GIUNTI EDITORE

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Hold on to Your Dream:
From Nairobi to Pollenzo and Back Again
A true story

by

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Okra

My mother was named Sabina and she gave birth to me during the rainy season.

That was how I was thrown into the world. And since I came into it while it was raining, my middle name is Okoth, which means “rain.” The people of Rachuonyo said that she was beautiful and that she left because my father had taken a second wife, without her permission. They said that she had been right to leave.

When I was four years old, Rachuonyo was a village of two hundred people. I say two hundred, but I didn’t know how to count. There may been a hundred of us. Every family in its house of packed mud and straw, in the center of an acre of land. Then there was the traditional Christian church where we went on Sundays dressed in white, the men in dress shirts. But I was just a little boy, and I wore a t-shirt belonging to my brother Patrick which hung down to my ankles. Anyway, none of us, not even Patrick, had any dress shirts.

Our home consisted of three round fire pits and three pots, a paraffin lamp in the kitchen, a table and four chairs in the big room, and the carpets and two blankets in the room for sleeping.

The first to leave, before I was even born, was my brother George, the oldest, who left to seek his fortune in Nairobi. The second was my mother. The third was my father with his new family. All three of them left before I had any memory of things.

So, this is the garden in why my seed was thrown, a garden with no one to water it, no one to nurture it, and no one to weed it.

Max is leaning against the wall, outside the café. With one knee bent and his hands stuck in the pockets of his jeans, he watches the coming and going of the vendors who are setting up their stands at the market. It’s early in the morning of a day that’s going to be clear and warm. One of the last of the summer. The last of this university reunion week that we’ve spent together. He will return to his life, to Stuttgart, and I will leave for Kenya.

Max continues watching the market being set up, as though a moment later he might be called to assemble a stand and hawk its wares. He’s someone who thinks that you never

know where life is going to take you, which road you're going to go down, or what might be useful for you to know how to do.

He doesn't hear me approach, that's how absorbed he is. I'm just a few steps away from him. I see him smile. Not at me. Not yet. This hopeful smile, like someone who sees something beautiful in front of them, it's such a characteristic expression of his, the one I'll remember him by in the years to come. The one that I'll no doubt see plastered on his face if ever we meet again. If life isn't too hard on him.

I'm not saying that everything depends on what happens to you, of course not. There are people who are hopeful in disaster and desperate despite their good fortune. But being born and growing up in a family that can feed and protect you teaches you a certain type of hope and smile, a sort of confidence in the fact that things can be changed and will turn out well. If you come from a background like mine, hope bears a greater resemblance to resistance, to struggle, to the certainty that you'll have to find the strength to go on somewhere inside yourself. This type of hope doesn't make you smile, it makes you grit your teeth. So Max and I have two different faces, even if we're both given to hope.

At university, my face was different from almost all my fellow students. I was poor, they were rich. I didn't have a family, they had families who loved them, parents to call on the phone after an exam, siblings who studied at the best schools in the world. I felt like a man, they were kids. I had a background I kept hidden, they had stories to tell about horseracing championships and sailboat vacations.

But I would be dishonest if I said that this was the main obstacle for me in making friends. Max, for example, was a guy who walked around in worn-out jeans and faded t-shirts. He dressed worse than slum kids, even though his parents are Frankfurt industrial magnates. He claims to have realized when he was still young that the world was full of injustice, and that was when he had begun living more justly, more poorly. Of course, being poor and living poorly are not exactly the same thing. But I can say that, even since I've known him, he has always been coherent: frugal and slovenly. He didn't care about appearances. Not then, not now. Max goes to the heart of things and people. Even back then he was seeing a half-Ivorian girl and had a true passion for Africa. Yet despite these excellent premises, Max had to invest in a constant, patient courtship, lasting over a year, in order to become my friend.

I was around other people. In class, at the cafeteria, in the courtyard, at the dinners organized by one classmate or another. I was the one who was silent, who listened, and who

laughed at others' jokes. The one you became accustomed to seeing, and inviting. If they'd asked you something about me, you'd have said: sure, Duncan, I know him. But what could you have said about me?

The African. The foreigner. Nothing else.

We sit down at our table, the one in the back, farthest away from the counter, where we've had a thousand conversations over just as many coffees. Beyond the glass the vegetable seller is piling up crates of zucchini, and the first female customers begin to wander among the stands. Max takes a pencil stub out of his pocket and prepares to write down the shopping list on a paper napkin. Tonight's dinner has got him excited, just thinking about it makes him happy. We're a couple of gourmets: what better way is there to say goodbye than with food.

"A dinner, he says, that we'll remember for the rest of our lives. Like in that film, *Babette's Feast*. Ever seen it?"

I shake my head.

"How is that possible?" Max says, scandalized. "You've got to see that film."

And he starts telling me about this meal on which the governess Babette, who's secretly a chef, spends all the money she has. A lunch with dishes that are so delicious, cooked with such skill and love, that the diners are literally moved to tears.

I listen and drink my coffee, slowly. Coffee is a precious thing. I can't believe the rush people are in to drink their coffee. They even drink four or five a day. As though it were water. As though it were nothing. In Kenya I didn't drink coffee. There, coffee is only for the continental breakfasts at downtown hotels, or for export.

Meanwhile Max continues talking. The market seller has finished piling up his zucchini, and is moving on to the bell peppers and eggplants. Tomorrow at this hour I'll be on my way to Turin's Porta Susa station. From there a bus will take me to Caselle Airport. A connection in London. Dubai. Nairobi.

My life has changed many times. I've learned to begin again. Some beginnings have been awful, others merely difficult. Beginning is always difficult. I've learned that looking back doesn't help. Even if you've left someone behind that you loved. People come and go. Getting close to people is stupid. I know.

"Duncan," Max calls to me. "What is it? You seem distracted."

I look up at him.

"Really?" I spread my arms. "I don't know, I was listening to you."

We remain silent for a short time. With the two empty cups in front of us, and a ray of sunlight that cuts the table in two.

"Are you worried?" he asks me.

I smile. Getting close to people is stupid, I think. But it's inevitable.

"There's something I'd like to show you," I say finally. "You know, I'm not sure whether I'll have another chance." I make a vague gesture with my hand. An ellipse that includes me, him, this morning, and all the rest.

Max looks at me intensely. He nods. He doesn't ask me what. He only says: "All right, let's go."

We've left Bra behind us, walking at a good pace. Neither of us has a car. We considered the possibility of taking a bus. We waited for it at the stop for a while, but school hasn't started back up yet, so the buses are few and far between. So, Max says, "Let's just walk. It's less than five kilometers. I know a path that cuts through the fields."

We walked for a while along the side of the road, there weren't many cars. Then we veered off onto a path. I listened to him talk about the Master's he'll be starting in October, about what his brothers have been up to. I think: how great it would be if everything began right now, from here, on this day in early September. Which of course is always the case: at any given moment, something is beginning. But I was thinking: how great it would be if this September university began, if we were two students who had just enrolled, with three years of classes ahead of us, the fear of exams and winter afternoons of study, spring evenings of drinking wine and chatting, hitting on girls and making them cry because of how stupid we are. Starting over from scratch, but doing it well, fearlessly.

"Get a look at that!" Max says.

We're back on the road, and you can already see the outline of the university's castle. But Max is indicating a point on the road. A small hedgehog is stumbling along, its head inside a yogurt container. Max crouches down and frees it. He sits there with the container in his hand, as the little creature scampers off into the grass. Not much further up the town begins, and there's a row of dumpsters. Animals, especially hedgehogs and foxes, often venture all the way up to the houses, looking for food in the trash.

The parking lot gravel crunches beneath our feet.

"It seems like just another normal day," muses Max.

It's because of this sound of the gravel. The noise with which every day of the past few years began. Not that we'd been aware of it then.

"So where are we going?" asks Max,

"Follow me," I say.

Walking through classrooms and courtyards we see no one, because it's still early in the morning and classes haven't begun. The university used to be a royal estate of the Savoy family. This empty, with its stone lanes and its towers, the small church with pinnacles and gargoyles, it seems surreal.

We finally reach the didactic gardens. The sun is already warming up. Up from the ground rises a green smell of lymph and tomato stems.

"You haven't lost the habit," he smiles.

"What?"

"Look at yourself!"

In my hand I have some weeds that I've knelt down to pick.

"They've been neglecting it," I say. "The lettuce isn't looking good."

"For crying out loud, Dun!"

"This didn't happen when I was here."

We keep going. I reach down to pull out, to straighten. Max munches on a tiny zucchini. We've reached the back of the garden, where the round northern Italian squash snake their way up a trellis. In the vicinity is a certain chaos of leaves, stalks and wild flowers. We're at the edge of the cultivated section, where nature is left to its own devices.

"The okra has grown even more. Without me."

There are several plants. Some as high as a meter tall. They have borne fruit, fruit that resemble little green horns, and they're trying to turn out even more: there's a white flower, with a reddish-purple center. It doesn't know that the cold is coming soon.

I pluck two small leaves, little more than sprouts. The larger ones can only be eaten when cooked, like chard.

"Taste it." I hand one to Max, then take another for myself and chew it.

"It tastes like spinach and also like tiny, raw peas," he says. "Give me another one." We eat a few of the tiny leaves.

"I brought this," I say. "I sprinkled a handful of seeds soon after I arrived, here, at the back of the garden. I threw them down like a challenge. Let's see if you grow by yourself. And the okra has grown. This was what I wanted to show you."

Max nods. "It's a strong plant."

"It's like me."

"Strong," he insists, laughing.

I shake my head. I look down. "A seed that's thrown to the ground, that grows on its own," I say.

Max listens to me. He says nothing. If I don't say anything else he won't ask me any other questions. He never has, even when I could see them written on his face. He was the only one who never tried digging into my past. With a bit of green hanging off the corner of his mouth, he smiles at me.

For an instant I close my eyes to the sun. I keep them closed while Max walks over to me and places a hand on my shoulder. *My friend,* the hand says to me*, I am here. You are not alone.* And it is that touch, strong but light, that opens the doors to my memory.

The family that I remember had no father and no mother. Both of them had left. She left first, when he married another woman. Then he left with his new family.

So only the children were left: me, my brother Patrick who was thirteen and for us was our father, Mary, my sister who was ten years old, who was for us our mother, and then Maureen, who was six years old and who was my little sister, and that's all. We had an older brother George, too, but he had left to find his fortune in the big city before I was born and had never returned.

Our days were all the same. In the morning, when the sun came up, Patrick woke up Mary and Maureen and they set out together for the school on top of the hill. Mary and Maureen didn't like school at all, but Patrick said that it was important and he was the head of the family.

I was too young to go to school. I slept until late and only woke up when my hunger did. But there was never anything to eat. We ate once a day, twice at the best of times. So, to kill time, I went out into the yard in front of our house and made puppets out of mud or little stick constructions. I couldn't get far from the house because from the school on top of the hill Mary kept an eye on me. Thinking back, I'm not sure whether she actually saw me, but at the time I

believed that she was always watching me and that if I tried heading off into the brush, she would smack me with a twig when she got back. But I liked knowing that I was in her eyes, during those long mornings of waiting. I was four years old.

My siblings returned for lunch. Even though there was nothing to eat for lunch. So we filled up the water bowls and drank in little sips in order to feel something in our stomachs, then Mary and Maureen went back to school, complaining of that half-hour's walk on an empty stomach. Patrick, on the other hand, even though he was the only one who loved school, went to work in the afternoon in the neighbors' fields, or to make coal in order to earn a little something.

Sometimes he brought me with him. That was when I thought I was already an adult, like a man who works. I helped him take the weeds and stones out of the ground. The men encouraged me and laughed at my lack of strength, when I insisted on carrying a stone. But soon they tired of me, returning to their labors. I crouched down to play beneath a tree. Sometimes elderly people would come over and sit with me, seeing as they were too old to work. From the circle of shadow they would observe the men's work, saying what had been done properly and what hadn't. They spoke of the rain and the harvest, and of terrible years. Every so often a woman would come to bring them some chai or even just a little water.

One day I saw the men throwing kernels of corn onto the ground and burying them. I waited until they had left and then began to dig up and collect the seeds they had thrown away. I had seen Mary cook them in water, on the fire. That night, at least, we would have something for dinner.

Suddenly I felt something grab my arm. The hand that was gripping me was as hard as wood. I didn't see this old man get up and leave the circle of shadow. Now he was glaring at me with ferocious eyes.

Damn boy, what are you doing?

Grandfather, they're throwing them away!

What lies are you telling?

Look, those men, it was them.

Then the old man burst out laughing and let go of me: My boy, they aren't throwing them away. They're planting. Then he started laughing again. You don't know anything about life, do you?

That was how I learned that the best seeds, of the strongest plants, were conserved to be put back into the ground. If God sent abundant rains, each seed would generate a new plant, and each plant many new seeds. Food in abundance.

It just wouldn't be in time for dinner.

"It's hard to imagine how hungry you must have been," says Max. "I'm not sure I can even understand the feeling."

"It's true, you probably can't imagine it. It makes me laugh when everyone here says 'I'm so hungry!', maybe it is in the middle of the morning, sometime between breakfast and lunch."

Almost every day we ate only once, and many days all we ate was okra.

Mary and Maureen harvested the fruit and leaves in the underbrush. The okra wasn't cultivated. It grew on its own. Like us. My sisters boiled the big leaves in a pot on the fire, without anything else, not even salt. And while dinner was cooking, I would come inside and ask: What's there to eat? Because maybe it was a lucky day and Patrick had managed to get his hands on some vegetables, corn or manioc. But the best days of all were when he went hunting and came back with a squawking chicken under his arm.

Then Mary and Maureen would break its neck with a swift blow and pluck it on the doorstep. I would play with the feathers and I was happy because I knew that soon the house would have that golden aroma of broth. For us a chicken lasted for three days, and the last day, when only the bones and the few shreds of meat attached to them were left, my siblings left them to me. That's how it always was: when there was almost nothing left, that almost nothing was for me.

At that point I would say: Patrick, why don't you go hunting again?

And my siblings would laugh. I'd better not, Patrick would say, it's very dangerous.

Let's go forage for okra, Mary would say.

I hate okra, I would reply.

One night, Otis's uncle crossed through our field and came to knock on our door. It was a beautiful night. The sky red from the sunset, and the ground was red from the chicken blood around the boundary stone in the yard where Mary had slit the chicken's throat.

I sat down in the dust, with the neem leaves still lukewarm from boiling stuck on my arms and legs. Mary had had to chase after me for a long time before she caught me. And she'd

only managed because of the chicken: Duncan, if you don't let me treat you, you won't even get the beak, she'd threatened.

All of us children were covered with pustules, and those compresses were the only remedy. Anyway, I was sitting there, all covered in boiled leaves, when Otis's uncle came into the courtyard, yelling.

Where's your brother, where is that wretch? he yelled.

Patrick came out of the house and closed the door behind him: Here I am. Is there a problem? He was using his man's voice and standing up really straight, but Otis's uncle was much taller, towering above his head, and he was very angry.

I know that you took one of my chickens, he yelled, give me back my chicken.

I didn't take any chicken, my brother said, and certainly not yours.

Then Otis's uncle raised his arm like a wooden axe and began hitting Patrick. Liar, he yelled, liar! Look at the feathers and blood!

It isn't your chicken! My brother defended himself, covering his head with his arms to fend off the blows. It's a different chicken! A different chicken!

Liar! Otis's uncle continued yelling. He yelled and he hit. You liar, you thief!

That was when I pulled myself up and began kicking Otis's uncle's legs, even if Otis was my friend and we always played "four pieces of wood" together.

I started shrieking: He isn't a thief! He's a hunter! A hunter!

Mary and Maureen came out of the house as well and they were crying and imploring Otis's uncle to stop. It was all a big mess and, in the end, Otis's uncle stopped hitting my brother and was gasping for air from the effort. He looked at all four of us, spit on the ground and left.

You're not a thief, I said, we know that.

My siblings looked at each other and starting laughing. Even Patrick, despite the blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. That's how I found out that Patrick certainly was a hunter of chickens, but that he hunted for them in our neighbors' yards.

Max laughs. And I laugh too, thinking back on it.

"Who knows how bad you must have felt when you discovered that Patrick was stealing the chickens," said Max. "It must have been such a let-down."

"Not at all. I was so proud of him. Because I had seen Otis' uncle beat him as one would beat a man, and my brother had taken that beating like a man, without shedding a tear. In

defense of that chicken. We needed it: it has been three days that we had been eating only boiled okra, and we needed that chicken for strength. The strong survive, and those who don't have enough strength do not survive."

I was proud of Patrick.

Our father, Willy Okech, had left us with absolutely nothing. Just a mud house and, as tradition dictates, a second name: Okech, meaning "hunger," because he had been born in a time of great famine. That how it works where I'm from: when children are born they are given an English first name, and a Swahili second name that says something about their time and place of birth. Because the villages don't have birth registers.

That's why, as I said, my name is Okoth, which means "rain," because I was born in the rainy season. If the child is a male, his second name will become his children's last name.

Patrick's second name was Ochien'g: Light of day. Like the sun, Patrick rose from sleep every day and found a way to get us what little we needed to survive. The chickens, the manioc, that, too, "hunted" from our neighbors' gardens, and a little money to buy lamp oil, notebooks and pencils for school.

Patrick was also really good at dividing things up, so that there was enough for everyone. For example he would buy a pencil, split it in three, and sharpen each piece so that they would all have pencils for school. It was the same with notebooks. And with chicken. Everything was divided up, and what little there was did not become a lot, but enough.

We were siblings, friends, fathers and mothers to one another and we were never a burden to the people of the village.

"Didn't the people in the village help you in some way?" asks Max.

"We never told anyone that we hadn't eaten, that we were hungry, that the blankets were thin and we were cold at night, that we didn't even have shoes to go to Christmas Mass. We knew that it wasn't a good thing for others to know of our poverty."

"How could they not have known, in a village that had only one hundred people in it? Certainly they had seen your mother and your father leave, at some point." Max's tone was indignant. "They knew and yet they chose to look the other way."

"It happens," I say, as I shrug my shoulders. Max is very intelligent but sometimes I have to explain things to him as if he were a child. "Life is hard for everyone and no one can bear a greater burden than the one they already do. And those in need are a burden. A disease. A

disaster. So we were poor in silence. With honor. On Saturdays we wore clean clothes to go to church. Patrick played the drums with the other kids. The women stopped to talk with my sisters. Everyone said hello to us with lots of smiles, looking us in the face. Then we would go back to our house and to our hunger. It was like this every day, at that time. No day was different, not even Christmas."

On Christmas Day, the first that I remember, it was very hot.

In my language Christmas is called Siku-Kuu, which means "Great Day." You can recognize Siku-Kuu by the smell when you wake up in the morning. It smells even better than chicken broth. Because it's like a hundred chickens cooking together and a thousand hot chapati breads. In each house in the village the fires are all lit before the sun rises, and on every fire is a pot, and inside every pot is something that is boiling, frying, or stewing flavor. From the open doors the smell of food invades the village streets and the fields, it saturates the warm air and rises up into the sky, all the way to the sun. The sun of Siku-Kuu is an immense loaf of bread, golden and fragrant.

But in our house that day, not a single fire was lit. Patrick made us sit around the empty table.

We don't have anything to cook and we can't ask our neighbors for food, because we don't have anything to offer in exchange, he told us. Today is an important day for all the families, but this is our condition. I'm going to get wood. Mary and Maureen will go collect okra.

But can't you go hunting? I asked.

I can't go hunting on Siku-Kuu, said Patrick.

Please, today is Siku-Kuu and we can't eat okra, please! I begged him. Everyone's eating chapati and chicken. We can't eat that stupid boiled okra.

Enough, Duncan.

My brother had a grim look on his face. But I couldn't stop. I cried. And I grabbed onto his legs. From our open door entered the smell of other people's Christmases and I couldn't understand why we didn't have one of our own.

That was the day, the only day, when Patrick hit me. Then he went out to collect wood in the forest. My sisters went out as well to collect okra leaves and I was left alone, in the hut that had been emptied of everything and everyone. It was the first time that I clearly felt a difference between us and the others. The first time that I thought: It's not fair. I felt it in my

stomach, inseparable from my hunger. It isn't fair that we don't have a Siku-Kuu. It isn't fair that this "Great Day" is so small, the same as every other day.

When they returned I was still there, on the ground. I was waiting for something, something that was supposed to happen and make everything right.

Did you find chicken and chapati? I asked.

But nobody answered. When everything was ready, they sat down at the table and began eating the boiled herbs in silence. Now, all these years later, I know that they were sad. Maybe they were thinking about our mother and our father. They felt small and alone. All of us were still children.

Come eat, Duncan, Mary called to me. Come on, at least you can feel a full stomach.

But I just sat there, motionless. I was still waiting for Siku-Kuu to come. Then Patrick got up looking like he had more blows in store for me. And I thought that not having chapati for Christmas was bad, but getting beaten twice was even worse.

When we emptied our bowls, Patrick said: We've only eaten okra, but we're the only ones who know what's in our stomachs. It isn't written on our face. Now let's go out into the street as if we'd eaten a mountain of manioc, fried chicken and chapati, and be happy like everyone else.

So, we went out in the yard and to everyone that passed my siblings gave their best wishes, talking about how well they'd eaten this Siku-Kuu and how it felt like they were going to burst. I played with Maureen and looked at the shiny shoes of those who passed and thought that Otis's uncle was right. Patrick really was a liar. And a thief as well: he had stolen my Christmas.

We are sitting down now, on two overturned pails, on the sliver of shade created by the tool shed. It's hot now. The sun is high in the sky. It's almost eleven. The garden is literally vibrating with flying, buzzing insects.

Max looks at his hands. He stretches his arms out beyond the shade, opening and closing his palms in the sun. Then he lets his arms fall to his sides.

"I'm sorry, Duncan." He says it with sadness. He says it as though it were his fault.

"That was the way it was," I say as I pull myself to my feet. "Let's go."

All of a sudden, I am afraid to meet his eyes. I am afraid to find out that something has changed. For my whole life I've been the child who was taught not to talk about poverty. You just deal with it in silence, like all of your other faults and embarrasments.

"Now?" he says with surprise. "Ok, let's go."

Max gets up slowly, without much enthusiasm. As he walks by he snaps off a branch from a large rosemary plant. We leave the garden and an aromatic, salty smell trails behind us. One beside the other we walk in silence, taking the route through the village without going back by the university.

Someone is surely there by now. Everyone knows everyone in Pollenzo, the office assistants, the class monitors, the lab technicians, the students from every year. We said goodbye to everyone in the last few days. We have already kissed and hugged everyone, told our stories, and gathered their good wishes. They see us already in the future, doing what we can to change it and to make it better. But we are still here, not moving forward. Just one more day, to allow us to let go of everything that has held us up, kept us together during this time when we were being shaped, taking on new forms. It has protected us like a hothouse, permitting us to grow while being protected from the wind, protecting our young selves and our new ideas to change the world.

Then, suddenly Max says, "Thank you, Duncan. You could not have given me a more precious gift."

There is no pity in his eyes. There are no shadows clouding the smile on his face. There is only gratitude and emotion.

We continue walking in silence. Halfway down the path we stop. We turn and look back one last time.

"I like to think that it will never change," says Max, "that one day I will come back here and I will recognize everything."

"It's because you are sentimental," I tease him. "You haven't even left yet and you're already thinking about how it will be when you come back."

"And you're not?"

"No, when I leave, I leave. You just don't think about it anymore," I reply. "That's the way it is for me. I don't know how to come back. I've never come back to anything."

Soda

"Where is this flour from?" Max asks me.

"It was in the jar, you should ask Lisa."

"We're at Lisa's house. Lisa is in Sicily, at her parents', and she left me her apartment for the whole week. She'll be back for the beginning of the academic year. Max, meanwhile, is in his old room, at Mauro's.

"What about this egg?"

"It was in the fridge."

"But Lisa left in July!"

"I'm joking. I bought it yesterday afternoon. And no, don't ask me which farm I went to. I was at the supermarket."

"You're the shame of international gastronomy," says Max with joking indignation.

"On the table there's flour, an egg, sugar, milk, and row of spice bottles. That should be everything. It's a simple, everyday recipe from when I was seven years old in Nairobi, perched on a chair watching Ester cook.

"Good," I say. "Now we're going to make mandazi."

I crack the egg in a bowl, and add milk, two cups' worth. Three espresso cups of sugar. With a fork I start mixing.

"Find me another bowl."

Max, who's been sitting watching me, jumps to his feet. He opens the cupboards in the tiny kitchen. Lisa's is a "bonsai" house, where you have to be careful not to make any abrupt or expansive gestures. You can't even stretch in the center of the kitchen without hitting the lamp.

"Will this work?" He shows me a large wooden bowl, at the bottom of a tower of bowls organized from largest to smallest.

"Yes, perfect."

I pour in the flour. Now it's time for the spices. Lisa keeps them in little glass bottles on which she's taped mysterious labels in Hindu. I add them in pinches, I recognize cinnamon and cardamom. Now the flour is dirty white in color. The spices have given it a whole-grain look. Max and I look at each other, satisfied. I empty the mixture of egg, milk and sugar into the spiced flour and start kneading. As one who almost never cooks, I've rarely kneaded dough.

Generally, I don't like cooking. It's a woman's art. I learned to do it when I was seven or eight, in circumstances that made me hate the stovetop. These years of studying food and food culture haven't been able to cancel out that primitive sense of rejection. Sure, I'm an exception among students of the gastronomic sciences. Here, nearly everyone loves to cook. Some people make cheese, some beer, and some make bread with their own starter. During the time of our studies, people were constantly organizing dinners, constantly kneading, putting into the oven, serving. I think I'm the only one who only ever limited himself to tasting.

Kneading dough is a pleasurable sensation: your hands sink into layers of liquid and dryness, the variegated glue of the dough imprisons your fingers. Slowly but surely, in the palms of your hands large distinct clumps turn into dough. The ball grows larger, devouring the chaos of the ingredients.

"There we are," I say, looking with satisfaction at the round, smooth ball of dough at the center of the bowl.

"So, it's a preparation with no yeast," Max comments.

"Fuck, the yeast!" I say, slapping my forehead with a flour-covered hand.

We search through the pantry. Max finally unearths a paper envelope, faded green, stuck to the chipboard back of the last shelf.

"Sodium bicarbonate and tartaric acid, shall we call that yeast?" he says, smiling ironically.

"Ester used yeast like that," I say in my own defense.

"Yeasts are single-celled organisms," Max declares with absolute seriousness. Then he clears his throat and imitates a voice intended to be feminine: *All organisms want to do two things, feed and reproduce, whether it's a hippopotamus or yeast! What is the leavening of bread if not a living being that's eating, producing energy and carbon dioxide?*

When we put bread in the oven, I continue, imitating Professor Morini's voice, *the yeast dies.*

"Professor Morini!" laughs Max. "How I miss her chemistry classes."

"Unbeatable."

"So, what are we going to do?" Max waves the little envelope in front of my face. "Are we going to use these salts which, when heated, produce carbon dioxide to fluff up your fritters, or are we going to eat some disgusting fried cracker?"

"Well, at least no living being will have to die," I say, dissolving the dry yeast in a glass of water.

I start kneading the dough once again. Eventually I've reshaped my smooth, round ball. I cover it with a cloth to let it rest. I open the fridge and take out two Schweppes, passing one to Max.

"Soda," I say. "You have no idea how much I used to like it."

The first day of the new year, as we are throwing balls of mud with my cousins, Mary comes to call me.

Sitting at the table with my brothers and sisters is a tall boy wearing a white shirt, so white that it hurts our eyes. On the table there is a bottle of oil, some corn flour, a bag of rice, and two packages of sugar. I have never seen so much food all at once.

As I stare at the food on the table the boy stands up and comes over to me. He is wearing black shoes with with laces.

And so, you are Duncan, he says. He looks at me, smiling.

Duncan, this is our brother George, he has come to see us from Nairobi.

I look at my brother. I had never seen him and I did not remember him because he left when I was too young to recall.

It's a good thing that you have come back, I say, because we did not even have anything good to eat at Christmas!

Duncan! Patrick reprimands me.

Leave him be, says George, winking at me. Duncan, I am sorry I did not get here in time for Christmas, but I brought you a present.

From a plastic envelope he pulls out a pair of red shorts, they are new, with the tag still on them. It is the first time in my life I have received a present. Something new. I have only two ripped tshirts for every day, and then one for Sunday. All things that Patrick wore before me, and maybe George even, possibly even my father.

I like this new brother very much. I like the way he smells of soap. I like that he brings presents and food. I like that he tells Patrick to be quiet, because Patrick is usually the one in control.

Mary takes my new shorts immediately. She does not want me to touch them with my muddy hands.

Go and play outside, she says, I will call you when dinner is ready.

But I want to stay with them, so I sit on the floor, in a corner.

Mary, put the water on for tea, George says.

You brought tea, too?

Yea, it should be here somewhere.

Soon they forget about me. They talk among themselves. It is the first time George has ever come back since he left long ago. No one ever comes back to the village unless they've done something important in town, before having put away some money for the ones who are waiting for them at home. It means that the ones who come back, come back as winners. As rich men, wearing shoes every day of the week, tea with sugar whenever they want it, and bottles of soda when they are thirsty.

It is much different than I thought it would be, says George. I did not know this was the situation you were in. That our father had left, too.

Mary has put the water on and she is cooking the rice. My brothers and sister speak directly among themselves about these years, about what has happened to our family, of how life is in the city. Their voices are like sugar melting in the hot tea in the afternoon, entwining with the smell of the rice as it cooks. I am happy. I feel safe. I feel like everything will be all right.

I fall asleep.

When I wake up, dinner is ready. It is an enormous dish of rice, all for me. I eat so much that I have rice coming out of my eyeballs.

"It was the first time I was ever that full, I had never eaten so much and so well in my whole life."

. . .

Raviole

"I can't let go now. This year has been a very hard year. Once I finished university, you and everyone else left. I started looking for a job but I wasn't able to find anything. There were days I could not breathe I was so anxious. Without a job I would not be able to renew my residency permit. Without a job I did not know how I would support myself now that the university is over and my scholarship has ended. What was the point in studying so much and learning so much? Then the opportunity came in from FoodHub in Bruxelles. I went. You cannot immagine how I felt when we discovered that they could not hire me because the laws in Belgium had changed in January: all companies were obliged to hire Belgian citizens first and if no Belgian citizen was qualified, they had to give precedence to European citizens. Only if there was no one qualified for the job in all of Europe could they hire a foreigner. This is what I am for your people: a foreigner."

Max's eyes filled with sadness. His mouth tightened and he said quietly, "It's a disgrace."

"I really loved white people," I said as my voice cracked. I had never voiced this thought out loud. I never admitted to this defeat, even to myself. "I believed in Europe like you believe in a promise made to you by someone you can trust. It really hurt me to find out that it was all a fairy tale, a lie. That white people weren't special and that they didn't love us. That I would never belong to something here. I felt really, really stupid. I put more faith in a dream that I did in the history books."

"We're not all like that, you know it," said Max quietly.

"So, I came back from Bruxelles without a place to stay and without any money. Eugenio put me up for a little while. I was forced to ask for help again, and again the doors were closed in my face. I was up against a wall once again. What did I do wrong? Why can't a person have

dignity and be able to work in order to buy bread? I've always had to ask for food, for clothing, to be able to study. I've always had to ask for help. You don't know how it is. Patrick, in the village, made us eat okra at Christmas rather than ask anyone for help. Whoever is in need is a disgrace for the others, a weight, a sickness. I'm tired of asking. But I had to do it again. I went to talk to Carlo Petrini: and this is how the project in Kenya was born. They have worked really hard and done a lot and now everything is ready to start. Petrini is really pleased with the project."

"You don't want to let him down, is this what you are telling me?" Max looks me straight in the eye and looks almost as if he might cry: "Is this the reason you are leaving?"

On Christmas Day, my first one in Italy, Carlo Petrini invited me to his home, along with three other foreign students. I knew he was the founder of the Slow Food Movement and of the university in Pollenzo, and without him not even Baringo would have existed. He was a man who had come up with new ideas about food and his thoughts had taken root even in far-away places, all over the world. His were ideas and thoughts that I would not have been able to come up with in a million years and now, they were taking root inside of me as well, during the hours spent in class. I was indebted to him for my scholarship as well. So, you can imagine how emotional I was the day I crossed the threshold of his home, the day of Siku-Kuu.

He opened the door and welcomed us into his home. It was warm and well-lit. I removed my coat. The table was already set. Petrini had a big smile on his face. He is a person who is full of strength and happiness. His sister, with an apron tied around her waist, was bustling around the stove, she was finishing the preparation of the meal for all of us. Along with me, Eunice was there, she is also from Kenya, and two students from Brazil. Eunice's presence comforted me because she acted as my translator, so that I could understand something of what the others were saying. Then two more Italian friends of Petrini's arrived and we sat down at the table. Everything was exceptionally good.

"But more than anything else from that Christmas, and from any Christmas after it, I remember the *raviole di carne* that Petrini's sister prepared one by one, with her own hands. I had already learned a lot about good pasta, but I still had not eaten handmade pasta with filling. When the *raviole* were put on the table I had just overcome the difficulty of the *salsiccia cruda*. You know I have a hard time eating it. But everyone said it was wonderful and I didn't want to

to be unkind in any way to Carlo Petrini. So, I ate a little bit of it, as much as I could. I had eaten things that were much worse in my life. At that point, I really hoped that the rest of the meal was cooked instead of raw."

The *raviole* were placed on the table in a steaming bowl. I smiled in relief. The aroma that rose from the plate was a guarantee of good food. I can't tell you which meat were used to make the stuffing, I think it is a secret. But when your teeth bit into the thin pasta and the meat inside was released, thick and rich, it was like having all of the joy of Christmas in your mouth.

After the meal we stayed and talked for a while. I was listening to Eunice and thinking that it was Siku-Kuu in Kenya, too. I was hoping that the toys and sweets had arrived at the *Giardino dei bambini*. And that my brothers and sisters in the village had chapati and chicken.

...

"Is everything OK, Duncan?" asked Petrini, placing a hand on my shoulder.

He spoke Italian but I understood. I also understood the warmth of the gesture, the kindness in his eyes and the grasp of his hand. I nodded. It was true: that day, at that table in his house, on Christmas, I felt like I was a man among men. Not a foreigner. This is why I thought of my people, this is why I had become even more nostalgic for a moment. It had been a long time since I had felt at home anywhere.

...

Every Easter and Christmas, I returned to Carlo Petrini's house. Little by little I understood more and more Italian and then I could speak. This is how I finally came to tell him something about myself, some of the details of my life. I wanted him to know how incredible the things he had done were. Every once in a while, we would stop and talk when we ran into each other at the university, or he would call me on my cell phone.

Where are you, Duncan?

On the street, on my way to class.

On the street?

Yes.

Haven't you been on the street enough for one lifetime?

And then we would laugh. Because he was a friend. I've met only two men like this in my life, Eugenio's father and Carlin Petrini, men who were as tall as trees. Capable of taking

care of and protecting many lives, as a giant tree does with the small birds that land on its branches. These men have an internal light and a special energy. Just looking at them gives you courage and hope.

At Easter during my second year Carlin Petrini called me. He had to go to Nice in France for a convention and he wanted me to go with him. We left after lunch on a afternoon when the sky was filled with white clouds. We were quiet for a while, and then we talked about my studies and how my exams had gone.

You speak Italian well now, he said.

I knew this was a meeting we had put off for a long time, until I was able to speak to him in his own language, man to man.

You are a very good student, he said to me as he drove. He turned to look at me for an instant. I am very proud of you. Yours is an amazing story.

My story is not a good story, I said.

You should be proud of it, instead.

I was quiet as he continued to speak.

You held out and you found the strength to transform your life. Like grain transforms itself into flour to become bread. You took hold of your life and you are making something of it. This is what he said. Then he asked me: Do you have a dream, Duncan?

I want to work so that Africa won't go hungry anymore and won't have to ask for help. We have so many resources: the juiciest fruit in the world, tea, coffee, cocoa, just to name a few, and we let them take everything away from us. But even if we stopped the containers that leave from Africa we would not have the machines nor the people to do the work. This is what I want to do: I want to transform a continent that is like a child whom everyone can harm and who is dependent on everyone for everything into an adult continent that can experience the dignity of taking care of itself and of its own children.

This is what I said, but I wasn't sure I had explained myself very well. It was the same good concept that I had talked to Veronica about as we stood in the darkness of the tree. But now I had studied and this good concept was taking shape, it had grown and was becoming more precise.

Very good, said Petrini, it is a great utopia. For now, you have to study more. But hold on to your dream. This will stimulate you to study harder and your studies will allow you to turn this dream into a reality.

Thank you, I said.

Once we arrived in Nice we parked and look for a place to get something to eat. We ate oysters and drank cold white wine. We didn't talk much, we were silent as we watched the sun set into the sea. And I thought that having a father must be something that gives you the feeling of strength that I was feeling right then.

"This is the problem with fathers," said Max. "Especially when they are great men like Carlin Petrini."

"What are you saying?"

"I mean that a son, sometimes, to avoid letting his father down, make choices that don't correspond to what he really desires."

"That is not it. The dream to change the African economy is mine. I am the one to told my dream to him. It's mine."

"On a sunny day in Nice. But now? Is that really what you want to do at this moment in your life? To go back? What I want to say is, it doesn't matter if everyone else thinks that this is how the story should turn out. It's not a film and it's not a novel. The kid who survived hunger, violence, life on the streets, does not have to turn out to be the next president of Kenya. This is your life, Duncan. You don't want to go back? Stay. You can come and live with me. You can go back later on, when you feel ready. If you feel ready."

"Max, listen, I know you mean what you say. I know I could rip up my tickets and come to stay with you in Stuttgart. And I thank you. But this would not resolve anything: once again, I would be someone who needs help, I'd have to look for a job again, put up with all of the rejections, and even if I did get a job I would wake up every morning with the fear that something would go wrong."

Suddenly I felt like laughing. And I laughed.

"Why are you laughing?" asked Max.

"I'm not going to be the president of Kenya, anyway. I am going to make honey, for now anyway. That's all."

"You have to start somewhere," he smiled.

"See, what I really want," I began again, in seriousness, "is just to know that it will all work out. Can you swear to me that it will?" I look him right in the eye, like a challenge.

Max hesitates, then says: “It wouldn’t be right. For you to come with me, nor for you to leave.”

“Of course not: no one can promise something like that. These are the promises that mothers use to put their children to sleep at night, so they will sleep deeply. But I slept for too long with my eyes open, so that no one would kill me in my sleep. And I am even afraid of the day in which I’ll have a job, a house, a family, I’ll be protective of it all like a candle flame that could go out at any moment. So, you should let me go.”

“Go, then. But do it because you want to do it, not to please someone else.”

“And what is wrong with not letting down the expectations of the people who believe in me?”

“It would be wrong.”

“Do you think so? I was not studying hard because I love to study, I was studying because I made myself do it. For myself, but also for all the people I did not want to disappoint: Father Moses, Veronica, Juma and the Pentagon, Eugenio, Petrini. Striving to be your best for others sometimes leads us to improvement. It is a blessing to have someone who looks at you and thinks that you can do great and wonderful things.”

“I think so. I think you can do incredible things.”

“Even now, when you know everything about me?”

“Even more than before, one hundred times more. Do you want to know how it will go?”

I nod my head.

“You will start with a lab for honey extraction. It will grow quickly and make a good amount of money. You will get married and you’ll have a wife and kids waiting for you at home when you come back from your business trips. You will travel a lot to strengthen the network of Kenyan producers who will be changing the face of the country. Then the elections will come along and you will enter politics and ten years later you will be elected president of Kenya. You’ll make life extremely difficult for the evil people in the world.”

“Seriously?”

“Nothing less,” confirms Max with a serious voice, but his eyes are laughing. Then he closes with, “And of course, the good guys will win.”

“Are you going to come and give me a hand in saving the world?”

“Sure, Aisha and I will both be there.”

"And our kids will play *banta* together," I say. "Your will talk a lot and mine will win tons of marbles."

The glance that we exchange is filled with hope, it's a prayer. People come and go, it's wrong to get attached, but it's inevitable. Maybe some attachments are made by a very long cord, that can reach for thousands of miles and last for many years, without ever breaking. And so, two people can remain united, even if their lives go in different directions.

The loudspeaker announces the train for Torino Porta Susa. Arriving with a 30-minute delay. Max and I catch each other's eye.

I grab the handle of my old suitcase. My heart is beating quickly. Suddenly everything is real and imminent: the future has arrived in the form of a regional train that brakes and screeches along the tracks.

Max throws his arms open wide and hugs me tightly. I drop my suitcase. His thin, wiry arms made for rock climbing wrap around me like a climbing rope. We hug each other so tightly that I can feel his heart beating on the other side of my ribs.

"It's all going to work out," he whispers in my ear.

I close my eyes. I can feel the tears running down my cheeks: I believe him. It doesn't matter that I know it's not true, no one can ever say how things will go. Only a mother to a small child. It doesn't matter if Max isn't a mother, or a woman. I am not a child. It doesn't matter if we are related by blood.

Love is love forever. And it is the only place in the world, where, for an instant, we are safe.

Patè di olive verdi e nere

Camporeale, November 19, 2019

Cara Maria Paola,

with this letter I would like to tell you what happened after we finished writing the story of my life together. It would have been great to take that train to Torino and then a plane to Africa but my life is never that simple; you know this already.

I came back from Belgium disappointed. I asked Eugenio if I could stay with him for a while so that I could find time to come up with a solution. I arrived at his house when Alessandra was not very happy (possibly for work matters, or for family reasons). I cannot tell you why. But it was March and it is very cold. Even the house is cold. I feel like an elephant in a tiny room: maybe it is my fault that they are unhappy here. I told Eugenio that it was a long time that I had lived with a family: I was suffering. It is hard to be a guest in someone's house. I feel like I am a burden.

I feel like a new car that is standing still, because I have my degree in hand but I am not moving in any direction.

I look through my phone contacts to find all of the producers I knew when I was studying in Pollenzo.

Among these I find Evo from the Volpedo market, which is the city of Pellizza, the painter who fought for the poor.

Ivo is from Sicily, where there is a cooperative of farmers who want to realize the dream of a different kind of agriculture. They want their voices to be heard and to be respected.

The cooperative is in Camporale. It is about forty mintues from Palermo and there is a town of about 2,500 people. The economic reality of Camporeale is difficult but a seed has been sown: the farmers are working to cultivate the future.

The cooperative is called Valdibella: their philosophy is very social, not capitalist. They believe in a "circular economy", in organic food, and in biodiversity that respects the environment.

I called Ivo, as I mentioned, and I asked him if I could talk to the director of the cooperative. He explained to me that the president of Valdibella is his brother in law: a very kind and very helpful person. His name is Massimiliano Solano. I talked to Massimiliano and he said to come and visit the company. This was two weeks after I had been staying with Eugenio.

My car might finally be in motion! To Sicily.

I called Entoni to tell him that I was on my way to Sicily: his reply was that Sicily is the Africa of the north so I would be near to Africa. The Sicilians eat well but they eat a lot!

I flew to Sicily. At the airport in Palermo Massimiliano was there to meet me with my name written on a sheet of paper.

We arrived at the cooperative Valdibella: it is right on the hill, it is very green and there are trees all around. He told me all about the company, the interesting story of a dream that is growing, and now they want to develop various types of products, and to transform the gardens in addition to producing. For this reason they are looking for someone in a lab to develop recipes and to handle the company. I understood then that people can be connected in the same dream even if they have never met one another. I explained to Massimiliano that I too have the same dream: to develop the economy of Kenya as the wish to do in Camporeale, but I have not yet found enough funding to permit me to do this. Valdibella does not produce only vegetables, but they have other types of products such as wine, pasta, almond milk, almond cream, and more.

Then Massimiliano introduced me to another partner, as well as his brother-in-law Peter and his wife Giusy.

I am going to collaborate with them to transform the raw materials and develop new recipes by following the philosophy of the cooperative, which is also mine: organic food, health,

sustainability. Maria Paola, I am happy: I've already developed six new recipes and there are still more to create. The cooperative is already producing one of them, which is paté with green and black olives. Soon others will be in production. I really like working with them and I would like to continue our collaboration, even when I am in Kenya.

For now I am in Sicily and I am not moving, but I keep my dream right here next to me, my dream to return to Kenya and have a company that can give opportunities to those who are not fortunate, that can unite the small land farmers and then develop and put into place a circular economy. Life has taught me that sometimes, you just have to be patient. Not always if you have a dream you can make it come true right away, this is true for smaller dreams as well. The bigger dreams need much more time and energy and work and sometimes you even lose faith in them if someone doesn't give you a hand.

Here I work, eat, and sleep with my dream right next to me, for a few years now. The farmers here in Camporeale do the same, as do many others around the world. We all have the same dream. For this reason, I think that I can make it come true and build a future for Kenya that is different so that other children won't have to live the life that I did.

This book has given a voice to all of the thoughts that I kept inside of me, in silence. But now many people can hear them. I hope that my story can give some people courage and that they will know that we are all connected by the same dream, even if we have never met one another.

Soon it will be Christmas. I've organized my residency documents and maybe in the new year we can see each other. Take care, Maria Paola. Especially now, when you are about to have a baby and you'll need to take care of it.

Duncan

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* * *

What happened to the Children's Garden, Duncan?
Juma is now a teacher. He is married to Maureen, one of his schoolmates and they have a son.
Shadrack is an electrician. He too is married to a girl from the school of Papà Moses.
Boniface works in a hardware store and he has a girlfriend.
Muge worked as a laborer first in a shoe factory, and then in a biscuit factory. But he has decided to return to teaching and now he works in a school similar to that of Papà Moses.
Jacob, after leaving Papà Moses' school managed to get in to a very good secondary school, and he continued on to university and has now graduated.
No one knows what happened to Veronica, but I wish her well.
Not one of them has left Nairobi.
Papà Moses, with his wife Sylvia, continues every day to take in, care for and teach poor children in Nairobi. He considers all of them to be his children in some way. Every year one class from the school takes the KCSE state exam. As of today, none of them has been able to pass the exam.
As for Max, he is now in Friburgh with Aisha, who is finishing her studies there in medicine. He's got lots of projects in mind, and while waiting to start one of them, he is working as a chef.

(a letter from the co-author to the Italian booksellers)

September 2019

Dear Bookseller,

Maybe we met in 2012. Then, with my debut novel, The Negative of Love*, I was lucky enough to be able to visit bookstores all over Italy. In 2016 with my second book,* The Magical Child*, I came back again. But even if in neither of these two moments we crossed paths, I feel close to you for the transitive property of friendship: friends of friends are my friends. And books are our friends in common, our trust in the power of words and stories is what unites us.*

Maybe that's why I stopped in my tracks two years ago: I was working on another project, I stopped writing and started listening. Antonio Franchini and Giulia Ichino called me: "We want you to get to know a person, trust us." Under a loud tent in the Turin Book Fair I was introduced to Duncan, then a student at UNISG / University of Gastronomic Sciences founded in Pollenzo by Carlin Petrini. About him they told me this: "We know he grew up eating garbage in a slum, then life led him to the cradle of sustainable foods in Pollenzo. We would like you to ask him to tell you everything that happened in between, and to give him your voice."

By day I work in a bank, not by choice even if it is with passion, and I have done so since I was very young. I graduated with two degrees. I devote all my energy to supporting my husband and his amazing social projects, always so beautiful and so difficult. Then there are my four brothers and the people I love. In all this, writing is something that I make time for only when it becomes necessary, when I feel I have something to tell: then I decide to write, and I cease everything else. But the project must be worth it.

Duncan's story was worth all this, and much more. While I listened to it, and then began to shape it on the page, I also realized that, for the third time I was writing a similar story: that of someone who survives and through his pain, manages to hold on to a glimmer of light, a small spot of indestructible humanity and beauty.

The book you are holding in your hands is not a story of migration: it happens that the protagonist is born and grows up in a slum in Nairobi, but he could be in any rundown suburb where so many struggle to live, even those who may be living in a loft in the center of town.

Duncan's story is a story of resistance and hope. To hope and to dream - so they taught us - are rather innocent actions. Yet they are the only realistic way to get through pain and come out of it alive: as living people and not just as survivors. This is true for the lives of individuals and for the life of our country, so unable at this time to imagine its own future.

I thank you for the work you do as booksellers: it is made of hard labor and stamina. I hope that your bookstore is a cozy den that attracts many tenacious word-seekers and that you will always be able to find the strength to continue, to unlock the doors every day and find your dream awaiting you inside.

With gratitude,
Maria Paola