

## Human Unfamiliarity

Lucianna, a young African girl, holds my hand. I've met her only hours ago and yet a friendship has formed, a familiarity that will help carry me through tomorrow. We stand looking out over a soccer field, a bare space of land with high school boys running back and forth across it. The boys' feet send up little plumes of dust, illuminating and catching the sun's slowly sinking rays as it dips below the horizon of circular brick-mud huts, maize, and tropical trees. The sun makes Lucianna's eyes and teeth shine when she smiles beside me. My skin shines from the sweat of the day and from the pure contrast to the world I've been dropped into.

It's tomorrow already, and Lucianna finds me during a break in their class schedule. Soon, other girls and even some boys gather around, their eyes lifting to take in my tall frame, and they giggle. Words I don't understand are thrown around the mishappen circle in hushed tones and their hands reach out slowly to touch my pale skin. More giggling. One of the girls asks in wonderful English if she could? I smile and nod and her hand runs down the length of my simple brown braid. She squeals and they all laugh. Later, the same girl says that when my group stood at the front of the school, she admired me for my braids. I was astonished, my hair is so bland. I tell her I admire her bright and bubbly laugh. It is wonderful, these high schoolers and their smiles, the way the words pour from their mouths. The questions they ask are so alike to the ones coming from my mouth and yet, they glow with a twisting accent. Do we dance in America? It is hot like it is here or do we sweat because it's cold where we come from? What is our regional food? Am I saved?

They are ever coming, the questions are, and yet I answer all of them. We only dance at dances or parties, in my region we line and swing dance. It's both: hot in the summer and cold in the winter. The best is fall, the in-between of the hot and cold months. When I tell them of snow

they don't believe it. We have no regional food, though the closest thing would be a burger and corn-on-the-cob because there are a lot of cows and corn fields where I come from. I am saved and believe in Jesus, I'm here to meet brother and sisters of the faith and encourage and be encouraged.

One from the group takes the paper she has been drawing on and folds it so carefully and then sets it atop my head. A paper crown for their visitor. I set it gently in my bag as they scatter to go back to class.

It's evening now, and I stand on a desk with Lucianna holding my hand again. It's unnerving, standing on a desk yes, but also the energy the building holds and the scene I'm witnessing in front of me. I am glad she holds my hand; it grounds me from the overstimulation. The chapel smells like bodies that have been in the heat and humidity too long. It has been dark out for an hour by now and the lights are hazy with bugs swarming the florescent bulbs. What started as a talent show has turned into something much more. Not a party, no, but a type of worship I have never experienced. Hands touch hands, and people bump into one another as they all dance in front of us. Dust is everywhere, in my hair, on my teeth, and in between my toes. There's a group of boys and a couple of girls on the stage at the front, but they are only the opening act, the side event. The main event and focus is the crowd. The music swells, and the beat gets louder as the DJ on the phone and speaker turns it up even more. I cannot hear myself think as everyone stomps and claps on the desks and those that need more move from the tops of desks to the floor and move with their whole being. I look to Lucianna to understand. But the energy has taken her too. Her hips move side to side in a swaying motion and her sandaled feet tap out the rhythm that has taken over the whole crowd. I hold tighter to her hand, and she looks at me and laughs, urging me to move too. So, I do.

The boys at the front are moving in ways I have never seen in America, their feet skipping and pounding like a tribal tap and their hips shake and their arms wave. One moves in perfect beat with the techno music as if he is a machine working how the music tells him, it controls him. Girls from the front of the crowd run and join them on stage laughing and dancing. The music comes from their mouths too, their melodies native concoctions I have never heard before. My ears itch to know what they're saying.

And suddenly it dawns on me. We are no longer just standing on desks for a better view of the stage, no, we are a part of the worship. Because here to move to music means to worship God for it. We dance together because he gave us the means to do so, so we bring it to Him to glorify Him.

One of the teachers walks to the front and grabs the microphone, shushing us all. After a few last-minute beats from the DJ, the talent show-turned-worship-night ends. Lucianna lets go of my hand and we both step down to sit on the seats of the desks. She takes a rag from her pocket and wipes off our dusty prints. Once we have given out awards and pass around American sweets, Lucianna finds me again and takes me by the arm, leading me to a group of her schoolfriends. They ask me to tell them more of America and some of our American line dances we told them about. In return to my last answers and Cotton-Eye-Joe teaching, they attempt to teach me some of their African moves as well. American hips don't move that way. We all laugh as we don't quite grasp the other's piece of culture.

The goodbyes were so much harder than I imagined they would be. The tragic sadness of the whole affair hits me hard when our leader says it's time to go. I take out my phone and ask for a picture with Lucianna and her friends. They laugh and agree and put their arms around me and each other. Some others from another group run over and pile in behind us, the girl who

admired my braids and the one who gave me my paper crown come with. They smile and giggle as they see their faces on my phone. I smile at their reactions and take another quick one. I'm clasped in hugs and told to come back again next year. My heart aches while my mind revolts. My mind tells me that I do not belong in this humid place of unfamiliarity where my hair and skin do not match and do not dry and yet my heart tugs back saying that a week is most definitely not long enough, there's so much yet to do and people yet to meet. So many names and hugs I've yet to learn and receive. I need more time.

Goodbye Lucianna. Goodbye Uganda.