KOMERA. BE BRAVE.
BY CAITLIN VAKA
A STORY OF A CONGOLESE REFUGEE
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Komera. Be brave. Aleze told himself as he sat down in a classroom, full of faces he didn’t recognize. This place was so different than back home. Putting on his bravest face, Aleze walked forward as his teacher motioned for him to come to the front of the classroom.

This is your new classmate Aleze- say hi everyone! He just got here from Africa. Aleze is a refugee.” Aleze anxiously waived, not understanding what his new teacher was saying.
“A refugee?” “What’s that?” one classmate quietly asked another. “Why’d he move?” “Is he going to be staying here for a long time?” Aleze sat back down in his seat, squirming with all of the eyes of his new classmates on him.

Pulling out his new notebook and pencils, Aleze began to scribble his name at the top of the page. He couldn’t believe it- a brand new school! Aleze was so excited to be in a real classroom again. The last time he was in a real classroom was in his home in Kivu in the Congo.
Education had always been important to his tribe, the Banyamulenge, a fact that his father would frequently remind him of. “Anything can be possible through education,” his father would tell him. Education didn’t stop when they moved either. Aleze’s father had helped to organize an informal school. They would sit on the ground, where everyone gathered to get food everyday, and the teachers would teach from memory.

Komera. Be brave. Feeling nervous about his first day in the United States, Aleze thought about his cousin from back home. JD had always been brave- he was never scared of anything. Aleze laughed to himself about how fearless JD really was, whether he was answering a question in class or running around the camp, JD always pushed Aleze to try new things.
The bell for the next class rang, and Aleze awoke from his daydream, confused. “Come with me!” A small blonde girl reached out her hand, ready to lead Aleze to his next class. His buddy brought him from one room to another amidst the sea of people.

“Bonjour!” The French teacher greeted him at the door. Finally! Someone he could talk to! Aleze excitedly responded, “Bonjour! Je m'appelle Aleze!”
French class reminded him of his school in Kivu. French was the official language of his home country. Aleze had loved learning new languages— in fact he knew eight of them! He fondly remembered the classrooms with their wooden benches, where he would sit closely with five or so other classmates.

He could remember exactly the way the room looked the day they had to leave. He remembered the way the sunlight hit the chalkboard early in the morning, the sound that the breeze would make wafting through the open windows, and the way the clock ticked. His father showed up at school that morning, pulling him from his test that day, saying that they didn’t have much time and that they had to leave.
They rushed home and Aleze could only pack a small bag of what he could carry. He quickly put together his passport, some socks, and a few of his favorite things: his passport. “Where are we going?” Aleze asked his father. “Burundi,” he answered. Aleze, JD, his siblings, his parents, and all of his aunts and cousins crammed into his family’s small car that morning and started driving.

“But we aren’t really that different at all,” he thought to himself as he looked out the window as they drove away from his home.

“Why are they coming after us?” Aleze’s little sister asked. “We didn’t do anything to them.” “It’s because we’re different,” Aleze answered. “We look different than they do. We speak a different language. We have different traditions.”
“It’s not safe for you on the main roads,” a police officer and family friend told them. “Go through the back roads.” Round and round they drove, as far as they could go, until they could go no further.

“Will you help us? It’s not safe for us to drive further.” Aleze’s father asked a taxi driver. The taxi driver could see that they needed help, and motioned for them to come to his car, even though it might be dangerous. Soon they approached the border of Burundi at Gatumba, where hundreds of refugees stood, hoping to be let in.
Aleze shook his head and tried not to think about Gatumba, he liked to remember his time in Burundi in Bujumbura instead. But as hard as he tried, he couldn’t erase that night from his mind. There was so much chaos, and JD had been in the middle of it all.

Aleze remembered how JD had helped him find safety in the bushes. JD was the reason he was alive. JD had even been brave in the middle of all of the craziness that night. Aleze watched him save a young girl from the crossfire. He was thankful that he had had someone like JD to look up to growing up,
The French teacher smiled at him, bringing Aleze back from his memories to his new class in the US. “Aleze, viens t’présenter à la classe.” “Would you like to introduce yourself to the class, Aleze?”

*Komera. Be Brave. Aleze missed his cousin, but decided that he would make JD proud of him at his new school. Aleze took a deep breath, looking out back of the sea of faces. “Je m’appelle Aleze, Et je suis un réfugié.” “My name is Aleze, and I am a refugee.”*
About the Conflict

Aleze’s experiences reflect the effects of the Congolese conflict on young children. After gaining independence from Belgium in the 1960s, the country has experienced years of conflict and violence, resulting in thousands of displaced refugees, and in recent years the use of child soldiers. Aleze left his home at the beginning of the Second Congolese War in 2004, first living in the Gatumba refugee camp before moving to Bujumbura, Burundi. The story takes place after his move to the United States in 2007. The Second Congolese War and Gatumba Massacre largely reflects the ethnic tensions between various tribal groups originating from the Hutu and Tutsi groups.

To learn more about the conflict and the refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, you can find resources through UNHCR & UNICEF.
ABOUT ALEZE

Aleze is originally from Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo. During the Second Congolese War, his family moved first to the Gatumba refugee camp, then Bujumbura, Burundi. Aleze and his family then moved to Flemington, NJ in the United States. After moving to the United States, Aleze learned English and was fluent by the following year.

Aleze graduated from Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, NJ in 2013, and attends Furman University in Greenville, SC where he studies Political Science. He became a US citizen in 2014 and hopes to pursue a career as a diplomat.