



HOPE & HUMANITY  
IN THE FORGOTTEN FIGHT  
AGAINST AIDS

**BEYOND  
BLOOD**

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CORNEL ONYANGO NYAYWERA

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# INTRODUCTION



When our taxi dropped us off, I assumed we'd taken a wrong turn. It would have been an easy mistake, since there were no street signs to guide our way. We were dropped off at a rickety wooden bridge over black water that was only passable on foot. We crossed the bridge one by one, holding our breath, partially because of the smell and partially because of the fear of falling. After the bridge was a swamp, stagnant and brown from the recent rainy season. We rolled up our jeans and trudged through the water, toward the lone house that stood on the horizon. I wasn't surprised by how dilapidated the house was. I wasn't caught off guard by the heavy stench of sewer that followed us across the swamp, the trash floating by, or the two wild dogs that sulked pitifully around the grounds. What gave me pause was the fact that her house was all by itself; it was completely isolated.

I couldn't speak for all of Kenya, but in the urban slums I'd visited, people seemed to live communally. The houses—made of sticks, mud, galvanized iron, or timber, depending on which village you found yourself in—were always close together. Some were literally connected, the walls on either side shared with the

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neighbor next door. Others had space in between them—be it inches or meters—but were still lined up in a row as if to prove their solidarity. Then there were some that were more scattered and less orderly but close enough to each other to share a central latrine, a clothesline, or an enclosure for chickens.

There was something about this house that felt different, even ominous. We had journeyed down uneven dirt paths and through thickly populated slums to get to this swamp, where we were scheduled to meet Pamela.

The house was tiny and made of mabati, or dull iron sheets. The pitched roof, also made of metal sheets, looked like it might blow away with a strong gust of wind. There were two cutouts on either side of the doorframe that should have been windows, but they were boarded up with thin slats of wood that didn't allow much light or air in—or out. Around the base of the house was a barricade of small rocks, maybe intended to keep the swamp water out, although I doubted they did their job.

After what felt like an hour's trek through ankle-deep standing water, the six of us walked to Pamela's door. I lifted my arm to knock but stopped when Cornel told me, "Just walk in. She never has visitors, so she knows it could only be us."

The house was a single room that was dim, musty, and sparse inside. I only saw a small couch, an upside-down box with an empty drinking glass on top of it, and a circle of rocks in the corner, which I assumed was used for a cooking fire. I thought no one was home until I saw movement on the couch. From under a blanket, a figure slowly turned to face us. She managed to perch herself up onto her elbow but was too listless to sit up all the way. Cornel and Duncan went to her side and encouraged her into a sitting position. They draped the blanket over her lap as she thanked them softly and looked at the four of us standing shyly in the corner.

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Cornel introduced us by name and then said, “My friends, please meet Pamela.”

The woman who sat before us was skin and bones; she looked like she might break if she breathed too deeply. Her skin was covered in white blotches, as though she had third-degree burns from head to toe that were in different stages of healing—fresh, bleeding, infected, scabbed, and scarred. Her eyes lingered at half-mast, which didn’t look like a sign of sleepiness as much as it did sadness, like she didn’t have the will to open them any wider. Her hair was very short in some places and absent in others, small tufts resembling how I thought a cancer patient’s might during the early stages of chemotherapy. Her lips were cracked and colored with dried blood, and her voice hoarse.

Cornel translated from Luo to English as we asked her questions on camera. We talked to her about her upbringing, her faith, the sequence of events that led her to where she was, and her thoughts about the future. A sadness inhabited her. I didn’t see it just in her eyes but also in her whole being. I sensed it in every movement and every sound.

I’d seen and heard some hard things in the previous weeks—conversations and images that sat in the pit of my stomach as if an internal fist were clinging to them for dear life. But for some reason, the sight of Pamela—the physical manifestation of her virus, the stereotypical circumstances of an unfaithful husband infecting his faithful wife, the utter isolation in which she was now forced to live—hit me hardest of all. She was a woman who’d been handed a death sentence with no hope of pardon. Her life was disintegrating in front of my eyes.

It’s been over a decade since that trip to Kenya, which feels like a long time and like no time at all. Since then, I’ve gone back to Africa more times than I can count, and much of what I’ve seen still sits in the pit of my stomach—the pain, the joy, the injustice, the progress, the devastation, and the restoration have

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all become part of me and part of the extraordinary journey that I never saw coming. None of us could have even imagined it. To this day, Cornel, Duncan, and I are still in awe of all that's transpired.

We're honored to tell the story that fills the following pages. It's told by all three of us, which is fitting, since each of us was as important as the other in what took place. It's a reflection of how we view our partnership, which goes beyond business and even friendship to form a brotherhood—two Kenyans and one American who had nothing in common until they had everything in common.



# CORNEL

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I began walking at eight months. Not just walking but running. My mother will tell you that on the very day I took my first steps, I also chased her through the market as she went to go fetch something. She already had my eldest brother, Leonard, by then. He had not walked until he was thirteen months, so she knew to be surprised. Yes, to hear her tell it, *nodhii mabor*, he was going places.

I grew up in the village of Seka Kagwa, in Kendu Bay. It is just outside the Kenyan port city of Kisumu. My home was no more than a hundred yards from Lake Victoria, the second-largest freshwater lake in the world. My tribe is Luo, and we are a tribe of fisherman. For centuries, we have relied on the lake to catch fish like tilapia, Nile perch, and omena to eat and sell. But from a young age, despite netting fish for shillings as early as ten years old, I knew I did not want to grow up to be a fisherman. The problem was that there was not a lot of opportunity to be something more.

My mother and father were not educated. Neither of them even made it through primary school. Because of that, or maybe

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in spite of it, I was determined to go as far as I could. I eagerly waited for the day I could finally lift my right arm up over my head and touch the bottom of my left ear with my hand. That was the sign that one was old enough to attend school. If you try it on a child of three or four years, they cannot do it. I have met Westerners who are shocked to hear of that measure of growth. But, you see, most children in my village did not know how old they were. We were born at home so we did not have birth certificates. We were born to illiterate mothers so no date of birth was known or written down.

As each of my seven brothers and sisters passed the hand-to-ear test, they too began attending school. I am happy to report that each of us completed primary school, all the way from class 1 to class 8. But we were only able to do so because it was free. There were only a few small charges here and there for uniforms and books. As small as those costs were, it was still a miracle that we were able to pay them at all.

We did not have any money. But we did not know anyone who did, so I never felt too sorry about it as a boy. Lake Victoria was once a rich source of income for the bordering countries of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. But it became overfished. Too many fishermen were all trying to catch the same thing. And the amount of available fish was always shrinking. In the 1950s, in order to boost that amount, several non-native fish were put into the lake. Nile perch were one of them. But they turned out to be predators who pushed our local fish further toward extinction. Many of those local fish had been algae-eating fish. When they were no longer around, the algae rapidly spread and ended up choking the lake. So did the water hyacinth. It may be nice to look at, with its green glossy leaves and purple flowers. But it is an aggressive weed. It sits on top of the water and restricts the oxygen of everything below it. It is crazy to think how one living thing can ravage an entire population.



## CORNEL

The lack of livelihood around me served as proof that fishing was not my future. It encouraged me to become even more diligent about my studies. I ran home every day after school to make sure I had enough time before the sun went down to complete my work. Most days, there was upward of fifty assignments to do. We all knew what the teachers would do if they were not turned in. Or worse, done incorrectly. My mother told me I could wait to do it later by candlelight, as that was when my cousins and siblings usually did it. But the candlelight made me feel limited. Like I would not be able to properly absorb the information. Only once the sunlight was gone and my work was complete would I go outside to join the end of a football game, find food in nearby trash piles before they were set on fire, or walk down to the lake to bathe.

It was during those evening hours at the lake when I saw local fishermen meeting with different women. The light of the moon allowed me to see that the women were not their wives. They went together behind the bushes. When the women came back out, they carried fish. Sometimes more than two or three in each hand. I did not understand what was going on at that young age, of course. But I knew how hungry we all were. I knew that desperation sometimes created reckless behavior.

Those were the nights I tried to bathe as quickly as possible. I did not want to risk the fishermen telling my father that I did not know how to mind my own business. I hurried back home to get ready for bed. When it came time to sleep, I gathered with all of my siblings in the single room we shared. There was space on the floor for one mat made of papyrus leaves. All of us could fit if we lay vertically and promised not to toss or turn. There was one blanket among us. But we rarely needed it. One of the good things about a mud-brick home was that it stayed a pleasant temperature despite the heat of the dry season or the chill of the wet season.

Roosters and egrets always announced the rising sun,

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although I often woke before their calls. My mother said it was because I was koso kwe and gombo ng'eyo, restless and curious. I escaped the house as quietly as I could to collect branches for firewood or to fill pots with lake water in case we had millet to boil. We did not have cows, only what was given as a dowry to nearby relatives. But I went around before school and offered to milk any cow that I saw. In return, I asked the owners if I could take some of the milk home. Sometimes they let me.

School was several kilometers away. My siblings tended to walk ahead, while I waited in front of Harrison's house each morning. He was my best friend. He and his family lived across from us, just down the hill toward the lake. Out of everyone in our class, only Harrison liked school as much as I did. His only downfall was that he ran late. We would have to hurry to catch up with the rest of the students. We made our way down the long stretch of dirt road to join the sea of green uniform shorts, white collared shirts, bare feet, and books. Most of us did not have backpacks so we held our books. Even if I had had a backpack, I would still have held my books in my hands. That was how you treated treasured items. I looked forward to school each day. It felt to me like an escape, although many would tell you it felt more like imprisonment.

But it was often more like hell than heaven because of the brutal spankings. I do not remember going one day without being hit. If you did, then you were among the luckiest. We did not necessarily get hit because we behaved badly. The punishment was more about power than discipline. The teachers seemed to enjoy it and delivered beatings for a great many things. If we did not complete our homework, we got spanked. If we missed a question on a test, we got spanked. Answer by answer, the teacher made us raise our hand if we got it wrong.

We were spanked with tree branches on our buttocks or back. Our uniforms were often faded and torn in those areas. We were

also struck on the palm of the hand. Some teachers struck four times. Some struck twenty. It was not uncommon for students to bleed or faint. Some were taken to the hospital. The parents accepted these actions. No one questioned a teacher. They were held in high esteem. There was no way a teacher was wrong. Students were to obey and endure any punishment the teacher gave, period.

There were times we tried to outsmart the teachers by putting books between our buttocks and our shorts so we would not feel it when they hit us. That was soon discovered due to the sound of the stroke against the hardcover of the textbook. We then cut out thin layers of mattress and sewed them into our underwear to provide padding. When that was also discovered, we were made to strip off our shorts and underwear in front of the whole school during the weekly parade. They hit us on our bare behinds in what was as painful as it was humiliating. For many kids, the treatment was too much to bear. Many ran away from school. Some never returned. I always returned. The beatings were the cost of learning.

My favorite subject was English. Our national language was Swahili, of course, although most in our village spoke only Luo. Those of us at school were privileged to learn English as well. I spent hours studying English grammar and was fascinated by the way the words were constructed. I was eager for ways to practice. The school did not have any books for us to read besides government-issued textbooks that we shared in school only, so I would go to indoor markets looking for brochures and magazines. I often read aloud to people passing by.

I believe it was in those articles that I first learned of the science behind HIV/AIDS. For years, there had been talk in our village about a disease that caused many deaths. Most of the people affected seemed to be women. At least, that was what the men said. No one spoke of the disease by name. It seemed there was

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no need since the physical signs were obvious enough. A woman got very skinny. And then she got kicked out of her home. That meant she had it. There was no need to discuss it further. Doing so might spread the chira, the curse. But as I learned more about the disease, I knew the silence was about much more than the fear of a curse. It was that people could not speak about what they did not understand.

If the articles sparked my interest in AIDS, my curiosity caught fire at school. We took health class during the later years of primary school and received quite a bit of information about it. Since most of the material was in English, I imagined that the Western world was full of only scientists and doctors. I remember thinking how unfair it was that those of us hearing the truth about AIDS were not the people who needed to hear it most. We as youth were not in a position to change minds or abolish shame. I felt trapped because what I learned could not go beyond me. I could not speak of it in the village and did not dare bring it up at home. Where I came from, the secret to survival was knowing your place.

Especially with my father. He was a stern man. He was in charge of what we spoke about and what we believed. He expected to be served and respected. He enforced discipline. He had the final say in family matters. It was all very typical of Luo culture. Men were wuon dala, head of the homestead. I imagine his father was the same way, although I did not know him. My father did not know him either. He died when my father was only three years old. My father was quick to anger. Perhaps it stemmed from that. No father and too much changaa, homebrew.

Although not in a physical sense, my grandfather was still very present in our lives. Many members from my father's side of the family lived on my grandfather's land with us, another thing typical of Luos. I grew up with my aunts, uncles, and cousins all within shouting distance. It was a village within a village. We all

had mud and stick homes with grass-thatched roofs. We all had a separate outdoor mud-brick room to use as a kitchen. We all had latrines made from branches of *Markhamia lutea*, the Nile tulip. We were spaced out just enough to make us feel both independent and connected with each other.

One of my first cousins and his wife lived a five-minute walk away. They were the farthest out from the rest of us. Their placement afforded them more privacy. But we were still aware of their comings and goings. We noticed right away when my cousin started leaving his wife for weeks at a time.

A cultural practice of our tribe is wife inheritance. That means when a male relative dies and leaves behind a wife, a member of his family must inherit her. The ancient custom was meant to ensure that the widow had someone to support her and her children financially and to carry on the family lineage. It was also a way to keep her late husband's wealth within the family bloodline. The new husband therefore provides for her but does not need to move her into his home. He goes back and forth from one home and wife to another. That was why my cousin was gone for long stretches. It turned out that a distant relative in a nearby village had passed on. My cousin was with his inherited wife and her children.

I knew that polygamy and wife inheritance had long been part of our culture. But that was the first time someone in my family had practiced it in front of my eyes. I figured the adults would be pleased that my cousin upheld such a time-honored tradition. Instead, it was met with grave concern. I overheard them discussing how the distant relative died suspiciously. He was *odhero ahinya*, rail thin, and had the look. They said his widow had also lost a great deal of weight in recent months. They spoke about the need to cleanse our land. And then I heard my grandmother say that the inherited wife was rumored to be a *Kikuyu*. That caused the biggest gasps. Out of the forty-plus

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tribes in Kenya, Luo and Kikuyu had the most rivalry. Still, I was surprised to hear that her being Kikuyu could have been more tragic than having a deadly disease.

My father's eldest brother put a stop to everything. He decided that my cousin just needed to keep up his part of the land. Beyond that, they were not to concern themselves with rumors. And that was that. Life continued.

As the fishing trade got worse, more and more people were out of work. My father was one of them, although I do not really remember a time when he was regularly trying to catch fish in the first place. He did not go down to the lake each day with the other fisherman. He did not spend the hour before sunset bleeding the fish and removing their guts. He rarely brought home money. I knew that because I heard my parents discussing it. My mother would ask if she could have a couple shillings to get flour or beans at the market, and my father would hit her and tell her, "Ionge erokamano," "You are ungrateful."

In our culture, the role of the woman was *tiyo gi luor*, to serve and obey. They stayed quiet. They raised the children, cooked for the family, cleaned the home, and grew basic staple crops. But as my father continued to not work, my mother took on more responsibility. She wove baskets out of papyrus reeds with my sisters and took them to the Oriang market, in Kendu Bay, every Thursday. She taught herself how to make jewelry and then washed merchants' clothes in exchange for beads and hardware. She went down to the lakeshore and tried to catch sardines with a net or with a pole and hook if someone lent her one. Since she did not have access to a boat and could not swim, she was limited to walking out waist-deep and hoping the fish were not scared off by the movement of her legs. What little money she made went toward school uniforms and food. It was understandable that when it came time to pay for our secondary school, there was nothing left.

Once a Kenyan student completes class 8, they must pass a national examination in order to attend secondary school. It is highly stressful for the pupils. Some start studying months in advance. Some stay late at school to review textbooks. Some lie awake for hours at night going over multiplication tables in their head. Those of us who took great pride in academia did all of those things. I did not just want to pass. I wanted to pass with the best possible score so I could gain admission to the best possible secondary school.

Secondary lasts four years, similar to an American high school. There are three types of government-funded secondary schools one could go to based on the outcome of their exams: national, provincial, or district. Students with the highest scores got into national schools. That is what everyone strived for. They were better schools that provided a better chance of getting into university. They were even rumored to have things like laboratory equipment, musical instruments, and sports gear. The problem was that they were the most expensive out of the three types of schools. The student not only paid for a better academic experience. They also paid to live on campus. These were not day schools but boarding schools. So even though the government paid for a large part of it, there were high boarding costs that the family was responsible to cover. Upward of 32,000 shillings, or around US\$320, per year.

There was a four-year age gap between my brother Leonard and me. He trailed behind in primary school. I sped ahead, so we finished class 8 and took the examination at the same time. I was very anxious during the long month of waiting for results. Leonard did not seem affected. Even on the day we received notice that the results were in, he chose not to walk to the school to find out. “Nyisa duoko na kiduogo,” “Just tell me my results when you get back,” he said.

Harrison and I ran to school and stood with the crowd out-

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side the head teacher's door. The list was posted. My legs trembled as I jumped up and down from the back to try to spot any information I could. When I saw a clearing, I elbowed my way in and traced my finger down until I found my name. Next to it was my score. I opened and shut my eyes to make sure I saw it correctly. My scores were high. High enough to make me eligible for admission to a national school. A sense of honor rushed over me, stronger than anything I had felt before. I knew then the true value of sinani, perseverance.

Leonard's score made him eligible to attend a provincial school. Harrison scored highest out of us three. We spent the walk home discussing which national school we would attend together. My mother and father were very proud when I shared the news. Their two eldest sons had passed the national examination.

It was an unseasonably cold and wet afternoon several weeks later when my mother sat me and Leonard down to confirm what we knew but did not want to admit: She could not afford to send us to school. At least, not both of us. And certainly not to a national or provincial school. She told us that she may be able to provide a little money for one of us, but it would have to be a district school. The closest one was in Kisumu, seventy kilometers away. And that would still only work if the rest of the fees were earned and paid by the son who chose to attend.

Leonard and I looked at each other. I nodded. He was the eldest. He should be the one to go. I opened my mouth to tell him so right as he stood up, extended his hand, and said, "In ema idhi," "You should attend."

I had long known that Leonard did not have the passion I did for education. At times, I felt it was my elevated level of enthusiasm that pushed us both through primary. He often complained about going and seemed content just staying around the house. Even though I was not the same way, I understood. School was hard in every way. The struggle to comprehend the teachings was



often the least of it. For as many could not afford the fees, just as many could not afford the pain.

I asked Leonard several times if he was sure. He nodded and repeated, “An somba ogik gi ka,” “Yes I will sit back.” The look in his eye was of pure relief.

I began working any job I could find. I mixed mortar and pushed wheelbarrows at small construction sites. I pedaled a bicycle taxi and drove a boda boda, a motorcycle taxi. I dug graves for the growing number of funerals each weekend. I cooked and served food in a kibanda, a restaurant. I slowly saved up 5,000 shillings. It may have been only a little money. But to me, it was a whole world. I knew it was not close to covering even the initial registration fee. But I felt it was enough to show the school I was serious about learning. It would serve as a sign of trust that I would continue to pay.

Standard practice was that the head of the household enrolled their student in secondary. The adult was to visit the school, state the intention of their child to attend, and pay some or all of the registration and tuition. I went to my father and gave him all my shillings. It was time for him to enroll me at Bar Union High School, in Kisumu Nyahera, I told him proudly. He said he would.

Later that morning, I stood in the doorway of our home and watched him walk in the direction of the school with the money in his pocket. I stayed awake as long as I could that night, waiting for him to return to tell me how it went. By the next morning, he was still not home.

I finally saw my father some days later. He told me in Luo, “Oh, my son, those school people think you are great. They are so happy. Those people will now send you a calling letter.”

A week went by. Nothing came from the school. I arrived home from one of my jobs as my father stumbled out the front doorway.

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“Just wait. They are coming. Be patient, my son,” he said as he walked by me without looking.

After more weeks passed, my mother mentioned that a distant aunt, called Prisca, worked as an accountant at Bar Union. That was all I needed to hear. I took off on foot to go check with the school myself. I was met with happiness from my aunt when she saw me but sadness when she checked with the secretary and confirmed that the school had never heard of me. My father had not gone to the school to enroll me. I knew the money had been long spent.

I allowed myself to feel disappointed and betrayed only during the walk back home. Once I arrived, my determination to go to secondary school took over. My mother gently told me I should not expect to go. There was no way to pay for it. I had rarely, if ever, gone against my mother’s advice. But that time, I insisted that she let me go. I would work. I would find food. I would find shelter.

She paused and said, “Abiro dhi kodi,” “I will go with you.” She managed to borrow 5,000 shillings from her friends. We used part of it to pay for public transportation to Kisumu, where we traveled with one shared bag of clothes and belongings. We put the other part toward the school fee. I had missed the first two months of the three-month term. But they allowed me to enroll as long as I kept up payments. Aunt Prisca played a big role in this. I will never forget that kindness.

My mother was hopeful she could find more small business opportunities in Kisumu than in Seka. While I stayed with an aunt called Margret who lived close to the school, my mother rented a small wooden shack in the slums of Nyalenda as she worked hard to save money. Back and forth she went from the slum to our village. She put shillings toward my schooling and then took some back home to pay the fees for my brothers and sisters still in primary school. She supplied small bits of food for

me and then took food back for my father and siblings. It was as if she lived a double life. My father was not pleased. Each time she went back to Seka, he would scream that she did not know her place. She needed to stay and take care of him, the home, and the other children. She eventually headed back to Kisumu but for shorter and shorter periods of time, always with fresh bruises.

I worked on and off that entire first year of secondary. I would attend classes for some weeks and then work a job for some weeks. Most of what I found was maintenance work in restaurants. It not only supplied me with a little money for fees but also with a little food. I would wait until the restaurant closed each night and then sort through the trash to find discarded scraps. The weeks I attended school were filled with hunger.

But all of that ended when the school administrator officially sent me away. He said I owed too much money. I could not return for the second year until my first year was paid in full. I went seventy kilometers back to Seka, determined to find another solution.

It was wonderful to see my family after such a long time away. I had never been gone that long before. I also enjoyed visiting many of my friends with whom I had attended primary school. The majority had not gone on to secondary school despite passing exams. The common reason was money, although it did not just pertain to school fees. The larger issue for many of them was having to cover the cost of household provisions.

There had been a high increase in deaths over those years. Many of my age-mates had mothers and fathers who had passed on or were so ill they were close to it. My fellow teenagers therefore had to make ends meet for their brothers and sisters. They stepped into the role of parent and provider. Some of the males became fisherman. Some of the females made and sold crafts like pottery or reed mats. I am sad to say that some were unable to find work because of their association with the HIV virus.

The village had far more abandoned homes than when I left.

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They were boarded up so as not to let the chira out into the wind. Many of the children or surviving spouses who used to live there had been shunned and sent away to live with relatives. Others built makeshift homes on the outskirts of town. Some orphans relied on the compassion of the rare few who would care for someone with such direct association with the disease.

There was a home on our family land that was boarded up as well. My cousin, the one who inherited the wife, had passed away several months prior to my return. The initial concern from the adults in my family had been warranted. He contracted HIV from his inherited wife. In turn, he infected his first wife. She then birthed two children who were both born with it. My cousin and both his wives died within mere weeks of one another. The children were dispersed among family outside Seka. My father said it was for protection. I don't know if he was referring to the children or our family. I felt sick to my stomach either way.

The village felt heavy. Like it was suffocating under the weight of the disease, like the lake under the hyacinths. I knew just the person who could help lift my spirits: Harrison. I had not seen him since before I left for Kisumu the year before. I walked over to his house. His mother greeted me in the doorway. I asked if he was home. She extended her arm inside but did not say anything. I went in and found him lying on a small mattress in the corner of the room. He rose up to his elbows when he saw me. His sunken face and skinny arms told me all I needed to know. I went over to him and fell to my knees. It was one of the last times I would see him alive.

It got so bad so fast. The spread of AIDS devastated my village, like gasoline thrown on a wildfire. Maybe the chaos was there all along. Maybe it was just the acknowledgment of the disease that spread. Maybe the polygamy and impulsive behavior of fisherman were finally met with consequence. Maybe my time away allowed me to come back with fresh eyes and see what had

been hidden in plain sight the whole time. Maybe the state of our village was the new normal.

I was not around too much longer to find out. I received word that a harambee school had opened in Kisumu. Americans would call that a charter school. It was in the slum where my mother had stayed and was the first of its kind in the area. Since it was just starting, they had nothing, only two teachers, Mr. Sila and Mr. Anguka, and no books, desks, aides, or supplies. They also had no tuition. Any small costs associated with the school were ten times cheaper than the cheapest district school in Kenya. That is how I became the thirty-third student ever at Kassagam High School.

The school struggled due to the lack of resources. As a means of support, it became sponsored by a local church. I was into my third year when that happened. Members of the church started coming every Thursday for Christian Union. They met with students to share about the Christian faith and hand out tracts so we could study different books of the Bible. Spiritual nourishment, they called it. I went to a Catholic church here and there growing up. My family was not consistent in our attendance and did not often speak about our beliefs at home. It was not until Kassagam that I was formally introduced to Christianity.

The school became Kassagam Baptist High School. And I became a Christian. I began to read the Bible daily and learned more and more about the life of Christ. As I did, something filled up inside me that I had not known was empty. I felt as though I finally had somewhere to place my grief and fears. I had someone to help shoulder the hopelessness and sorrow I felt about the conditions of my village. The pain of watching loved ones like Harrison die at the hands of others' decisions. The injustice of my brothers and sisters struggling to attend school. The hardships my mother endured at the hands and fists of my father. The demons my father battled at the expense of his family. The frustration of

## BEYOND BLOOD

wanting more than what society told me was attainable. For the first time in my life, I was able to trade those burdens for weightless faith.

Like I had at Bar Union, I shifted between going to school and going to work. Some weeks here and some weeks there. Even though my presence was not as consistent as the other students, I was given the honor of class secretary. They placed me in that leadership position for all of my three years at Kassagam. It was a role I greatly valued. Reminiscent of my days as a debating prefect in class 6 and the school librarian in class 7, I enjoyed the responsibility, although the elite role did little to increase my chances of educational success.

I did not pass the secondary school examination at the end of my fourth year. None of the Kassagam students did. It was not surprising as much as it was disappointing. At a school like that, with very little to offer students in the way of academic support, it was expected that no one would pass. Where other schools held three-day rehearsals prior to the exam, we were shown some laboratory test examples one day before the exam. Where other schools had practical lessons as part of everyday learning, we were left to imagine how to use a computer keyboard, pipet, test tubes, Bunsen burner, or chemistry beaker. Our school was not even a registered exam center yet. The unfortunate consequence of all those factors meant we failed the very exam required for entry to university.

A poor person cannot afford to attend a good school. A poor school cannot equip students for academic success. A good student at a poor school only gains entry to a system that later locks them out. I left Kassagam, clinging to the promise that when God shuts a window, He opens a door. And that is precisely what happened.