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Bernard Ashley

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THE SUNDAY NEWS MAGAZINE

MY WEEK

56. *Ben Maddox – TV journalist*

There's no routine week for someone in my job. It all depends what's happening in the world, and what assignments I get given by Kath Lewis, my boss at Zephon TV.

Most days, when I'm not 'on the road', I'm in our South Bank office for the daily news conference at nine thirty. I'm among the youngest there (25) so I might get one of the more active assignments (I'm into sports big time, and often cycle to work from my flat in Hackney). I won't have read all the papers but I'll have listened to 'Today' and 'Zephon Radio News' on my Bluetooth radio.

Then it's out and about! But Kath Lewis likes initiative, so if I've spotted a potential story myself I might get a crack at it – till I'm pulled off when it's not getting anywhere.

Evenings – when I'm at home and not in the studio – are going to the gym twice a week, catching a football match on TV or, better

still, at one of the London clubs – or washing up after a great meal cooked by my partner Meera, who has the ability to use every pan and utensil in the kitchen, even for baked beans on toast. Then I catch up on newspapers and magazines, watch our own transmissions – if I'm not involved in them – or listen to some jazz.

No, all of that last bit was lies, the sort of stuff you'd expect to read – actually I sleep a lot or slouch around or read old Captain Marvel comics.

I still get letters about the Magayanan kidnapping of the last Home Secretary's daughter. But I was just lucky – in the right place at the right time – if I'm modest. If I'm being big-headed, I sniffed that story out myself, pursued it, and saved a couple of lives.

Brash? Doesn't that go with the job?

(Ben Maddox was talking to Adèle Heath)

M4 HEADING WEST

– The sub's on the ball again, going like a Red Fire down the left. Bill – this back four looks as scared as antelope of what he's going to do – and he's doing it!

Yes! It's a sweet ball, going over, head height – and perfect into the path of number eight – and...phew! Wow! He's hit it first crack! It's a goal! That bony forehead! Keeper no chance! A great goal! Who's the number eight?

– Charlie Akrofi!

– Charlie Akrofi's scored! But it's the young sub's goal, all the way! They're shouting for Akrofi in the stands, but some young genius made that goal. What's his name?

– Hang on, he's wearing twenty-three on his back...

– We'll find it! Number twenty-three, not been on the pitch long...

Ben Maddox had thumbed the tuner of his world-band radio to the country he was heading for and hit on this crackly football commentary from the Lansanan Premiership – ideal listening for the mood he was in, because it didn't carry the vibes that music does. And with

his radio cutting out the need for talk with the other passenger sitting in the back of the taxi, he could go on with the thinking that had to be done.

– *It's all over now, Bill, must be, sure! Two games into the new season and it's six points, top of the table, for Sikakoko Arsenal. Eh?*

– *True words! Hear that shoutin' an' jubilation!*

– *How long 'fore the whistle blows?*

– *Minutes. Minutes only. And we've seen something very special in this stadium here today...*

– *Praise God, we have!*

– *...a rare new talent coming up!*

The taxi took the DEPARTURES lane under the Terminal Four sign, and Ben Maddox pulled the phones from his ears, switched off the radio, and stowed it in his hold-all.

'Here y'are, gents,' the cabbie said, and Ben paid him, asking for a receipt – never forgotten these days; journalists' expenses are as crucial to the job as shorthand.

The doors to the terminal swung open, and now Ben and his cameraman were breathing international air in the departures lounge, and both of them suddenly relishing the excitement of heading off somewhere on a story.

Joyce Avoka's story -

written up by R. A. – part 1

Joyce Avoka's home was as poor as Lansana could offer. A few kilometres south of Sikakoko Township, up in the Yoori region, it was a roadside dwelling built partly of breeze, partly of mud, crouching under a rusting roof that flapped its tin wings whenever the wind blew. Fourteen years old, she had never been to school, but spent her days at the roadside selling whatever her family could gather together. In good times it would be food for the truck drivers who passed – bananas, plantains, a few melons, perhaps a young deer if her father's trap had worked – standing there under the palm fronds from sunrise to sunset. In bad times it would be fallen trunks of wood that she had herself dragged from the trees, for which others around might offer an egg or two to save them doing their own foraging. At night she slept as deep as death, exhausted – and growing old at twice the speed of most others in the world.

Tonight, it was raining. In the wet north east of Lansana the West African rains came and went in hard, frequent, spiteful bursts, and even if Joyce had been awake, she'd have heard nothing scary above the sounds of the downpour in her corner of the children's sleeping room.

So she didn't hear the men coming. Muffled not only by the rain, but by the creak and the strain and the dinning of the roof, the men lifted the scrappy mosquito screen aside and slithered through the high, small window like snakes, two of them – while other men were doing the same at other huts along this poverty-stricken part of the Sikakoko road.

They were child snatchers. Seeking children – to fight for the prophet Yusa and the Yoori tribal cause.

Joyce awoke suddenly in the rough arms of a different smell. These arms didn't belong to a family body; she was assaulted by the odour of a stranger, spiced by fear and action. A sweating hand was clamped over her mouth as she was grabbed from her place on the floor. She kicked, bit, and tried to scream as the little kids started to stir – but nothing could stop her from being carried like a log out through the doors and into the rain.

She heard screams and shouts as children from other huts were carried and pushed across the slippery mud in its funnelling to the road, where an open flatbed truck was revving in the roadside torrent.

'You talk – we come back and kill you!' And a high male scream was heard as a machete taught a father the lesson.

'Yusa! Yoori! Yusa fights for liberation!'

The raid was swift, cruel, and efficient. Within five minutes of the first waking, Joyce was being sat upon among a handful of other squirming children, all slithering in the truck like a boat-catch of fish as it bounced off north along the road. And Joyce knew as she lay there, her nose bleeding from the blow as she'd been thrown into the truck, that the Yoori Red Fires had at last hit their huts. Her family's fear that one day it would be their turn to be taken had come true. Like it or not, Joyce Avoka had been kidnapped for a 'soldier ant'.

THIS IS AN E-TICKET

KEEP IT SAFE.

Travel Plans for Benjamin Maddox,
Johan Aaranovitch
Trip Locator MQWNST7C

Charter

Begin: ***11 Apr***
Confirmation: ***Confirmed***
Number of Persons in Party: ***2***
Date: Friday 15 April
Flight: ***BA00321***
Airline: ***British Airways***
Depart: ***14:10***
Airport: ***London Heathrow***

Terminal 4

United Kingdom

Arrive: ***19.55***
Airport: ***Lansana Atlantic, Lansana***
Aircraft: ***Boeing 767-3000/300ER***
Seat: ***19-D/E***
Mileage: ***3290***
Class: ***Coach***
Travel time: ***6.45***
Meal: ***Yes***
Stopovers: ***0***

With his e-ticket in his hand and doubt in his head – Ben still couldn't quite trust a sheet of paper from his own office printer to carry him all the way to Lansana and back – he pushed his hold-all along in the check-in queue for BA flight 321. But his companion Jonny Aaranovich seemed much more relaxed about whether or not they'd get onto the flight: his own sweat was for the camera equipment that he hadn't trusted to the hold.

'Stay in bed, I might as well – my camera landing at Kotoka International in Ghana and me in Lansana Atlantic,' he'd muttered to Ben, 'so it's coming with me.' Now he lugged and dumped the steel case as the queue moved forward, and Ben thought again how convenient pens and a palmtop were compared with camera equipment – even the 'lightweight' professional stuff issued by Zephon TV. It was like the difference between a piccolo player and a harpist on an orchestra tour.

But that was thinking 'awkward', not 'danger'; there was no difference between them otherwise. When TV reporters and their crews go abroad, they all share the same risks of being kidnapped or wounded or killed, the same chances of not getting to use their return tickets, self-printed or not. Newsmen and women in turbulent countries are like front-line troops when it comes to being where the action is. Not that where Ben and Jonny were going was a turbulent country, not yet, not unless they went out of their way looking for trouble.

There had been scents in the air, though; and one of them had been a small piece tucked into page four of a Sunday newspaper. It had alerted Ben's boss, Kath Lewis, to what might be coming up. Page four, a left-hand page, never has the reader impact of pages three or five. The eye

always goes to the right-hand side first – and it certainly hasn't got the grab of the front page – so it was always a good place to go trawling for the news that other people might not be picking up. As Ben knew well, all news organisations – radio, TV and newspaper – have their own strings of local correspondents in various countries; and the international news agencies like Reuters and UIP fill the gaps in many news editors' schedules; therefore most good stories, once broken, get picked up quickly by everyone. So to be there first, to get the scoop, to transmit one news bulletin ahead of the rest, is to clock up viewing figures – and be at the top. But what might lie behind the urgent headlines could be weeks and months of investigating a story that isn't a story – until it breaks. And this was Ben Maddox territory. This was where Kath Lewis was trying to make him special.

DEATH

IN THE RAINS

The moderate Yoori negotiator in Lansana, Mbidi Renula has been reported killed in a road accident, heading north through a tropical storm. He was returning to the northern Yoori District from a visit to the capital of Lansana, Johnstown, on the Atlantic coast.

The Yoori people of Lansana have long sought independence for their traditional homeland, the mountainous region north east of the Ade river, allying themselves with the predominantly Yoori country Kutuliza which lies across the Lansana border. If they were to fly the flag of any country it would be Kutuliza's.

Details of the accident are scant. The road is notoriously potholed and poorly drained, but the carriageway is wide, and the chances of a four-wheel drive vehicle leaving it and crashing into a tree, as has been reported, are remote, even in a flash flood.

Lansanan government sources have not released details of the meeting that Mbidi Renula had with Dr Obed Abu, the president of Lansana.

UIP local sources

ZEPHON TELEVISION – South Bank Studios

Kath Lewis had called Ben into her office on the Monday morning.

'See this?' she asked.

As if he had! He and his partner Meera had celebrated their second year together with an April weekend in Paris, Eurostar style, and he still hadn't sneezed the chestnut pollen out of his system.

He took the cutting from his boss and read it while she talked at him, fast. 'He was moderate, that man. The Yoori have got lots worse than him – hardline extremists who want independence, like the Tamil Tigers do in Sri Lanka. If he was trying to do some deal with the president, then this accident puts the kibosh on that.' She looked at Ben for a reaction. He sneezed. But he wasn't a messy sneezer. With some people you had to look away while they tidied up a nose job. Ben was as smooth as his television appearance; a quick apology, a no-nonsense blow and polish, and it was back to full attention from those hazel eyes. At the same time, a sneeze and its follow-up buys seconds; a longish cough a few more. Ben coughed. *What did he know about the Yoori of Lansana?* They were an old African tribe with a fierce reputation, not much more than that. *What did he know about Lansana?* It was a Christian country, with a predominant Lansan tribe, and a Yoori population in the north, and that was all.

'Okay, you know nothing!' Kath Lewis cut off his apology for the cough. People sometimes forgot that she'd grown up through television journalism the practical way; she knew all the tricks. 'Well, they want independence, the Yoori, their own state, form an alliance with Kutuliza.

Their tribal lands are where the rains fall heavy on the mountains, where the Ade Dam is, and the turbines that give Lansana its electricity. So, if you're Lansana, no nuclear power, depending on hydro-electricity, are you going to grant them independence, give it away?'

'Not unless they make me an offer I can't refuse.'

'Do you know the name for the Yoori extremist army?'

Ben shook his head.

'"Red Fire" – a vicious breed of soldier ants.'

He hadn't been asked to sit, and the weekend had been strenuous; travel and a big disappointment often are. 'Is this all off the internet?' he asked, leaning on a nearby table.

Kath Lewis ignored his rudeness. 'Some of it,' she said. 'Read this. It's off our own website.' She scooped up a printed sheet of A4 from the top of her in-tray.

Ben took the sheet and read it quickly.

ZEPHON NEWS

Fact File

Yoori Red Fires: A fearsome force from the late 1980s the Yoori Red Fires of North East District Lansana have been developed into a formidable fighting force involved in guerrilla attacks against the Lansanan armed forces, as well as on political targets. Deaths are thought to be in their thousands, although statistics aren't available

The Red Fires are terrorists drawn from the high, wet, mountainous north east, close to the border with Kutuliza, the predominantly Yoori country lying to the north. Some say that they operate out of Kutuliza, but this is denied by the Kutulizan government, which publicly distances itself from the terrorist force.

With weapons thought to be supplied from a foreign source, and with captured quantities of arms from the Lansana security forces, the Red Fires receive rigorous military training and a Yoori idealogical makeover ('brainwashing').

Boys (and some girls) as young as 14 are trained in special mountain camps - and with their fathers, brothers and cousins form a fighting force known as 'Red Fire soldier ants' who use artillery, surface-to-air missiles, and rocket launchers. Whole villages and townships in the north of Lansana are attacked in the cause of Yoori independence. Red Fire units have been accused of hacking to death women and children in predominantly Lansan tribal villages.

Kath Lewis talked on as Ben read. 'A young Yoori once watched one colony of ants fighting and defeating another colony of ants. He asked an elder how they had won, and the reply was, "By organising in bands and showing no mercy." And that was what the young man did with his enemies, his name was Yoor, and he became the first Yoori king and ruler of the region...'

Ben sneezed again.

'Are you allergic to something?' Kath asked.

'April in Paris,' he smiled. 'But I brought you a bottle of claret.'

'Well, you're getting out there. Lansana, not Paris. This story– ' she took the cutting back from Ben, left him with the internet fact sheet '–is going to kick off in a few weeks, because the hardline Yoori don't want a truce, they want a bloody independence, so they can link up with Kutuliza in the north. That's tribal. It's also economic – Kutuliza wants some of that water.'

'Are our viewers going to be much interested in that?' Ben asked, genuinely doubting Kath's focus this morning. 'We've got hose-pipe bans of our own...'

She blinked at him, three long, slow blinks that said, *shut up, you know nothing, and trust me, upstart!* 'If push goes to shove, goes to open and bloody civil war, Africa will have another Angola, Zaire, Sudan on its hands. And we'll have refugees and asylum seekers in our sympathetic cities the way we had them from Somalia, and British troops sent out as part of the UN being blown up on their streets – that'll interest our viewers!'

Ben blinked himself. He understood. Like a good chess player, Kath Lewis could see several moves ahead.

Lansana might well be the next big international story.

'And there's the human interest. Kids are human interest, the "Aaaah!" factor. On their recruiting raids for these young soldier ants, the Red Fire steal kids out of their beds and take them off to training camps in the mountains. Their parents never see them again.' She looked at Ben with an eyebrow raised, saying, *Story, or what?* 'And now someone's made cold meat of this Yoori pacifier so it's all going to boil up to fever pitch...'

'To mix a few metaphors,' Ben said.

'Get lost!' Kath told him. 'And bring that claret in before you book your air tickets.'

But Ben didn't go. He smiled his smile at her, the camera-easy smile – only spoiled by another hefty sneeze, which he got out of the way quickly. 'Why don't I know much about this?' he asked. 'Why isn't this conflict for independence as well known as the Tamil Tigers?'

'The boy's bright after all.' Kath got up. She went to her world map on the wall, pointed to Lansana in West Africa, the north east corner of it coloured dark with high mountains. 'Here's the only water in the country – but plenty of it – and they can't afford to pay for oil for all their energy needs. Capitalising on it, Lansana use their hydro-electric plant for their own energy, and – significantly – they sell it to countries around. So they can't let the Yoori have those mountains. But they don't want push to come to shove, they prefer to sit on it, or else their water customers will go looking for supplies elsewhere.'

Ben nodded. Now he really understood. 'And hence they've got to keep Yoori independence off the agenda – why their government's soft pedalling on trouble brewing in the north, and sitting on some of the atrocities.'

'Is my mixed metaphor guess.' Kath swung round at him, caught him by surprise, he was standing too close.

'Sorry!' They both backed off.

'So why does a moderate Yoori negotiator get killed?' Ben asked. 'The government doesn't want him out of the way. Is it his own hardliners...?'

'That, Benjamin Maddox, is why Zephon TV employs investigative reporters. Who did it? Which side?' She looked knowingly at him. 'Or, how many sides are there?'

Ben nodded. 'I'll book the tickets,' he said. 'Can Jonny Aaranovitch come?' Jonny was the best cameraman at the station and he and Ben had hit it off over the Magayanan political kidnap affair; another trip with him would be great.

Kath Lewis looked at her schedule on the wall. 'Sure, Jonny's okay; he's back from his kibbutz on Monday.'

'His Israeli bolthole. I know, that's why I asked.'

'In fact,' she made it sound as if she genuinely had just thought of this, 'I want this low key, no big production number, so just the two of you, sound on the camera – and Jonny can do the editing, be your producer. He knows what's what.'

'How long?' Ben asked. Television was a short fuse business; it was the magazines and newspapers that let a long cord of cordite smoulder for a story.

'Get an open return. I'm backing my hunch on this one. Things could move fast now this matey's dead, but you might have to be patient. I'll give it a fortnight, could be three weeks...'

Ben's eyebrows of surprise were being overworked this morning. With a pro's nod he went, all his sneezing done; the scent of adventure in his nostrils seeming to have seen to that. Paris was in the past.

SIKAKOKO TOWNSHIP, LANSANA

Sixteen year old Mujiba Kalala sat on the edge of his bed with a ballpoint and a notebook. An active boy, a promising footballer on the books of an Lansanan premiership club, he could also be studious and reflective. And right now his mind was in turmoil as to where his life should take him. But there was no one with whom he could share his dilemma; he was no longer at school with a best friend, and the other apprentices at the club only ever wanted to talk about girls and football. His father was part of the problem – if problem it was – so he couldn't talk to his parents. Therefore he did what a bright teenager did with a mental tussle. He wrote it out – a sort of brainstorm – in the hope that seeing things on paper would help...

THE DILIGENT STUDENT NOTEBOOK

THESE PAGES BELONG TO MUJIBA KALALA, DEVOTED SON OF HIS FATHER, NOKONGOLO KALALA, OBEDIENT SERVANT OF THE LORD GOD AND OF YUSA, HIS PRIESTS AND ANGELS, WORDS OFFERED NOT FOR PRIDE BUT FOR HELP TO HAVE ABUNDANT WISDOM FOR UNDERSTANDING MYSELF

I try to know what is happening inside me. It is a strong body I have, with thanks to sweet Jesus and to Yusa and my ancestors, but it is split into two parts, through the heart, through the head. My arms and my legs pull me in these two directions, and

how can both ways be right? How can I best serve my father, my mother, eternal Jesus, the revered prophet Yusa, and myself? I have been given a special gift. I am different from many other boys, thanks to the genes of my ancestors. I play my football at a high level. I can say this not as pride but as fact. I am not clever to have this gift, I am lucky, so my head is not big about it. People say this gift can take me in a direction which will change everything for my family, but how do I know if these people are saying the truth? But I do know the truth of my father's strong priest-like love for the prophet Yusa and our Yoori people. This he would like me to have, and I love him. But I love my football, too. Can I serve both, and do justice to both? What is the right thing to do? I ask these pages. In writing them I seek God's mercy and Yusa's wisdom in sending an answer.