

Ode to Joy

The little girl smiled at me. Her face was darker than the African night and shiny smooth. I thought a face this sculpted and serious couldn't possibly smile, the same way that the ironwood sculptures they were selling on the roadside in the dust only stared, unmoved like the people selling them. It was not a scowl but I was intimidated nonetheless by this seven year old girl in the heart of Africa. Her name was Joy and she had the beating of me from the off. This was her back yard, after all, and I was a long way from home.

And yet here I was, teaching her. Spellings in the local tribal language.

"Benya" I said. "What does it mean?"

And then it happened; that hardwood countenance melted and her face became suddenly alive and each crease told a happier story.

I was glad she was happy "but what does it mean?"

She said nothing, only continued to show those perfect luminous teeth, her face alight as she moved her head a little to the side that it caught new angles: bright sunlight trapped in the shadows. Each time I asked the smile seemed to strengthen. She was enjoying herself. But still she said nothing, just watched me; the strange creature I undoubtedly was to her, sweating in the cool of the morning, flicking at tsetse flies and jumping at my own shadow. She has seen me skirt a wide hemisphere around a ragged dog as I passed through the village, the rabies poster in the clinic back home clear in my mind; the malaria pills stashed safely in my money belt.

She clicked her tongue and the dog sprang up, bounded over to her, then flopped harmlessly on its side and let her scratch its mangy belly. Joy smiled.

Later I asked the teacher what it all meant.

"Little Joy" I said "why did she do that each time I asked her what it meant? What benya meant?"

It was the strangest thing. The teacher tilted his head a little and beamed at me, just like Joy had. Then he laughed.

"Mzungu", he said, white man, "you put too much importance in words. Benya means biiiig smile."

School starts at 7 in Zambia's Northern Province, but it is not sharp; the children trickle in as nonchalantly as the standpipe in the corner of the yard. First one and two at the school gate, grubby fingers curled around the chainlink. Then three, four until I'm standing shivering in the chill of the morning surrounded by a dozen or so eager pupils, clad as they are in parkas and beanies. Except for the red dust blown up by the passing ox cart, the fruit of the sausage tree hanging heavy above the tiny schoolhouse and the chorus of strange songs I might be transported to my own gloomy October suburb at the other end of the world.

The children know his shape from a distance along the road. It is seven thirty and the teacher is on his way and in no hurry; they slip through the fence, the sight of him their permission to enter, and pound the dust to the rusty swing set in the playground. Joy is there, beaming. She is carrying a dented paint tin and is eager to show me its contents.

"Teecha" she says; "Manende. Manende."

In the bucket is what I take to be oysters; flat and greased and very black. I take one because she tells me to; everyone takes one and it is cold, slimy in my hand. Soggy newspaper; like the messy stage of papier mache.

"It's millet bread" the teacher explains; "Joy's mum brings it each day because she can't pay school fees. Everyone has to contribute something. Manende we call it."

I have taken the biggest piece and I watch as the teacher dips into the bucket and pulls off a much smaller piece and pops it in his mouth. He winks at me as he works it round his mouth. "It's good," he says, then swallows hard and strolls back to the classroom.

Joy is watching me, expectant. She sees the bread that I'm holding limply in my hand. It smells damp and my fingers sink into the flesh of it. She draws her fingers to her mouth and motions me to eat. I think of Yorkshire pudding and Marmite. Her eyes are fires and now everyone is watching the Mzungu as he eats the black bread.

Just smile, I think to myself, as I take the first bite. Just Benya.