

## Rooster Woman

(SUSANNAH)

ONCE THERE WAS A ROOSTER WOMAN. They called her Twon-ne. She was strong yet light-footed. Once, also, there was a hunter who found Twon-ne, badly beaten, with a small child whimpering close by. Her blood was steadily seeping out of her body and her heartbeat was faint, but the body of Twon-ne insisted on one raspy breath after the other. The hunter carried her out of the forest and into town where he deposited her at Gulu Hospital. He had no details about her. She carried no identification, and the baby was less than a year old—eight months, nine? There was no way he could have known that this was Twon-ne, the brave woman, the strong woman, the woman who'd fought in battles, not shying away like some of her compatriots did.

Twon-ne lay in the hospital bed for weeks—exactly how long, she didn't know. When she came to, the nurses told her that she and her child had been taken there by a hunter. When Twon-ne came to, her mind recalled the last half of

things, sometimes even the last word of sentences spoken to her. She had trouble speaking. She had trouble remembering anything. Her throat was parched and her lips were constantly dry. Her tongue felt thick, as if it was out of practice. But she tried.

My name is not Twon-ne, she tried to say. That is not my name.

But her tongue was too thick, and no one could understand her.

What is your name? Who are you?

*Who?* She'd remember that last word of the request, *who*, wondering what it meant, or if it was a statement, and what on earth was she being told. *Who?* They were asking her name. Nyingi nga?

Sometimes they'd ask: Gangi tye kwene? Wanting to know where her home was. But all she heard was *kwene, where?* She didn't know. She couldn't answer. But she endeavoured to try and worked hard to recall how she'd come to this place.

She could see a forest, mango trees, a clearing, and then a homestead with a firepit—wang'oo. But there was no family around this firepit. No child to pipe up after dinner when all the chores of the day had been done. In earlier times, someone would say: Ododo na ni yoi! And everyone else would respond with an enthusiastic eyoi! Then the story would pour out from eager lips to even keener ears. Sometimes there were songs in the stories. Sometimes there were poems, chorus chants from the audience, responses to a magic word or

refrain from the storyteller. Some of the stories were parables. Or sometimes they were thinly veiled jabs at people who sat around the fire. *This is how you deal with that kind of situation, the old ones would say in their stories; or, That could happen to you.* Ododo, to recount history, teach lessons, entertain.

But what Twon-ne saw in her recent memory was no ordinary wang-oo. There were no old people who'd retire soon after the children's stories had been told. There were no young children, not one. No young adults wanting to hang about just to listen, too, and tell dirty folktales then cackle into the starry night. There was a fire, and some men who said, Tell us a story. Tell us a story, the men demanded. Tell us a story or get ready to die.

THERE WAS ONCE A ROOSTER WOMAN. They called her Twon-ne. She was a very strong woman. She was so strong and so hardworking that it made up for the fact she had no children when she first showed up in that homestead. She was so strong that she worked on her section of the garden and then worked on the plots belonging to two or three other women before day's end, ensuring all the work would get done. She was so strong that the other women in the homestead stopped making fun of her decrepit hut that was overrun by an anthill. They stopped saying within earshot, Look here comes the barren woman. Or, Go call the barren woman to eat. They called her Twon-ne to make fun of her childlessness and her form. Twon-ne had no red rooster's comb, but when she walked, she struck out her flat chest like a rooster about to crow. She was a tall woman who looked even taller because of her slim physique. She had no curves. Her clothes hung from her shoulders and blew about in the breeze, revealing sinewy, tightly muscled arms and legs. Twon-ne's whole body was tough and dry; nothing about her was soft. But she was a woman who puffed out her chest and held her head high as she strutted about with long strides.

In 2001, there was a lull in the violence, and many families started to sneak out from the camps back to their villages to till the land there and subsidize the food rations they were given by the World Food Programme and Red Cross. So it made sense when the women in the homestead insisted that Twon-ne take the lead as they walked from the camp to the

plot of land that the family owned in Wipolo village, at the border between Lacekocot and Pajule. Twon-ne, lead the way, the women insisted—because she was strong, because she knew the bush, because she'd been a rebel before. If they encountered rebels, the women said, Twon-ne will know how to talk to them. If the rebels did not want to talk, perhaps she would take the shots for the women, give them a chance to run away with their lives. Twon-ne didn't mind. She was not afraid. After all, she knew better than all the women behind her that the rebels were only people, just like her and just like them. She tightened the kanga holding the baby she'd had since arriving in the homestead and proving herself. She strapped the baby snugly to her back and led the way to the garden, across the river and up the hill.

We'll remain in the valley until you tell us that it is safe to go up, the women suggested.

So Twon-ne walked up the hill with her long strides and puffed-out chest, sleeping child on her back, not minding, not minding at all, until she met the rebels, and her mind went blank. She hadn't expected to meet them. She stopped and stood still with her hands behind her, supporting her baby's bottom as he lay, still fast asleep with his cheek resting between her shoulder blades. The leader stopped too and stood still. His arms hung straight from his shoulder, relaxed, like the AK-47 strapped across his chest.

Where are you going?

To dig.

Where are you from?

I'm from the camp over on the other side of the river. Twon-ne pointed behind her. It seemed far away, but it wasn't.

It looks as if today is your bad day, the rebel said, moving his hand towards the butt of the gun. It had a menacing bayonet at its end, but still, Twon-ne was not afraid. Oding woko.

It's not my bad day unless it's God's will.

Well, I'm sure that today is your unlucky day.

If it's in God's plan, I won't argue about that. There is no alternate for our final day.

Twon-ne did not look into the rebel's eyes directly. That'd be too forward. She looked beyond his shoulder to the bushy landscape behind him so that her gaze was averted, but not submissive. Her words were very clear. She did not mumble. There was no mistaking what she said.

If I am meant to die today, then I accept what you say.

The women below heard Twon-ne's voice carry down and they ran away. But Twon-ne's stance, with both feet on solid ground, her hands on her baby and her words comfortable from her mouth to their grated ears, showed that she was not afraid of them. She knew, as they did, that the rebels were only people like she was.

Where are the rest of the women you were with?

How would I know? Do you see them by my side? Did you see them when you met me?

Where did they run off to?

I don't know. I didn't think to ask before they took off. What's the matter with you lot? Did you not see them run away in different directions?

Suddenly, the leader of this pack of rebels saw smoke from fishermen close by. He suspected that government troops could be nearby.

That must be them. Let's go!

What about the rest of the women? another rebel asked, unsure about what they were about to do—whether it was to run away themselves, face the Uganda People's Defence Forces, or shoot the other people running away in the back, as they often did on their standbys into Uganda from Sudan.

Leave them alone. We can't afford to stay here. Let's go!

Twon-ne had no time to think. She joined the rebels. Turning away might have meant a shot to her back or a machete blow to the back of her neck. She walked at their fast pace. They were a small bunch of men—she couldn't make out how many, but not a big crowd. Perhaps they had only started the standby. They hadn't begun the harvesting of children, ripping them from their beds, snatching them off the road on the way to or from school, from fetching water at the river. There were no young hapless followers, recently abducted, looking dejected, lost and scared.

Twon-ne walked with the rebels until they came to a deserted homestead where there were many mango trees.

Some of the younger men—boys, as it were—collected twigs, sticks and small logs, and took them to the wango. They all sat down for a while, waiting for the warmth from the fire to heat the evening air, which had cooled after sunset. Everything was quiet until one of them said: I know you.

Twon-ne didn't respond.

I know you, the man repeated, pointing at Twon-ne, who kept her eyes on the flames in front of her.

You might not know us, but we know you. Your name is Nightry, Nightry, he said.

He didn't call her Twon-ne. Nightry.

Aren't you called Nightry?

Yes.

Didn't you escape from us?

No, I didn't escape. I returned home during combat.

There was a terrible battle and I left.

The men laughed. And then one of them spoke from the other side of the firepit. She could not make out his face.

Only his voice came across.

Okay, so then make us laugh.

Again: Make us laugh.

What do you mean, make you laugh? How can I make you laugh?

Well, you just did. Make us laugh again, you woman who can decide to walk away from combat just because it's a terrible battle. You already made us laugh. Make us laugh again.

She said: I can't make you laugh again. The only thing that makes you happy is killing people. Nothing else seems to make you happy. I can't make you laugh.

So they said: Okay, then give us money. Give us one hundred thousand shillings.

Twon-ne hesitated for a moment, then her response to the astonishment of their request flew out of her mouth: And how am I going to get one hundred thousand shillings? Do you see it on me?

It was a quiet night. Nothing seemed to move except the fluttering leaves of the mango trees. Twon-ne rocked her body back and forth, wanting her baby to stay quiet, even though she could feel him getting restless now that he was awake.

Okay. Where is your mother-in-law? Maybe she can give us one hundred thousand shillings.

One hundred thousand shillings. Surely they were making up that number. What were they going to do with that money? Walk over to the shops with their guns and buy things and pay for them? A hundred thousand shillings.

My mother-in-law. Hmmm! Didn't you see her running away from you?

Being polite was not going to score any points from these people.

Okay. Give us a goat.

I don't have a goat.

Right. Then give us a cow.

I don't have a cow. What is wrong with you people? If I don't have a hundred thousand shillings, or a goat, how am I going to have a cow, leave alone a cow to give you? Did you see me moving with a cow when you found me?

You are a sarcastic woman. You haven't said anything to make us happy. You better tell us a story.

ONCE THERE WAS A WOMAN called Twon-ne who returned from the bush without a child—not like Kilak, the first woman, who'd left her home and returned with twins, Labongo and Gipir, who became the fathers of all Luo-speaking people in the world. By the time Twon-ne returned from the bush, she'd not even developed breasts yet. She was young. How could she have had a child then? When Twon-ne returned, she was taken to World Vision's reception centre in Gulu. She stayed there for ten months, learning how to be among people who were not intent on going on standbys. She learned how to live among people who were at home, settled in the heart, purposeful in stride, fearful only of those who'd cock their guns towards the body or the home. Twon-ne learned to be a person again, not a wild woman, the way they said that people who'd returned from the bush were.

She had become human again, a person, when she told the people at World Vision outright: I have no family to return to. The people at World Vision said: You must have relatives, everyone does. She said: I do have an aunt, but I don't know where or how to find her. As you know, many people have left their homes and are now living in camps. I wouldn't know where to start looking for my aunt. The people at World Vision asked Twon-ne to pack her things, and they gave her a driver who asked where he should drop her off. She told him to drop her off anywhere. She didn't know anyone at the camp anyway. The driver stopped the car at the roadside and she got out with her belongings.

There was a parade taking place where Twon-ne was dropped off, so she stood by the road to watch it go by. Someone pointed at Twon-ne and said she knew her.

Me?

Yes, you. You come from Kalili near Lackocot. Your father's name was Abonga and your father's sister used to live near Kitgun. Are you not the one?

Twon-ne said yes, she was the one.

Come with us, your aunt lives close to us in the camp.

Twon-ne picked up her belongings—a small bag with a change of clothes and a few things that the people at World Vision had given her to start a new life—and went with the parade. It ended up in the camp. When her aunt saw her, she seemed happy.

I'll take care of you, she said, so Twon-ne followed her aunt to the small hut where she lived.

On the first day, everything was good. They ate together and reminisced about the old times. On day two, the aunt started to show some claws, but she was still smiling, like the rat who nibbles at your toes at night while you are sleeping, and then blows, blows, blows softly to soothe you and make you forget that you are in fact being eaten alive. On day three, the aunt stopped blowing. Her claws were out, all of them, lunging at Twon-ne's face, cursing, cursing her for being the only one that stayed alive. Twon-ne had been abducted with her two brothers, as well as her two cousins and nephew, who were her aunt's sons and grandson. All of

them were dead now, all except her. Her aunt was alone and her fiery grief threatened to engulf Twon-ne if she did not leave. Twon-ne left her aunt with everything, everything that she'd been given from World Vision to start her new life. Her aunt took it away.

You left with my sons and grandsons and expect that you should leave here again with anything? I owe you nothing! You owe me everything that was ever important in my life!

Twon-ne left her aunt on day four. She left with only the clothes on her back and open empty hands. She wandered about in the camp, looking for ideas, and she didn't know what else. Her name was not on the list in the camp, so she didn't qualify to receive any food rations. Twon-ne wandered in the camp for two days without anything to eat. On the third day, she saw a soldier standing at ease, looking well fed, his skin all shiny and healthy, and got an idea. Perhaps she could ask him. Maybe if she could do something for him, maybe he could give her something to eat, or money to buy something to eat. But then, from the corner of her eye, she saw a man she could have sworn was a childhood playmate a long time ago.

Way, way back, before her father had chased away her mother and brought home a new woman who beat them every day and accused them of eating their father's share of dinner, Twon-ne and her brothers had lived with their father in Lacekocot. Way before her father had chased after their

missing stepmother and got himself infected with HIV/AIDS and come home to die; before she and her brothers were abandoned in the homestead, suffering from guinea worms and malnutrition and poverty—before all that, she'd known this man as a boy and had played with him in the compound. She called out to him.

Is that you?

Eeh! It's me. Eeh! It's good to see you again.

I know! We find ourselves here, living like refugees, people with no homes, but what can we do?

Really, what can we do, living like dogs in our own country?

They stood silently for a moment, looking around at the congested huts. Huts so close together that their roofs touched. Huts so close together that sometimes a spark ignited the straw thatch of one and in no time reduced the whole camp to ashes and wailing crowds of homeless people who were already homeless in their homeland and in their own country.

Where are you based? Where are you living?

I'm living like a dog, truly. I have nowhere to go.

Twon-ne sat down with the man and narrated the story of her escape, of how she'd walked away from the battle, because it was terrible, because she'd had enough. She told him about her father, her stepmother, her abduction, the repeated rapes and the final battle during which she'd just

melted away from the battlefield and walked back home. She was tired of fighting, tired of struggling. All she wanted was to find a home, rest, recuperate and live.

Come, the man said. Come. I'll take you home. You don't have to worry, now. Come with me. Let's go home.

ONCE THERE WAS A WOMAN called Twon-ne, the rooster woman. She hadn't always been called so. Before she was called a rooster woman, she'd been a girl, abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army and taken to Sudan to be the wife of a man called Ali. From over there in Sudan, they called her Nighty. She told them her name was Nighty because no one else used their given names over in Sudan. While she was there, Nighty was also taught to fight. Occasionally, she was allowed to be part of a standby and go back to Uganda to collect food, children recruits, and other supplies. Collecting food and supplies meant looting them from the homes of people, many of whom had already run away to the camps. Getting recruits meant wearing a menacing face and yelling while holding a threatening gun in the faces of terrified families, or sometimes at lone children who'd never imagined that they'd be considered old enough to be forcefully recruited into the Lord's Resistance Army and made to fight soldiers from their own government.

In 2001, Twon-ne returned from the bush. She found it was a sad place to call home. Most people had left their homes and lived in the camps for the internally displaced people, or IDPs. The soil in Northern Uganda was dank, heavy and darkened with blood stories that would never find the lightness of words to carry them out. Everyone had a story to tell about kidnapping, terror, rape. Nobody spoke about good times. It was as if the light stories had dissipated into



the night sky and taken their place amongst the stars that mocked the people every night.

In that night, Twon-ne wanted to reach for the stars inside her body and find smiles, warmth from the wang-oo, and stories that would remind her of where she came from, stories that would keep her going on.

In hospital, Twon-ne struggled with her memory, stringing sentences from the last word of each utterance to the first word in the next, like a chain of nonsense, until she understood what was being spoken to her. Twon-ne's body began to heal from the outside. Braided scars on her back, arms, legs, thighs, bottom and face remained to serve as memories, some keeping their stories to themselves. Twon-ne could not recall what every scar represented, try as she might, so she rubbed at the ones she could reach as she learned to trace the new landscape of her body. She'd have to wait for the stories to come through her pores, in her nails, hair, through her voice box, from inside her body, where they lay scattered and lost. The swelling of her tongue receded, as did the one above her eyes that had would have rendered her unrecognizable to anyone—though no one had come to claim her at the hospital. Her son cried whenever the nurses brought him to nurse or just to spend time with her. After a while, he'd just look at her in silence. His babbles were lost to her as were his smiles. She wasn't, she supposed, too terrifying to look at anymore, just not familiar enough to evoke those endless giggles she used to get from him.

In time, her memory would work itself backwards to recall how it happened that she was in a hospital ward in Gulu. Sometimes she'd hold her son close to her chest feeling him re-learn to relax against his mother as she sat on a chair and looked out of the window into the yard where sick people sat in lines, waiting for treatment. During those times she'd remember vaguely that at one point she had lived with her two brothers and her mother in a village called Kalili, which is impossible to locate on any map. Suffice it to say, it's near Lackekocot, which itself is not far from Pajule. Her earliest memories came to her in still pictures: her father beating her mother; her mother leaving with her and her siblings. When her father found out that his family was gone, he'd followed them to her mother's maternal home and insisted on taking his children back to Kalili. Twon-ne recalled, in quick succession, sometimes in flashbacks, sometimes in disjointed and unrelated short film clips: a stepmother, biting hunger, abandonment, guinea worm infections, her father dying, her aunt rescuing her and her brothers one lovely afternoon when everything became possible. In excruciating detail, the memory arrived of the evening, and then the exact moment, she and her brothers arrived at her aunt's home. The rebels arrived a while later. From her aunt, the rebels demanded that she pick two children and donate them to the cause, but her aunt couldn't decide. She couldn't. Twon-ne shuddered at that memory, knowing that she'd have to work hard to remember everything, good and bad. It was all a part

of her now, like the new scars that were forming on top of the old ones.

Make us laugh, the rebel had told her. She couldn't erase his voice from her head. He was the same person who had recognized that she was called *Nighty* from over there. Make us laugh.

Another voice, another one from the vague past, had demanded of her aunt: Pick two for us. Pick which two children you will donate to the resistance army who are fighting for your freedom. Twon-ne was eleven, maybe twelve years old then. The voice was gone from her head now, but she recognized the words when they formed together. And now that she was a mother, she could not imagine anyone asking her to make that kind of decision.

Twon-ne sat by the window, not interrupted by friendly voices of family and friends coming to check on her recovery, because none came. The nurses were diligent and quick, with low voices and gentle hands. She appreciated that, but even more, she wanted to make solitude work for her. She needed to recall more than the most traumatic events that had led her to this place.

One day, as a soldier in the Lord's Resistance Army, Twon-ne had resolved to go back home because she was tired. First, she was tired of the fighting on that day. Second, to what end was she fighting? For who? There would be no benefit to her winning or dying for this war, so she left.

She was tired, also, of the life over there in Sudan. She was tired of the killings she'd seen, the surrounding death whose stench remained in her nostrils for years after. She was tired of having to be the wife of a man she hadn't chosen. She was tired of the bossiness of her co-wives, who treated her like a maid, beating her whenever their husband called her to sleep in his bed. Twon-ne was tired of fetching water in the river of a foreign country because that meant that she had to be wary, to keep her gun close, to watch for men who spoke in other languages and waited at the river for unsuspecting women. Twon-ne didn't want to live in a country where she had to forage in the bushes for leaves that resembled the ones from her homeland—how else would she know what to cook, having not been there long enough to have a garden? She was tired of the sticky smell of hot blood, of how it found its way to the back of the throat and tinged the taste of everything she ate for a few days after battle.

So, she'd left in the middle of combat, determined to make her way back home. Now she found herself recuperating in a hospital, and she was still tired. She was tired of having been the daughter of that useless man who'd abandoned his children and gone chasing women and alcohol, returning home only to die.

THERE WAS ONCE A WOMAN called Twon-ne, the rooster woman. She was once very strong and very brave, but now she was recuperating in Gulu Hospital, wondering if she'd ever regain her mind, if she'd ever be okay. Everything remained jumbled up in her body. Her child was growing fast. He was toddling, saying a few words. She didn't know how he was cared for during the day, or where he slept during the night. All she knew was that at first he'd seemed frightened of her. He'd wailed when the nurses brought him to see her, clutched at their legs so tight, not wanting his own mother's embrace. She couldn't blame him. She had no idea what she looked like in this broken body, with this broken mind. In any case, she was tired, and sometimes she was too tired to recognize her own voice coming to her from the back of her mind, repeating the name: Susannah Arac, Susannah Arac. An nyinga Susannah Arac. My name is Susannah Arac.

## *Telephone Operator*

(HELEN)

A YEAR AFTER OPWONYA GOT me the job, he was killed in a car accident. And with that, no one else knew that I, a simple telephone operator, had recently returned from captivity and was no longer an active rebel.

Opwonya was the one who'd collected the money every night, smiling his small smile, encouraging me without saying anything, but insisting always that there was not enough money from the day's take to pay me as much as we'd agreed. It could have been true. Every night before leaving I gave him five or six thousand shillings—all the money that various patrons had paid to make their phone calls according to the rates that were posted on the board by the table. MTN—300 per minute, CELTEL—500 per minute, MANGO—400 per minute. And international calls for those rare patrons who could afford it was fifteen hundred shillings per month. My table, which I set up every day at All Nations Christian Centre in Lira Town, which is located on Kampala-Gulu highway,