have been suffering for so long." He introduced himself as Geoffrey Obello, a twenty-seven-year-old schoolteacher from Ogur subcounty, near where the Barlonyo massacre had taken place. He told me that the crowd had recognized the boy as an outsider by his accent. "These Acholis," Obello fumed, "have been killing us, stealing our property, burning our houses."

"We must kill them all!" a passerby shouted.

Behind us, people were filing through the school's gates. I went back inside and saw onlookers competing to get close to the corpse. Boys stood balanced on bicycles to see; women pushed their children to the center of the crowd. Every so often someone gave the body a kick or ceremonial thwack with a mourning branch. A man saw me and yelled something, and the knot of people loosened enough to allow me to view the broken, splayed body of a young man. The mob wanted me to see. It was proud of what it had done.

Nearby, at the police station, a few dozen officers were sitting in the shade of leafy mango trees, armed and in riot gear, waiting for orders to deploy. "If

we try to control them now,” the police chief said, “it will be a bloodbath.”

I returned to the hotel, but the mob’s cheers followed me—growing louder, full of adrenaline, heading toward the military barracks. Not long afterward the shooting began, and it continued for several hours as the army restored control. That evening, after the tear gas cleared, Wilson came to see me. The hotel bar’s television was switched to the BBC, which was airing footage of Acholi huts set on fire by the mob. Five people were reported dead, including the lynching victim. He turned out to have been a Langi after all.

Wilson was clad head to toe in a flowing outfit of green *kitenge*, a kind of brightly patterned Congolese cloth. The Langi were his people but he was annoyed at them. The rioters had smashed his car’s side mirrors and windshield. “It was a little childish,” he later reflected. “I don’t see any reason why this tribe could point an accusing finger to any other. Not only Acholis are in the LRA.”

The next day, a Ugandan photojournalist told me more of the story. He’d happened upon the mob as it surrounded a government office building and attacked a dented Toyota. A strange tall man in green *kitenge* had emerged from the building. “I’ve lost children,” the man yelled, “and I am not reacting the way you are reacting.” The rioters paid no attention. So the man walked back into the building. He reemerged brandishing a Kalashnikov. At the sight of the gun, the mob moved on.

“THIS THING HAS DISORGANIZED my family seriously,” Wilson told me one afternoon as he welcomed me into his apartment, a dim and dingy cold-water flat located in a far-flung Kampala suburb. Josephine and the children were in the living room, sitting solemnly, as if for a formal occasion, on tatty foam-cushioned furniture. Josephine was barefoot in a bright orange dress, her hair swept back high. She held the baby, Ruth, who was wearing pink chiffon. Wilson was relaxed in a tight white T-shirt, surrounded by his other children. And sitting on a wooden box in the far corner, wearing a khaki school uniform and a look of sad detachment, was Wilson’s son Oscar.

The rebels hadn’t killed Oscar. They’d made him into a soldier. It was another boy whose bludgeoned body Wilson had discovered in the bush. Nine months after he’d given Oscar up for dead, Wilson had received a phone call: his son had reappeared in Amugo. Oscar had escaped from the LRA by playing dead during a battle. He’d walked sixty miles back, dodging



Wilson Obote in uniform, Lira, Uganda, 2004.

the rebels and surviving on raw mangoes. Wilson had rushed back to the village, where he embraced Oscar and started to cry. “It wasn’t joy,” he told me. Jimmy was still missing, and Oscar’s return only made the older boy’s peril seem that much more profound.

Oscar was trying to readjust to home, but it wasn’t easy. “His temperament has changed so much,” Wilson told me. Once cheerful, Oscar had become dour and argumentative. When he was angry, he talked harshly,

like a rough adult. Oscar attended the school next door, where Wilson had once taught English, but the other kids teased him, called him a “rebel,” and he often got into fights. The headmaster was losing patience with his aggressive behavior.

Wilson had pulled Oscar out of class to talk to me. When his father introduced us, the boy shook my hand with limp deference. He was slight, with big almond-shaped eyes, and he looked younger than his fourteen years. He seated himself on the couch and curled up, crossing his arms tight across his chest and rubbing his elbows. When the conversation turned to the war, Josephine stood up without a word and padded off into the kitchen. Pots and pans clanked in agitated rhythms. “I think you can see it is hurting her,” Wilson said. “Whenever I am talking about this, she doesn’t feel right.”

Oscar could understand English, but he preferred speaking in Luo, his tribal language. So I asked questions and Wilson translated the boy’s answers. In a high singsong voice, Oscar recounted the morning of his abduction. Several other village children had been lashed together with him and Jimmy and pulled by their ropes down the road. One of them was a fourteen-year-old girl, whom an LRA officer soon took as a concubine. On the way out of the village, the rebels had looted some nearby shops and forced their unwilling porters to carry away crates of soda, boxes of biscuits, and bags of beans and sesame.

After a long march, a camouflage-clad rebel commander addressed the abductees. He had a reputation as a fearsome killer, and he spoke harshly. The commander told the children that they were to address him as *apwony*—“teacher.” He promised that they would be fighting men, and they would “have freedom.” But if they tried to escape, he warned—if they so much as cried or complained—they were dead.

The captives walked for two days without much food or water. Finally, they reached a rebel camp—the same place Wilson discovered, abandoned, a few days later. A number of raiding parties converged there with a great many abductees, perhaps several hundred. Jimmy and Oscar were assigned to different battalions. Then there were prayers. All the abductees were anointed with sheanut oil, which the officers smeared in the shape of a cross on their foreheads. The ritual, they were told, bound them to Joseph Kony forever.

Oscar never met Kony, who was said to be hiding out in Sudan. But he was still terrified of him: LRA abductees believed their army’s leader was omniscient, capable of tracking them anywhere if they ran. The boys in

Oscar's unit carried crosses made of grass or wore rosaries, which they were told would offer miraculous protection during battle. Oscar marched long distances every day and learned how to shoot in the evenings.

LRA commanders often force fresh recruits to murder other children, frequently their friends or relatives, because such killing binds the abductees to the LRA. Having done the unthinkable, the new recruits feel that they can never go home. Through violence, they are reborn as rebels.

Oscar said he killed eight people in his nine months with the LRA. When I asked him how he did it, he answered in a precise monotone, and Wilson translated: "The first time he contributed to killing was when a boy tried to escape." This was soon after Oscar's capture. He and a group of recent abductees were ordered to gather around the condemned boy and were handed sticks. "They just clubbed him to death," Wilson said.

I didn't say anything, and after a moment, Oscar thought of something else to tell. "He got used to the killing," Wilson translated. "It wouldn't get him scared."

"Do you think about it now?" I asked.

Oscar shook his head resolutely, no. He stretched and yawned. Class had let out at the school next door, and the sound of children's voices lilted into the living room.

"He liked the work," Wilson said. "He was enjoying it." Oscar said he had participated in the abduction of fifty children for the LRA, and when I asked if he felt bad for them, Wilson told me, "No. He was happy, because he was also revenging what happened to him." I didn't understand, so Wilson elaborated. "The way he was abducted, he didn't feel good. But now that he was abducting the rest, he knew he was also doing the same thing that happened to him. So that's why he was happy."

"HE MAY BE A LIAR," a friend of Wilson's once told me, "but sometimes he will tell you the truth." The problem was you never knew. Wilson told me, for instance, that he'd once acted in a film by a famous American director named Robert Altman. I'd ignored him, but the boast turned out to be true, or at least sort of true. The film, *War Child*, was a television drama by a director named Bob Altman, of Darien, Connecticut. He was not the creator of *Nashville*. But this Altman did have a contract to make a miniseries about the Lord's Resistance Army, and in early 2001 he'd come to Uganda to shoot on location. He worked with a local crew, and he

initially hired Wilson as a military consultant, to train his young cast to act like child soldiers. But Wilson had a way of cultivating patrons. He managed to talk Altman into giving him a starring role: Joseph Kony. “He understood it on a gut level,” Altman said. “It was clear to me that it was a role that he had really lived and breathed.”

Three years later, on a pleasant Easter weekend, *War Child* had its Kampala premiere. It was rare for Ugandans to see their country on film, and the opening night, held at an outdoor amphitheater, attracted a large and curious crowd—mostly families with children. The movie, projected against a white bed sheet, rolled when the sun went down. Wilson had prepared for his performance by studying rare archival footage of Kony, and he played the warlord with a bug-eyed snarl. He first appeared midway through the film, shirtless, whirling a wig of beaded cornrows, shouting, “Hallelujah!” He waved a Bible and, wagging his finger, preached to a group of abducted children, telling them that God had anointed him to do his will. “Go now,” he bellowed, “and kill!” A gasp hissed through the audience.

Wilson stole the show, and he should have been savoring it. But he sulked through the premiere. It was as if every joyful moment mocked him. One morning that weekend, I met him at one of his favorite bars. His voice was sluggish, his eyes were deadened, and he complained of a cold. “I have lost a lot of weight,” he said. “I think it is because of the worries I have.” Wilson looked like he’d been up all night drinking or arguing—probably both. He and his wife were quarreling constantly. “We started blaming each other,” Wilson said.

His infrequent visits home from the north inevitably turned into excruciating interrogations. Josephine would demand news of Jimmy. Wilson would say he had none. Then the recriminations would start. Sometimes the fights got physical. Jimmy was the darling of the family. He was bookish, mature, a scholarship student. Josephine was so devastated by his loss that she had become a born-again Christian. She spent much of her time at a ramshackle church, praying for a miracle. Wilson coped by talking of Jimmy constantly, as grieving parents do, calling him “a pillar in my house.”

“Among all the children I had,” Wilson said, “he was the person I would least expect to belong to an army. He’s a very sentimental person. And I believe that these people have played with his psychology. They have played with his ego. And they have confused him. In fact, when I have this discussion it makes me a bit . . .” His eyes filled with tears. “I don’t always like to

discuss it.” After all, Wilson was spending a lot of time at the front, and he said, “We know we are fighting our own children.”

Wilson tried not to dwell on the possibility that he might actually meet—or even kill—Jimmy in battle. He clung to a distinction in his mind between the forces he called “the enemy” and the innocent children he wanted to save. But, in reality, the LRA’s killers were also its victims: there was no distinction. This was the war’s defining perversity. It was also why most Ugandans were in favor of ending the war through negotiation, even if that meant Kony would escape punishment. You didn’t have to be an LRA sympathizer to question the moral implications of the government hunting children with attack helicopters. (“Innocent,” an army spokesman told me, “is a relative term.”) Each week, the army released figures of “enemies” killed and “abductees” rescued, but everyone knew that the only real difference between the two categories was that one group had been captured alive, while the others were dead. They were all just children.

The day after Easter, as Wilson was preparing to head north again, I met him at an outdoor café next to the amphitheater where *War Child* was shown. He was wearing another tie-dyed outfit, with a T-shirt emblazoned with the image of a spear and a machine gun and the baffling message WAR STORIES ABDUCTION SHIELD. In Wilson’s more puffed-up moments, he liked to call himself a “freelance child activist.” He was always determinedly vague about what he did with the army up north, but he claimed to have participated in the rescues of hundreds of abductees. He never mentioned casualties.

“To be sincere, what I am fighting for now is not my son,” he told me. “My son is nothing—I mean, he is my prior objective. My objective now is to rescue these children and to have a peaceful country. If my son happens to be among those people, if he dies in the crossfire and the situation is calm, I will have been happy to sacrifice his life for the betterment of the nation.”

Every once in a while, Wilson caught some wisp of a rumor: Jimmy wanted to come home; Jimmy was dead. Sometimes he would hear that his son had been sighted passing through some remote village, and he would make a desperate pilgrimage. But Jimmy was never there, and Wilson said he’d stopped counting Jimmy when he was asked how many children he had. “He is still my child, but the life is now . . .” He paused. “I entrust the life to God.”

Even if he were to find Jimmy alive, Wilson doubted he would be the son he once knew. Oscar had told him that he had sometimes encountered his brother in the bush, and that Jimmy was no longer a gentle boy. He had become the aide-de-camp of a feared rebel commander. He carried himself like an officer. He barked orders. He didn't act like someone who wanted to come home.

Wilson understood that. The LRA didn't need psychology or witchcraft to brainwash children. It was much simpler than that. "For someone who has never handled a gun," he said, "when he's given a gun he will find that when he orders someone to sit down, he sits down. He will really be very pleased. He will love the situation. He will not want to get out of that."

TWO NIGHTS LATER, my mobile phone rang, and Wilson said, "I've got my son." The joy in his voice exploded over the line. "I'm with Jimmy."

He was calling from the road, but he'd be home in Kampala the next morning, and he asked me to come over. I arrived to find the place overrun by friends and family.

"God is great!" Josephine shouted. The prodigal son was sitting on a three-legged stool in a corner of the living room. Oscar sat beside him, and their other siblings were on the floor at his feet, clinging close. Jimmy was now fifteen, as tall as his father, and skinny, with a child's soft face and an adolescent's awkward bearing. He wore a monstrously baggy blue denim suit. When he'd escaped, Jimmy had been dressed in rags, and even before seeing him again, Wilson had rushed to a clothing store. "I didn't have any idea what size to buy him," he later said. As always, he'd erred on the side of exaggeration. Jimmy had rolled up the legs of his new trousers, revealing his bare feet, which were toughened and covered with terrible blisters from marching in poorly sized boots.

"Life is really very funny," Wilson said, beaming at his sons. "I could not imagine these people coming back."

Everyone clamored for Jimmy's attention. Overwhelmed, the boy sat with his eyes cast down and fidgeted with his hands in his lap. Then one of the well-wishers who'd stopped by, a girl named Sarah, shared a story about how her own brother had been kidnapped by the rebels and taken into the bush. "He stayed there for one and a half weeks," she said.

"Only one and a half weeks?" Jimmy said. He smiled and cocked his head. "Then he wasn't there."

He began talking with a confidence I'd rarely heard from a teenager in Uganda, a rigidly hierarchical society in which elders demand deference. His voice hadn't yet broken, but in the LRA he'd been a man of authority. Jimmy had some education, which set him apart. He said he'd quickly won promotion to second lieutenant. He told us that for a time he'd commanded a unit of a hundred and seventy rebels. He had only escaped, after a year and a half in the bush, when a fellow officer suggested it. "I'm tired of killing," his friend had said. So they'd stolen away, following a road south to a refugee camp, where they surrendered. The next morning, Wilson received a telephone call. "*Baba*," said the voice on the other end of the line. "It's Jimmy."

Wilson had traveled north to collect the boy that same day. He found him at a rehabilitation center, a vast tented camp filled with wounded and traumatized children. Ignoring the objections of administrators who said Jimmy needed intense counseling, Wilson checked him out and took him home. "I told them, if it means taking him by force, I am taking him," Wilson said. "I got him across Karuma Falls immediately. I wanted him on the side where I was feeling safe."

But Wilson knew that Jimmy and Oscar hadn't entirely escaped. Medical studies have found that ninety-seven percent of former LRA abductees experience symptoms of trauma. Jimmy spoke of "demons" that torture kids like him, and he meant it literally: the LRA's commanders warned their young soldiers that if they ran away, the spirits of those they had killed would pursue them forever. "I just try to forget whatever happened in the bush," Jimmy said. "Otherwise it could be very dangerous for me." Oscar couldn't shake his demons so easily. He had terrible nightmares, and sometimes, suddenly, he smelled human blood.

Wilson thought psychology was Western mumbo jumbo. He couldn't see any good in making his boys relive their darkest moments. Instead, he fell back on the traditions of the northern tribes, which have their own ways of cleansing souls and consciences. So, not long after Jimmy's return, Wilson decided to hold a special homecoming ceremony for his sons in his mother's village. My jeep was back from the shop, and one morning in April we loaded the family's battered plaid-patterned suitcases into the back of the jeep and went north.

With Jimmy home, Wilson's family had regained the appearance of normalcy. On the ride up, Wilson, who was wearing his army uniform and

shiny sunglasses, pointed out landmarks to little Ruth, who was sitting on his lap. Josephine, who hadn't once returned north since the attack, looked excited and relieved and about a decade younger. In the back, Jimmy and Oscar were locked in animated conversation, as they had been incessantly since being reunited. And that night, at the hotel bar, Wilson was as contented as I'd ever seen him. He told anyone who'd listen about Jimmy's miraculous good fortune. When our waiter responded with a Christian blessing, Wilson smiled widely. "I am not a man of God," he said. "But for the last two days we have been friends." He talked of his son the rebel—the second lieutenant!—as if he were a tennis prodigy. Wilson said he was just trying to free his boy from his feeling of shame. But he couldn't hide it: he was genuinely proud. Over giddy retellings, he promoted Jimmy to lieutenant, then colonel.

The next morning, a Sunday, we left Lira on a rutted dirt road, driving several miles until we reached a mud-brick church. Behind it stood several round thatch-roofed huts arrayed in a rough circle around a bare patch of dirt and attended by a few scrawny chickens and goats. It was a makeshift village, occupied by refugees from Amugo who had fled to the Lira area when the war had intensified. But for the purposes of a homecoming, the place would have to do.

Jimmy and Oscar were treated like returning warriors. In keeping with Langi rituals, the women of the village, in worn floral-print dresses, laid three forked branches on the path leading to their grandmother's hut, symbolic arrows pointing the way home. Beyond the sticks they placed an egg. The boys stepped over the branches, and then Jimmy, who was first in line, crushed the egg with a stomp. The women shook leaves dipped in water over the boys' heads, commanding the rebel spirits to leave the children. To the sound of ululating voices, the elders of Amugo performed a shuffling thanksgiving dance.

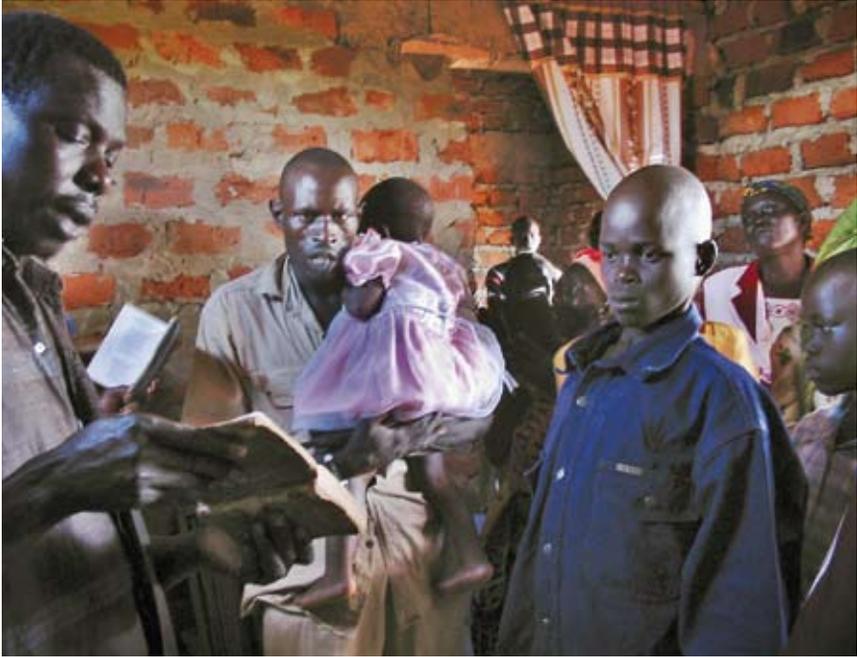
As lunch was prepared, Oscar sat alone in front of his grandmother's hut, toying quietly with a pink stuffed animal, while Jimmy took a seat on a wicker chair. The village children gathered around, and Jimmy regaled them with war stories. It hadn't been so miserable, he said. He and his comrades ate well, lived off the land, stole anything they needed. They were no longer children once they carried a gun. They were different people entirely. Most of the LRA kids, Jimmy said, took a *nom de guerre*. His was "Jimmy Olwol."

Jimmy Olwol did terrible things. Josephine watched him with a fretful look as Jimmy spoke with tough-guy assurance about the atrocities he'd committed. He demonstrated how the rebels tied their captives' arms behind their backs. He said he'd killed many people. With a giggle, he added that LRA commanders sometimes ordered him and his comrades to desecrate the bodies of those they had killed and to ceremonially drink their blood. His appalled audience laughed uncomfortably. A few women clicked their tongues—whether with pity or disapproval, I couldn't tell.

In a small, stuffy brick house, the home of the village's richest man, we sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," Martin Luther's martial hymn. Wilson addressed us, praising his sons for their bravery and loyalty to each other. Then a reverend said some soothing words: God had protected the boys; he had preserved them for his own invisible purposes. There was a reading from Isaiah. And then Jimmy and Oscar kneeled on a woven papyrus mat. As Wilson looked on, the minister laid his hands on the boys' heads and said a blessing. They were forgiven.

MONTHS PASSED. I returned to New York, and Wilson occasionally e-mailed. He asked about my presidential election and told me about his war. But the warmth had gone out of our connection. Wilson had always imagined that I would write about him and he would become rich and famous, and when I'd told him, before leaving Uganda, that it might be some time before I wrote his story, he'd acted betrayed, as if I'd borrowed something valuable and wasn't giving it back. Now, in his brief messages, he was always asking for something from me. He wanted me to bring Jimmy to America; he wanted money for his story. I told him, guiltily, that I couldn't be that kind of friend. Our e-mail exchanges became less frequent, until eventually they stopped. Then, one afternoon, I got a phone message from a friend in Uganda, telling me that a few days earlier Wilson had shot a woman dead with an AK-47 and then turned the gun on himself. Wilson was alive, though badly injured. He was in prison now, facing a murder charge. That was all my friend knew.

I returned to Uganda a few months later, and as soon as I got there, I called one of Wilson's closest friends, a man named Richard Nixon Okello. He was a thoughtful man with a kindly manner, and he'd known Wilson for nearly twenty years. But Okello hadn't seen Wilson for a while, even though his friend was in Lira prison, not far from where he lived. "I got annoyed



Wilson Obote, center, at a homecoming service with his sons Jimmy and Oscar, Ober, Uganda, 2004.

with him because he was not repentant,” he said. “He was behaving like a hero after killing a woman in cold blood.”

Wilson had always cursed his deprived upbringing, but in the story Okello told me, it was good fortune that ended up destroying him. In May of 2004 a highly fanciful account of Wilson’s search for Jimmy had appeared in a Ugandan newspaper. The article was read by some Austrian philanthropists, who invited Wilson to Vienna to speak about the war in northern Uganda. “They wanted to hear the story of how he fought the monster,” Okello said. Wilson obliged, with his usual flair for embellishment. He presented himself to his audiences as an army battalion commander and talked of leading his troops on a mission to rescue his sons. He said that he planned to start a radio station to coax LRA fighters to lay down their arms, and the Europeans were greatly moved. They sent Wilson back to Uganda with ten thousand euros and a desktop computer.

Wilson used much of his new wealth to buy a home at one of Lira’s best addresses: a brick house, wired for electricity, with a columned porch and a sheet-metal roof. He became a big man in town. His position in the

Internal Security Organization made life's routine problems—a dispute with the phone company, say, or an expired car permit—magically disappear. He had money, especially after he used his imaginary radio expertise to score a consulting contract with an American AIDS charity. He was popular; late at night, he could be found buying rounds at a bar favored by white people and visitors from Kampala. And, in keeping with his heightened status and with Ugandan custom, he took a new, younger wife—a longtime girlfriend named Grace, with whom he already had two children. Josephine, back in Kampala, had little choice but grudgingly to accept the situation.

Wilson finally had the life he'd always wanted, and yet, when the fleeting feeling of satisfaction passed, he was as vexed as ever. When he drank, he fought, mostly with Grace. She was pretty, but as an educated woman, willful and temperamental, she was a bad match for a man like him. Grace accused Wilson of sleeping around. (He was, of course.) She refused to have anything to do with his troubled sons. Wilson hated Grace's mother, who thought he was a good-for-nothing. When the relationship went bad, Wilson's mother-in-law told him she didn't believe his Austrian patrons even existed. She was sure he'd stolen the money.

Grace moved out, moved back in, fled again, forgave him. Finally she asked for a divorce. One morning, a cousin went to visit Wilson at his new house. He was drinking gin and talking murder, and he had his AK-47 out. Wilson's cousin tried to calm him down and took the gun's clip with him when he left. But Wilson had more bullets. Later that day, he got into his battered Toyota and drove to his mother-in-law's, where Grace was staying. He made a scene there, brandishing the gun. Wilson yelled that his wife was coming home one way or another. Grace came outside to talk. What happened next is disputed: Okello said Wilson claimed he meant to fire as a warning; a witness later told me, "He just shot her." In any case, Wilson emptied the gun's clip. Grace was hit four times. With the last bullet, Wilson shot himself. "But I think he was a coward. He did not do it properly," Okello said. "When he realized he wasn't dead, he got up, drove his car to the police, and told them, 'I have killed many people. Put me in.'"

Following Wilson's imprisonment, Josephine could no longer afford the apartment in Kampala, and she was afraid to take the family back to Lira, in case Grace's relatives tried to take revenge on Wilson's sons. So she had retreated to her mother's village, where the boys were attending a local school for which Josephine could no longer afford the fees. The north was calmer

now; the LRA, reduced to remnants by a government offensive, was hiding out in a Congolese jungle, cut off from its weapon suppliers in Sudan. The International Criminal Court had issued an arrest warrant for Joseph Kony. The refugees were returning to their land. Still, when I found Josephine and the boys, in a village so remote that it could only be reached by a footpath, the boys told me they used false names at school in case the LRA ever came back. “If they abduct me a second time, they will kill me,” Jimmy said. “That’s their motto.” There wasn’t much to eat in the village—just beans and cassava—and the boys missed Kampala. But what they really missed was the security of having a father.

Wilson’s legal situation was bleak. The penalty for murder in Uganda was death by hanging, and the justice system was so overburdened that Wilson would probably spend years in jail before seeing a judge. But Wilson had managed to secure the services of a defense attorney. I found the lawyer at his Lira office, a file-strewn storefront lit by a naked bulb. He informed me that if Wilson could come up with seven head of cattle, he could pay “blood compensation” to Grace’s mother. Then he could pay off a judge—it would cost a few thousand dollars—and the murder charge would evaporate. “In these circumstances—I mean, the fact that it’s his wife—he can get away with it,” the lawyer said happily.

The prison, a compact and grimy building, was on the other side of town. Okello went there with me, bringing Wilson some provisions: a pound of sugar, a few bars of soap, a one-liter bottle of Coke. Wilson, attended by a red-bereted prison guard, met us in the lobby. He shook my hand and said, “You’ve gotten fat.” This was both a compliment and an accusation. In Uganda, a man who is prospering is said to be “eating,” and girth is considered synonymous with wealth. Wilson, by contrast, had been winnowed by seven months in the lockup. He was barefoot and stuffed into a too-small prison uniform, a stiff canary yellow shirt and shorts. His face was gaunt and scarred from his suicide attempt. There was a little furrow where the tip of his nose used to be.

The guard led us across to a dingy visiting room that was lit by a small barred window and crowded with families bringing bags of rice and bowls of stew to their jailed relatives. The room had rules: visitors were to sit on the hard wooden benches that lined the walls, while prisoners squatted on the concrete floor. But Wilson refused to kneel. He sat beside me on a bench. A beefy matron rapped a baton against the doorjamb in reproach. Wilson

stood up and gestured to his shoulders as if they bore epaulets. “I am a lieutenant in the army,” he yelled. “You wait until I get out!”

Wilson sat back on the bench and smiled. His mouth was a mess: three of his incisors were missing, and a fourth was just a sharp stump. “I put the barrel here,” he explained, sticking his index finger below his lower lip. “Then the bullet passed here”—he rubbed what remained of his top row of teeth—“and it blew off my nose.”

I asked Wilson what had happened. “How could I kill the mother of my two children?” he asked. “I would have to be insane.” His eyes met mine. “To be sincere,” he said, “it was an accident.”

The room emptied; visiting hours were over. Through the window, the sound of voices in harmony, a prison choir, floated into the room. Wilson told us that lately he’d been getting right with God. “You know that I am a very good preacher,” he said. Okello and I rose to leave. A guard held open the prison’s heavy front door, and we walked out into the bright afternoon. I looked over my shoulder to catch a last glimpse of Wilson, standing at the prison’s entrance, costumed in his coarse yellow uniform. He shouted good-bye with a wide, jagged smile. He’d made me promise to come see him again. I told him I would, though I knew that I wouldn’t.