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The Joy of Rain

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Lightening cracked the sky, thunder followed like slaps of senseless anger.

Elephants; huge, sodden 'boulders', huddled under umbrella acacia as muddy water abseiled their flanks.

We sat and listened to the fat bruising rain...

"Are we stuck?"

In reply, Moses revved the engine. The jeep belched as it regurgitated squelching, gloopy mud. We slithered out of the hole and moved forward.

"Twende, twende: let's go," breathed Moses.

I softened my grip on the hand rail and slowly exhaled.

"Where now?"

"We will go where the track allows us."

He grasped the wheel as if daring the vehicle to disobey him; he a Masai elder. The rain eased and the stuffy smell of dry earth, swallowing water, floated in the air. The land had craved this inebriation, the drought had been endless. This rain would be welcomed and celebrated in many towns and villages - but not by me. We had set out from the lodge that morning to find a cheetah and her cubs and now my disappointment was dripping from the trees. Nothing for me to celebrate.

The scrub thinned as we neared the plains and, as we drove onto them, the rain stopped and the steaming savannah stretched before us. Like a torch, the sun was already beginning to spread a blanket of light.

"We will have to go to Imbirikani."

No, I shouted to myself.

"Well... if you are sure?"

"It is our only option until the roads dry."

The day couldn't get worse.

"We will go and see the village school."

Obviously, it could.

We splashed down the ramshackle 'High Street' lined with an assortment of corrugated, mud buildings; built from leftovers and strung together like a child's homemade necklace. 'Hotel' was daubed on the walls of one and a doomed goat was tethered at the butcher's shack.

Leaving the village, the road unzipped fields of tomatoes, their newly washed leaves studded with fruit, glistening like red marbles.

We arrived at the school; I positioned a smile.

The children were outside under the Kenyan flag singing about a mango tree; apparently, I was lucky because it was not Thursday, Swahili-speaking day. I was welcomed as if I was a rare and possibly threatening animal. We sized each other up. They were a collection of all things ill-fitted: jumpers, woolly hats, pyjama trousers, shoes made of old tyres, odd shoes, no shoes at all. The only uniform thing about them was the mud; they were all liberally splattered. The rain had been thoroughly and messily celebrated and, collectively, they resembled a piece of living impressionism. A large, yellow dress, with a tiny girl inside, sidled up and stretched a fingertip to touch the back of my hand; shocked, she flinched and ran away.

"Come, come! You must see our classrooms, you must speak to them." Solomon, the head teacher, looked at me hopefully.

Me! Speak? What to say?

He led me into a classroom and thrust a piece of chalk at me; I held it with something akin to horror. I looked around, sunlight struggled through a small window trying to dry puddles left by the rain. The children sat at desks shaped like window frames. A girl, with eyes downcast, showed me her book, every millimetre of each page was filled. A faded, blow-up globe dangled from a nail in the ceiling and the nature-table was growing in the earth floor. The rain would have clattered a rhythm on the roof, I wondered if they had stopped to tap along with it.

Solomon was rubbing a clean space on the blackboard when he stopped and turned to the door,

"Oh no! Oh no! Excuse me. Stay there, I will be back quickly-quickly," and he ran out.

The boy, with a sleeve unravelled to the elbow, stood up to speak,

"He has gone to chase the animals away, we plant trees and maize but they keep eating them. We need a fence."

"Does he often run out like that?"

"All the teachers do."

We waited for him to return. I stood before them, absorbing heat from their gaze; there was a frenzied insect somewhere, also seeking escape.

What on earth can I say?

What can I say...?

What to say...?

What to...?

"Did you enjoy the rain?"

In that dark classroom, dark faces split; it was like streets of glowing windows at night'. The children launched smiles that ricocheted off the walls. Balloons of laughter popped and exploded like happy fireworks. The joy of rain fizzed around the classroom. Virtual rainbows everywhere. I wanted to scoop them up; put them in a sealed bag; take them home; keep them; treasure them.

Joy, wrapped up in rainbows, so unexpected; something to celebrate after all.