My Father's Head

Okwiri Oduor

I had meant to summon my father only long enough to see what his head looked like, but now he was here and I did not know how to send him back.

It all started the Thursday that Father Ignatius came from Immaculate Conception in Kitgum. The old women wore their Sunday frocks, and the old men plucked garlands of bougainvillea from the fence and stuck them in their breast pockets. One old man would not leave the dormitory because he could not find his shikwarusi, and when I coaxed and badgered, he patted his hair and said, "My God, do you want the priest from Uganda to think that I look like this every day?"

I arranged chairs beneath the avocado tree in the front yard, and the old people sat down and practiced their smiles. A few people who did not live at the home came too, like the woman who hawked candy in the Stagecoach bus to Mathari North, and the man whose one-roomed house was a kindergarten in the daytime and a brothel in the evening, and the woman whose illicit brew had blinded five people in January.

Father Ignatius came riding on the back of a bodaboda, and after everyone had dropped a coin in his hat, he gave the bodaboda man fifty shillings and the bodaboda man said, "Praise God," and then rode back the way he had come.

Father Ignatius took off his coat and sat down in the chair that was marked, "Father Ignatius Okello, New Chaplain," and the old people gave him the smiles they had been practicing, smiles that melted like ghee, that oozed through the corners of their lips and dribbled onto their laps long after the thing that was being smiled about went rancid in the air.

Father Ignatius said, "The Lord be with you," and the people said, "And also with you," and then they prayed and they sang and they had a feast; dipping bread slices in tea, and when the drops fell on the cuffs of their woollen sweaters, sucking at them with their steamy, cinnamon tongues.

Father Ignatius' maiden sermon was about love: love your neighbour as you love yourself, that kind of self-deprecating thing. The old people had little use for love, and although they gave Father Ignatius an ingratiating smile, what they really wanted to know was what type of place Kitgum was, and if it was true that the Bagisu people were savage cannibals.

What I wanted to know was what type of person Father Ignatius thought he was, instructing others to distribute their love like this or like that, as though one could measure love on weights, pack it inside glass jars and place it on shelves for the neighbours to pick as

they pleased. As though one could look at it and say, “Now see: I have ten loves in total. Let me save three for my country and give all the rest to my neighbours.”

It must have been the way that Father Ignatius filled his mug – until the tea ran over the clay rim and down the stool leg and soaked into his canvas shoe – that got me thinking about my own father. One moment I was listening to tales of Acholi valour, and the next, I was stringing together images of my father, making his limbs move and his lips spew words, so that in the end, he was a marionette and my memories of him were only scenes in a theatrical display.

Even as I showed Father Ignatius to his chambers, cleared the table, put the chairs back inside, took my purse, and dragged myself to Odeon to get a matatu to Uthiru, I thought about the millet-coloured freckle in my father’s eye, and the fifty cent coins he always forgot in his coat pockets, and the way each Saturday morning men knocked on our front door and said things like, “Johnson, you have to come now; the water pipe has burst and we are filling our glasses with shit,” and, “Johnson, there is no time to put on clothes even; just come the way you are. The maid gave birth in the night and flushed the baby down the toilet.”

Every day after work, I bought an ear of street-roasted maize and chewed it one kernel at a time, and when I reached the house, I wiggled out of the muslin dress and wore dungarees and drank a cup of masala chai. Then I carried my father’s toolbox to the bathroom. I chiselled out old broken tiles from the wall, and they fell onto my boots, and the dust rose from them and exploded in the flaring tongues of fire lapping through chinks in the stained glass.

This time, as I did all those things, I thought of the day I sat at my father’s feet and he scooped a handful of groundnuts and rubbed them between his palms, chewed them, and then fed the mush to me. I was of a curious age then; old enough to chew with my own teeth, yet young enough to desire that hot, masticated love, love that did not need to be doctrinated or measured in cough syrup caps.

The Thursday Father Ignatius came from Kitgum, I spent the entire night on my stomach on the sitting room floor, drawing my father. In my mind I could see his face, see the lines around his mouth, the tiny blobs of light in his irises, the crease at the part where his ear joined his temple. I could even see the thick line of sweat and oil on his shirt collar, the little brown veins that broke off from the main stream of dirt and ran down on their own.

I could see all these things, yet no matter what I did, his head refused to appear within the borders of the paper. I started off with his feet and worked my way up and in the end my father’s head popped out of the edges of the paper and onto scuffed linoleum and plastic magnolias and the wet soles of bathroom slippers.

I showed Bwibo some of the drawings. Bwibo was the cook at the old people's home, with whom I had formed an easy camaraderie.

"My God!" Bwibo muttered, flipping through them. "Simbi, this is abnormal."

The word 'abnormal' came out crumbly, and it broke over the sharp edge of the table and became clods of loam on the plastic floor covering. Bwibo rested her head on her palm, and the bell sleeves of her cream-coloured caftan swelled as though there were pumpkins stacked inside them.

I told her what I had started to believe, that perhaps my father had had a face but no head at all. And even if my father had had a head, I would not have seen it: people's heads were not a thing that one often saw. One looked at a person, and what one saw was their face: a regular face-shaped face, that shrouded a regular head-shaped head. If the face was remarkable, one looked twice. But what was there to draw one's eyes to the banalities of another's head? Most times when one looked at a person, one did not even see their head there at all.

Bwibo stood over the waist-high jiko, poured cassava flour into a pot of bubbling water and stirred it with a cooking oar. "Child," she said, "how do you know that the man in those drawings is your father? He has no head at all, no face."

"I recognize his clothes. The red corduroys that he always paired with yellow shirts."

Bwibo shook her head. "It is only with a light basket that someone can escape the rain."

It was that time of day when the old people fondled their wooden beads and snorted off to sleep in between incantations. I allowed them a brief, bashful siesta, long enough for them to believe that they had recited the entire rosary. Then I tugged at the ropes and the lunch bells chimed. The old people sat eight to a table, and with their mouths filled with ugali, sour lentils and okra soup, said things like, "Do not buy chapati from Kadima's Kiosk—Kadima's wife sits on the dough and charms it with her buttocks," or, "Did I tell you about Wambua, the one whose cow chewed a child because the child would not stop wailing?"

In the afternoon, I emptied the bedpans and soaked the old people's feet in warm water and baking soda, and when they trooped off to mass I took my purse and went home.

The Christmas before the cane tractor killed my father, he drank his tea from plates and fried his eggs on the lids of coffee jars, and he retrieved his Yamaha drum-set from a shadowy, lizardy place in the back of the house and sat on the veranda and smoked and beat the drums until his knuckles bled.

One day he took his stool and hand-held radio and went to the veranda, and I sat at his feet, undid his laces and peeled off his gummy socks. He wiggled his toes about. They smelt slightly fetid, like sour cream.

My father smoked and listened to narrations of famine undulating deeper into the Horn of Africa, and when the clock chimed eight o'clock, he turned the knob and listened to the death news. It was not long before his ears caught the name of someone he knew. He choked on the smoke trapped in his throat.

My father said, "Did you hear that? Sospeter has gone! Sospeter, the son of Milkah, who taught Agriculture in Mirere Secondary. My God, I am telling you, everyone is going. Even me, you shall hear me on the death news very soon."

I brought him his evening cup of tea. He smashed his cigarette against the veranda, then he slowly brought the cup to his lips. The cup was filled just the way he liked it, filled until the slightest trembling would have his fingers and thighs scalded.

My father took a sip of his tea and said, "Sospeter was like a brother to me. Why did I have to learn of his death like this, over the radio?"

Later, my father lay on the fold-away sofa, and I sat on the stool watching him, afraid that if I looked away, he would go too. It was the first time I imagined his death, the first time I mourned.

And yet it was not my father I was mourning. I was mourning the image of myself inside the impossible aura of my father's death. I was imagining what it all would be like: the death news would say that my father had drowned in a cess pit, and people would stare at me as though I were a monitor lizard trapped inside a manhole in the street. I imagined that I would be wearing my green dress when I got the news – the one with red gardenias embroidered in its bodice –and people would come and pat my shoulder and give me warm Coca Cola in plastic cups and say, "I put my sorrow in a basket and brought it here as soon as I heard. How else would your father's spirit know that I am innocent of his death?"

Bwibo had an explanation as to why I could not remember the shape of my father's head.

She said, "Although everyone has a head behind their face, some show theirs easily; they turn their back on you and their head is all you can see. Your father was a good man and good men never show you their heads; they show you their faces."

Perhaps she was right. Even the day my father's people telephoned to say that a cane tractor had flattened him on the road to Shibale, no one said a thing about having seen his head. They described the rest of his body with a measured delicacy: how his legs were strewn across the road, sticky and shiny with fresh tar, and how one foot remained inside his tyre sandal, pounding the pedal of his bicycle, and how cane juice filled his mouth and soaked the collar of his polyester shirt, and how his face had a patient serenity, even as his eyes burst and rolled in the rain puddles.

And instead of weeping right away when they said all those things to me, I had wondered if my father really had come from a long line of obawami, and if his people would bury him seated in his grave, with a string of royal cowries round his neck.

"In any case," Bwibo went on, "what more is there to think about your father, eh? That milk spilled a long time ago, and it has curdled on the ground."

I spent the day in the dormitories, stripping beds, sunning mattresses, scrubbing PVC mattress pads. One of the old men kept me company. He told me how he came to spend his sunset years at the home – in August of 1998 he was at the station waiting to board the evening train back home to Mombasa. When the bomb went off at the American Embassy, the police trawled the city and arrested every man of Arab extraction. Because he was seventy-two and already rapidly unravelling into senility, they dumped him at the old people's home, and he had been there ever since.

"Did your people not come to claim you?" I asked, bewildered.

The old man snorted. "My people?"

"Everyone has people that belong to them."

The old man laughed. "Only the food you have already eaten belongs to you."

Later, the old people sat in drooping clumps in the yard. Bwibo and I watched from the back steps of the kitchen. In the grass, ants devoured a squirming caterpillar. The dog's nose, a translucent pink doodled with green veins, twitched. Birds raced each other over the frangipani. One tripped over the power line and smashed its head on the moss–covered electricity pole.

Wasps flew low over the grass. A lizard crawled over the lichen that choked a pile of timber. The dog licked the inside of its arm. A troupe of royal butterfly dancers flitted over the row of lilies, their colourful gauze dancing skirts trembling to the rumble of an inaudible drum beat. The dog lay on its side in the grass, smothering the squirming caterpillar and the chewing ants. The dog's nipples were little pellets of goat shit stuck with spit onto its furry underside.

Bwibo said, "I can help you remember the shape of your father's head."

I said, "Now what type of mud is this you have started speaking?"

Bwibo licked her index finger and held it solemnly in the air. "I swear, Bible red! I can help you and I can help you."

Let me tell you: one day you will renounce your exile, and you will go back home, and your mother will take out the finest china, and your father will slaughter a sprightly cockerel for you, and the neighbours will bring some potluck, and your sister will wear her navy blue PE wrapper, and your brother will eat with a spoon instead of squelching rice and soup through the spaces between his fingers.

And you, you will have to tell them stories about places not-here, about people that soaked their table napkins in Jik Bleach and talked about London as though London was a place one could reach by hopping onto an Akamba bus and driving by Nakuru and Kisumu and Kakamega and finding themselves there.

You will tell your people about men that did not slit melons up into slices but split them into halves and ate each of the halves out with a spoon, about women that held each other's hands around street lamps in town and skipped about, showing snippets of grey Mother's Union bloomers as they sang:

Kijembe ni kikali, param-param

Kilikata mwalimu, param-param

You think that your people belong to you, that they will always have a place for you in their minds and their hearts. You think that your people will always look forward to your return.

Maybe the day you go back home to your people you will have to sit in a wicker chair on the veranda and smoke alone because, although they may have wanted to have you back, no one really meant for you to stay.

My father was slung over the wicker chair in the veranda, just like in the old days, smoking and watching the handheld radio. The death news rose from the radio, and it became a mist, hovering low, clinging to the cold glass of the sitting room window.

My father's shirt flapped in the wind, and tendrils of smoke snapped before his face. He whistled to himself. At first the tune was a faceless, pitiful thing, like an old bottle that someone found on the path and kicked all the way home. Then the tune caught fragments of other tunes inside it, and it lost its free-spirited falling and rising.

My father had a head. I could see it now that I had the mind to look for it. His head was shaped like a butternut squash. Perhaps that was the reason I had forgotten all about it; it was a horrible, disconcerting thing to look at.

My father had been a plumber. His fingernails were still rimmed with dregs from the drainage pipes he tinkered about in, and his boots still squished with ugali from nondescript kitchen sinks. Watching him, I remembered the day he found a gold chain tangled in the fibres of someone's excrement, and he wiped the excrement off against his corduroys and sold the chain at Nagin Pattni, and that evening, hoisted high upon his shoulders, he brought home the red Greatwall television. He set it in the corner of the sitting room and said, "Just look how it shines, as though it is not filled with shit inside."

And every day I plucked a bunch of carnations and snipped their stems diagonally and stood them in a glass bowl and placed the glass bowl on top of the television so that my father would not think of shit while he watched the evening news.

I said to Bwibo, "We have to send him back."

Bwibo said, “The liver you have asked for is the one you eat.”

“But I did not really want him back, I just wanted to see his head.”

Bwibo said, “In the end, he came back to you and that should account for something, should it not?”

Perhaps my father’s return accounted for nothing but the fact that the house already smelt like him – of burnt lentils and melting fingernails and the bark of bitter quinine and the sourness of wet rags dabbing at broken cigarette tips.

I threw things at my father; garlic, incense, salt, pork, and when none of that repelled him, I asked Father Ignatius to bless the house. He brought a vial of holy water, and he sprinkled it in every room, sprinkled it over my father. Father Ignatius said that I would need further protection, but that I would have to write him a cheque first.

One day I was buying roast maize in the street corner when the vendor said to me, “Is it true what the vegetable-sellers are saying, that you finally found a man to love you but will not let him through your door?”

That evening, I invited my father inside. We sat side by side on the fold-away sofa, and watched as a fly crawled up the dusty screen between the grill and the window glass. It buzzed a little as it climbed. The ceiling fan creaked, and it threw shadows across the corridor floor. The shadows leapt high and mounted doors and peered through the air vents in the walls.

The wind upset a cup. For a few seconds, the cup lay lopsided on the windowsill. Then it rolled on its side and scurried across the floor. I pulled at the latch, fastened the window shut. The wind grazed the glass with its wet lips. It left a trail of dust and saliva, and the saliva dribbled down slowly to the edge of the glass. The wind had a slobbery mouth. Soon its saliva had covered the entire window, covered it until the rosemary brushwood outside the window became blurry. The jacaranda outside stooped low, scratched the roof. In the next room, doors and windows banged.

I looked at my father. He was something at once strange and familiar, at once enthralling and frightening – he was the brittle, chipped handle of a ceramic tea mug, and he was the cold yellow stare of an owl.

My father touched my hand ever so lightly, so gently, as though afraid that I would flinch and pull my hand away. I did not dare lift my eyes, but he touched my chin and tipped it upwards so that I had no choice but to look at him.

I remembered a time when I was a little child, when I stared into my father’s eyes in much the same way. In them I saw shapes; a drunken, talentless conglomerate of circles and triangles and squares. I had wondered how those shapes had got inside my father’s eyes. I had imagined that he sat down at the table, cut out glossy figures from colouring books, slathered

them with glue, and stuck them inside his eyes so that they made rummy, haphazard collages in his irises.

My father said, “Would you happen to have some tea, Simbi?”

I brought some, and he asked if his old friend Pius Obote still came by the house on Saturdays, still brought groundnut soup and pumpkin leaves and a heap of letters that he had picked up from the post office.

I said, “Pius Obote has been dead for four years.”

My father pushed his cup away. He said, “If you do not want me here drinking your tea, just say so, instead of killing-killing people with your mouth.”

My father was silent for a while, grieving this man Pius Obote whose name had always made me think of knees banging against each other. Pius Obote used to blink a lot. Once, he fished inside his pocket for a biro and instead withdrew a chicken bone, still red and moist.

My father said to me, “I have seen you. You have offered me tea. I will go now.”

“Where will you go?”

“I will find a job in a town far from here. Maybe Eldoret. I used to have people there.”

I said, “Maybe you could stay here for a couple of days, Baba.”

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