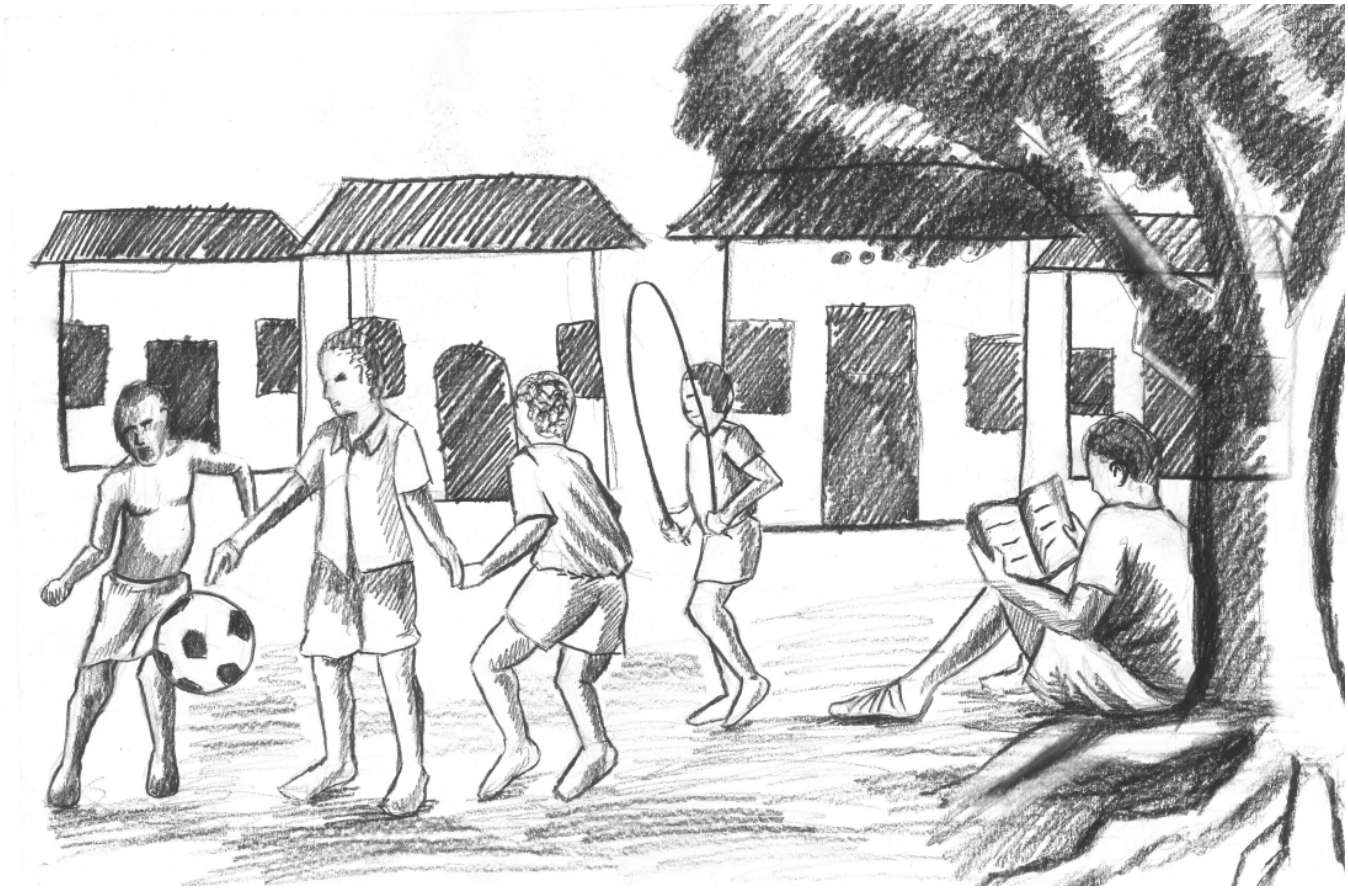

Number Five

Rodney Muhumuza

I

My name is Samuel. People here, they call me Sammy. I will turn thirteen in November. On that day, if there will be nothing more, at least there will be a cake of many colors set on the old table with crooked legs right in the middle of our sitting room. Mother will put it there with a pointed finger as she reminds me not to touch, to mind my own business until she says, *It is yours now, but aren't you going to wait for your brothers?* I can see the little cake staring right back at me as my brothers come running and jumping, one after the other.

We live in a box of a house, a single room, the first in a row of ten houses joined together in the background of a long line of flats along Bombo Road. There is no window, no ceiling, no water tap, and at night our source of light is the yellow gleam of a bulb hanging low from a wooden beam supporting the tin roof. A green curtain strung on nails divides the sitting room from the bedroom, light from darkness. This is my home.

Not counting the house girls who come and go, only five of us have lived here permanently as far back as I can remember: Father, Mother, me, Efrem, who follows me, and Jesse, who follows Efrem. As the firstborn, I enjoy benefits that my brothers are just now beginning to notice, benefits that can sometimes cause Efrem to erupt in tantrums of jealousy, sulking and refusing to touch his supper, like last year when I got a complete tuxedo for my twelfth birthday and he recalled that he had been given nothing for his tenth, nothing apart from the cake, of course. Cake will always be there.

I am talking about my birthday because, although it's still eight months away, this morning, while I ironed my school uniform, Mother sat on the edge of her bed silently watching me from the corner of her eye. I knew better than to look back, because doing so would only invite a sharp rebuke about focusing on the job at hand lest I burn the cloth. And yet when I turned to face her, unable to help myself, instead there was on her lips a funny smile, and then she surprised me by asking if I was putting on clean underwear. Also, did I want a new toothbrush? I kept quiet, gripping the flat iron as its pointed end pressed a shirtsleeve.

Mother carelessly scratched her scalp as she turned to lay her bed, lazily fanning a bedsheet toward the wall and then doing it all over again when the sheet blew back toward her, landing with folds like sand dunes in the desert and missing a corner of the mattress. "I am just checking on you," she said.

Where did that come from? Why was she checking on me? It felt strange and I remembered, without telling her, that she gave me a new toothbrush only five days ago, the morning after

she had asked me late in the night to open my mouth widely so she could smell my breath. Unless she was just messing with me, why did she really think I needed a new toothbrush when always my toothbrush must have matted bristles before I get a replacement. The one she gave me five days ago is, therefore, still brand new.

Mother sat up on the bed she had made, her hands running over the cottony softness of the bedspread. I put the flat iron on the floor and pulled the plug, bothered that she was still watching me, now with more seriousness as she eyed my chubby left hand holding the khaki shorts, then the stockinged feet that she knew would flee the room anytime without saying goodbye.

She stood up and came straight for my collar, which she straightened, her long fingers lingering over my shoulders as I greedily put on my shorts.

"Your teachers say you are good. Actually, Mister Jerome said you are a dedicated student. They all tell me how they are proud of you," she said.

"Even the mathematics teacher?" I asked impatiently.

"I didn't ask him many questions. I met him along Kampala Road and we talked about you very briefly. He was hurrying to school. But you know what they say, what they always tell you, that mathematics is the easiest subject if you are not afraid of it. But you boys and girls see stars when they ask you simple questions. You should be confident. Maybe you should pray to God for that?"

"There is a boy in my class who correctly answered each question on our last math exam. The teacher gave him one hundred percent. How can I get one hundred percent?"

"Don't worry about him, Sammy. I am sure he is not as good as you are in other subjects, not so?"

I let Mother's encouraging words sink in and quietly turned away when she coughed out loud, an elastic cough that broke and echoed through the room. Then I heard a slow clearing of her throat that I knew meant she was going to say something else. *What else does she want to say*, I thought, as I hurriedly entered my shoes. Until recently she never had time for such talk on a Tuesday morning, any morning, had never wasted her precious minutes staring blankly at me, but now she was lingering in the bedroom and expressing herself with such tenderness that I wondered if she was changing right before my eyes.

She was now perched on the edge of the bed, her head bent forward, elbows on knees. I turned once more to peer into those familiar brown eyes, more beseeching now than at any time I could recall, and, when she caught my glance she said: "Sammy, I know your birthday is still months away, but is there anything you want us to get for you?"

"But it's not yet—"

"I know. There is no problem. But please say something we can afford," she went on before I could finish, "like maybe an outing to the National Theatre to see *Thirty Years of Bananas* or some books you want to read?"

I told her I needed time to think about it, that she would get my answer when I came back from school.

I certainly wanted and needed books since I would have a lot of time after writing my final exams. But, as I walked to school, some other nice things I wanted floated in my mind and then mysteriously disappeared like speeding cars on Bombo Road, replaced by Mother. I saw her sitting behind her desk, calling in the woman with a crying baby, then the next, working hard so that I can stay in school and so that in November she can give me a nice present.

This year started on a good note for my family. Mother got more responsibilities at the hospital where she works three days a week, in addition to her regular work at a clinic on Kimathi Avenue. Father, who left his last job working as a laboratory technician for a sports doctor he hates, has now opened his own shop selling drugs on William Street. In his shop he sells aspirin, magnesium, penicillin, every drug that a sick person might want. His business card says he is a chemist on William Street.

I am not sure who makes more money between my parents, even though Mother has two jobs and Father has one. On those days when I fantasize about my family getting a car, maybe a Honda Civic like the red one driven by the fat accountant who runs after our neighbor's house girl, I believe Father has more money in the bank and only he can buy a car. I have never seen a woman driving a car. Mother is not going to be the first one I will ever see.

There is another reason why I don't give Mother a chance, not even if she had enough money to fill a wheelbarrow. As Mother sometimes says, Father is the *nyineka*, and *nyineka* remains the *nyineka*, the boss. He can break wind and shamelessly ask Mother or one of us, "You, have you *gassed* for us? I am going to chase you out." Mother is the one who must wash the dishes after we eat supper as Father cracks his silent knuckles listening to the BBC. Father gets up and sniffs the dishes before he decides whether or not he will eat. And whatever Father does, Mother looks troubled and has questions: Are you not hungry? The salt is not enough? Should I give you

more sauce? Watching them, I feel as though for him it's just food while for her it's more than food, and what he says or does can decide if Mother goes to bed a sad or happy woman. I think that if Father faces no consequences for coming back home any time he chooses, Mother knows that under no circumstances can she not be at the door when Father comes knocking. How, then, could she buy a car, even a bicycle, before Father owns one?

Father is still the *nyineka*, but at the same time Mother is starting to make important decisions of her own that I sometimes think Father just tolerates no matter how bitter they may make him feel. I know, for example, that it's to Mother I must go when they chase me away from school for unpaid school fees. Around Christmas I started to see Mother in a different way. She started raising her voice when Father asked about things that didn't really concern him, and I could also see that sometimes he seemed more eager to talk when usually Mother was the one who begged for conversation.

It was Mother's decision, at the urging of her friend Regina, to transfer me and Jesse to another school where, she announced one evening over tea, "the kids are more confident and the school meals are so much better." She said that with a flourish as she placed a saucer bearing peanuts on a stool before Father, who shook his head as he grabbed a fistful. At the time I had no idea he didn't like what he had just heard, because he hadn't been quick to say anything. I want to recite the events of that evening not because they meant a lot or were too sad, and maybe they were a bit sad, but for an altogether different reason. For the first time Mother took a stand and didn't waver despite every attempt by Father to put her in her place. For the first time I knew what her voice sounded like when she wasn't afraid of Father. That evening, just before she raised the issue of taking me to another school, in fact I had been postponing a trip to the latrine, very much close to wetting my pants. But somehow an urgent need to ease myself transformed into a desire at once to stay where I was. I saw that Father was poised to say something and I didn't think it would be good, whatever he said.

Now, Efrem and I disagree on what really caused the harsh words that came. My brother thinks that when Father wiped his moustache with his palm, which he does when he's in a bad mood or about to get into one, that this was the signal for Mother to excuse herself and maybe walk away. I think it all happened too fast and perhaps it was unavoidable, and I tell my brother, only jokingly, that if anything is to be blamed for that night's *war* then it has to be the very salty peanuts we were eating. But we both wish the power had gone that night, as it often goes at night, because in the darkness no one talks.

After talking about the need to invest more in the children, Mother had proceeded to ask Father what his thoughts were, adding finally that admissions to the new school had already been received and so money should be put aside for our new school uniform and other things. She even said that she was planning to post the school fees the next day.

"So why do you want my opinion now?" Father said, sharply landing his teacup on the table.

Mother shifted her leg to straighten her skirt, then felt the tips of her fingers. She hesitated for a moment, perhaps wanting to choose her next words carefully. I heard her inhale deeply. "I had to tell you at the right time. But it's okay if you don't want—"

"Listen, Irene. I know you think you have solved every problem, but what the boys need is not a change of school. We only need to encourage their curiosity and they will do well. Sammy is bright enough. He is going to pass his exams with flying colors even if he goes a month without stepping inside a classroom. I don't think you are helping him by moving him around, just because you have a bit more money now. Who is giving you advice?"

I must say, before I forget, that the only other time I ever heard Father say Mother's name in such a loud way was on the happy occasion five years ago when Jesse was born. Standing by her bed in the labor ward, he had stroked her moist hand with a tube in it and whispered, "Irene, you look so beautiful." In the labor ward, smiling and beaming with joy, he had spoken as though addressing someone he had just met, and I remember feeling embarrassed as I gazed out the window, trying to get lost. Now, in the narrow space of our sitting room, the sudden utterance of Mother's name sounded dangerous, and it forced me to stiffen in my seat and listen even more attentively.

Night was falling rapidly outside, the moon casting its blue-orange glow across the grimy flats yonder. A neighbor's child cried loudly, a hungry cry. It was not yet time for the wild cats to start chasing rats across the dirt courtyard, down which some children screamed as their backs were splashed with cold water. One of them started to run away, because I heard his mother warning him to come back if he didn't want her to smash him. Inside our house a pair of droning bugs foolishly attacked the yellow light bulb, going at it with such persistence that I could count the seconds before Father or

Mother spoke next.

"Why are you talking about money now?" Mother said in a voice low and calm. "If you like, we can talk about it while the children are listening. Is that what you want? There is a lot to say, my dear."

"Then tell me. I am listening. You are being so ridiculous tonight. What is wrong with you, by the way? How can you make such a decision without first discussing it with me? That is the main issue, not money. We are not talking about money."

"You should be thanking me for my efforts, not putting me down. I hear who's giving me advice? As long as I am healthy and working, as long as I am still around, I will look after my children. I will ... Please don't make me say what I don't want to say."

Father glanced at me, then at Efrem, confirming if he did not already know that at least one of us was very much alert. I fell back in my seat, trying not to annoy him.

In the silence that followed, Mother leapt to her feet, no doubt thinking about putting supper on the table and calling it a night. "Jesse," she called, and when my brother didn't respond she shook her head regretfully.

"Where are you going now? Sit down, Irene," Father said, his voice shaking with rage. "I am still talking to you."

"I don't think we have anything else to talk about tonight. Haven't you already said enough? Tomorrow is another day," she said as she walked away. "I have told you already. As long as I am alive, I will give my children the best education I can afford. And as long as the children like the school and I can afford it, that should be no problem for anybody."

I looked up at the wall where one gecko chased another, and yet another desperately tried to catch a mosquito, its bulging eyes giving a wicked reflection against the yellow light of the bulb. Efrem gently shoved his elbow into my ribs, which meant, when he did not turn sideways to look at me, that it was something to do with Father, who was cracking knuckles that didn't pop. His rough beard glistened as though it had just been smeared with oil, and when he turned to inspect us once again, I saw that the whites of his eyes sparkled with wetness.

I remembered a time not so long ago when Mother would have sat still if that is what Father demanded, if she thought he wanted her total and frank silence, but that night of *war* it was clear those days were behind us. Mother may not exactly have ended Father's ability to command attention just by merely saying something, or nothing, but her behavior showed a new confidence. She could stand her ground if she had to. Or was something else encouraging her? To be honest, I don't know.

Afterwards, it was Father who sat looking dejected in the sitting room, repeatedly crossing his arms and clearing his throat until Mother came minutes later offering us supper. He never ate his food. The rest of us ate in silence.

II

At school I can't throw Mother out of my mind. I still can't help but wonder why she is already thinking of a present for my birthday. I have been anxious since I left home this morning, trapped in my own thoughts, very quick to cross the road when I ought to be more careful, and even now so distracted that I catch myself pulling strands of hair from my scalp. Not even the harsh voice of the new science teacher, who today is explaining the mating habits of some farm animals, can stir me back into concentration.

A short while ago, before we came out for the mid-morning break, Mister Kennedy, whose pimples and stubborn tongue amuse us, was describing how a cow runs amok when she needs a bull, how she can break any barrier looking for a mate. "The cow can go bertherk," he said, "so motht farmerth know that ith good practith to alwayth keep at litht one bull on the farm. One bull ith alwayth enough!" Mister Kennedy went on, "I don't know how many of you will become farmerth when you grow up, but pleath never forget that."

I sit on a bench near the front, and Mister Kennedy from time to time hovers over me, motes of chalk dust landing like snow on my desk. A short while ago he focused on me and called my name suddenly, "Thammy, are you with uth? Can you tell uth what a he-goat ith called?" I knew the answer, but why did it escape me? Why did I stare at Mister Kennedy as if I were dense?

Mother is in my head. I want to get to the bottom of why she is interested in my birthday. I ask myself why why why? Why, for the first time ever, is Mother seeking my opinion when she doesn't have to? And why was she looking at me like that?

It is shining bright outside, a fierce morning sun that forces the birds to take shelter. Not a single bird, not even a crow, is in the air. It is fifteen minutes before the bell rings again and we all flock back into the classroom. I am sitting on a concrete plank on the edge of the playground where girls and boys are kicking up dust, their heels tumbling and falling as they chase a ball that unravels and crumbles with

one strong kick, revealing the rubbish it is made of. They try to patch it up again with their saliva and shoelaces, but two kicks later it crumbles again. What a fiasco! This is why I shall never play such games. I prefer to watch.

While eating my snack, a vegetable samosa that Mother made last night, I glimpse three of my classmates under the shade of a leafy tree talking about something that has one of them, Marjorie, laughing so wildly that she suddenly loses her grip on the ice cream cone in her hand. She screams "Mummy" as the cone drops and then watches in horror as the white cream melts into a thick brown gravy. The two others, Simon and Brenda, backbenchers I rarely talk to, seem strangely moved by the accident, for they slap their hands together in celebration. Simon kicks the cone away and then jumps to smash it underfoot. They are standing near the path leading back to the classroom, so I walk in their direction, not quite meaning to join them but with every intention of catching Marjorie's eye. She is pretty and she can be playful, this Marjorie with brown skin and a gap between her front teeth that some stupid boys laugh at but which mesmerizes me. Strong calves beneath her pinafore glisten like Blue Band. I imagine sometimes that my sister, if I ever have one, would resemble her. I feel shy when she brushes past me inside the classroom. Now, when she sees me going by, she hollers and I pretend not to hear.

"Sammy, it's not yet time to get back in class. Come on, bookworm," she says.

I like her confidence, but I am not anywhere near her level. She comes toward me and the first thing I smell is milk on her breath.

She says, "What do you think Mister Kennedy will talk about when we go back inside?"

"I don't know. Isn't this the animal husbandry week?"

"Animal hathbandry! You know, his examples are so funny. I am always scared that he is going to pick on me to prove something for the class. He gives me goose bumps when he stands near me."

"He is always asking you questions," Simon says. "He never forgets you."

All the while they had been gossiping about Mister Kennedy, and now they are discussing his pimples that can be seen growing anywhere on his face these days. This morning there was one on his left cheek that looked like it would burst anytime and might have exploded by now, and there was yet another one, very small, growing on his chin. The smaller pimple looked more disturbing because in its smallness I could see how it would grow and fatten like an anthill in the savannah.

"Mister Kennedy has lost a lot of weight. He doesn't look healthy," Simon says.

With a frown on her face Brenda says, "I haven't noticed that, but I will try to observe him carefully when we return to class."

"The man must be sick. Sometimes he has a cough," Simon says.

"I hope Mister Kennedy is okay," Marjorie says.

When the bell rings I run ahead of them, Marjorie following closely behind. I can hear Simon and Brenda still whispering about Mister Kennedy as we mount the stairs and then quicken past the science teacher at his desk outside the classroom.

Mister Kennedy is twenty-seven years old and recently graduated from a teachers' college in western Uganda. He first walked into our classroom a month ago, looking fresh in his khaki pants and blue shirt, with none of the pimples that now grow on his face. Standing next to the English teacher Mister Jerome, who introduced him to us that morning as "coming here with strong recommendations," the new teacher seemed like one of us as his arms quivered with what must have been anxiety. Mister Kennedy did not have the threatening manner we take for granted in our teachers: the menace of a hand brandishing *kiboko*, the roving eyes that demand obedience. Standing next to the English teacher, Mister Kennedy looked harmless.

After the introduction, Mister Kennedy had taken one step forward and said, "Good morning, clath. Ith an honor to be teaching here at Buganda Road Primary Thcool." Some of my classmates were still laughing when Mister Kennedy asked if there were any questions. When no hand was raised, he said at last, "Thianth is a hard thubject only if you don't pay attention or fail to obtherve thingth carefully."

Mister Kennedy soon impressed us with a rambling style that he said he learned from his father, also a teacher. He would say, "I am like a takthi driver. I hate to leave anybody behind. Are you with me?"

The truth is that we like him mainly because he wastes a lot of time and we can ask him petty questions and then sit back and enjoy while he rambles on and on. If he is aware that we are abusing him, it doesn't show on his face. In the morning, when he talked about mating cows, he had in fact been set up nicely by a boy who wanted to know if cows prefer to be artificially inseminated, and could a farmer, the boy wondered, tell what an animal

wants simply by looking at it? "Good questionth," Mister Kennedy said, his eyes wide with delight. "As animalth cannot thpeak for themthelves, we cannot be thertain what they want, but remember that whath good for the gooth ith good for the gander. I am sure you know what I mean. I would argue without fear of contradiction that they prefer intercourth. If the animalth would speak, ith what they would say. Ith nature."

And thus, duly provoked, Mister Kennedy had taken us further into the "interethting thubject of animal hathbandry."

Although I am more relaxed as I settle back on my bench, my mind still races back to Mother, who right now is likely to be found in a cubicle drilling needles into the delicate arms of babies who wail and kick wildly while their mothers blow wind into their tiny ears or, when that fails, yell at them to be quiet. Or perhaps she has taken a short break and presently is sitting in the staff canteen sipping tea and gossiping with her colleagues.

There are rumor-mongers everywhere, but nurses, Mother included, take the gold medal. I know that she likes to know what is happening to others. I know that she gossips quite a lot. God bless the nurse who is absent when the others gather in one place, for then she immediately becomes the subject of their vicious tongues. I just hope Mother is there when they are gossiping. It's the only way to ensure they are not talking about her.

I remember one morning early last year when, having been sent away for failing to pay school fees on time, I walked six kilometers to the clinic on Kimathi Avenue where Mother works some days, there to be welcomed by an armed guard who let me in without questions because, he said, I resembled Sister Irene. Then I faced a bespectacled woman at the reception desk who looked me up and down and shouted to no one in particular, "People, tell Irene the boy is here." I was led to a cubicle in which Mother, looking very different in her nurse's uniform, was bent over her desk scribbling on a child's immunization card. She glanced once at me in the doorway, and I remember standing in a corner of her cubicle and waiting for her to invite me in as if I were one of her patients. She knew why I was there. It was only after the child and its mother had been attended to and sent away, and as another woman with a baby tied to her back lingered at the door, that she finally looked at me like she knew me.

The trip that morning to Mother's office is memorable for a different reason. Later, after Mother had gone to the bank, leaving me alone in the cubicle, I heard two women asking why Irene's son was there. Their malicious voices filtered in through the flimsy walls.

"They have chased him from school. Why? School fees?" one woman asked.

"Of course," a second woman said.

"So now Irene has gone to the bank to look for money? Ha! Ha!"

The fan above me was whirling fast, and I strained my ears to listen through the cardboard.

"But Irene has two jobs. Where does she put the money?"

Later they were joined by a third woman, Sister Merab, whose shrill voice I immediately recognized when she walked into the corridor and said, "I hear Irene's son is here. Have you seen him? Is it the big boy?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"In the immunization room."

"You give him a broom and tell him to sweep the corridor. Give him some work. But Irene is not serious. The school term has gone halfway and she hasn't paid school fees yet."

"Maybe she is waiting for her husband to pay."

"If I had two jobs like her, I wouldn't wait for my husband."

This Sister Merab claims to be Mother's friend. She has been to our house two times. The first time, she brought cookies to congratulate Mother on the birth of Jesse. The second time, she came to borrow money when her child fell sick one evening. It was during that second visit that she told me to call her Aunt Merab, tousling my hair and trapping me in her lap while she snorted and explained her troubles to Mother, who lent her money that night.

In the cubicle, as I sat waiting for Mother to come back, I half-believed Sister Merab would eventually push the door and shamelessly try to give me a hug. It would be a disgusting thing to do. I remembered the swollen fingers smelling of talcum powder and the tearful eyes as she waited for Mother to bring her purse.

We have been let out for the day. The sky is clear, but the sun is moving further west and will soon disappear on the horizon. A marabou stork is perched peacefully atop a tree that long ago lost its leaves forever. It's time to go and pick Jesse from outside the cafeteria where he will be standing, waiting for me to take his hand. Together we will start the short walk back home, past the disabled man selling roasted peanuts outside the school gates, past the valley of bats, past the Hindu temple in which men with red dots on their faces sit on mats

and try to levitate, all the way until finally we shall come upon the rusted black gate welcoming us into Number Five.

I think Mother will already be at home or about to get there. I know that she will demand, upon seeing us, that we change out of our school uniforms, which she will hang on a nail in the wall. She will offer tea or porridge, if there is any. But very soon, sensing my cold stare, she will probably glower at me and ask if I have no homework. Or maybe she will ask me why I am looking at her like that, does she owe me anything?

Or maybe she will ask me again if I have a birthday wish.

III

I am starting to think that my concern for Mother's wellbeing did not begin the morning two days ago when she asked me about what I wish to get for my thirteenth birthday. I have been thinking about her for weeks without actually thinking of it, if that makes sense. Now I see and count all the ways in which she has changed. Two ways concern me. These days she attends church service without fail and cannot miss even if there's a mighty storm coming. I've also noticed that she frequently sits down to flip through the family album, dwelling more on the black-and-white pictures of herself as a young, petite woman in miniskirts. She flips quickly past the more recent ones, now colored, now surrounded by the rest of us. Why is the album more interesting to her these days? What is she looking for in the old photos?

A weekend visit one afternoon in January by our Aunt Constance, Mother's older sister who is her best friend and maybe even her soulmate, is memorable. She came as she usually comes: in high heels. And they talked as they usually talk: with feeling and touching. There are no secrets between them. Me and my brothers, we are not permitted to call her Aunt Constance when Mother is around. Mother will scream, "What did you say? Mama wa Jinja," for Aunt Constance is our second mummy who visits regularly from Jinja. She is thirty-eight, two years older than Mother. Their love is deep, and, as if to remind each other of how far they've come, they sometimes repeat an old story from 1966 that I would like to share: it's a rainy evening, and suddenly Constance, squatting by the hearth as supper cooks, realizes that her sister has been missing for a while. Everyone is worried. After the men of the homestead fail to find Irene, Constance quietly ventures out and finds her sister standing beneath an overhanging rock, shivering but very okay. She likes the rain and she saw and heard the search party but was waiting for her big sister to fetch her. Just as Constance knows where to find her sister, so Irene knows that her sister will show up.

So Aunt Constance is special, as are her visits. She carries me onto her lap and buries my head in her big breasts while she cries, "My husband Sammy," and she says this as if it's really true. It makes me happy to hear her say that. I feel a rush of warm water in my brain. This indeed happened during her last visit in January, but, as I've told you, that visit is memorable for another reason. Mother and Aunt Constance perused the family album together, spending time over photos that reminded them of their childhood. It was a lazy Saturday afternoon, Father gone and not about to return. Jesse was sleeping. The four of us, including Efrem and me, had the sitting room to ourselves.

A funny argument began when Aunt Constance's eyes lingered over a photo taken last Christmas in our sitting room. Mother did not seem to care much for the photo and wanted to move on. In this photo the five of us are looking straight into the camera: a man and his wife and their three boys together in one place. A family portrait. But Aunt Constance did not see a picture of happiness and went so far as to ask why Mother looked so sad. I don't know whether she said this because that's what her eyes told her, or because she wanted to get Mother to open up about what's going on in our family.

"Trust me, Irene. You don't look happy in this picture," Aunt Constance said.

"There is nothing wrong with me. Let's move on. There are other pictures from that day," Mother said, pointing to another photo, "Am I not looking happy in that one also?"

There was no noticeable change in Mother's tone, but suddenly she started scratching her palms.

"The rest are smiling. It's only you who is not smiling. See," Aunt Constance said, pointing to another photo from Christmas.

"There is nothing special about these pictures, my dear."

"My man Sammy, come here."

I jumped from the mat where I had been quietly watching them and hovered over Aunt Constance's shoulder. She placed the album in my hands.

"Sammy," Aunt Constance said, "tell me what you think about this picture. What can you observe about it? Can you use all your English to analyze for us?"

"We are all looking straight into the

camera, even Efrem who sometimes cannot focus."

Aunt Constance laughed and said to leave my brother alone. "What else do you see?" she continued.

"Four of us are smiling or are about to start smiling. Mummy seems to be far away."

"You see! She doesn't agree with me when I tell her she looks sad. Look at this."

"She just looks bored."

"Yes, I think you are right."

When Mother spoke again, having kept quiet for some time, it was to ask me and my brother to go out and play. And when we hesitated, she rose from her seat and personally shoved us through the doorway.

The sun was brilliant outside, and I walked toward the farthest end of the courtyard, where in front of a carpenter's workshop boys and girls of all ages were running about, playing their usual games. Such games, I have told you, don't interest me. I like to watch. Confusion everywhere. Dust everywhere. I sat upon the verandah but quickly rose again, finding it too hot. I slouched toward the barren avocado tree with its gnarled roots that rise from the earth like the tentacles of an octopus. Efrem went to watch the big neighborhood boy Sula, who was bouncing a ball on his head.

I was still watching the children of Number Five when suddenly Laurent the carpenter came out of his workshop screaming and furiously clapping his hands. His problem was that the children were raising too much dust. But he did not get the response he wanted from the children, some of whom briefly stopped what they were doing and sneered at the short, muscular man. One of them, grabbing his crotch, told the carpenter that he would lend him his thick *kasolo* if he left them alone. They despised the carpenter because he never grew tall, because most of what they knew about him was laughable, and especially because he could sometimes behave like a child, for example peeing against a tree and seeming to laugh at the urine as it trickled down the trunk.

One boy spread his thin legs and bent his head downward until he was seeing the carpenter between his legs. When Laurent saw what that boy was doing, saw that the boy was mocking his smallness, he ran toward the boy and kicked him. The boy collapsed to the ground and then fell again, like a wobbly calf, as he tried to get back on his feet. Laurent grabbed the boy's neck and informed him that his mother, his mother whose bottom he knew very well, was a whore. "You son of a *malaya*," he said, pushing the boy to the ground, "I will beat you and I will also beat your mother."

I had heard Laurent say this before. Although Mother had given the carpenter work many times, including a job not long ago to make a wardrobe on wheels, I wondered what Laurent thought of Mother. Nothing in particular came to mind. But the thought of Mother as a whore in the eyes of this dirty-looking carpenter made me angry. How would I have responded if Laurent had hurled the insults at Efrem?

The sun was falling behind the flats yonder, glowing like the yolk of a bird's egg. A flock of white birds flew in a semi-circle over the courtyard. Egret maybe, for the birds flew low and quietly in a semi-circular formation.

"Efrem, let's go home," I shouted.

When we got back inside the house, Mother and Aunt Constance were still where we had left them, side by side. They weren't talking. The photo album on the table had been shut, but in the gray darkness of the sitting room the air still felt heavy with their argument. How had they resolved things? Had Mother in fact agreed that she looked sad in that photo? I looked at Mother, then at Aunt Constance, then at Mother again. I wished they could say something.

I hope you can begin to see why I am concerned about Mother. Maybe she is just as worried about me. I want a birthday gift from her. I don't want her to ask me what she should get me for my birthday, moreover several months ahead of time. Mother has never been one to worry over such things, especially when the school term is ending and she is thinking about the next term's fees. And please don't get me wrong. She has always been generous, but not quite in this sort of way. Her kindness is like that of the prophets. They don't tell you what they think you want to hear. Besides, for Mother and for us a small cake is usually enough to celebrate a birthday.

Would I have thought much of it if Father had been the one to inquire into my birthday wishes? I don't think so. Because that's more like him. He would be kidding. He's more likely to come home and tell me he has gifted me a cow without horns, or a bull with balls that touch the ground, or a billy goat with a beard like a sheikh, the animal so near I can almost smell it and yet so far away in some kraal. Father can give anything, everything, especially at night. ▪

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"Number Five" is excerpted from a book-length roman-à-clef, still unpublished, about boyhood in an African city ravaged by the fear of AIDS.