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SOMALIA: THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

(An Adaptation from Tim O'Brien's Book- The Things They Carried by (Vintage books 1994))



First Lieutenant Jimmy Muthomi of number 16 platoon of Echo Company of the 7 Mechanised Regiment (MR) deployed in Somalia under the auspices of peace enforcement with the African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) was obsessed with his mobile phone and particularly WhatsApp. The phone had a profile photo of a girl named Nkirote, a student at Methodist University at *Nkubu* in the eastern slopes of Mount Kenya where she was studying psychology. Lieutenant Muthomi carried the phone with her image plastered as a screen saver, making it easy for his

constant glances. The lieutenant also carried the phone ear-pods in his left breast pocket with the cords occasionally dangling as he walked. He also carried the phone charger in the bank at his hip pocket and another bank in his ruck sack both chargers weighed 250 grams each. He also carried Nkirote in his thoughts who was very weighty.

In the late afternoon, after a day's patrol in the sunny heat of Somalia, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, open the phone, and spend several hours of the night seeing the many messages on WhatsApp from Nkirote, imagining a romantic evening with Nkirote. More than anything, he wanted Nkirote to love him as he loved her, but her communication was mostly chatty, elusive on the matter of love. She was a virgin; he was almost sure. She wrote beautifully about her university and roommates and term papers, about her love for religion (She was of Methodist faith) and respect for and great affection for a leading political figure who was both their county governor. She often quoted lines of poetry; she never mentioned Somalia or Al Shabaab, except to say, *'Jimmy, take care of yourself.'* All her messages were signed 'Love, Nkirote,' but Lieutenant Muthomi understood that 'love' was only a way of signing and did not mean what he sometimes pretended it meant.

At last light, when darkness descended, the lieutenant would carefully put the phone on charger slowly, a bit distracted, he would get up and move among his men, checking the perimeter and their state of readiness of his platoon then at full dark he would return to his hole, the *handaki*, and watch the night and wonder what Nkirote was doing.

The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near-necessities were sleeping bags, tin openers, pocket knives, dog tags, mosquito repellent, cigarettes, lighters, matches, sewing kits, rations consisting of two tins corned beef, three tins of pineapples, and two canteens of water. It also consisted of the camel pack, a foldable canvas container meant to carry three litres of water while snugly fitting to the back. Together, these items weighed between 12 and 14 kilogrammes, depending upon a man's habits or rate of metabolism. Keboga Evans who was a big man, carried extra rations; he was especially fond of carrying extra cans of pineapples. Kirinyaga, who was the field hygiene technician, carried a bottle of disinfectant. He also carried a toothbrush, dental floss, and several hotel-sized bars of soap; He also carried a shovel. Jamlick Gachugo, who was scared, carried tranquillisers until he was shot in the head outside the village of Tawakal in mid-April. By necessity, and because it was Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), they all wore steel helmets that weighed 3kg

including the liner and camouflage cover. In the rucksacks, they carried the extra pair of fatigue jackets and trousers and Jungle hat. On their feet, they carried jungle boots, each weighing 1.5 kilograms. Until he was shot, Jamlick Gachugo carried 10 rolls of premium bhang and also 2 kilogrammes of top quality Khat called *Kangeta*, which for him was a necessity. Isako Jaldi, the Radio operator, carried the combat radio and two packs of condoms, he claimed that even in Somalia you never know when you can bump into a willing female target.

They were also weighted down with their assorted mobile phones which despite strict instructions from the higher ups, they still contrived to carry. The phones averaged 200 grams, same with the power banks. They all had airtime bundles loaded on the phones for surfing the net, which weighed nothing. Their mobile phones added to their thoughts and with added thoughts, added weight from incessant demands for coins for some worthy cause from the many contemporaries and loved ones. Occasionally, their mobile phones assumed added weight attributed to the many political bickering back in the home country. At 44, the grandpa of the platoon, the platoon sergeant, avoided this entirely. He only carried the old QWERTY phone model just colloquially named as *Katululu* it served the bare basic function and had negligible weight.

Necessity dictated. Because the land was infested with booby-trapped Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) and because the Jihadist snipers were common, it was Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for each man to carry a steel-centred, nylon-covered flak jacket, which weighed 5 kilogrammes, but which on hot days seemed much heavier. Because you could die so quickly, each man carried at least one large compress bandage, usually in the helmet band for easy access. Because the nights were cold, and because the rains could come at any moment, each carried a green plastic poncho that could be used as a raincoat or groundsheet or makeshift tent. With its quilted liner, the poncho weighed almost 2 kilogrammes, but it was worth every gram. In April, for instance, when Jamlick Gachugo was shot, they used his poncho to wrap him up, then to carry him across the Lagah, then to lift him into the chopper that took him away.

They were called legs or grunts or PBI (Poor Bloody Infantrymen). To carry something was to hump it, as when Lieutenant Jimmy Muthomi humped his love for Nkirote on the dry plains and through the wadis. In its intransitive form, to hump meant to walk, or to march, but it implied burdens far beyond the intransitive.

Lieutenant Muthomi was obsessed with the body of Nkirote. He remembered touching her left knee during a session when they had been having a coffee date. It was at an old building at Meru (Why does Meru have so many old buildings?) he remembered, Nkirote who wore a tweed skirt, and as they were about to leave, he touched her knee, she turned and looked at him in a sad, sober way that made him pull his hand back, but he would always remember the feel of the tweed skirt and the knee beneath it and the look of the waiter who pretended not to notice anything but at the same time trying to smother a knowing smile. He remembered kissing her good night as she reached the gate of the college. Right then, he thought, he should've done something brave. He should've carried her up the stairs to her room and tied her to the bed and touched that left knee all night long. He should've risked it.

What they carried was partly a function of rank, partly of field speciality. As a first lieutenant and platoon commander Jimmy Muthomi carried a compass, maps, binoculars, a signal code book and a M-4 rifle browning pistol that weighed 3.4 kilogrammes fully loaded. He carried a strobe light, a satellite phone, a platoon notebook and the responsibility for the lives of his men.

As an RTO, Jaldi carried the French made TRC-325 radio, a killer at 12 kilogrammes with its battery. As a medic, Lokadokoi carried a canvas satchel filled with morphine, plasma, malaria tablets, anti-snake venom, bandages, surgical tape, and all the essentials a medic must carry, including M&M's for especially severe wounds, for a total weight of nearly 10 kilograms. Lokadoi also carried hope. As a big man, therefore a machine gunner, Wanyama Godfrey carried the cumbersome Light Machine Gun (LMG), which weighed 12.5 kilograms unloaded, but which was almost always loaded with 32 rounds. In addition, Wanyama carried between 4 other full magazines of ammunition (Ammo). As rifle men, most of them were common grunts and carried the standard AK 47 assault rifle. The weapon weighed 3.5 kilogrammes unloaded, 5.2 kilograms with its full 27-round magazine.

Depending on numerous factors, such as topography and psychology, the riflemen carried anywhere from 12 to 20 magazines in their side pouches, adding on another 4.4 kilograms at minimum, 7 kilograms at maximum. Among the riflemen somebody carried the 60 mm Asian commando mortar, 5.6 kilograms unloaded, a reasonably light but clumsy weapon except for the ammunition, which was heavy. A single bomb weighed 2.5 kilograms. The typical load was 12 bombs. But Jamlick Gachugo, who was scared, carried 4 bombs when he was shot and killed outside Tawakal and he went down under an exceptional burden, more than 10 kilograms of

ammunition, plus the flak jacket and helmet and rations and water and toilet paper and 10 rolls of Bhang and premium *Miraa* and all the rest, plus the unweighted fear. He was dead weight. There was no twitching or flopping. Dokhole, who was a mere metre away when it happened and who remains surprised by it all to this day. Dokhole said it was like watching a rock fall, or a big sandbag or something—just boom, then down—not like the movies where the dead guy rolls around and does fancy spins and goes ass over teakettle—not like that, Dokhole said, the poor bastard just flat-fuck fell. Boom. Down. Nothing else. It was on a bright morning of mid-April.

Lieutenant Muthomi particularly felt the pain of Jamlick Gachugo's demise and totally blamed himself. They stripped off Gachugos' canteens and ammo, all the heavy things, and Jemo Kithinji said the obvious, the guy's dead, and Jaldi used his radio to report contact and one KIA and to request a chopper. Then they wrapped Gachugo in his poncho. They carried him out to a dry wadi, established security, four of them surreptitiously smoked the dope which Gachugo had carried, the rest sat facing outwards from the chopper landing zone each wrapped in his thoughts.

Command is lonely, Lieutenant Muthomi kept to himself but Nkirote dominated his thinking, he pictured her smooth young face, imagining that he loved her more than

anything in the world, more than his men, and now Jamlick Gachugo was dead because he loved her so much and could not stop thinking about her. When the helicopter arrived, they carried Jamlick Gachugo aboard. They marched until dusk, then dug their holes, and that night Dokhole kept explaining how you had to be there, how fast it was, how the poor guy just dropped like so much concrete. Boom-down, he repeated, like cement.

In addition to the five standard weapons—the AK 47, M-4, LMG, GPMG and Mortar—they carried whatever presented itself, or whatever seemed appropriate as a means of killing or staying alive. They carried catch-as-catch-can. Abubakar carried a slingshot; he called it *Manati* a weapon of last resort, ammo would never be a problem; he had added. Edgar Lopo who liked fighting carried brass knuckles. They all carried fragmentation M-26 grenades—700 grams each. They all carried at least one M-18 coloured smoke grenade—350 grams' weight. Some carried white phosphorus grenades. They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried.

In the first week of April, before Jamlick Gachugo died, Lieutenant Jimmy Muthomi received a good-luck charm from Nkirote. It was a cowrie shell, about 100 grams at best, smooth to the touch and had the colour of a leopard. It was also oval shaped

like a miniature egg. The gift made him love her even more. On the patrols, through even in the hot days of early April, his mind wandered about her and he had difficulty keeping his attention on the patrol. On occasion he would yell at his men to spread out the column:

“Fungua hapo!” –He would call out.

but then he would slip away into daydreams, just pretending, walking barefoot along river *Kathiita Munyi* which was not navigable, with Nkirote, carrying nothing. He would feel himself rising. He thought of the forests and shrubs alongside the river, the very clear moving waters, the setting sun and gentle winds, all love and lightness.

What they carried varied by mission and the expected number of days outside the main company base. If a mission seemed especially hazardous, or if it involved a place they knew to be bad, they carried everything they could. In certain suspected heavily mined localities, where the land was dense with IEDs, they took turns humping a 28-pound mine detector. With its headphones and big sensing plate, the equipment was a stress on the lower back and shoulders, awkward to handle, often useless because of the shrapnel in the earth, but they carried it anyway, partly for safety, partly for the illusion of safety. On ambush, or other night missions, they

carried peculiar little odds and ends. Dave Okach carried night-sight vitamins high in carotene and a pocket-sized half-litre bottle of vodka. Until he was shot, Jamlick Gachugo carried the starlight scope for night vision, which weighed 6.3 kilograms with its aluminium carrying case. Grand-Pa carried a whistle and grip and field experience. They all carried ghosts. When dark came, they would move out single file across the meadows to their ambush coordinates, where they would quietly set up the claymores and lie down and spend the night waiting.

Other missions were more complicated and required special equipment. In mid-April, it was their mission to make safe an IED which had been openly planted next to the village borehole outside Tawakal village. Edward was the demolition expert and carried his paraphernalia, including one-kilogramme blocks of pentrite high explosives, four blocks to a man, 68 kilogrammes in all. He also carried wiring, pliers, detonators, and battery-powered clackers. Which weighed at 3 kilogrammes. Edward had been blessed with more than his fair share of melanin, which explained why he was blue black, which hopefully did not add to his overall weight. He also was prone to sweating too much hence dubbed PSO-the platoon sweating officer which reduced his weight.

Edward Chero got to work while the rest of the platoon fanned out, watching and waiting as they trained their eyes in the surroundings, thinking and imagining and worrying about odd things: In some respects, though not many, the waiting was worse than the demolition of the IED itself. Imagination was a killer.

The morning was hot and very still. Not good, Dokhole had said. He looked at Edward Chero crawling to the IED, then his eyes gazed out to the dry flat terrain beyond the village of Tawakal. Nothing moved. No clouds or birds or people. As they waited, the men smoked and sipped water not talking much, feeling sympathy for Edward. Jamlick Gachugo popped a chewing gum in his mouth and announced to nobody in particular that he was off to pee. After five minutes, Lieutenant Jimmy Muthomi changed his position to a shadier thicket and continued to examine the surroundings. Trouble, he thought, was everywhere. And then suddenly, without willing it, he was thinking about Nkirote. Dense, crushing love. he tried to concentrate on the work Edward was doing and the war, all the dangers, but his love was too much for him, he felt paralysed, he wanted to sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood and be smothered. He wanted her to be a virgin and not a virgin, all at once. He wanted to know her. Intimate secrets: Why poetry? Why so sad? Why that sadness in her eyes? Why so alone? Not lonely, just alone— sitting off by herself in the cafeteria—even dancing, she danced alone—and it was the

aloneness that filled him with love. He remembered telling her that one evening. How she nodded and looked away. And how, later, when he kissed her, she received the kiss without returning it, her eyes wide open, not afraid, not a virgin's eyes, just flat and uninvolved. Lieutenant Muthomi gazed at his men. But he was not there. He was at one with Nkirote at the banks of *Kathiita Munyi* next to each other, their shoulders touching. He was smiling. Vaguely, he was aware of how quiet the day was, the sullen and hot environment, yet he could not bring himself to worry about matters of security. He was beyond that. He was just a kid at war, in love. He was twenty-four years old. He couldn't help it. A few moments later, Edward Chero called out, grinning, that he had finished the task. Lieutenant Muthomi nodded and closed his eyes while the others clapped Chero on the back, congratulating him and made jokes about his rising from the dead. The men laughed, and all felt great relief. The good moment was immediately spoilt when a Jihadist rifle shot sounded from yonder, the bullet hitting Jamlick Gachugo in the head on his way back from peeing. He lay with his mouth open. The teeth were broken. There was a swollen black bruise under his left eye. The cheekbone was gone. Oh! shit! Jemo Kithinji had said. The guy's dead. The guy's dead, he kept saying, which seemed profound—the guy's dead. I mean, really.

The things they carried were determined to some extent by superstition. Lieutenant Muthomi carried his good-luck cowrie shell which had been a gift from Nkirote. Sergeant Ndungú, the grandpa, walked around with a five-foot stave carved from the *Bambakofi* tree. He said the stave had been blessed. Philip Garoli carried a rabbit's foot. Mwololo carried his grandfather's feathered hatchet, Jack Mwambs a practicing catholic carried a rosary wrapped in his neck; he also carried a prayer book. TJ NdoIndol carried comic books. Kiganane, a devout salvation Army adherent, carried an illustrated New Testament that had been presented to him by his father in law, who was a pastor in western Kenya. Mohamed Noor carried the religious *hirizi* wrapped around his upper right arm as a comforter and to ward off any incoming bullet. Nat Ogaye carried a killer Hippopotamus molar, He called it *Nawi*. Lawrence Mpatsa wore his wife's underwear. David Pepeyao did not wear underwear. Richard Zawanda, otherwise a very gentle person, carried a sharp knife that had been presented to him as a gift by Franko Matiiri. The knife was dark brown from a covering of a sheep skin, rubbery to the touch, and weighed 1 kilogramme at most. It had been found from a suspected Al Shabaab corpse, a boy of fifteen or sixteen. They'd found him at the bottom of a laggah badly burned, flies in his mouth and eyes. The boy wore coloured *kikoyi* and sandals. At the time of his death, he had been carrying a pouch of rice, a rifle, and three magazines of

ammunition. You want my opinion, Franko Matiiri had said, there's a definite moral here smiling, as he collected the knife from the corpse and handed it over to Zawanda. He then kicked the boy's head, and smiled as he watched the flies scatter. They carried stationery and pencils and pens. They carried Sternos, safety pins, trip flares, signal flares, spools of wire, razor blades, candles, grease pencils, tin openers, Psy Ops leaflets, jungle hats, bolos, and much more. They carried plastic water containers, each with a 2-litre capacity. Meitamei Edward carried empty sandbags that could be filled at night for added protection. John Wainaina carried tanning lotion. Some things they carried in common. Taking turns, they carried the big PRC-77 scrambler radio, which weighed 30 kilogrammes with its battery.

They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear. Often, they carried each other, the wounded or weak. They carried infections, plastic cards imprinted with the AMISOM Code of Conduct. They carried diseases, among them malaria and dysentery and stress. They carried lice, ringworm, leeches, and various rots and moulds. They carried the land itself—Somalia, the place, the soil—a powdery orange-red dust that covered their boots and faces and faces. They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the thorns of *wait a moment* shrub, of fungus and decay, and donkey

droppings smells, all of it, they carried gravity. They moved like mules. By daylight they took sniper fire, at night, they were mortared, but it was not battle; it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost. They marched for the sake of the march. They plodded along slowly, dumbly, leaning forward against the heat, unthinking, all blood and bone, simple PBIs, soldiering with their legs, toiling up the hills and down into the wet lagas and across the wadis and up again and down, just humping, one step and then the next and then another, but no volition, no will, because it was automatic, it was anatomy, and the war was entirely a matter of posture and carriage, the hump was everything, a kind of inertia, a kind of emptiness, a dullness of desire and intellect and conscience and hope and human sensibility. Their principles were in their feet. Their calculations were biological. They had no sense of strategy or mission. They searched the villages without knowing what to look for, not caring, kicking over things, frisking children and old men, sometimes threatening the inhabitants and sometimes not, then forming up and moving on to the next village, then other villages, where it would always be the same. They carried their own lives. The pressures were enormous. In the heat of early afternoon, they would remove their helmets and flak jackets, walking bare, which was dangerous but which helped ease the strain, they carried like freight trains, but they carried it on their backs

—and for all the ambiguities of Somalia, all the mysteries and unknowns, there was at least the single abiding certainty that they would never be at a loss for things to carry.

After the chopper took Jamlick Gachugo away, Lieutenant Jimmy Muthomi led his men into the village of Tawakal and exacted some revenge on the village, somewhat. Then they marched for several hours through the hot afternoon, and then at dusk, while Dokhole continued narrating to everybody how Jamlick Gachugo had died falling like dead weight.

Lieutenant Jimmy Muthomi found himself trembling in early evening. He tried not to cry. With his shovel, which weighed 3 Kilogrammes, he began digging a hole in the earth. He felt shame. He hated himself. He had loved Nkirote more than his men, and as a consequence Jamlick Gachugo was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war. All he could do was dig. He used his shovel like an ax, slashing, feeling both love and hate, and then later, when it was full dark, he sat at the bottom of his foxhole and wept. It went on for a long while. In part, he was grieving for Jamlick Gachugo, but mostly it was for Nkirote, and himself, because she belonged to another world, which was not quite real, and because she was a student at the

Methodist university in Nkubu, a poet and a virgin and uninvolved, and because he realized she did not love him and never would.

“Haki ya Mungu nimeshangaa! Like cement”, Dohole Ropa whispered in the dark. “I swear to God—boom, down. Not a word”

“I’ve heard enough of this”, said Opiyo Johnson.

But Dokhole went on.

“A pisser, you know? Still zipping himself up. Zapped while zipping”.

“All right, fine. That’s enough”

“Yeah, Nimeshangaa Kweli kweli! you had to see it, the guy just— “

“I heard, man! Cement. So why not shut the fuck up? “

Dokhole shook his head sadly and glanced over at the *handaki* where Lieutenant Jimmy Muthomi sat watching the night.

The air was thick and wet. A warm dense fog had settled over the Somali thickets and there was the stillness that precedes rain. After a time Dokhole sighed. One thing for sure, he said. The lieutenant is in some deep hurt. I mean that crying jag—the way he was carrying on—it wasn’t fake or anything, it was real heavy-duty hurt.

“The man cares,”- Dokhole said

"Sure," Opiyo Johnson answered.

"Say what you want, the man does care." Dokhole continued.

"We all got problems." Opiyo had mused.

"Jamlick Gachugo too?" Dokhole eagerly asked.

"No, I guess not" Opiyo had said. *"Do me a favour, though. Shut up!?"*

Shrugging, Dokhole pulled off his boots. He wanted to say more, just to lighten up his sleep, but instead he opened his New Testament and arranged it beneath his head as a pillow. The fog made things seem hollow and unattached. He tried not to think about Jamlick Gachugo, but then he was thinking how fast it was, no drama, down and dead, and how it was hard to feel anything except surprise. It seemed unchristian. He wished he could find some great sadness, or even anger, but the emotion wasn't there and he couldn't make it happen. Mostly he felt pleased to be alive. He liked the smell of the New Testament under his cheek, the leather and ink and paper and glue, whatever the chemicals were. He liked hearing the sounds of night. Even his fatigue, it felt fine, the stiff muscles and the prickly awareness of his own body, a floating feeling. He enjoyed not being dead. Lying there, Dokhole admired Lieutenant Jimmy Muthomi's capacity for grief. He wanted to share the man's pain, he wanted to care as Lieutenant Jimmy Muthomi cared. And yet when

he closed his eyes, all he could think was Boom-down, and all he could feel was the pleasure of having his boots off and the Somali heat curling in around him and the damp soil and the Bible smells and the plush comfort of night.

“Nimeshangaaa!”

After a moment Solo Mambo sat up in the dark.

“Zidi Kushangaa! What the hell!” he said. *“You want to talk, talk! Tell it to me! “*

“Forget it!”

“No, man, go on. One thing I hate, is a silent Rendille”.

For the most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity. Now and then, however, there were times of panic, when they squealed or wanted to squeal but couldn't, when they twitched and made moaning sounds and covered their heads and said *Dear Jesus! Ngai! Nyasaye! Mungu! Jeso! Mwathani! Mtume!* and flopped around on the earth and fired their weapons blindly and cringed and sobbed and begged for the noise to stop and went wild and made stupid promises to themselves and to God and to their mothers and fathers, hoping not to die. In different ways, it happened to all of them. Afterwards, when the firing ended, they would blink and peek up. They would touch their bodies, feeling shame, then

quickly hiding it. They would force themselves to stand. As if in slow motion, frame by frame, the world would take on the old logic—absolute silence, then the wind, then sunlight, then voices. It was the burden of being alive. Awkwardly, the men would reassemble themselves, first in private, then in groups, becoming soldiers again. They would repair the leaks in their eyes. They would check for casualties, light cigarettes, try to smile, clear their throats and spit and begin cleaning their weapons. After a time, someone would shake his head and say;

“No lie guys, ilikuwa Kubaya! I almost shit my pants,”!

and someone else would laugh, which meant it was bad, yes, but the guy had not shit his pants, it wasn't that bad, and in any case nobody would ever do such a thing and then go ahead and talk about it. They would squint into the dense, oppressive sunlight. For a few moments, perhaps, they would fall silent. Scary stuff, one of them might say. But then someone else would grin or flick his eyebrows and say, Roger-dodger, almost cut me a new asshole, almost. There were numerous such poses.

Some carried themselves with a sort of wistful resignation, others with pride or stiff soldierly discipline or good humour or macho zeal. They were afraid of dying but they were even more afraid to show it. They found jokes to tell. They used a

hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. Greased they'd say. Offed, lit up, zapped while zipping. It wasn't cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors. When someone died, it wasn't quite dying, because curiously it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorised, irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself. They talked PBI lingo.

They told stories about Jamlick Gachugo's supply of bhang, how the poor guy didn't feel a thing, how incredibly tranquil he was.

"There's a moral here", said Franco Matiiri.

They were fanned out waiting for Jamlick Gachugos' chopper, smoking the dead man's dope.

"The moral's pretty obvious" Lenyarua said, and winked. "Stay away from drugs." he had added "No joke, they'll ruin your day every time.

"Cute," said Isaya Amadi. "Mind blower, get it? Talk about Jamlick the born soldier. Nothing left, just blood and brains."

They made themselves laugh. There it is, they'd say. Over and over—there it is, my friend, there it is—as if the repetition itself were an act of poise, a balance between crazy and almost crazy, knowing without going, there it is, which meant be cool, let

it ride, because Oh yeah, man, you can't change what can't be changed, there it is, there is absolutely and positively and fucking well is.

They were tough. They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. grief, terror, love, longing— these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight. They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down, it required perfect balance and perfect posture. They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of being afraid. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honour, just to avoid the dishonour of being fearful. They died so as not to die of embarrassment. They walked point and advanced under fire. Each morning, despite the unknowns, they made their legs move. They endured. They kept humping. They did not submit to the obvious alternative, which was simply to close their eyes and fall. So easy, really. Go limp and tumble to the ground and let the muscles unwind and not speak and not budge until your buddies picked you up and lifted you into the MI chopper that would roar and dip its nose and carry you off to the world. A mere matter of falling, yet no one

ever fell. It was not courage, exactly; the object was not valour. Rather, they were too frightened to be cowards. By and large they carried these things inside, maintaining the masks of composure. They sneered at sick call. They spoke bitterly about guys who were malingerers. pussies, skivers, they'd say. Candy-asses. It was fierce, mocking talk, with only a trace of envy or awe, but even so the image played itself out behind their eyes. They imagined the release of being hit, though not fatally. They imagined it. They imagined the quick, sweet pain, then the evacuation to the sector headquarters at Dhobley, then a hospital with warm beds.

And they dreamed of freedom birds. At night, alone on sentry duties, staring into the dark, that their tour was over and were being lifted by the dash-8 jet cruising three kilometres above headed to Nairobi, to the west. They felt the rush of take-off. Gone! they yelled. And then velocity—wings and engines but it was more than a plane, it was a real bird, a big sleek silver bird with feathers and talons and high screeching. They were flying. The weights fell off; there was nothing to bear. They laughed and held on tight, feeling the cold slap of wind and altitude, soaring, thinking It's over, I'm gone! —they were naked, they were light and free—it was all lightness, bright and fast and buoyant, light as light, a helium buzz in the brain, a giddy bubbling in the lungs as they were taken up over the clouds and the war, beyond duty, beyond gravity and mortification and global entanglements. they

yelled. I'm sorry, motherfuckers, but I'm out of it, I'm goofed, I'm on a space cruise, I'm gone!—and it was a restful, unencumbered sensation, just riding the light waves, sailing that big silver freedom bird over the mountains and plains, over Kenya, over the farms and great sleeping cities and farms and highways and tea farms and the *Masinga* dam and above *Kungu maitu* and *Joskaki* and *Thingitho* and *Githurai* and *Salama* and *Kisumu Ndogo* , it was flight, a kind of fleeing, a kind of falling, falling higher and higher, spinning off the edge of the earth and beyond the sun and through the vast, silent vacuum where there were no burdens and where everything weighed exactly nothing—Gone! they screamed. I'm sorry but I'm gone! —and so at night, not quite dreaming, they gave themselves over to lightness, they were carried, they were purely borne.

On the morning after Jamlick Gachugo died, First Lieutenant Jimmy Muthomi crouched at the bottom of his foxhole and burned Nkirote's good Luck Charm. Then he burned her two photographs and erased her photo from his mobile phone and replaced her face with the map of Somalia as the screen saver. There was a steady rain falling, which made it difficult, but he used heat tabs and Sterno to build a small fire, screening it with his body, holding the photographs over the tight blue flame with the tips of his fingers. He realized it was only a gesture. Stupid, he thought. Sentimental, too, but mostly just stupid. Jamlick Gachugo was dead. You couldn't

burn the blame. Besides, the photos were in his head. In his phone and even now, without the photographs, Lieutenant Muthomi could see Nkirote playing volleyball in her white gym shorts and yellow T-shirt. He could see her moving in the rain. When the fire died out, Lieutenant Muthomi pulled his poncho over his shoulders and ate breakfast from a can. There was no great mystery, he decided. In those burned photos, Nkirote had never mentioned the war, except to say, Jimmy, take care of yourself. She wasn't involved. She signed the letters Love, but it wasn't love, and all the fine lines and technicalities did not matter. Virginity was no longer an issue. He hated her. Yes, he did. He hated her. Love, too, but it was a hard, hating kind of love. The morning came up wet and blurry. Everything seemed part of everything else, the fog and Nkirote and the deepening rain. He was a soldier, after all. Half smiling, Lieutenant Jimmy Muthomi took out his maps. He shook his head hard, as if to clear it, then bent forward and began planning the day's march. In ten minutes, or maybe twenty, he would rouse the men and they would pack up and head west, where intelligence had indicated there was suspected enemy activities. They would do what they had always done. There were signs that it would rain and when it does in Somalia, it is always a deluge. The rain, he knew, might add some weight, but otherwise it would be one more day layered upon all the other days. He was realistic about it. There was that new hardness in his stomach. He loved her

but he hated her. No more fantasies, he told himself. Henceforth, when he thought about Nkirote, it would be only to think that she belonged elsewhere. He would shut down the daydreams. This was not the Methodist university; this was another world, where there were no pretty poems or term papers, a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity. Dokhole was right. Boom-down, and you were dead, never partly dead. Briefly, in the rain, Lieutenant Muthomi saw Nkirote eyes gazing back at him. He understood. It was very sad, he thought.

The things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do. He almost nodded at her, but didn't. Instead he went back to his maps. He was now determined to perform his duties firmly and without negligence. It wouldn't help Jamlick Gachugo, he knew that, but from this point on he would comport himself as an officer. On the march he would impose strict field discipline. He would be careful to send out flank security, to prevent straggling or bunching up, to keep his troops moving at the proper pace and at the proper interval. He would insist on clean weapons. He would confiscate the remainder of Jamlick Gachugo's dope. Later in the day, perhaps, he would call the men together and speak to them plainly. He would accept the blame for what had happened to Jamlick Gachugo. He would be a man about it. He would look them in the eyes, keeping his chin level, and he would issue the new SOPs in a calm, impersonal tone of voice, a Lieutenant's voice,

leaving no room for argument or discussion. Commencing immediately, he'd tell them, they would no longer abandon equipment along the route of march. They would police up their acts. They would get their shit together, and keep it together, and maintain it neatly and in good working order. He would not tolerate laxity. He would show strength, distancing himself. Among the men there would be grumbling, of course, and maybe worse, because their days would seem longer and their loads heavier, but Lieutenant Jimmy Muthomi reminded himself that his obligation was not to be loved but to lead. He would dispense with love; it was not now a factor. And if anyone complained, he would simply tighten his lips and arrange his shoulders in the correct command posture. He might give a curt little nod. Or he might not. He might just shrug and say, carry on, then they would saddle up and form into a column and move out toward the villages west of Tawakal.

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