

THE RICH RIVER

by Mercy Adhiambo

I must have been six years old at that time, but the events of that day are forever engraved in my mind. It was my first day at school, and like everybody else, I put on my heavily starched green tunic dress. None of us had shoes—shoes were for upper primary school pupils, and for the few whose parents worked in the big city.

I was scared. School scared me. From the stories I had heard from my elder sister, it was going to be terrible.

“Your class teacher is going to be Mrs. Onyango. She will lift your dress and pinch between your thighs...,” she had told me in the morning just before I left for school. Although Mama had rebuked her and assured me that all would be well, I still had some lingering fear within me.

“I am Atieno,” the girl who sat next to me said.

I did not reply. I just stared at her. She was the talkative type, and I was shy.

“Did your mother give you anything to carry to school?” she asked almost immediately.

“Yes, sweet potatoes,” I replied weakly. For some unknown reasons, I found her question irritating.

“Give me some, my mother did not give me anything,” she said, looking straight into my eyes.

I reached for my bag and gave her the tiniest piece of my sweet potatoes. She shoved the whole of it in her mouth, then stretched out her hand for more. I looked at her in disgust, then gave her one more.

She munched on it slowly, then smiled at me.

“Look at my hands, my mother lashed them yesterday.” She held out her arms for me to see.

My stomach lurched at the sight of her hands. They were bruised and swollen. I did not believe her. No mother lashes her little girl like that!

“What did you do to earn that?”

She did not answer. She just smiled, but I noticed the tears in her eyes.

There was heavy silence between us. My thoughts raced to my mother. Sometimes she got angry at the things I did, like making faces at her visitors, but she had never caned me so badly.

The teacher entered the classroom and interrupted my thoughts.

“Good morning everyone?” She greeted us in a low voice.

We all stood up and saluted her.

“I am Mrs. Onyango, your class teacher,” she continued in the same tone.

Silence reigned.

“I want each one of you to give a brief introduction about who you are,” she continued.

The introductions began at the front. Most of the pupils spoke softly, and it was with great difficulty that those of us at the back got to hear their names.

Mrs. Onyango, probably bored by the monotony of the introductions, was beginning to doze off.

“My name is Atieno, I am six years old, and my mother is a seller,” my desk mate introduced herself with a confidence.

“Young girl, we do not say seller, we say business lady,” the teacher corrected her.

“Yes, Ma'am”.

“So what does your mother sell?”

“She sells herself, Ma'am.”

“What?”

“My mother sells herself to interested buyers.”

There was silence. Nobody talked. Atieno and the teacher looked at each other.

The teacher made her way toward Atieno, her eyes so fierce, that for a moment I thought she was going to hit her.

“How do you know that she sells herself, young girl?”

“That is what she tells me every night when she leaves the house.”

“Do you know it is wrong to lie, Atieno?”

“I know it is wicked to lie, and those who lie will burn when good people go to heaven, Ma'am”.

“How many children are you at home?”

“It is just my Mama and I. My Mama says she had me by mistake. She says I am the bad one who refused to die like the rest, even after she drank a whole gallon of detergent to get rid of me while I was in her stomach.”

Atieno's voice faltered off, and there were tears in her throat.

Loud murmurs went through the classroom. It must have been the pupils wondering why Atieno was holding such a long conversation with the teacher. We were too young to understand.

“Who brought you to school?”

“Myself.”

“Class, you are dismissed for break...” the teacher said, and I noticed her reaching for the wall for support. Her eyes were also very red.

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That evening as we walked home from school, Atieno walked at a sickeningly slow speed. I felt the need to be her friend. Nobody wanted to talk to her.

“Some of my sweet potatoes are still in my bag, maybe...,” I started.

“I think I am full,” she said, looking straight ahead.

“But you didn't take lunch.”

“I never take lunch. I am used to staying hungry.”

I saw tears glinting in her eyes, but she blinked them away rapidly.

“Where do you live?” I asked in a final attempt to sound friendly.

“Across the river; that is where I live with Mama.”

“I also live across the river with my Mama and Papa,” I said.

She did not look at me. She picked a piece of grass and chewed absent-mindedly on its blade.

We walked on without talking to each other until the river lay before us.

“Do you swim?” she finally broke the silence.

“No, I fear water,” I replied honestly.

She did not comment, and I began to wonder why she had asked me the question.

“In the depth of this river, there are six one shilling coins, and four five shilling coins. That makes a total of twenty six shillings.”

I did not quite understand.

“How do you know?” I asked perplexed.

“I threw them in,” she said with no feeling at all.

I was amazed. I loved money. The highest amount of money my mother had ever given me was two shillings, and here she was, telling me that she had thrown twenty six shillings into the river, yet she could not even buy herself a piece of Maandazi for lunch!

“There is a man who comes to our house at night when my mother has gone out to sell herself. He touches me, then gives me the money,” she said to me without a hint of feeling.

“Does your mother know?” I asked, concerned. My mother always told me to report to her any man who touches me.

“Yes, she does.”

I felt my heart beating strangely. And there was a searing pain in my chest.

When we reached the river, she groped in the pocket of her green school tunic, fished out a shiny ten-shilling coin, then, after studying it carefully, hurled it into the river with all her might. The waters swallowed the coin hungrily as we looked on.

I noticed the veins in Atieno's face. I noticed the tears in her eyes. I noticed the sorrowful look that clouded her face.

“Yesterday, the man gave me ten shillings, but yesterday he did more than touch me,” she said with her gaze fixed in space.

I also took the fifty-cent coin that I had and dipped it into the flowing waters of the river. I do not know why I did it, but I found satisfaction in seeing it disappear in the river.

Atieno lifted her dress and dipped her feet in the shimmering water. I did the same. Then she removed her clothes and walked slowly into the river. I did that too.

That day, we swam and played in the river until we reached the plateau that lies beyond childhood, beyond fear, beyond sorrows of this world...where one just swims like a fish or soars like an eagle, or one floats like a ghost, unaware of anything that is going on around them in this corrupted world.

While in the water, Atieno held my hand tightly, looked into the depths of my eyes, then told me to be her friend...and I cried.

When I reached home that night, my mother pinched my ear for having stayed out late. She served me Ugali and fish for supper.

“Mama, in the depths of River Gol Richo, there are so many coins; to be precise, there are thirty six shillings and fifty cents,” I told her after eating my meal.

She did not understand, and she did not bother to inquire. She just sent me to bed, and that night, I dreamt of nothing but Atieno, the river and myself, and how I would seek the man who gave her the coins, and hurl him into the river with so much might, just as Atieno had done with the ten shilling coin he had given her after destroying her.

