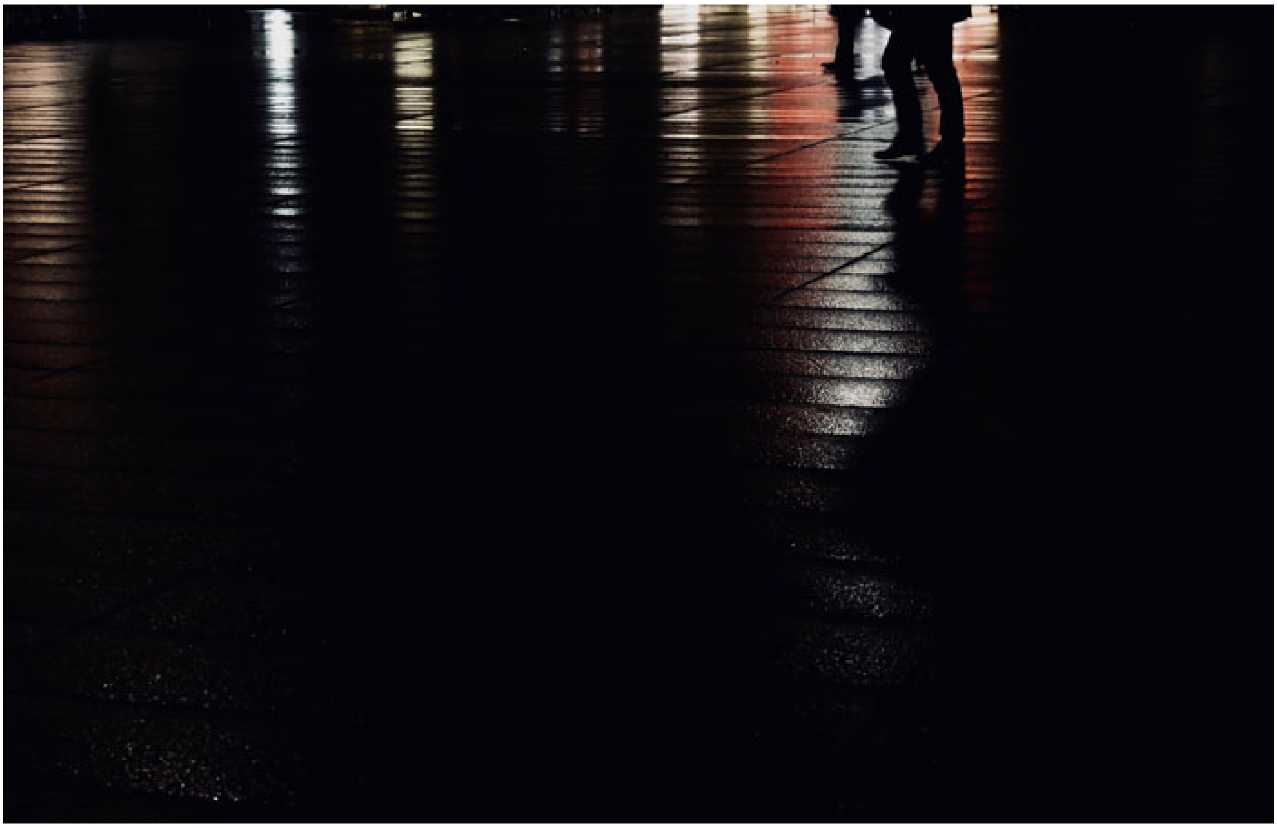
SHORT STORY

Mohammed Odhiambo Oloo

by Wambui Waldhauser



"City Lights" by Saam (Ahmed Osama)

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Every Sunday, Ned did something with all his three children so that his wife could have a few hours to herself. He always did something physically engaging with them, perhaps a long walk to the playground, to make them tired enough for their nap after lunch. This Sunday was to be like all of Ned's Sundays in recent years except for one thing: He had to fit in dropping by the school to print out and distribute the students’ exercise for Monday’s English lesson somewhere between his jog and taking the children off his wife’s hands.

He jogged along the Dornbirner Ach, at first facing the distant Karren Mountain, which was already capped by the first winter snow. The Ach, a wide stream strewn with rocks, flowed sluggishly to his left on its way to Lake Constance. The temperatures had fallen below zero the night before and there were thin sheets of silvery, translucent ice floating on the water. The air was icy too, stinging as he forced it down with quick, short breaths. There were several footbridges across the stream and he crossed the last one just before the motorist’s bridge on Stadtstrasse to jog back towards the woods. On his way he passed early joggers like him and a few dog walkers. Some of the walkers and joggers greeted him with a “Servus” in the local dialect or offered a friendly smile. He had still not quite gotten used to strangers greeting him. Vienna, where he and his family had lived up until eight months ago, was too metropolitan for casual greetings from strangers in the street. Nairobi had definitely not been better. It still took him aback — this meeting of a stranger’s eyes and acknowledging them with a greeting. At first, when he had been too late to return an unexpected greeting, he had worried that he was seen as rude. He had returned the greeting quite self-consciously, wondering whether the other person had heard him. Time and habit had made his participation in this provincial ritual easier. He now found himself anticipating the greeting of an oncoming stranger, trying to gauge whether the other person was going to say hi or not before they met and passed each other. Other times, lost in thought, he forgot to observe this curious rural politeness and the voice of a stranger would wake him from his reverie just as he was passing by.

After having grown up in Nairobi and having lived in Vienna, Dornbirn had an intimacy to it that he found both endearing and disconcerting. One of his neighbours, for example, worked at his eldest daughter's kindergarten. Özlem, his wife, rarely did the drop offs and the pick-ups and so it was to Ned that the neighbour had made known the fact that they were neighbours and that she remembered Özlem from their school days. Her enthusiasm suggested that something was expected of him in the way of friendliness but he had been unsure exactly what it was or how to go about it. He had nodded and smiled and had often thought that he would initiate small talk when dropping off or picking up his daughter but, in those moments, he was utterly at a loss for words and could only manage a smile and a “thank you.”

Despite hearing and reading about Vorarlberg's conservativeness, he was yet to be confronted by outright unfriendliness in his new home. Özlem, who had been born in the province, had missed her family desperately while living in Vienna. She had been planning on going back to Vorarlberg after graduating from medical school in Vienna before they met. It was a whirlwind romance and she unexpectedly fell pregnant after six months of living together. Özlem had been raised by progressive Moslem Turkish-Austrian parents, who allowed their daughters to leave their heads uncovered among other liberties that were uncommon in their community. Still, some cultural ideals ran too deep. In Özlem's world, a child belonged in a marriage. Though Ned, having grown up on the streets of Nairobi, had never had a family in the traditional sense, popular Kenyan moral and cultural ideals, especially those pertaining to marriage and children, had managed to instill themselves in him. And so, when one day, as he was labouring over a German grammar exercise in the kitchen, Özlem had interrupted him, her face white with shock and her hand clutching the stick of a pregnancy test, he had proceeded to propose and therewith seal both of their fates. They were married two months later in a loud, colourful wedding that could have easily rivalled its equally loud and colourful counterpart in Kenya. His quick acceptance into the Muslim Sezgin family could be attributed to Özlem and her being the pride of a large extended family as a doctor, and the fact that his name was not actually Ned but Mohammed Odhiambo Oloo.

Ned had been Moha, short for Mohammed, in Nairobi. He became a legend there the only way legends were made in a place whose currency could only be brute force and God given brains. To give credit where credit was due, it was his older brother who paved a legendary path for him. His older brother was the brute force and Moha provided the brains. Moha had always been aware of his shortcomings and so, when he fell short in brute force, he compensated by pretending to have it from keenly watching his brother. Both boys had always been a couple of heads taller than their agemates. It was, however, not just their mere size that instinctively inspired fear and respect in the streets. It was the way they carried themselves. How they occupied space. At first, it was Ned's older brother who planned their food hunts. It, however, became apparent that Ned was more gifted in the planning bit. And there was something else: When Ned talked, no one suspected he had rolled out of bed under the Odeon flyover bridge that morning. His words and the way they rolled off his tongue were more at home on Standard Street or in a café on Moi Avenue. In downtown Nairobi, this elegance in speech was foreign and the too shiny words sat uneasily with the homeless, who did not quite know whether to distrust him or whether they could benefit from being associated with him.

Moha had always been a reader. He read scraps of dirty newspapers and torn magazines when the other boys were chewing miraa or, when times were hard, sniffing glue to fill the hollowness of hunger. Once in a while he got lucky and found a semblance of a book, tattered and dirty in one of the garbage pits, and, if he was lucky and there was still enough legible print on it, he would sit curled up with it in an alleyway far from the city security guards. From reading, he knew how to arrange words in a sentence and make them sound almost like they did on the small radio that his brother carried under his armpit. When he was dressed in a half decent way, which was not too hard once they figured out how to swipe second hand clothes from overflowing stalls in the Gikomba market, Moha could speak to a passer-by with big words and impress them enough to get a few shillings. He hated it though, the begging or asking part as his brother preferred to call it. When he did, he made sure to stand straight in defiance of something in him that made him want to hide or make himself small, his still boyish shoulders pulled up and back and his eyes never leaving the strangers. He had watched what happened when someone made themselves small, saying “mkubwa tafadhali” – boss please – in a performance of servitude. The mkubwas would hurry off disgusted and those who gave would do so with pitiful looks. Moha preferred pretending he was one of them – that he woke up like a normal citizen from a normal bed that was inside a normal room with a normal door – though his intentions were blatantly clear. It felt more like a business transaction when he struck up a conversation and, at the end of it, a coin or a note was extended. His subjects varied from the state of traffic to changing weather and politics. Pretending came easily then and he would sometimes get carried away and forget that their world was not his world.

One evening, there was a skirmish with the police, one of those political demos that always turned ugly at some point. Moha was told that his brother had received blow after blow from a police baton until he lay unmoving on the ground. It was then that he inherited his brother's chiefdom on the streets.

No one called him Moha now. Or Mohammed. At first, when Wolfgang, the man who had helped him settle in Austria, had suggested changing his name, Ned had been confused. Even after Wolfgang had explained — somewhat shamefacedly — that being black and named Mohammed in Vienna came with a certain kind of baggage, Ned tried to understand but could not come to terms with dropping his name. He was angry at being asked to and, for some time, he insisted on being called Mohammed, especially after Wolfgang and others took to calling him Otiambo or worse Osiambo for Odhiambo. That was before the attack in Vienna’s Inner City. It was exactly 24 hours after the attack that Özlem, heavily pregnant with their second child, had responded to an insistent knocking on the door to find the police requesting to speak with her husband. They were having dinner and he was helping the youngest coil long spaghetti on her fork like she had seen him do. The police said they would only be asking routine questions and he gave the girls and his wife, who were standing confused by the door, what he hoped was a convincing smile before being led by the police out into the street. At the police station, he worked hard to swallow his fear. He tried to remind himself that the police here were different from the Kenyan police: They wore a different uniform; the police station was much quieter than the Kenyan ones; it was cleaner, more organised. His mind though seemed to regard these differences as trivial and was bent on reliving past experiences.

After his brother's death, the police became objects of irrational, dreadful fear. Before his brother's death, the police had been to Moha more of a nuisance than an active threat. They showed up when there were public demonstrations, teargassed and water-cannoned protesters and generally showed them who the boss was before disappearing as quickly as they had appeared. The few chest-thumping protesters who were imprudent enough to get into a fight of egos with them were unceremoniously thrown in the back of police jeeps and driven away to police cells. Moha knew his way around the police. His interactions with them were almost by instinct. He did not have to think; there was only one way to interact with the police and that was to avoid them. In those first few weeks when he was grieving the only living relative that he had ever known, he kept visualising how his brother had died. In his head, he played and replayed a film of his brother's death, at times adding and subtracting details from it. Sometimes he would simply watch and relive it as a form of punishment to himself for being alive. His imagination had always been powerful. On evenings when he and his brother's crew sat together, passing from hand to hand tiny, smoking stubs of vela, the local cannabis, and listening to the thrum of Nairobi city slowing down, he told them stories he had read. When he had all their attention, when everyone was so deeply enthralled in the story-telling that the smoking stub hovered a few seconds in the air before the next person in the circle was jolted back to reality and snapped it away, then Moha would not be so much telling a story as giving commentary to a film playing in his head. He lived in two worlds: the physical one where he walked and breathed, and the other world as colourful and real but only seen by him. After they had told him to stop looking for his brother, that they had seen his body on Haile Selassie Avenue and watched the Kanju Askaris pick him up and toss him in with the other bodies at the back of their pick-up, the film of his brother dying started playing and replaying in his head. Moha had not seen it happen, but his friends had reported it to him as best as they could. His mind went back to everything he had ever witnessed and chose images, copied and pasted them in a sequence that became so real to Moha that, had he chosen to tell of his brother's last minutes, lying on the tarmac of Haile Selassie Avenue under the rising and falling of a police officer's club, no one would have doubted the authenticity of his account. After that, Moha had the irrational fear that he was being hunted by the police. Whereas, before his brother's death, he had avoided police as you would avoid a storm or an oncoming vehicle, now he felt like he was a magnet and, should the police come too close, he was bound to be pulled into a violent embrace with them. Changing continents had not helped. Seeing a police-marked car in Vienna or merely walking past a police station was sufficient to increase his pulse. He would try to mask his anxiety, convinced that, should the police sense his fear, they would be upon him in seconds.

At the police station, he was led into a bare room and sat separated from two policemen, who were trying to seem friendly — Would he like a glass of water? No? Perhaps a coffee? — by a table of light brown wood. He sat upright, his hands underneath the table clasped between his knees and wearing what he hoped was a calm if questioning expression. He kept his eyes on the police officers' faces and tried to avoid looking at the weapons they both wore on their hips. His heart, however, would not slow down and, from time to time, he had to clasp his hands tighter to stop them from shaking. Ned discovered that he had been playing football with the brother of one of the case's suspects. He was questioned for an hour, which to him felt much longer. Upon getting home, he called his football team captain, a biology teacher with whom he had once shared an apartment in their student days. According to his captain, he was the only team member who had personally been questioned apart from the team captain, who had received a mere telephone call. From then on, Moha changed his name to Ned Odhiambo Oloo.

On this early winter morning, after his jog and a quick shower at home, Ned rode his bike to the high school where he taught English. Schools had always been a magical place for him. When the tides turned in his favour and he moved from living on the streets to living in an orphanage in Nairobi, it was in the new school that he truly felt at home. He quickly proved to be a bright and studious student, often reading ahead of his class. For the first time, he felt seen and allowed to dream. Schools still gave him a sense of wonder and it was here, among his students, that he felt most alive with purpose. He especially took notice of students who had fewer advantages than most and tried to empower them by giving them what had been given to him many years before: a sense of purpose and the permission to dream.

In normal times, he would not have bothered on a weekend. The students would have shared the learning materials. Due to social distancing, however, each student needed to have everything on their desk to avoid huddling together. At the school, he exchanged a quick greeting with a colleague, who had had the same idea and was on her way out, before taking the stairs to the first floor and depositing his bag on his desk in the staff room. He printed and copied the reading materials and exercises before jogging back down the stairs to class 8c, where he distributed the sheets onto the empty desks. He was in a rather good mood after his jog, having done 8 kilometres in just under half an hour, a new record for him. He hummed under his breath an old song from his childhood – Wabiro wabiro mos mos, wabiro koru. Wabiro gi mtokaa, wabiro mos mos, wabiro koru, *We are coming, we are coming, slowly we are coming…* As Ned's mind so often did in recent days, it wandered to what a visit in Kenya with his family would look like. The last time he had been home, their two older children had been one- and two-year-olds. They had been too young to understand much and, it being Özlem's first visit to Kenya, she had been just a little too overwhelmed. He wanted to visit with them again as soon as he could, probably over the summer holidays. That was one of the perks of being a teacher, almost three months of holiday in a lump sum. At the time of the next visit, their youngest boy would have turned one and the older girls would be able to understand much more, he thought. He wanted to take them on a safari, a leisurely one this time and not the hurried and hectic affair they had had to do with last time. Camping in one of those new glamorous places in the Masai Mara, the children would go out of their little minds with excitement. He paused at a desk, a small smile freezing on his face. Outside, sirens had been getting louder and louder. So far, he had ignored them as he had done countless times before. There was a geriatric home on one side of the school and on the other side, in a nearby street, the Stadt Dornbirn Hospital. Sirens could often be heard from here but for some reason they sounded much closer this time.

Ned had finished distributing the last batch of English exercises and had just picked up the next stack for another class when he became aware of a commotion nearby. He registered movement outside the large windows, which he had left slightly opened, and, at the same time, he heard heavy footsteps in the hallway outside the classroom. He was about to head to the door when the windows were thrown open from outside. Bewildered, he watched as men dressed entirely in black combat uniforms climbed in through the window, all the while training heavy machine guns on his chest. Ned's hands flew up above his shoulders without thinking, one hand still clutching a sheaf of papers. Someone was saying something, shouting it harshly. Ned, watching the policeman's lips move as if he was a spectator and not part of the scene, tried to calm his pounding heart, his mind struggling to catch up with what was happening. He swivelled around towards the doorway as more men dressed in the same way entered, all carrying guns trained at him. They took long, slow steps, their bodies slightly bent forward at the hips and their arms extended, holding out their weapons. Several of them were shouting or issuing commands at the same time. Ned could not make out what they were saying. Every single one of them was threatening and, for some reason, the lights had turned too bright, making everything blurry. There was also an odd ringing in his ears and blood was pumping too loudly in his head. Vaguely, he made out the word POLIZEI scrawled across their breasts. His hands went up higher and, as if instinctively searching for comfort, clutched the sheets of papers tighter. After what felt like an eternity, he heard his own voice detached from himself.

“Was? Wie bitte?” He kept repeating the three words until the ringing started to subside and he could make out words above the pounding in his head.

They commanded him to keep his hands where they could see them. Not a problem at all.

They asked who he was. As he gave his three names, the names in his Austrian passport, he thought how strange it sounded. How strange they all sounded, distant and inhuman. They wanted to know what he was doing at the school. They were sceptical, sometimes repeating the same questions over and over.

Who is the school headmaster?

Who is the school caretaker?

He was slowly calming down and started constructing simple sentences, answering all their questions.

They wanted to see his identity documents. Everything was in his bag on his desk upstairs in the staff room, he told them. No, he had none in his pockets.

After what felt like ages, there was a consensus to let him go up to the staffroom and produce the said documents.

The group at the door parted minimally to let him through. He almost lost it again when someone shouted that he should walk slowly, hands above his head where they could see them. No hasty movements.

He wondered what exactly would constitute a hasty movement and under his breath he mumbled to himself “no hasty movement, no hasty movement, no hasty movement…” over and over again. There was a long hall ahead of him and, at the end of it, a flight of stairs to the first floor. He felt them at his back; he felt their guns trained on him and, for a brief moment, he allowed himself to think of his wife at home, waiting for him to return and take the children to the playground. He consciously forced the image from his mind and, trying not to do anything that might be seen as hasty, he slowly lifted his feet, one step at a time. “No hasty movement, no hasty movement…”

The stairs were the hardest. He had always kept himself physically fit but he had just done an eight-kilometre run and he was taking the stairs slowly, too slowly, his shaky hands still above his shoulders and more than ten guns trained at his back. His thigh muscles burned in protest. Once, he almost lost his balance as he tottered at the edge of a step, his arms flailing awkwardly above him. He had to shut out the shouted “No hasty movements!” behind him before he could calm himself down enough to continue.

One of the policemen opened the staffroom door for him. It was an awkward business, taking his wallet out of his bag as slowly as he could. He gave his Ausweis to one of them and the policeman made a great show of reading the identity card on both sides. Then, he made two calls on a mobile phone, slightly turning away from him as he spelled out Ned’s names and gave a series of numbers to the person on the other end. As this went on, Ned looked at their faces for the first time. Some gave a hard stare back as if daring him to do or say something, others seemed engrossed in the one-sided details of the telephone call that was going on while others feigned interest in the empty desks and scattered sheets of paper in the staffroom.

Later, after they had satisfied themselves that he was neither an intruder nor a threat to anyone, it was explained to him — as he weakly leaned against a desk — that a teenage girl had made a call to the police, claiming that she had seen a black, masked intruder at the school.

That evening, Ned felt spent as he sat at the dinner table with his wife and children. He was ill at ease in his skin. The shame he had felt walking out of the school building, as he gave curt answers to the group of people that had gathered outside, expecting to witness more drama than five police cars driving off and a lone black man walking out, still clung to him and he could not shake it off. A feeling at once foreign yet familiar. It was a different kind of shame than what he had felt as a homeless, young person. He had known how to cover the shame of being homeless by owning it and not letting it own him. He knew how to keep it where no one could see it and, in spite of it, he could outwardly stand tall and look people in the eye. This new shame was not in him, it was on him, plastered for all to see and he felt small in its power. He could not own a foreign thing forced on him and he did not know what to do with it. The only thing he knew with certainty was that it would be much more difficult to bear if seen by his wife or, God forbid, by his children.

He told Özlem the whole story when the older children had been put to bed. She was feeding their little boy something gooey and yellow from a bowl while listening to him. She exclaimed and shook her head and asked how they could have dared. When he came to the end and grew quiet, not knowing what to add in the form of commentary, she stood up and gave him an awkward hug, pressing her head into the crook between his neck and shoulder. When she went back to feeding the baby and also grew quiet, her eyes moving between gooey, yellow stuff and the baby’s mouth, he felt the weight of that shame spread and settle between and around them.

Ned left his wife and the baby and went to sit in his small office in the attic. Earlier during dinner, his eldest daughter, having been told an edited version of what had happened, had asked him if the police had apologised. With somewhat of a start he had said, “No, they didn’t.” For several minutes, he sat in his office, staring at a dark computer screen. He then started writing a long letter that he would send to the police disciplinary office the following morning. Later, as he lay beside his wife in bed, he quietly whispered, “We could have a decent life in Kenya. A teacher’s salary and a doctor’s salary… a Turkish doctor’s salary; we could have a decent life.” His wife searched for his hand under the blankets and squeezed it, before laying her head on his chest.