

Kibawe

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I was sound asleep when the conductor roused me to ask where my stop was. Irritated as I was, I responded as politely as I could. “Kibawe,” I said, heaving out a sigh. The word, suddenly strange on my tongue, reminded me of the text message, that familiar parental exhortation I could not ignore. I unlocked my phone to check the time. Fifteen minutes to eight o’clock. Just in time.

Outside the window, everything seemed as it was, like it had always been. The same rice fields, the same wooden houses. Except that the night had covered everything in darkness.

Five minutes later, the headlights illuminated the giant “K” on the sign that had the word “welcome” carved below it. It was a road sign we used to make a game out of when we were kids. My Mom, saving herself from the trouble of waking us up when we would finally arrive, would tell us that the first one to see the letter “K” would win a prize. In that way, we would try to be awake throughout the trip. I recall how seriously we took the game. My siblings and I would argue on who saw the “K” first, but my mother always knew best. She would tell us we saw it together, and so she would give each of us a piece of Fox candy she hid somewhere in the car compartment. I recall how fun it was, but I can’t recall when we stopped playing the game. I would like to think it happened when my older brother and sister stopped coming home with us to Kibawe as they stayed most of the time in the city to study.

We passed by the welcome sign and I closed my eyes.

The bus pulled over at the terminal a few minutes before the clock struck eight. I took my things and proceeded outside. There were no vendors trying to make me buy peanuts or corn, unlike when we stopped over at Maramag. Kibawe was silent. Too silent.

At the left side of the terminal, the habal-habal and tricycle drivers stood by. Most of them asleep on the backseat of their vehicles; those awake busied themselves with cigarettes and a game of tong-its. One of the onlookers of what appeared to be a very serious round of card game turned to me and asked where I was headed. “Ilang Batao,” and he nodded, signaling me to follow him to his tricycle. He helped me with my luggage, and we went our way.

Everything was the same. Kibawe still and quiet, undisturbed by the rage of the tricycle’s engine and the beating of my heart. A few blocks later across the highway, the driver turned right and stopped in front of a familiar white gate where hung a caution that says “beware of dogs.” I stepped out of the tricycle and took a deep breath. The scent of grass, guava, and dog shit welcomed me.

I didn't need to knock. Our dogs began barking, and a woman in her cotton robe headed towards the gate to open it. I gave the woman a kiss on the cheek. "Dinner?" she asked, a hint of tiredness in her voice. I told her I was famished. She offered help with my bags. But I knew better than to let my mother carry something as heavy as travel bags.

Everything in the house seemed as it was before I left, except for the attempts at making the surrounding a wee bit merry for the yuletide season. There was a small tree in the corner and a miniature setup of the Nativity scene on the coffee table that nobody ever used except when we had visitors.

I laid my things on the floor and went to the dining. My father and sisters were there. I gave my father a kiss on the cheek, and as response he asked me to sit, have my dinner. He always hugged me and called me by my nickname. But he didn't this time. My sisters acted as if I did not exist, and I didn't mind. At least the dogs were there, excited to see me. After dinner, I carried my things to my room and disappeared.

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I had trouble sleeping. It was cold. My skin was acclimating with the cold, but my mind wouldn't surrender to sleep I so needed. I took my jacket with me and headed downstairs for a cup of tea. My older sister was there, her eyes fixed on her phone. The television was trying its best to grab her attention. I took the remote and turned the TV off. She turned to me and said she was watching. I didn't bother talking back, I just turned the television on again and began brewing my cup of tea.

I trickled honey and lemon juice into it, stirring it lightly when my sister turned the television off herself and headed straight to her room.

I didn't care.

I sipped my tea, read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* as if it were the only thing that mattered.

The tea must have helped, I didn't shiver when I took my jacket off. I sat on my bed, not knowing what to do next. I wanted to sleep, but couldn't. My eyes wandered around my room and noticed my guitar hanging on the wall. I couldn't remember the last time I held that guitar, but I remember how much I loved it. I wanted to hold it again, but my hands wouldn't let me.

To my right was a window. They had removed the paper I taped on it. The right side of the window was broken so I wrote a note with a reference from the "Walking Dead," the TV series my brother and I loved to watch together a few years back. The right side was still broken, so I opened the left side instead.

I'd always do this when in Kibawe. I would creep out of the small opening of the window, and sit on the roof. I wouldn't do anything. Just stare at the sky and play with my imagination. The

thought I had always been so fond of was about the theory I had when I was eight years old. The stars, looking like unstrung Christmas lights, were the eyes of gods watching over us. I went back inside when my lids finally felt heavy. I stretched my arms as far as I could, until my back had had enough. I lay down, and after a while, got myself to sleep.

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The morning was uneventful. The family still nonchalant, not fully taking in my presence, except when they had to ask me to take on some urgent little task, or scold me for not returning the jam back to the fridge, or for not stacking the plates properly in the rack.

I withdrew completely into my room and would only go out to eat.

The next days would be spent throwing out things I didn't need anymore. I realized I was a hoarder. Old test papers from grade school, letters, and toys I used to treasure had piled up in my drawer. Each thing reminded me of something good in my childhood -- the coloring book my younger sister and I would spend a lot of time on, the toy boats my siblings and I would play with in the rain. There was also that bracelet which was a twin pair of Ate's. We used to wear them every day until she lost hers. Now they're segregated in boxes labeled "to be donated" and "to be thrown."

It was already past four o'clock and the weather outside was the kind that invited walking. And so I changed my clothes and put on my running shoes. I told my younger sister who was lounging on the sofa I'd be going out for a run. She simply nodded, and I went my way.

I happened to pass by the small kindergarten I was enrolled in when I was three years old. I was two years younger than my classmates then and I wasn't supposed to be there. Mama Lisa, the woman who took care of us when we were kids, told me I was enrolled because I wouldn't stop crying whenever my Ate would go to school. And so I went to school early, wearing a school uniform just like the rest, never letting go of my Ate's hand. I couldn't recall any of those events now, but I saw an old photograph of me in kindergarten uniform.

I went to the plaza, and ran a few rounds. I saw the bench my friends and I would sit on after classes in high school. We would buy junk food and ice cream, talk about boys and other girls, until it was time for us to go home. I smiled when I passed by the bench, because the wooden seat still had the crack my friend caused by accident.

I didn't want to stay longer in the plaza than I should, so I decided to take a different route. I passed by the parish church where my family and I used to go to every Sunday. Then I ran past my old school. I studied there for two years and made a lot of memories. I would bring my guitar to school, and our class would sing during breaks. We would get scolded by the nuns, so we'd wait for dismissal, then we'd stage a mini concert in our room. We would only stop when the guard would tell us to leave. Back then, our biggest problem was when a guitar string would break.

I looked over at the back gate, and I saw the field where we would hold our flag ceremony. Every Monday we would sing both the native and English version of “Bukidnon, My Home,” which I still couldn’t memorize until now.

The sky had dramatically changed its shade, so I went on my way, running across the highway and turning right on the third block. The road I was on was where I first learned how to ride a bike when I was nine years old. My Ate taught me how. She said I must learn or else she wouldn’t talk to me.

The sunset reminded me of so many childhood summers. In the afternoons, my mom would let us play outside with our neighbors, and it was around this time, when the sun was slowly softening that she’d summon us back into the house for some snacks. Then we would wait for my dad to come back from work, and my siblings and I would have a race on who could kiss our father first. I usually won, and he would hug me and call me by a nickname he coined especially for me.

A lot of memories flooded my mind and flowed through my eyes. I stared at the sunset, watched it alter hopelessly, its colors fading, turning into another memory. It wouldn’t be the same sunset tomorrow.

Everything in Kibawe was the same, except its people who had become unfamiliar. Even my family was becoming distant, each of us drifting away from centeredness of home. As I spent more time in the city to study and chase my dreams still many years away, Kibawe was a name ready to sleep and slide into oblivion. But I never thought it would wake at a single beep of my phone which showed the message “come home.”