

Enguzi - Suchita Shah

Click. It shouldn't have happened, that myopic shutter-blink that could have catapulted me into jail. Later, I would explain it away as a tourist malady, a tic, because here, in Uganda, on the road from Kampala to Jinja, on a low sign that heralds a bridge over a dam, it is spelled out, in black and white, that photographs must not be taken.

My target hadn't been the drab, decaying bridge, or the nondescript curve of water beneath, but instead a billboard on the other side. An inconsequential advertisement.

We had set off early to avoid the traffic, which collects in the sapping heat like beads of sweat. Our stomachs satisfied with sweet *gonja* plantains, chargrilled at a roadside stall and served on ruled notebook paper, we crossed the bridge.

Seconds later, a swirl of blue lights flooded the rear view mirror, announcing an SUV from which hurried motioning brought us to a dust-spattering halt. Winding down the passenger window I was confronted by a man in dark military gear. Smiling, he reported that we had been seen photographing the bridge. *No*, I went to say, *the billboard. A great health ad.* But my lips wouldn't move.

"Show me your ID," he said.

A foreign passport, in the wrong hands, is a valuable bargaining tool. My companion, let's call him Zee, a local, knew this, and stepped in. His voice deepened, mirroring without parodying the officer's syncopated cadences.

"It is my camera. You deal with me."

Thus began a curious game of chess between two seasoned players. The officer paused, his beady eyes flecked with uncertainty. I noticed how young he was, how slight. The snap-happy people to whom he had come for his daily bread were not typical *muzungu*, white, tourists. We were *muhindis*, Asians, people umbilically connected to East Africa; but—what's this—one carried himself with the insouciance of a local, while the other wore a terrified expression and a ridiculous hat. Who were we? He tried a different move:

"Give me the camera."

"I cannot do that."

Pawn met pawn, and I knew that Zee would safely navigate us through this game, the etiquette of which I was woefully unaware. He got out of the car, stretched himself to his full height, and followed the officer to an open patch of rust-red ground.

When this was over, we would laugh about it over pizzas at the sailing club. Relaxed by Lake Victoria, we would lazily observe a *boda-boda* driver washing his motorbike, a ritual involving two yellow jerry cans and much elbow grease. We would go to Main Street and pass multi-coloured shop-fronted houses inscribed with the names of the Gujarati families who had built them before the expulsion, and further southwest the most famous Gujarati of all, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, his statue watching over the source of the Nile, where his ashes were scattered in 1948.

But I did not know this then. All I could see were two men talking, gesturing, sometimes even smiling, as though they were friends. Except one had a rifle.

A *matatu* thudded past, exhaling clouds of black smoke, emblazoned with ‘God is Great No.3’ in blue-and-white to match the stripes that signalled its taxi status. All along that road, I remembered, were shops and businesses, their skyward-facing signs (‘Jesus is Lord unmatched football’, ‘Amazing Grace Medical Centre’) part description, part invocation. Here, success required endeavour and faith.

The officer pulled out a mobile phone, and soon another official appeared, dressed in green. A knight’s move, unforeseen. My pulse quickened as the negotiations intensified. The three men walked back to our car.

“Let us finish this here,” said Zee.

“Yes, we will agree. Two hundred thousand,” said the green-uniformed man.

But the young officer was eager to raise the stakes. Pointing to a building on the right, his voice stinging with insinuation, he interjected, “Those are the cells for terrorists.”

A single word hung in the silence that followed. Seizing it, Zee swooped in with a final, masterful move. “Terrorist? Do I look like terrorist?”

Checkmate. You can get away with asking for *enguzi*, a little something to soften the palms, but even here you cannot accuse someone of being a terrorist, just like that. Words flew: *muzé*, big man... my lawyer... your name and rank... sorry, sir, we did not mean... let us finish.

And so, just as abruptly as it had started, the game was over, no hard feelings. For one, brief hour—one millionth of a lifetime triggered by the press of a button—I had

stood on my head in a new place: a liminal space between idealism and reality, where the lives of tourists and citizens converge, and where, for the eventual price of a pizza, an unintentional misdemeanour is forgiven, a safe passage ensured.