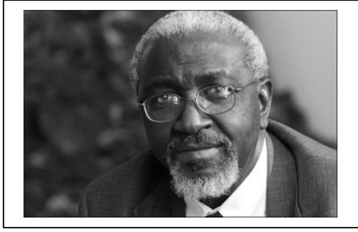

RUNNING WITH LIONS

A Memoir by Pius Kamau

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BOOK EXCERPT

I am like those light bits of nothing that a wind fashions into a ball of dust and grass - or pungu pungu in Swahili – and then spins skyward. Father has come down with tuberculosis, and a result, he lost his railway job. Father went home, but decided that I should remain in Mombasa with my more well-off uncle, Joseph, who promised to pay my school fees. Unfortunately, the next year, my second year of high school, Uncle Joseph decided to marry again – an expensive endeavor. As a result, he could no longer pay my school fees, and I was forced to leave school. Going home to join my family is out of the question because the Mau Mau war is raging. A good Luo friend, Nicholas, and his family help me get a job as a nurse's aide at Coast General Hospital in Mombasa. I have secured a room to rent within walking distance to work. My family is far away in Kikuyu Land as I walk the streets of Mombasa alone, aware the Emergency is underfoot in the country. I have no contact with my family. Communication is an impossibility. There are no phones in Kikuyu Land, and there is no mail service that will deliver there. Even if it was possible, I would not try to communicate with them for fear that my identity as a Kikuyu and my location would be discovered by the colonialists. Thus, at around 16-years-old, I begin my life's uncertain wanderings.

My first day in my new home, I immediately notice that the walls of my room resemble an abstract art gallery with blotches of varying sizes at all levels of the cement surface. I examine the multicolored stains. They represent generations of smashed lice laden with human blood. I can distinguish their history by the level of dryness and the glistening color of the splashes. As many as I have killed in my life, lice always seem to have a reserve army eager to take their comrades' place in the tropical night.

My small, windowless room has a bare cement floor which the previous occupants left an unholy mess. Thus, the first thing I do upon my arrival is to thoroughly clean the floor, which is my future bed. Although a monsoon deluge welcomes me to Kisauni, one of six constituencies in Mombasa County, I am mercifully protected from the elements and the vagaries of the coastal winds and rain.

Hunger is a constant companion. I have learned to scavenge as often as I can, and the force of the hunger expunges any shame I consider feeling about the act. When I have a few coins, I buy a samosa – a piece of deep-fried bread with a bit of meat in its interior. With a cup of tea, the samosa helps me through the night.

At night, I read and write with a kerosene lamp placed on a wooden crate. My treasured possessions are an English composition and grammar book and a few others I have “borrowed” along the way. I read and do exercises at the end of each chapter to learn new vocabulary. I also write essays. Gently, I tease and elucidate the mystery of English grammar. Learning English is a refreshing effort after my daily work of cleaning in the hospital.

My bed is a mat of palm leaves on the cement floor. I make a pillow out of my few books with my only pair of shorts folded over them. I find that sleep comes to me quickly. After time spent bent over the kerosene lamp studying, the tired body quickly finds a way to lessen the discomfort on the cement floor. I curve myself like a wheel so that the fleshy parts of me form a cushion that protects my sharp, bony parts.

Mosquito attacks are more disconcerting than the discomfort of the concrete floor. I hear the little devils buzzing around my ears while others dive-bomb my eyes and lips in the dark. I try to protect myself by waving my hands until fatigue overcomes my irritation and anger, and I drift off to sleep. But as I do so, I sense an army of many tiny feet marching across my legs, torso, and belly. Lice, out in force, are ready to feast on my inert body. I suppose that, as a victim of these perpetual assaults, I have learned to accept small doses of torture.

In the morning, I find the blood-laden lice clinging to the walls as if anesthetized by their bloody meal. In revenge, I crush them and do my best to transport them to their louse-heaven. My body is a forest of raised welts and little pools of blood. I rub and itch myself, still grateful for another night survived. I wash my face, arms, and legs with water I bought the evening before.

I usually set off to work down a narrow, unkempt path that separates the rows of houses. A slight, stale smell of urine and other waste lingers in this ground that’s overgrown with weeds and full of trash. Arabs own everything in Kisauni, from the houses of cement and stone that stand on sandy, rocky soil, to the water that we, their tenants, buy from them to use for cooking and bathing.

I pass people heading in either direction, some to the few Arab-owned shops where they buy sugar, salt, bread, milk, soap, and other necessities, and others to their houses. I feel quite ill and unsure of myself and of my place in this world of grown-ups. I have developed a habit of avoiding other people’s gaze. If I can’t see them, I surmise, no conflict can exist between us.

Still, from the corners of my eyes, I can see women sitting on the verandas of their houses, sunning themselves. Their faces are not covered here, at home. Their bui buis, the black face covering dresses, are laid aside. In fact, far from hiding their faces, some are soliciting men to come visit them. I know this dance from growing up in Mombasa. I am actually afraid of these women who I think of as knowing too much. I avoid eye contact with them.

I walk toward the floating, swaying bridge that hangs over the tongue of the Indian Ocean and encircles the island of Mombasa. Mombasa’s old harbor, with its ancient, green, algae-colored wharves, is to my left. Dhows from Arabia sway gently in the murky waters, as they have for centuries. My imagination sometimes transports me to a time past, and I hear cries as cracking whips slap a million raw, black bodies – members of native tribes who have been ambushed and taken. Most have never seen the sea before, and they find themselves tied to posts on sailing boats and vomiting from the nauseating, violent ocean’s motion. In the present, cars whistle past me, and hundreds of bare feet walk along the

pedestrian bridge ahead of me. Though surrounded by a multitude, I feel a deep sense of loneliness. I am full of doubt, and my future is dark. I have no idea where I am headed.

The shorts and shirt that were my night's pillow are now on my back as I cross the bridge that takes me to Mombasa. The wind is awake and alive and whips the waves that in turn hurl themselves against the bridge, shaking it, swaying the traffic. We resemble drunken sailors on whose faces the ocean's spray leaves a thin salty membrane.

I find my way to my workstation where I toil alone. There's no one to talk to about my nights or my books. I clean floors soiled with blood, mucus, urine and bloody feces. I disinfect gurneys, walls, and bedpans. I haul soiled hospital linens to the laundry. Touching blood and watching it congeal on my fingers is unpleasant and scary, and it reminds me of my father coughing up cup-fulls of blood.

Whenever I get a chance, I listen to the English, white-skinned nurses talk to each other. I study their voice inflections, their responses, and their word choices. I use these moments to learn their language even though I am not in a position to have a dialogue with them.

At noon, I am in charge of distributing patients' lunches. To my starving body, the patients' hot meals have a heavenly smell. In a Pavlovian reflex, the aroma elicits a gush of saliva. My empty stomach squeezes in knots, and hunger pangs become gut-stabbing pains. As often as I can, I sneak a mouthful of food and some milk. One bite of rice pudding is a heavenly, momentary feast of warmth and delight.

All of the nurses are English women, and most doctors are Indian men. These white nurses paint their lips a seditious red. They walk about with exposed bare knees, thighs, and thick, muscular legs. I avert my eyes not wishing to be magnetized and trapped in the spider web of imagination and sin. The doctors and nurses are very friendly with each other, and I often hear the moving of furniture, laughter, and other amorous commotion arising from locked rooms. In the after-work evening hours, they meet in the nearby doctors' quarters. I also see turbaned Sikh physicians and bui bui-clad Swahili women walking together in lasciviously suggestive ways.

The head of surgery, a white doctor named Mr. Murphy, does not engage the nurses because he prefers men. The Swahili call him Mr. Mavi, which in Swahili, means Mr. Feces. He has sex with young Swahili men, in this place where homosexuality is censored by Islam. Coastal people pretend that homosexuality is the worst sin in their religion, even though we all know that that's a lie. Mr. Murphy is looked at with disgust as if he is an abominable man, and yet, Mombasa Arabs are always searching for black boys to use for their enjoyment. Hunger and poverty drive many youth to extreme measures. Thus, many local youth succumb to the lure of money and sex with Arabs. The hospital grapevine has it that Mr. Murphy, a married English surgeon, has a sailboat on which one particular boy is a constant presence.

I see Asha for the first time on my walk home from work one day. She's leaning against the door of the house opposite to my torture chamber of a home. I deflect my gaze so our eyes don't meet. But some force, something I cannot resist, pulls my eyes to hers. The smile she beams at me is of a deep kindness I have not seen for a long time. Its magic takes my breath away. I feel as if I might easily sink into it. Instantly, I am reminded of warnings against such a pond of temptation from every church service, every Mass, and every confession I have attended. I have been told that this is a place where a boy like me can lose his soul. And yet, despite my better judgment, I respond and smile back.

I don't know where smiles come from, but it must be a place of extraordinary energy because I am physically moved, in my brain and in my heart. I imagine our smiles meeting in the space between us; colliding, intermingling. For a brief moment, we are connected. Then, no sooner than I let myself smile, something urges me to erase it. I scurry away without looking back.

Later the same day at work, in between cleaning the bedpans and emptying urinals, I am asked to transport a man who has been stabbed by a woman's husband. The man and the woman were found in a compromising position. He is bleeding profusely and requires emergency surgical intervention by Dr. Migwe – the only black physician in the hospital. Migwe and I have spoken a few times during my short stay at the hospital. He has taken an interest in me, asking about my plans for the future.

As I am wheeling the patient into the Surgical Theater, Dr. Migwe emerges into the corridor wearing surgical garb. He looks like a brown giant in green camouflage. To me, Migwe presents himself as a black physician and just another ordinary mortal at the same time. On the other hand, the Indian doctors present themselves with an air of superiority, as if they are imbued with magical powers. Migwe really is a rare being in this hospital in that he takes the time to explain things to me and to encourage me.

Migwe greets me at the door to the Surgical Theater. Then, as if on second thought, he asks if I want to come in and watch the procedure. I can't believe my luck. I jump at the opportunity and rush to change into surgical scrubs.

In the Surgical Theater, people's movements are choreographed, deliberate, and unnatural to my eyes. It's as if they are members of an army whose equipment and machines are unreal, other worldly. The smells, from the medicines to the patient to the sterilizing cleaners, are all new. Blood seems to be everywhere. I feel weak. My head starts to spin.

The white head surgeon, Mr. Murphy (a.k.a. Mr. Mavi), comes to check in on what is happening in Migwe's room. Migwe's tone of voice is respectful and deferential as he tells the other man what is transpiring in a foreign language. The white man says some incomprehensible things, but his tone sounds approving. After a while, he exits and goes to another Theater to operate.

After an hour, I am completely overwhelmed. I feel nauseous and have to beg to leave. All the same, this is the moment I am inoculated with the bug of aspiring to become "something medical." *But how can a medical career ever be possible for me?* I wonder.

The patient is later wheeled back to the floor and now has a hole in his abdominal wall, a colostomy. His bowel has been pulled through to the outside. For a while, gas and feces will pass through the colostomy into a bag.

As I walk home, I think about the extremes of the day that began with witnessing a temptress's smile and ended with witnessing the surgery of man who now has an artificial anus. "