

Sometimes

*Sometimes things don't go, after all,
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadel
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail.
Sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.*

*A people sometimes will step back from war,
elect an honest man, decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
Some men become what they were born for.*

*Sometimes our best intentions do not go
amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen; may it happen for you.*

–Shenagh Pugh

I did not know this poem until a friend sent it to me last week in one of those round-robin emails intended to inspire cheer around one's network of friends. Although I was busy with other things that day, the poem stopped me in my tracks. Here was the perfect summing up, in words like a quiet flame, of the incredible feat of 2008.

It started a little more than a year ago, on the cusp of the New Year. Kenyans celebrated their usual month-long Christmas, renewing family ties while seeking surf or *shamba*, and then went to the polls for the second time after the exit of the uber-ruler Daniel T. arap Moi in an orderly, friendly fashion. After a seemingly perfect voting exercise, we all sat back, expecting a quick announcement of the winner: Kibaki or Raila, it was sure to be close, but be of good cheer, either one would do, right, since both meant a Kenya sans Moi?

And then, inexplicably, there was a delay in releasing the results.

Most Kenyans were completely surprised when ethnically motivated attacks—said to have been incited by some of the very politicians Kenyans had just gone to the polls to elect—devastated first the town of Eldoret and then spread rapidly to the rest of the country's major towns. All of a sudden, the roads were choked with every kind of vehicle piled with the ragged belongings of terrified people who snatched up what they could and simply fled. All of a sudden, our movements were dictated by roadblocks manned by hooligans. Police stations and exhibition grounds sprouted UN-issue refugee tents and filled with desperate and desolate people we referred to (with a clinical detachment that belied the horror we all felt) as IDPs: Internally Displaced Persons.

Surreal as it now seems, middle-class Kenyans huddled in their homes wondering whether to make a dash for the grocery store or the bank (if it was open) and putting together little emergency kits of vital documents, all the while thinking maybe life as we knew it is about to come to an abrupt and unthinkable end. Kenyans with less to lose continued to battle each other and the police on a daily basis. Their neighbors also stayed indoors. Suddenly deprived of the peace and liberty necessary for making even a rudimentary living, they contemplated how to continue to eat, who to trust, how to keep their children safe and whether their schools would open this year,

all the while hoping, just hoping somehow, to avoid the worst of it. And many Kenyans from all walks of life began to pray, to call meetings and write newsletters and blogs, and to talk to their friends and neighbors and anyone who would listen about how much they did NOT want to go down this route. Although the patient threatened to roll off the table, Kofi Annan applied a series of urgent diplomatic shocks, and eventually a resuscitation of sorts—a coalition government—was effected.

Once relative calm returned, with Kenya still breathing but badly bruised and bleeding still, the national identity crisis set in. Proud, hard-working Kenyans, even though they labor with inexplicable patience under largely septuagenarian political leaders who are possibly the most parasitic on the planet, have long considered themselves different from the rest of Africa. “After what we went through before Independence [with the Mau Mau war and subsequent internment by the British of large numbers of the suspect ‘native’ population], Kenyans know how good it is to be at peace,” I’ve heard older people say time and again. Others would speak of Rwanda or Somalia or Congo and shake their heads: “Not here.” In some ways, a slogan applied to Atlanta during the 1970s and 80s also seemed to make sense here: everyday Kenyans were just too busy, too boisterously and energetically working to get ahead, to have time to hate. Now, when things also began to fall apart with Zimbabwe’s elections, Kenyans had to contend with remarks about how President Mugabe was going to “pull a Kenya” by rigging the elections and setting his people against each other. “Oh, *lovely* Kenya,” one letter to the editor from a Ugandan mocked. “How could such a thing have happened to us here in our lovely Kenya?”

Around April, the dust finally began to settle, and we could lift our heads again. And then, there he was.

Barack.

Young Barack Obama: tall and charming and definitely way under 50, going at it with Hilary and Joe and Mike and a whole bunch of others and actually holding his own—no, actually, making them look . . . less a sure thing than most people had assumed. A year before, he’d visited Kenya and shared a few thoughts about corruption and the benefits of coming to grips with the vice once and for all—and was dismissed immediately by discomfited politicians: “Who does he think he is? He’s only a junior Senator, only been in office a few months, a nobody, how dare he!” And now the guy was talking about change—no, CHANGE—and people were actually listening. He was lean and clean and definitely not mean in any way, shape or form, and hey, wait a minute! This guy shares our genes, he’s one of us. Barack is *us*. (Or are we Barack?) And it looks like, no it can’t be! Yes, it looks like he’s pulling away from Hilary. He’s going to do it. He’s going to make it! Come on Barack, you can do it. We can do it! Yes! Yes we can! We can hold our heads high again. Obama! You’re the man! O BA MA! O BA MA! O BA MA!

And that’s how it’s been ever since. Kenyans clung to this man and his dreams and his straight talk like a life raft, and they continue to buoy spirits. If you want to put a smile on a Kenyan’s face, just ask a few questions about Our Guy in the White House, and you’ll be rewarded with an LED-bright high beam. Impossible as it seems, this one man manages to embody all of the hopes and dreams of Americans keen to cast off shame as a national badge and return to the hard work, responsible governance and neighborly values that made our country great and our citizens proud, wherever they might be spending time around the globe. And then, of course, there was the way he appeared to inhabit the belief, often repeated but never lived

up to, that America welcomes and nurtures the talents of ALL its citizens, no matter what they look like, where they hail from or how their ancestors originally arrived on our shores.

For Kenyans, Obama means all of this too, but he's also the quintessential symbol of generational change—something, along with effective leadership, that Kenyans my age and younger have yearned for throughout the nearly two decades I've lived here. Perhaps more importantly, he's a symbol of Africa rising—of what might be possible if Kenya really put its resources to work building, through education and investment in infrastructure, and then multiplying, through wise strategies and policy making. As another Kenyan editorial writer wryly remarked, perhaps the thing that Obama highlights most clearly of all is just how wasteful Kenya has been with its human resources in the half century (!) since Independence.

For me personally, Obama has stitched the two halves of my life—pre-Kenya and in Kenya—together in a most magical and mysterious way. I have no doubt that Obama (and the experiences of the last year), in some important ways, has changed me. I know that as President, Obama will continue to change America and, even if he never sets foot in the country, that Obama and what he represents also will change Kenya. The headlines in the Kenyan newspapers for the last two weeks all have been about corruption on a grand scale. Turning a blind eye, yet again, to the instigators of ethnic violence, the Kenyan parliament's refusal to tax its overstuffed, overpaid members. And troubling signs that Kofi Annan's BandAid may not stick. Multiple financial scandals originating with government officials have broken at a time when much of the country is reeling from drought and crop failure, high food and fuel prices, and the lingering economic malaise of the mangled 2007 elections, a time when things definitely did not go as the vast majority of Kenyans mean them to. Obama—in Kenya, as in America—is keeping hope alive for millions.

Tonight—and maybe even for the rest of the week—Kenyans will be celebrating. But when the balloons and confetti drift away and bands pack up their horns and euphoria is just a tinny memory of itself, it will be time to return to something Barack said many times: "It's not about me, people, it's about you." In many ways, Kenya's task is the same as America's task: repair, rebuild, reform. Build bridges to each other, embrace each other and don't be afraid.

There's hard work ahead, but we can do it. We will do it. Oh, yes, we can!

Written a lifetime ago for a family blog on the eve of President Barack Obama's first inauguration. © Lisa Lawley, 2009.