

*Mildred Kiconco Barya*

What Was Left Behind

CHAPTER 1

*Nothing is permanent. Everything happens. Everything changes.*

In March, heavy rains hit the land with unexpected fury. Strong winds echoed and shook the eucalyptus trees around the herbalist's small hut on a hill, threatening to sweep it down the slope. The herbalist sensed that something grave was about to happen. Quickly she scanned the environment with her eyes, as if to map it in her memory-scape forever.

Yakobo's family was seated in their compound eating roast maize. They saw it coming: a long, eel-like reptile that twisted and stretched across the dark sky like an angry snake. The heavens groaned. White clouds spun with astonishing swiftness and gave way to the intruder seething with destruction. Thick, black clouds appeared and filled the heavens.

"Quick. Lose no time," Kamagara screamed. "We must get out of here." Rushing inside the house she picked up a pot of boiled potatoes. It was the only thing she could think of. But real survival depended on how fast they ran. Going down the hill was enjoyable if you were doing it for fun, but not when danger was right behind you, pressing down on you.

"Seba run faster," Yakobo hollered at his nine year old son. Kamagara cast her eyes back and shrieked, "It is about to strike. The tail is almost on the hill."

A gusting wind blew the pot of boiled potatoes off her head. The pot rolled and shattered against the trees. The splinters flew in the air. Kamagara, free of the load became a bird taking wing, a fragment in the air flitting rapidly.

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Mildred Kiconco Barya is the winner of the 2008 PALF Africana Fiction contest, judged by Junot Díaz.

The family descended faster than highway demons. They tore through the shrubs and avoided the footpaths that were teeming with other fleeing people and animals. Yakobo's family dashed onto the main road that led to three different routes. They hesitated for a split second and then bolted towards Kabale town. They kept bumping into other people who were scuttling in different directions.

Spears of lightning pierced the village, thunder ripped the sky. The reptile lifted its venomous tail with calculated force. One, two, three, boom! Rain poured hard and cruel. A sweeping flood engulfed the heels of Kamagara, then slapped her buttocks. In an instant, she heard a strange groan behind her. She looked back and saw a frightened, mooing cow fallen on its side, its legs dangling in the air. Flying objects rattled, houses tumbled down like chips of cracking rocks. Yakobo's family kept dodging bottles, pots, houses, trees . . . in a hundred narrow escapes. The rushing water and wind mingled with screams of animals and people: the plaintive bleating of sheep, the desperate barking of dogs and helpless cries of children. A squawking hen landed on Yakobo's shoulder. He pushed it off with his fist.

Ahead of Yakobo, more people tried leaping the spreading waters only to trip and fall. Seba glanced backward and saw a house coming, rolling towards them. He froze. Kamagara yanked him to her side. In the distance, a neem tree stood, not yet uprooted by the elements.

"Let's make it to that tree," Kamagara hollered.

Yakobo, with his mouth open, panted like a thirsty dog as he reached the tree. The water was now up to his waist and up to Seba's neck. Yakobo stared at the expanse of water that looked like Lake Victoria bursting and walking all over Earth in a rage. In conspiracy with the wind, the water was pursuing the people, knocking down houses and plants, taking over the land.

Yakobo put his arms around the neem tree. Kamagara dug her fingernails into Yakobo's back, rather, shirt but quickly realized that was not going to save her. She looped her arms tightly around Yakobo's waist. Seba stood hard-pressed between his father's arms and the tree. Together, they became fastened knots in a rope, links in a chain whose strength was their determination to survive.

“We have come to the defining moment,” Kamagara cried. “Mother of Christ, save us.”

They clung to the tree, the water swirling around them, reaching their chests, covering Seba’s head. Yakobo pushed his knee beneath Seba’s buttocks and propped him up. “Our end has come,” he sighed. “It is useless to run. We cannot overtake fate. But why strike with so much hatred?”

The wind growled and echoed in the waters. A green snake swam frantically towards the tree. Yakobo’s family saw it gliding through the waters, then slithering across Seba’s head on to the tree. The family held their breath, too panic-stricken to scream. Common disaster has a way of bringing foes to a truce in which they share a silent understanding. The snake climbed to the tallest branch and coiled around it. At last, the wind stopped howling and reinforcing the water. The tornado lasted about ten minutes in which everything was shaken and removed. Everything was destroyed except the neem tree.

Yakobo and Kamagara looked at the wreck. The undulating hills once beautiful were dissolved into mud. Torrents of water coursing through the hilly village had flattened it. It was impossible to see where ridges and contours had been, the sorghum-terraced gardens, plantations of maize crops, beans, potatoes, fields of pumpkins and peas. Neatly built adobe houses, grass-thatched huts, fruit shades and semi-detached houses were now bundles of debris. Remains of homesteads: broken pottery, sheaves of grain stalks and roof shingles were afloat. Pieces of vehicles were mangled beyond recognition. Years of hard labor and tireless efforts were erased from Earth like writings on sand. Graves opened and relinquished bones they had kept for centuries.

“Father, can I breathe?” Seba’s words came through.

Kamagara relaxed her hands and tapped Yakobo on the shoulder. Yakobo removed his hands from the tree but did not move a single step away. He did not speak. He felt his tongue had become part of the ruins, incapable of speech. He remained planted by the tree side. Seba too spoke no other words. He was thinking if only he could cup in his hands the silence that had gathered around them, he could throw it in the deluge and the words would return. But the silence was too huge to fit in his palms.

Yakobo finally broke out of the trance. He stretched out his arms so his left hand could clasp Kamagara's while his right hand gripped Seba's. Like ducks they began to wade through the waters. Seba shivered, his teeth chattered.

"We'll be alright," Kamagara nudged him. "Mother of God cannot save us this far and then drop us."

Yakobo drew a deep, shuddering breath. We've lost everything, his empty eyes conveyed.

What Yakobo did not know was that by losing their possessions to the tornado, a gate in which greater loss was to pass had been opened.

### CHAPTER 3

*Of all the words the kindest is this: Stay.*

The journey from Kabale to Kanungu was long and bumpy. Narrow winding roads snaked through high and steep hills. Yakobo's family boarded an old pickup, which whistled and yelled like it would give up the ghost any minute. The driver, Mzee Tingasiga, was aware of the ramshackle state of his vehicle and could see doubt in the eyes of his passengers. He considered it his duty to assure them that they would arrive safely at their journey's end.

"Castro is still going strong. Once in a while he breaks down but is up on his wheels the next minute. I know how to handle him."

Yakobo would have liked to comment there and then that Castro deserved to be written off, but he kept mum and so did the ten other passengers aboard.

"I've been with Castro for the last thirty-one years," Tingasiga smirked. "Some of you probably think that is too long, even for a good Ford, especially on these hell traps of ours we call roads. Castro will prove you wrong."

Initially, there were thirteen passengers huddled together on the pickup that shouldn't have carried more than ten people, according to the traffic rules. Mzee Tingasiga said it was unforgivable to leave any traveler on the road. Some sensible travelers, however, after hailing him to a stop,

would look at the decrepit body of his car and wave him off. Mzee Tingasiga would beg them, telling them that Castro was still going strong. But they would stand firm and shake their heads. There were travelers who got on board. Mzee Tingasiga kept stopping to add “one more,” until Castro failed to start. Everyone had to disembark and give Castro a push. When he roared with life again, he spewed out offensive clouds of exhaust fumes.

“Will this vehicle really reach our destination?” Kamagara asked, looking around. Then she realized that the passengers were quickly jumping on Castro and scrambling for space. Kamagara lost her place on one of the two small benches where she had sat at the start of the journey. The swiftest passengers found some room for their buttocks. Others sat on the laps of those who were perched somewhere. Some squatted. Some crouched over others. There was a young woman holding a baby. The baby cried until its voice became hoarse.

A short while later, Mzee Tingasiga slowed down to stop for one more. This time, all the passengers threatened to clamber out.

“Where do you think people will stand?” a long-bearded fellow asked.

“Why don’t you buy a bus if you want to carry more people?” Seba added his voice.

“We are suffocating here and you want to add more people? You’re lucky our traffic officers do not do their work . . .” the woman with the baby said.

“You donno. Castro is still going strong,” Mzee Tingasiga shouted but this time there was no conviction in his own voice. He raised both hands in the air in total surrender, then quickly brought them back on to the steering wheel. It was written on his face how hard it was for him not to take just one more. He had a difficult time telling the clustered people on the roadside that he was full, as if the people could not see it themselves. “Castro always has space for one . . .” he started, and looked at the three passengers bunched next to him. He saw their cold stares and shut up. Hardly twenty covered and Castro needed a drink. He emitted a puff

of black smoke from the bonnet, which had long forgotten how to close securely. Tingasiga parked by the roadside. He checked beneath his seat for a five-liter jerrycan and dashed into the bush. A few minutes later he emerged with water. Castro gurgled down the five liters, gave a loud belch, and after a short pause was on the road again.

“Sorry he had to take his drink. We all need to quench our thirst from time to time,” Tingasiga said to the three passengers tightly pressed against each other on the front seat. What the passengers did not know then but found out anyway was that after every few kilometers, whether uphill, downhill, or on a flat surface, Castro puffed for a drink. He rattled and farted noisily. And at every stop he left a large pool of oil on the ground.

After some time Castro turned onto roads whose tarmac had been eaten away, and the surface was filled with king size potholes. He slowed down so laboriously that people on foot appeared to be moving faster than he. His shock absorbers had worn off. Passengers felt every jolt. Kamagara gritted her teeth and held herself up tightly to make herself neutral to the bumps. “Keep a firm hold on my legs,” she told Seba.

When Castro entered a wooded valley, he gained speed. Then, the wind became too strong and upset Seba’s sensitive stomach. Passengers were fated to suffer all kinds of elements from outside: the heat of the sun, the pelting rain, and now the blasting wind, since Castro had no windows to close or board up. The women raised their *vitenge* over their heads while the men used their coats.

Seba’s head began to spin as Castro was negotiating the famous twenty-two hairpin bends of Kabaraga. Seba pushed himself up and looked down the road. A warm and sour liquid broke in his mouth. Before he knew it he was throwing up, splashing the people with his vomit. Yakobo hit at the body of the pickup repeatedly and Castro came to a grinding halt. Tingasiga kept the engine running, since turning it off would bring in new challenges.

“We are sorry,” Kamagara apologized to the passengers and Mzee Tingasiga, as she led Seba to the bush.

“I am used to it,” Tingasiga said. “It happens all the time. There is always someone who can’t take the wind in his stomach. Now imagine if

Castro was flying high. It would be worse. But we never know how to give thanks for little blessings.”

When Kamagara and Seba returned to Castro, a woman who was cloaked in kangas from head to toe and had not said a word since the start of the journey, removed the *kanga* on her head. Without a word, she started to clean off the vomit on the passengers with her *kanga*.

Mzee Tingasiga pushed his hand in his left pocket and produced coffee beans. “These will help the young man. He should have started with them from the beginning. Nothing prevents nausea like roast coffee beans,” he grinned triumphantly. “When my wives are pregnant that is what keeps them from retching. Before we knew this ancient cure one of them retched so terribly her womb ruptured. She could never keep the food down, and the baby, of course,” Tingasiga spoke matter-of-factly.

“At your age you still have babies?” the long-bearded fellow asked.

“I am only sixty-four.”

“I guess you’re going strong like your Castro,” someone else chipped in.

“How many wives do you have?” a bald-headed man asked.

“Why should I count them? You think wives are goats to be counted?”

The people cheered and laughed. Seba thanked Tingasiga for the coffee beans and the passengers created space for him. He was wedged between the *kanga* woman and Yakobo. The *kanga* woman pulled out of her bag a new piece and raised it above Seba. Yakobo held up one end while Kamagara held the other. Some other hand squeezed towards Seba a black polythene bag so he could vomit into it if the nausea returned.

The stench of vomit and sweating bodies pressed together mingled with the smell of ripe bananas, onions and chicken shit. The long bearded fellow had bought the bananas, onions and chicken along the way and dropped them near his feet. Tingasiga accelerated and Castro resonated like a bumblebee. Gale-force winds burst on the people and carried the awful smell away. The bald-headed fellow quoted Tingasiga and said the strong wind was now a little mercy to give thanks for.

Castro heated up every breath of the journey. Then he needed to take several naps, a change of tires—at least two times—and some screwing to

tighten him. During the perpetual breaks, passengers stretched their legs, disappeared into the bush to ease themselves, or bought boiled eggs and yogurt to hold their stomachs.

By the time they arrived in Rukungiri town, the sun was a deep orange disappearing beyond the horizon. Tingasiga stopped at a Total gas station and refueled.

“How is Castro?” the fuel attendant asked.

“Going strong,” Tingasiga beamed. The question and response were the same throughout the journey. All the pump attendants, wheel changers and mechanics knew Castro.

The woman with the baby decided to get off. “I have relatives in this place. I will stay over and continue with the journey another day.”

“That is very wise. Your baby needs rest,” Kamagara said, and held the baby as the woman climbed down from the Ford.

At another fuel station, one of the pump attendants asked the usual about Castro after refueling.

“Going strong,” Mzee Tingasiga responded. “He only needs a little tightening down somewhere and he will be as presentable as a virgin.”

“He leaks?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way.”

“When was the last time you serviced him?”

“Ah, Castro gets serviced everyday.”

The pump attendant shook his head and said no more. Castro didn’t need a little tightening. Two mechanics spent two hours hammering at him, trying to fix him up.

At a Shell station—the last fuel stop—Castro needed more pressure in the tires that had just been changed.

“A little pressure and he will be as new as dawn,” Tingasiga said.

The attendant wasn’t as discreet as the one at the Total station. He looked at Castro once and asked Mzee Tingasiga, “Why don’t you give him up?”

Mzee Tingasiga became angry. “Would you give up on your mother or your grandmother just because they’ve grown old? Young people of

today have no respect.” Tingasiga yanked his door open and the door studs came apart. He stared at the doorknob in his hand. When he slammed the door, it could not hold in place. Something had gone loose at its hinge. Tingasiga got a hammer from under his seat and struck the door shut. Castro creaked. Tingasiga asked the passengers next to his seat to move out so he could use their door to get to his seat.

“This is surely a death trap!” one of the passengers said.

“I don’t know who will kill the other first, this angry old man or his dilapidated car,” the other passenger groaned. The third passenger said that Castro and Tingasiga were in a symbiotic relationship. “Haven’t you noticed that Castro knows the places that are convenient for Mzee and that’s where he gives his death signals?”

It was true. The spots where they stopped were the right places to find water, fuel and mechanics with the right oils and tools.

“I could have travelled by bus,” the bald-headed one said. “I was up by 5 AM, but I thought I could save a little money. Now my back will need a whole week to heal, and I have wasted the entire day.”

There was only one bus that took the direct route all the way to Kanungu terminal. The bus left every morning at 5:30 AM. It cost more and was mainly used by business travelers going to buy coffee, sacks of groundnuts and beans. Other buses and taxis changed stations halfway. Passengers who used them often got stranded if they failed to connect with vehicles coming from other parts of the country to Kanungu. It was common to arrive midway and discover that the vehicles to transfer to had already departed, were delayed or would not be arriving that day. Those who hated the inconvenience and could not afford the 5:30 bus had no option but to board Mzee Tingasiga’s Ford, which took the direct route to Kanungu and charged friendly fares. But by the time they made it to Kanungu, each of the passengers had made a resolution never to board Castro again.

“Cheap things are the most expensive,” the long-bearded said, after reflecting on how he had also considered cutting costs. He had used the money he had saved to buy onions, ripe bananas and chicken so he could

have a wonderful dinner when he arrived home. Now, he had given away all the bananas—they were turning into pulp. It would have been pointless to insist on carrying them. He wasn't sure whether the hen was still alive; he could not see it, while his onions had got a large share of Seba's vomit.

"Yes, cheap things are very expensive in the long run," he repeated, and the bald-headed one nodded.

In a normal vehicle, the journey would not have lasted more than eight hours, but not so with Castro. Darkness descended on the travelers while they were still hunched on Castro.

The morning of leaving, passengers had boarded quietly. Yakobo and his family had stayed mute as they waited for Castro to fill up and get going. They only nodded to the other passengers instead of exchanging the usual handshakes. At some point folks aboard had talked about the tornado, disagreed on the number of survivors and only concurred on one point: it was the hand of fate that could destroy a village without warning. Then they had fallen silent, as if each in their own way were musing about the hand of fate.

Finally, Castro wound up on Kanungu road. Giant slopes appeared as if to block his way. Castro summoned up strength in one prolonged moan. He made powerful vibrations as he zigzagged between the steep slopes on each side of the road. At least his headlamps were functioning perfectly. Castro tackled the last sharp curves of the rift valley steadily. Tingasiga momentarily released the steering wheel and clapped. "Heroic performance," he screamed as they lurched into the park.

The people who set off at 7:30 AM, entered Kanungu park a few minutes past midnight. They were exhausted and too disgruntled to say anything. Still, Tingasiga proudly declared after the passengers had disembarked: "Thus far has Castro brought us."

Yakobo's family tried to make themselves comfortable on a cold bench in the park. In Kanungu, they hoped to trace some of their relatives who had shifted from Kabale generations back, when their homesteads had grown bigger than the land they occupied.

Before the current geographical boundaries were set, the present-day districts of Kanungu, Kabale, Kisoro, Kambuga, Kihhi and Rukungiri—former Rujumbura—were one. Their umbrella name was Kigezi, encompassing the whole of southwestern Uganda. The Bakiga ethnic group peopled Kigezi and worked hard on the land as cultivators and herders. In famine, or if the land became unproductive, they would relocate to other parts of the country in search of fertile lands for their crops and animals. The Bakiga were generally reputed for having the capacity to adjust to new situations and to make light of their misfortunes. They produced many children like the seashells on the shore. That alone made them numerous so they were always splitting and migrating. Yakobo's nuclear family was an exception in size. The locals called Kamagara a barren woman because she had produced one child.

The sun rose over the horizon. Yakobo and his family stirred. They had not slept fully, neither had they stayed awake. The long journey had tired them out. The squeezing of bodies and congested Castro left their bones aching. Now the hardness of the bench numbed whatever sensation had survived the long and tedious journey.

Seba looked around the park trying to register the surroundings. He stood up and stretched his legs a few meters from the bench. A chameleon, which had taken on the color of the earth, moved slowly from where Seba put his left foot.

"I almost stepped on it," he gasped, and covered his lips with his right hand. "It's so brown you can't tell it apart from the soil."

"That's how chameleons survive," Yakobo said. "They adapt to whatever environment they find themselves in."

"Ah, look at its legs. They are green."

"Well, it's taking its time deciding which color to turn into."

"Is it a good sign for us?"

"A chameleon is a good omen. It is our totem," Yakobo said, and rubbed his hand against his buttocks. "Our people believe that if your totem appears during a trying time, then you are not alone. A higher

power is watching over you and has sent the totem to give you assurance.” Yakobo squatted to look at the chameleon more carefully. It hunched up its back and rotated its protruding eyes. It focused on Yakobo, just as he was looking intently at it. In that exchange, Yakobo seemed to find the inspiration to lead his family out of the park. “We will find favor in this new land,” he said, with finality.

Kamagara gave him a quizzical look. Inside her dress was a rosary and that is where she had chosen to put her hope. “Mother of Christ will lead us,” she pulled out the rosary for them to see.

“It seems to me she has already sent an angel in form of a chameleon,” Seba said, and glanced at the angel they were leaving behind.