

The Flood [story] by Aimée Lehmann

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“Keep your eyes open for the latrine!”

“Latrine?” Markus peers over the box he’s lifting from the back of the trunk. Through the breezy rain, he scans the expanse of tattered blue plastic tarps around him. Pulled across lines and tied onto sticks, they make the field around him look more like a rural flea market than a home to thousands of people. “I don’t see any latrines!” he says.

“That’s my point.” Obiru wades past, through a half-foot of murky brown water, sloshing forward with his front foot first, performing an underwater search. “But there should be one around here. They dug them into the northwest quadrant of every sub-camp a couple of years ago.”

“Wouldn’t we see the walls?” Markus adjusts his load.

“No walls, my friend. Just a hole and cement footpad. Kakuma-style.”

Markus wonders if all refugee camps look this bad, as he follows behind Obiru. They pass one of the camp’s premium huts—a hovel built from dirt by one of the more resourceful refugees. An upper corner of it collapses; its water-logged wall reverting, with a splash, to its red sludge origins.

“So somewhere below us is a shit-hole?” Markus cringes.

“A fifteen-foot drop!”

Markus stops walking but his body doesn’t stop moving. The wash of floodwater, already halfway up his knees, pushes him across the rubbery, wet surface underfoot. “And it’s covered or uncovered?”

“Uncovered.” Obiru laughs. “That’s why I’m warning you.” The aid worker outpaces Markus by several yards, but at least he can see the clinic ahead.

“I think we should tell them this is our last delivery today!”

There is no politically correct answer for that and Markus realizes his mistake in asking to accompany Obiru into the camp today. But after more than two weeks of his volunteer gig, Markus has seen nothing of the camp, proper. They assigned him a desk-job—not too bad, sitting in the air con at least—but there’s no way to leverage that into a good college essay. And once he’s home, his high school counsellor, Ms. Rafters, will be all over his ass for that.

“Why don’t they at least mark the latrines, man?” Markus thinks of Squaw Valley or Bear Mountain, how they mark power boxes and gas lines under the snow.

“Floods here happen maybe once a year,” Obiru says, making much faster progress through the water, even with his two boxes to Markus’ one. “Usually we’re pulling thorns out of flat tires, or cleaning dust from the spark plugs. Rain here is good luck.”

“How the fuck is this good luck?” Markus slips, almost losing his balance. His left knee—his bum knee—already aches.

“It’s water.” Obiru laughs. “We’re in a desert, haven’t you noticed?”

“I know deserts man—I’m from California. And this is no fucking desert!”

“Not today.” Obiru trudges up to the raised hillock of the clinic.

“Where’re you from, anyhow?” Markus calls out. He can’t keep these Africans straight.

“Kenya.” Obiru drops his boxes at the clinic’s homemade sign. “We win all your marathons, remember?”

“Right.” Markus joins him. Leaning on the crooked, hand-lettered wooden sign, light blue block letters on white. “I’ll wait out here with the orphans. I don’t want whatever they’ve got inside.”

“What do you mean?”

“AIDS, Ebola—I’m not taking any of that shit home with me. I got better souvenirs in mind.”

Obiru collects Markus’ box, saying nothing, and weaves his way through the small crowd of children and mothers packed around the clinic door. Several of the refugees greet Obiru and he greets them back over his boxes. Markus waits for someone to greet him, too, but if anything, they only stare. So much for welcoming Africans.

He pries his way between the kids to get a spot under the eaves and leans against the clinic’s white cinderblock to light his cigarette. The kids—round eyes with rounder bellies—crowd him, staring up like at a video game. They press against his legs, and he thinks about the lice and scabies and everything else they might carry. One kid has a pool of thick, green snot caked on his upper lip. Markus flicks his ash that way.

Finally Obiru comes out.

“That took long enough.” Markus pushes off the wall.

“Making tomorrow’s list. Vaccination day.” Obiru pats a couple of kids on the head.

Markus remembers not to shake his hand later. He points to the floodwaters, where he’s been tracking green and white plastic bags, swimming by like fish. “You people don’t recycle.”

Obiru heads down the slope. “We’ve got three more deliveries to go.”

not doing this again." Markus crushes his throat-burning Sportsman into the wall. He would've thought these people knew their tobacco better.

"Then stay here if you like." Obiru shrugs. "But I'm not waiting for you, Johann."

"Johann?" Markus follows him down the hill. "Johann is that German guy visiting CARE?"

Obiru turns around. "You guys all look the same."

"He's fucking blond! I'm brown-haired!"

Obiru wades in.

"Fuck." Markus stares at the water for a minute before stepping in. It feels colder now that he's been out of it.

He blames his mother for this. It was her idea that he come to a fucking refugee camp. "It'll look good on your college applications," she'd said. "Make up for your A-minus in Bio." Now he's up to his ass in a flood.

"I think we should rest, man," he calls out to Obiru, who's halfway back to the Land Rover. "Tell them we got stuck. Who's gonna know the difference?" The rush of the water seems louder now. "It's not like these refugees are going anywhere!" he yells, tugging his left foot up but the suction holds it down, wrenching his knee. Markus wobbles, almost falls. "Why don't they cover their goddamn latrines?"

"The UN ran out of money." Obiru's only twenty yards from the car.

"For latrines?"

"For everything. Price of gas doubled and they couldn't even afford to bring the food up from Mombasa. Ended up burning a bunch of it at the port. Refugees were on half rations for months."

"Sucks," says Markus, looking down, the muddy wash now up to his knees. "I think this river's rising."

"You call this a river? On our way to the next clinic, I'll show you a river! Last year, some Aussie jumped in it, thinking he could surf. They found him the next day, washed up, under a cow."

"A cow?" Markus's foot slides out from under him. "Fuck!" The current pushes him a few feet before he can stop. He reaches for the corner of a hut, grabs it, but the wall disintegrates at his touch. He's clawing at something no longer solid; something disappearing the same way sandcastles did at the beach when he was a kid. "Help me out, man! For god's sake, help!" He falls to his knees. The water's at his chest. Pushing.

Obiru rushes back, taking no care for holes. He pulls Markus up.

"Shit, man. That was scary." Markus pulls his t-shirt away from his chest; everything on him wet, brown, stinking. "They don't use the latrines, do they?"

"Not during the day at least." Obiru looks Markus up and down; he laughs.

"The refugees only shit at night?"

"What would you do? No walls, remember?" Obiru, still laughing, turns around and restarts his careful walk to the car.

"Too dry to hold water."

Markus limps now. "Dude, there is no way we're doing this again!" If he hadn't blown his knee last season, he wouldn't even be here. He'd be checking out colleges with top ski programs. No chance for a scholarship now so he's stuck doing this goddamned community service.

"This is bullshit," Markus yells, wishing he had something to hold onto. "They shouldn't make you work in a flood, man. You shouldn't let people tell you what to do! You're letting them keep you down!!"

"Who's that?"

"The man."

"Who's the man?"

"Whoever's giving you shit!" When Obiru doesn't answer Markus decides that the Kenyan doesn't understand oppression. Markus stops. His knee kills.

"Keep moving!" Obiru calls back, almost at the truck. "You're slowing us down."

The next hut Markus passes has a stick that juts out, tarp attached, making an awning over the doorway for a rain-proof entrance into the hut. That piece of wood—thick and straight—would make a great poking stick. Markus snaps it from the wall, letting the blue plastic tarp flap against the door. A head, then a hand, emerges from the hut to secure it.

"You're taking me back to the compound after this, man," Markus yells. "Does the office still get internet in a flood?"

"I've got three clinics left before I go back to base!"

Markus stops. "You gotta get me outta here!"

"You got your stick." Obiru reaches the car.

Markus pokes his way forward, hurrying, thinking he doesn't much like Kenyans.

But Obiru waits for him after all at the car, lighting a cigarette. Markus can tell he's still searching for the hole, the way he bends and straightens in the water, edging away from the car.

"I think I found it!" Obiru calls out, standing with his back to Markus.

"Thank god." Markus tosses his stick away. It shimmies on top of the water before diving in. He takes a heavy foot forward, no need to be careful now. His left foot lands on solid ground; his bad knee finally has support. But the same instant he realizes he's standing on cement, his right foot sails forward—and doesn't stop.

Obiru calls out. "I was wrong. This isn't it!"

But Markus can't call back. The river pulls him down. He reaches out—but there's nothing to hold onto but water. He opens his mouth to call for help, but it fills before he can yell. His last thought, before going down, is that he's the one who found the latrine.

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