



THE TRUTH THAT MATTERS

By Sigve Tonstad, 2022

He said it is about NATO, but Navalny is the name,
the man in the far-off prison and hated all the same.
He said it is about values: this is the value he fears,
people living in freedom: "I will give them tears."

The claim of security threatened, this is partly true,
corrupt men fear the people, it is nothing new.
Navalny is spelled Zelensky, or do it in reverse,
doesn't matter to Moscow, both are under his curse.

If you wonder about his values, Navalny is the name,
and the emperor is naked, and all can see his shame.
Dissent, and go to prison, or drink the poison cup,
Submit, get the promotion, this is how to move up.

He fears what he cannot dictate, it puts him ill at ease,
it almost makes him sleepless, it takes away his peace.
And if you do resist him, the tanks are rolling in,
this is the truth that matters, everything else is spin.



What would you do if you knew Jesus was coming in five years?”
Sitting in a hermeneutics class full of men, my father’s head jerked up. He was a twenty-year-old theology student, sweet-faced and sincere. In his dorm room, he kept his few clothes and his many books, including his Bible, several Bible commentaries, and Ellen White’s *Steps to Christ* and *The Desire of Ages*.

The professor, a preacher by training, paused and repeated his question for dramatic emphasis while my father and his classmates scrambled to answer. Those who were thinking *Get married. Quick!* didn’t say it. Instead, they said they would knock on doors, hold evangelistic crusades, make and distribute religious tracts, and go overseas. They would go to India or Norway or Uganda, and they would tell as many people as they could about this urgent good news.

Of course, the professor’s question was hypothetical. Of course, it wasn’t.

The Seventh-day Adventist church began with the certainty of God’s imminent arrival. In 1818, William Miller, a Baptist preacher, read Daniel 8:14—*Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed*—and believed he was looking at a secret code: the date of Christ’s return. If each prophetic day was a year and the countdown began with the rebuilding of Jerusalem in 457 BC, then the second coming would happen in Miller’s lifetime. He must warn the world. Humanity, he wrote, was “sleeping over the volcano of God’s wrath.”

Soon and Very Soon

My mother was born into Adventism. Her father was a Bible teacher at the only Adventist high school in Finland. Even when he was young, my grandfather was known as the Grand Old Man on campus. Because he was entrusted with the spiritual development of other people’s children,

ARRIVING IN UGANDA

An excerpt from Sari Fordham's *Wait for God to Notice*,
(Wilkes-Barre, PA: Etruscan Press, 2021).

his own were expected to be models of Adventist virtue. My mother—studious, obedient, and loyal to her own mother—didn't complain. Instead, when she had free time, she climbed into the attic and read the illicit novels she had somehow procured. If my grandfather knew, he said nothing.

My grandfather, whom we called Pappa, was a shy man, with an elfin face and a generous smile. He was friendly to everyone but unable to form deep connections, even with family members. His most sustained relationship was with Ellen White. When he visited us in the United States, he came with one suitcase filled with her books. My mother reached for that bag, and its weight wrenched at her arm. She loved to tell the story: "I thought his suitcase was full of rocks, but it was only Ellen White."

I never saw my mother reading Ellen White's books, and unless she was pointing out inconsistencies to her daughters, she rarely discussed Adventist theology. She was an Adventist who minded the edges of the Sabbath, read from Psalms and the Gospels, cooked vegetarian meals, and before evening prayers, sang, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus," her attention clicking away from us, her face softening.

My father converted to Adventism when he was a child. His mother, Marjorie, was dynamic, beautiful, and impulsive. She divorced young and had a knack for bad relationships. When men told her they wouldn't date a woman with children, she dropped off her kids at various foster homes, visiting when she could. My father and his siblings were frequently beaten, and at one home, a woman broke my father's arm. My father's uncle intervened, arranging for my father and his older brother, Johnny, to stay at an Adventist home in the Mojave Desert. The couple owned a chicken farm and required the brothers to do chores and mind their manners.

My father attended a one-room Adventist school. He could barely read or write, and during class, he wandered around the room, no doubt annoying his teacher. Yet she responded with kindness, igniting in my father an admiration for the profession and an awareness of how one teacher can change someone's life trajectory. She stayed after school and tutored my father until he caught up with his peers. For the



My father's students at Bugema Missionary Training School.



My parents

first time, my father felt the pride that comes from academic excellence and the security that comes from a structured home life. He and Johnny lived for two years on that old chicken ranch, attending Sabbath School and church each Saturday. When their mother, who had moved to Hawaii for a job, finally brought them to live with her, she was surprised at how devout they were, particularly her youngest.

The Adventist church became the ballast in my father's childhood. My grandmother moved from man to man, apartment to apartment, job to job. Every few months, she and her children would pack their belongings and scrub down their rental unit. No matter, on Sabbath, my father was at church. Sometimes his siblings came. Sometimes his mother came, too. When he was old enough, my father enrolled himself in an Adventist boarding school, paying his way through work-study programs. In the most secular sense, the Adventist church had saved him.

My father was devoted to his mother, and he was also determined to be nothing like her. As a teenager, he developed his capacity to see things through. By the time my mother met him, he was like a landmass. Once he set his mind to something, he didn't budge. He listened politely to others and remained steadfast, doing precisely what he said he would do. My mother called this his stubbornness.

My father dedicated himself to serving God and dreamed of someday becoming a missionary. The life he envisioned looked so different from his mother's that he didn't recognize their mutual restlessness. By most metrics, they were opposites. She discarded everything. He discarded nothing. She was outgoing and assertive. He was introverted and diplomatic. She was impulsive. He was responsible to a fault. She couldn't sit still. He loved academia and could spend hours poring over his books. While he was studying for a degree in theology, she was having an affair with a married man. Yet beneath their contrasting natures were matching fulcrums tipping

them toward adventure— the more reckless, the better. If Marjorie's child was going to be religious, it made absolute sense that he would want to be a missionary.

After asking his class about the second coming, my father's hermeneutics professor listened to their answers, and what he

heard were earnest and self-important plans. The theology professor's job was to temper any fanaticism and to teach the value of inquiry. To be of any use to future congregations, these men needed to wrestle with hard questions like, *How could a good God allow bad things to happen?* The professor still studied and prayed over that one, while my father and his classmates had a fast answer, a non-answer: God was coming soon and would make everything right.

"If you knew Jesus was coming in five years," the professor told his students, "the best use of those years would be to finish your education and only then start preaching."

This moment became my father's second conversion. He loved studying and had often felt guilty for his misplaced priorities. Shouldn't he be more anxious to do the important work of evangelism? Now, he was assured of the importance of his interests. Education wasn't just valuable; it was crucial. Jesus said you needed to have the faith of a child, and didn't children question everything, and didn't Jesus say you needed to be as wise as a serpent? If my father really wanted to be a missionary, he should bring something to the table: an education. He filled out paperwork expressing his future interest in mission work, then burrowed down into his studies.

My father finished his degree in theology and enrolled in the Master of Divinity program at Andrews University. He met and married my mother, graduated with honors, accepted a pastoral position in Indiana, had two daughters, and took advantage of his proximity to Ball State University to study part-time for a Master's in Public Health. He hadn't forgotten about the mission field. It just didn't consume his daily consciousness the way parenting did. So when a letter arrived from Adventist Mission, he was taken by surprise. The church was offering my father—and by extension our family—a mission appointment in Uganda.

The job was at Bugema Missionary Training School, a sprawling campus about an hour outside of Kampala. It had a rigorous high school, an on-site farm, and a training school for ministers and teachers. The Adventist church wanted my father to transform the ministerial certificate into an accredited college degree, the first one offered at Bugema. My father had no teaching experience, no PhD, no unique connections within Adventism. It was as if someone was flipping through mission applications, read my father's, and thought, *Well, this guy seems earnest.*

My father didn't speculate about why he had been chosen. He assumed someone knew he was up to the task. He also believed in his own work ethic, in his aptitude to learn from others, and, of course, in his ability to see a task to completion. Mostly, he was elated, and even my mother felt the pricklings of excitement. He was being offered the chance to teach in Uganda. Life was finally getting interesting. Of course we would go.

Years later, my father learned that fifteen more qualified candidates had turned down the position before he had been asked. My parents didn't wonder why the others had said no. By then, they already knew.

Jambo

The long rains had ended when our plane landed at the Entebbe airport. The ground beside the runway was plush, and cattle egrets stepped through the grass, catching crickets and frogs. Sonja pressed her forehead against the oval window, and beside her, my mother peered past Sonja's nut-brown hair and gazed at the earth with its greens and reds. The intercom crackled, and with the voice of the British Empire in his throat, the captain said, "Welcome to Uganda."

Our plane stopped on the tarmac, stairs were wheeled over, and the door was flung open. It was midmorning, and already the heat seeped in. Passengers stood, gathered their bags, and shuffled for the exit. My mother held a carry-on in each hand and another slung over her shoulder. She set me in the aisle and told me to go on. She was overwhelmed with bags, and babies, and a growing sense of unease. My father had gone to Uganda before us, and without him, she was having trouble just getting off the plane. We were the last to exit.

Our first step into Africa offered light so fierce we shut our eyes before reopening them slowly, a sliver of eye against the sun. Our gaze swept across the tarmac and beyond that to a small, cement airport. Sweat gathered on our faces and bodies as we were embraced by the showy heat of Uganda.

My mother must have reeled at the enormity of our arrival. When she had married my father, she had left Finland behind. For months at a time, she spoke only English. At the bank and at bus stops, she was asked,

"Where are you from?"—a frequent reminder that she didn't belong. Now, she was even more conspicuously an



My sister and me in our yard in Bugema.



My mom, Sonja, and me at a game reserve with a guide.



My father and his students.



My grandmother as a hair model.

outsider. We planned to live in Uganda for six years, and she hoped this place would feel like home to her daughters. For herself, we had become her home.

My father waited behind a velvet rope. He stood, leaning outward, the image of a man who had lived alone the past two months and hadn't liked it. His hair was brown and long on his neck. It was recalcitrant, wavy hair, and he would have looked like a moppet if he hadn't been so tall and thin. He was, in fact, the tallest, thinnest, whitest man in the lobby. His glasses were overlarge, and he wore tan slacks and a western shirt with silver snaps. He was the first person everyone noticed as they entered. Still, when we stepped through the door, he waved one hand above his head and shouted, "Jambo! Jambo!"

He had come to Uganda before the academic year, arriving alone because my mother couldn't bear to fly through Europe without stopping in Finland to see her parents. Her mother had cancer, and she carried daughter-guilt with her. *How many years left?* Where our mother went, we her daughters followed. This would become our pattern: my father starting or finishing a school year in Uganda, the three of us in Finland.

Alone, my father moved into the house I would always think of as home, the definitive home: a place of warmth and wonder. It was a red brick house, squat and square, with a corrugated metal roof and a screened-in verandah. Because it was the farthest house from campus, nobody had wanted to live there. "Hurry to Uganda, or you'll be stuck with the house on the hill," my parents had been warned. When it was assigned to him, my father was elated. The jungle surrounding the house was still inhabited by monkeys, civet cats, mongoose, and bush babies. My father could scarcely believe our luck.

I am batching it in a very big house, my father wrote his mother. I don't know how Kaarina will take to the rudimentary conditions. I don't mind. My needs are taken

care of. Except that I have only two pots. It is so hard to transfer everything back and forth since I have no storage containers. So I must boil water for drinking, cook beans, and cook rice, all in the same pot, plus I cook my soup in it. I don't know what to do with one, while I'm doing the other. It would surely help if I had an electric rice cooker. I would appreciate it very much if you could airmail one to me.

Over the next decade, my parents would ask my American grandmother to send many things, including clothes, which they would ask her to wash first (*and don't iron*) so that the items would look used. *Customs is 100 percent of value, or more*, they wrote. My grandmother wearied of these letters, but that first request, she was quick to respond to: Only two pots, oh my! I'm not sure if the rice cooker arrived before we did; the screens are what my father remembers.

"When is your family coming?" the school secretary would ask. My father's solitary arrival worried the staff at Bugema. It sure didn't seem as if he planned to stay long.

"I'll send for them after the house gets screens," my father replied. He was joking and not joking. Our tickets to Uganda were open-ended, and he had a *mzungu's* fear of malaria. When we arrived, the screens, such as they were, were in place.

My mother dropped the bags and half ran to my father. They embraced for a time before remembering us. I hadn't seen my father in a long while, and when he bent to hug me, I wiggled away. Sonja placed her arms around his neck and allowed him to kiss her cheek, but she soon pulled away.

"You've gotten so big, pumpkin," he offered. She smiled and took my hand. "You girls have really grown."

"Well," my mother said to my father, hands on her hips. The worry on her face was gone, and behind the smile there was nothing more complicated than brightness.

"Well," my father said. He, too, was giddy. The two

months had been long ones, filled with work and wonder and foolish mistakes. Each day, he had been shoring up stories to share with my mother, for she was a fine one for laughing.

“So,” she said, “this is Africa.” She reached up and touched the hair that looped across his forehead. “You need a haircut.”

“How would you like to go shopping?” he said. “I know the best place in town.” The truth was that he would have liked to take us straight home. The flight was long, and he knew we must be tired, that my mother must be anxious to see the house, that a woman wants to unpack something. But we didn’t yet have a car, and the family who would drive us back to Bugema was now shopping in Kampala, an optimistic pursuit.

The Entebbe airport was outside of Kampala, and so we took a taxi into town. My mother gazed out the window, her first look at Uganda. The taxi rattled past dukas selling bananas and fish, past a dip in the ground where men stood knee-deep in water and washed a Mercedes with old t-shirts, past a marabou stork the same size as me. “Pretty amazing, huh?” my father said, pointing out the window. The stork was standing on a heap of rubbish, fussing over something. “They’re all over Kampala, but you won’t see many in Bugema.” We gazed at the trees and grass, at the ground and sky. Only the words were familiar. The difference between Finland and Uganda was like the difference between watercolors and oil paints. The textures were thicker here, the colors more intense.

My parents hadn’t stopped talking. They hadn’t been separated this long since they were married. They had met during my mother’s last semester of graduate school, her commencement nipping at their heels, her need to get married looming over every exchange. In her dorm room, she would sit with her friends and analyze her dates with my father. Was this significant? Was that? Would he propose before she left?

Though my mother alone knew it, their courtship was being played out under the long shadow of my Finnish grandmother, a shadow that stretched from Turku to Michigan. My grandmother was a formidable woman who had kept a keen eye on all her children’s romantic prospects. When my uncle Hannu dated the “Kissing Machine,” my grandmother dispatched my mother to the Machine herself to demand the couple break up. My mother complied, as did the Machine. Few, apparently, could say no to my grandmother. My mother’s own romantic prospects were scarce. She’s too skinny, the family said, too bossy, too shy with the boys. My mother was sent to America to get her master’s degree. That she

was also to find a husband was not only assumed, but also discussed in exhaustive, embarrassing detail.

If my mother was ever shy, it was certainly news to my father. “You’ll have to find another girlfriend soon,” my mother announced pointedly near the end of the semester. Her accent was British in its exactness, but Scandinavian in its rolling Rs. As her departure slipped from weeks to days, she intensified her campaign, pointing to girls with their miniskirts and their swinging blond hair. She selected tall, voluptuous girls, girls with twanging accents and large blue eyes, girls who were nothing at all like her. “Is she your type?” my mother would ask. “What about her?”

When my father finally proposed, my mother felt first a rush of relief and then happiness. They told the story of their courtship often, interrupting each other with points of contention, laughing at each other’s versions, then listing romantic rivals and complications, including a breakup. My father said he had every intention of proposing. My mother said that he would never have asked if she hadn’t compelled him to. If she’s right, then it was one of the few times my mother got her way over something significant. Though opinionated, smart, quick tempered, and strong, my mother had a soft spot for my father. That she ever agreed to live in Uganda would surprise everyone for years to come, her daughters most of all.

The suburbs surrounding Kampala were disarmingly rural with banana trees and tied-up goats and tin-roofed homes, and my mother hardly noticed we were nearing the city until the taxi jostled into Kampala. And even still, the capital of Uganda felt more like a town. The tallest building was the fourteen-story International Hotel. The road gave some indication of Kampala’s importance. It had become an alarming tangle of cars and bicycles and matatus, each jostling to pass the other. Our driver, sweat running down the back of his neck, poked his head out the window and shouted at pedestrians, then at a kombi driver, and then he turned to my father and shouted, “Nobody can drive here, eh?” and laughed. It was a laugh so full and leisurely that he could have been sitting in a parlor telling stories.

Kampala was built on seven hills. While Rome has Romulus and Remus, Kampala has the Kabaka and the colonizers and long-necked antelope. Imagine a land green enough to overwhelm every other color, though the dirt is red and the sky is blue. Imagine that the land is already separated into distinct kingdoms, each with its own language, culture, traditions, and religion. The monarchies are as distinct as any Europe has to offer. And there, in the heart of Buganda—a kingdom as old as the

British Tudors—lies Kampala (before it was Kampala). And imagine Ugandan kob stepping through the brush, moving in herds, their heads tilted, listening and then sensing no danger, eating at the green, green grass. Here, where we hurtle down the tarmac, is where the Kabaka once hunted.

In 1858, British explorers John Hanning Speke and Richard Burton came to Uganda, searching for the source of the Nile. When Burton grew ill, Speke continued without him, traveling north until he came to a virtual ocean of water edged with papyrus. Crocodiles lay upon the muddy banks. Though it was already named Lake Nyanza and owned as much as any body of water could be, Speke called it Lake Victoria.

He returned to England and announced (somewhat correctly) that Lake Victoria was the Nile's source. Burton disagreed. The two men traveled England, giving competing presentations and were about to debate each other in public when Speke died in what was either a suicide or an accidental shooting. For those living in Uganda, it didn't matter. Other explorers were coming, and then missionaries. They would arrive and find Uganda a good land, a lush and temperate place where the sun rose and set at seven, and they would set in motion the destruction that was to come.

Buganda was the largest kingdom and the most powerful. The Kabaka was king, and he lived on a hill surrounded by impala. The British called this place "the hill of the impala," and the words were translated into Luganda as kasozi k'empala, shortened eventually to Kampala.

Kampala became the heart of a new and reluctant nation. Kingdoms were gathered like fish in a net and tossed together under one protectorate: the British Empire. England used one kingdom as an administrator, another as a police force and army. They exploited grievances and pitted region against region. When Uganda's independence came, it brought with it the nationalism of many nations. Each former kingdom carried a reasonable grudge against the others, and with that grudge came fear. Is it any wonder that Uganda was hurled toward tragedy?

We arrived in Kampala ignorant or naïve, idealistic or malevolent, depending on how one would judge us. We carried with us the historical baggage of missionaries: the colonialism, the racism, the imposition of one culture over another, of one religion over another. We also carried the idealism: the sacrifice, the good intentions, the hospitals that had been built, and the schools. For good or for ill, we had come to Uganda. One family can't answer for all

the evils that religion has wrought upon the world, nor can it take credit for any mercies. The only certainty about our arrival was its foolishness. Years later, my mother would write in a mission talk: *If we had known enough about Uganda to make an intelligent decision, we probably wouldn't have gone.*

How my parents managed to remain ignorant, I'm not certain. When our plane touched down at the Entebbe airport, the United States had already closed its embassy, moved its ambassadors to Kenya, pulled out the Peace Corps (a volunteer had been shot and killed at an army checkpoint), and advised U.S. citizens against travel to Uganda. Idi Amin had evicted (or "booted out," as he said) sixty thousand ethnic Indians and Pakistanis, stripping them of everything they owned. He had accused fifty-five Catholic missionaries of smuggling weapons. They were lucky to only be expelled. Shopkeepers accused of price gouging were executed. People were disappearing. And Idi Amin had declared himself President for Life. In 1975, the year my parents received their invitation to serve in Uganda, the country's Finance Minister escaped to England, saying, "To live in Uganda today is hell."

The taxi stopped at the market, and together my father and the driver pulled our suitcases out of the trunk and lined them up on the street. "Watch them," my father told my mother. "They'll walk off if you're not watching."

My mother sat on a white hardback and set me on her lap, holding me to her with one hand, the other gripping the strap of her carry-on. "Don't wander off," she called to Sonja. "Come and wait here."

My mother had never lived anywhere hotter than Michigan, though she had visited California, Hawaii, and Florida. She was used to poverty, but not the tropical scent of it. The air of Kampala was heavy with smells: over-ripe fruit, burning rubber, the absence of soap. Flies landed on our arms and faces, their feet tickling our skin. My arms shot up in protest. The flies lifted, circled our heads, and landed again in the same moist places. A few children had gathered. We would have been a peculiar sight anyway, a bulky circle of suitcases and bewilderment, but with the exodus of expatriates, our existence was even more extraordinary. A boy bolted forward and touched Sonja's arm, then ran back, giggling. Other children held out their hands. "Hello, mzungu. Hello. How are you? Give me money."

What was a mzungu if not wealthy?

My mother placed both palms out, revealing their emptiness. "Do you have money?" she asked my father.

"If you start giving money, we'll be mobbed," my father replied.

My mother sat on a suitcase surrounded by children who were as beautiful and as curious as her own. Of their clothes, she would later write *one wouldn't even use them for rags, and many of the trousers have holes where it counts*. She would soon learn that Ugandans placed a point of pride on dressing smart and were appalled that Americans, who could afford better, dressed like hippies. She would learn that most Ugandans earned fifteen cents an hour, and clothing here was more expensive than in the States. She would learn that the stores were mainly empty, that a soldier would kill for a piece of soap, and that soap was, in fact, the perfect bribe. She would learn how to bribe and how to sweet-talk her way out of trouble. She would learn how to move through this city on her own, how to sell items in one place and purchase airline tickets in another. But no matter how much she learned, she would always be aware of the color of her skin, of its otherness. It was her passport as much as anything else.

The children darted forward in ones and twos, laughing. How could anyone be as drained of pigment as we were? They touched our skin and held tentative fingers toward our hair. Their hands were fleeting, like hummingbirds. Fingers grazed our bodies and then shot back to the bodies they had come from. The children stared at us, and Sonja and I stared back.

The other missionaries were visible from a distance, and my mother watched them for a long time as they approached. They moved easily down the road and did not seem to notice how they were noticed. Each person turned as the couple passed. They walked up to my parents, smiling. "Jambo," they said, shaking my mother's hand. "You are welcome, as they say in Uganda." The couple was tall and blond and friendly, and during the drive to Bugema, they took pleasure in trying to shock my mother, their voices overlapping: "Idi Amin. What a madman! He'll kill us all yet. He's certainly killed enough Ugandans, but don't say that to anyone here, it'll get you killed. He's crazy, all right. He was offering aid to America. He must have sent it, too, because there was nothing in the stores. Nothing! And everyone sitting around selling their nothing. What else are you going to do? I hope you brought lots of food with you. Or ate well on the plane. You've got to smuggle in flour if you want any without bugs, and you can only buy the buggy flour from a VIP store, strictly for expats. Of course, we all eat bugs here. We enjoy a good bug now and then, don't we? Good protein. Good for the vegetarian diet. Some insects actually are for eating. Termites are

edible. Did you know that? You just pull off the wings. No, we haven't tried them. We're not that hungry yet. Who knows, maybe next month."

My mother was more amused than anything. They expected her to be horrified, and their expectation was bracing. Besides, she was certain they were exaggerating. If the Adventist church was still sending missionaries, Uganda must be reasonably safe, food must be reasonably available. She smiled as if she couldn't wait to eat a termite, as if she had come for that very reason.

"It can't be all bad," my mother said. She had been to the market and had been dazzled by the fruit. There were pineapples, passion fruit, paw paws, and bananas. So many bananas. She hadn't known so many varieties existed. She had bought a bit of everything and couldn't imagine needing anything else. She gestured to her bag. "There's something to buy."

The wife turned to my mother. "The fruit *is* lovely. But you'll see, there isn't much else, and the political situation, well, it's pretty awful."

The trip to Bugema was at least an hour's journey on the road, which began paved and gave way shortly to dirt. The earth was red, and it rose up from the road and clung redly to the windows, and behind the van, a cloud of maroon hung in the air before returning to the road and to the grass beside the road. The lane was narrow, and when cars approached from the opposite direction, the smaller vehicles had to pull to the side. Bicycles and pedestrians traveled at their own peril. "The road to Jericho," the missionaries called it after the carjackings began.

ABOVE: Our family at the airport. BELOW: My family at the equator in Uganda.



We passed grove after grove of banana plants. A cluster of trees stood outside every home. Bananas could be boiled, steamed, fried, mashed, made into beer, or eaten raw. The word *matoke* means both banana and food. Through the shredded leaves, great clusters hung down from stems as solid as a leg. When the fruit was harvested, the stalk was cut with a panga, and the whole bunch, weighing as much as a goat, was dropped in a corner of the kitchen.

The homes were made either with cinderblocks or earth and were roofed with corrugated metal or straw. The kitchens, my mother would later learn, were usually separate, a hut in the back where women squatted beside a fire and where smoke was a second ingredient. Cooked on a stove, *matoke* could taste bland.

Sonja and I closed our eyes against the adult voices. We weren't jetlagged. There was only an hour's time difference between Finland and Uganda, between this land of lakes and trees and that land of lakes and trees. But we were tired from rising early, our day beginning with a drive into Helsinki, the checking-in of luggage, the moving from plane to plane, the whine of wheels before liftoff, the jolt of wheels upon landing, and then, finally, Uganda. We were soothed by this rhythm of tires against dirt, and even the bumps couldn't wake us.

Later, we would come to know this road and to love it. We would sit in the backseat of our Ford station wagon, our bodies angled toward opposite windows.

"I recognize that chicken," I would say.

"I recognize that man on the bicycle," Sonja would respond.

It was a joke, this game, as if the same chicken and the same man and the same bicycle waited along this road, waited for us to return. When we came home after a long absence, we would set our happiness to song. We would commemorate what we were returning to in a long and loving litany—our friends, our cats, our dog, our chickens, our house, our hallway, and even

our guava tree, the one I had named Bertha. We added verses and changed the tune, laughing at our own cleverness. We played with the words, stretching out the vowels. But the chorus was always the same: *We will soon be home. We will soon be home.*

It was late when we finally arrived at the house on the hill. Sonja and I were sleeping, our heads lolled back on vinyl seats. "Here it is," my father said. "What do you think?" He carried suitcases to the house. My mother carried children. They waded through grass that hadn't been slashed for several weeks. The house sat at the top of a hill in a small clearing, encircled by jungle. In the fading light, it was hard to notice the flowers. My mother was left only with the shadows, the buzzing of insects and frogs, the greens that grew steadily darker, and a vervet monkey that scampered from branch to branch, edging for a closer look.

My mother was a woman with many fears: driving, choking on pills, cancer. To that list, she promptly added snakes. Only later would she include Idi Amin and Uganda's "political situation," the delicate phrase missionaries used to refer to the killings. But those early days, our mother's biggest fear was snakes.

The house my mother moved into was so infused with snakes that even for Uganda, it was notable. It was as if Medusa lived in our attic. Students later spoke of a science teacher who lived there, a man who kept snakes on the verandah, their aquariums arranged in stacks. They said he bred mambas, pythons, vipers, and cobras, and when no one was looking, he cooed to them as if they were a room full of guinea pigs. Before the missionary returned home, he carried his collection to the yard, removed each lid, and watched as the snakes rustled in the grass, their pulses disappearing into the jungle. The story passed from year to year, class to class, and like the most vivid legends, it wasn't true. What is true is that there were snakes here, a lush and diverse population, and that they would remain long after we had left.



SARI FORDHAM is a professor, writer, and environmental activist. Her work has appeared in *Best of the Net*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, among others. Her memoir *Wait for God to Notice* was a finalist for The Sarton Award for Women's Literature.