

The Whistling Fire

JULY 31, 2012

Escaping the Congo

Stones and rocks knifed up through the surface of the road. Jannie's bare feet bled. At eleven years old and waif-like, she was light enough to step on most, but some were like daggers that cut into her soles. The dirt quickly soaked up the blood, exposing a mahogany trail of fading life.

She didn't know what else to do but walk. That's what her father said she must do. "Follow the sun where it sets. You'll be safe if you go in that direction. Run as fast as you can until you can no longer breathe, then just keep walking." These were his last words before the machete wounds in his side and back finally silenced him.

In the middle of the night, Jannie slipped out of her incinerated village. She ran until she couldn't take another step. Her adrenaline hid the pain and damage inflicted on her feet.

While sitting on the side of the road, catching her breath, the anesthetic wore off, and she felt the sting. Jannie looked at her wounds. Blood and bruises. She looked back up the road at the blotches of darkening red in the dirt. She forced herself off the rock. She limped for three more miles before the sun rose behind her.

She had to hide. There was undergrowth on either side of the dirt road. To the left there was a clump of trees. The grass is greener. Maybe there's water. She was more thirsty than hungry. She walked to the shady oasis. A small, but steadily-flowing stream rose out of the earth, ran along the base of the foliage, and like a serpent, dove down and out of sight.

Jannie cupped some water to her mouth. It was fresh and unspoiled. She looked up into the palms. There were nuts in the branches. She tried to climb, but her feet hurt too much. She picked up a couple of rocks and threw them into the fronds. A few fell to the ground, and she harvested the food. She pounded the nuts open with a rock, looking for worms. Finding none, and with her right hand to preserve custom, she ate them. She repeated the process until she was satisfied.

"The heat. The road is too open. I have nothing to carry water," she said aloud.

She decided to wait until the sun was beginning to set to continue her journey. Jannie sat down in the shade and fell asleep.

Hours passed.

A sound startled her awake. She could see up the road from her village, the bright orange color of the western sun touching the horizon was reflecting off the windshield of an oncoming truck.

Should she stay hidden, or should she ask for help? She didn't want to die. She didn't want to be... But...

Jannie stood up and was about to wave her arms, but something told her to crouch down and hide. As the truck approached, it slowed and came to a stop directly across from her hideaway. Through the brush she could see a man get out of the cab and point in her direction. She began to tremble.

She knew he saw her.

The stranger started walking toward her. Jannie had nowhere to run.

Someone in the truck called to him, and he stopped. He turned back, got in the vehicle, and they drove off.

Jannie took a deep breath and wiped the sweat from her brow. She looked at the back of her hand — filthy. She crouched down next to the stream and began washing: first her face and hands, then her legs and feet. She looked around. The sun had set. She slipped off her rag dress. There was no soap, just water.

She wrung out the material and got dressed. She shivered.

"I need to bring some nuts with me." She tore off a section of material, gathered some food, and tied them up in a small makeshift sack. She walked back to the road and continued west.

The evening was becoming cooler. In the distance, Jannie could hear the roars of lions and the laughing of hyenas. Both were dangerous. She stopped in the middle of the road. Her fear was overwhelming. She didn't want to be ripped apart by wild animals? Maybe she should have stayed in the village.

A growl close by. Jannie jumped and turned. A lion! She can't out run him. It'll be painful, over in seconds. "I'm sorry, my father, I didn't make it out of the Congo."

The lion made a rush and leapt into the air, his claws extended, his mouth open, his ears back and his mane flattened in the wake of his speed. Jannie closed her eyes. She had seen her young uncle ripped to shreds. She began to scream when a rifle cracked. The cat fell to the road. Jannie opened her eyes and whipped around. It was the man from the truck.

"I saw you earlier. I was going to offer you a ride, but my partner told me to leave you alone," the stranger said.

Jannie couldn't speak. She was shaking all over.

"Where are you from?" the stranger asked.

"My village was burned to the ground. My mother was raped, and then cut up until she bled to death, my father was murdered, and my brothers... I don't know where they are."

"You can come with me. You'll be safe."

Jannie followed the stranger to his truck, and they rode to his campsite. She was given soap and water to clean up, a new rag dress to wear, and some food. She was shown where she was to sleep: a cot with a thick sleeping bag. The stranger said good night and left Jannie to fall asleep.

Her eyes flashed open. Someone was tying a gag over my mouth. Others were tying her arms and legs. Her clothes ripped off. She screamed in pain, but the gag muffled her cries. Two, three, four. She lost count.

She didn't know how long it lasted. When it was over, they untied her.

Before morning, Jannie ran from the camp. This time she took some of the food and water that was leftover in her tent. She ran until she was exhausted. It was near twilight, and she heard a growl nearby. She turned in time to see the horizon obliterated by the body of a pouncing lion.

Lion's teeth in her neck. The pain. She tried to scream. He shook his head. It was over.

The lion dragged the body away. No one knew Jannie was dead. The men in the camp just shrugged their shoulders when they discovered she was gone. There would be no one mourning, no funeral, and no burial. Soon there would be nothing left. No evidence of existence.

But Jannie was no longer running, hiding, hungry, thirsty, tired, and bleeding. The road west, out of the Congo, was quiet. The bloodstains on the dirt were already fading.