

# Memoir by Sari Fordham: “House Arrest in Thirteen Parts”

## *Part I: The House, circa 1977*

The house in Uganda was red brick with a metal roof, a rusted water tank, and a screened-in verandah that had once been painted green. My mother spent most of her day on that verandah. She read Psalms to us there in the mornings, combed our hair afterwards, and then wrote letters to my father's family in the States or to her own in Finland. She was struck by how different the world was, how isolated each person was in their reality. *It's strange, she wrote my grandfather, that you're skiing and otherwise getting in shape. Here the weather is usually so exhausting that you cannot get enough exercise.*

The house sat at the top of a hill and was surrounded by jungle. Monkeys gathered in the trees, and such bright and peculiar birds flew through the clearing that my mother later regretted that she hadn't started birding yet. The house had three bedrooms and a bath. With the exception of the verandah, it looked like an average American house, maybe a little older, maybe a little shabbier. By Ugandan standards, it was palatial. It wasn't just the space, more than a family of four needed, it was also the amenities: running water, electricity, a fridge, a stove, a washing machine, and cupboards filled with items you could no longer buy in Uganda.



The Fordhams' house on the hill.

We lived a mile from campus, a mile from all those grievances. Our closest neighbors were unaffiliated with the school and lived in what we called "the village," even though the collection of mud huts belonged to a single Ugandan family: a patriarch, his wives, and their children. The wives and daughters collected water from our spigot every morning and carried it down to their communal kitchen. When my father was home, he would help hoist the pails onto their heads. One girl complained to my father that her neck hurt. "No wonder," my father later said. He could barely lift the pails.

My parents were missionaries at Bugema College, a Seventh-day Adventist institution. The campus was twenty-one miles from the capital, Kampala, but the trip could take over an hour, depending on the conditions of the road or the number of military checkpoints. The distance suited everyone on campus

just fine. The school had a dairy and a poultry farm, and beans and bananas were still available in the countryside. Whenever one missionary family eventually drove into town, they set aside personal grievances and ran errands for all the other missionaries.

The wives and daughters saw our house every day and had their own relationship with it. They walked past the screened-in verandah, the glass panes on each window, the light on the porch that turned on and off when the generator was working. They saw the external trappings of privilege and could only imagine what the interior held. We didn't think we were privileged. My mother worried because she couldn't buy toothbrushes in a store or children's vitamins. To supplement our iron, she threw a nail in with the beans as they boiled.

My mother disliked the patriarch because he beat his wives, and she assumed he also disliked us and was even spying on us for Idi Amin or someone high in the government. These were paranoid times. Bugema's principal had been warned that "the American" was being watched, and my father was the only American on campus. When the patriarch asked my parents what they thought of Uganda, their answers were repetitive and chirpy: wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, *wonderful*. They were on edge with every interaction. Yet when we were under house arrest, the patriarch was not the person who accompanied the soldier.

## ***Part II: The Missionaries***

My parents, Gary and Kaarina, met in 1966 at an Adventist university in Michigan. My father, tall and skinny, had grown up surfing in Hawaii and had a fondness for practical jokes. To my mother, he seemed like the all-American boy. Later, she learned that my father and his siblings had spent their childhood bouncing around foster homes. During the last such interlude, an Adventist family took in the three children. My father and his siblings converted, and then his mother, who

came for visits, did as well. My father found stability in the church and worked his way through Adventist boarding schools, eating only two meals a day because that's all he could afford. When my mother met him, he was studying for his Master's in Theology because he wanted to serve God and because he believed Jesus was coming soon.

My mother ostensibly came to the United States to study for a Master's in English. Like my father, she'd grown up poor, but hers had a different texture. She was born in Finland at the beginning of World War II and was raised during the harsh austerity that followed. Her father, a Bible teacher at an Adventist boarding school, gave his salary too freely to needy students and to missions, leaving little to support his five children, the eldest of whom was handicapped. My grandmother was so anxious about finances that she tried unsuccessfully to induce miscarriages during her last two pregnancies.

My mother lived with her family in a house without indoor plumbing or running water. As she later told us, an outhouse in winter was no joke. For washing dishes and clothes, she and her siblings carried up pails of water from the Baltic Sea. It was a decent walk even without the weight of water. My mother and her siblings were always busy with the task of subsistence. In the summers, they foraged for mushrooms and berries, which they either ate or sold. My grandmother, who had never been to the United States, wanted her children to aspire to a future outside of Finland, telling them that in American even the telephone poles were higher than anywhere else.

My mother was the daughter to leave. She received a scholarship to study abroad, but more to the point, she had no marriage prospects in Finland. Despite being raised among all those potential Adventist suitors, she was, when my father met her, a twenty-six-year-old spinster who looked sixteen. The eligible bachelors had dismissed her as the Bible teacher's bookish, less captivating daughter. In a black-and-white

photograph taken before her departure, my mother stands beside all her worldly goods, three small suitcases and a bundle. Her hair is tied up, her eyes downcast. What seemed lost on everyone in Finland, especially herself, is that she's strikingly beautiful.



The Fordhams in Uganda (author Sari is on far right)

My father noticed immediately. He walked into the library looking for a date. Everyone knew that if you wanted to be hired as a minister, you had to be married. Earlier that day, he and his friends had planted books on each of the library's study tables. The plan was to sit at the table with the most attractive woman, gesturing to the books. The hitch, for my father, was that my mother was a student librarian. Stripped of pretense, my father approached her directly and asked her out.

My parents got engaged four months after their first date, got married in Finland, honeymooned in Lapland, and settled in Indiana where my father pastored two churches and where my mother taught fourth grade, and where they rented their first house, a two-bedroom with wood panels and shag carpet. When Sonja was born, my mother quit teaching and spent her days photographing my sister and sending pictures to the beautiful baby contests advertised in the back of ladies' magazines. My mother found America strange and lonely. People would say, "Come over any time," but when my father drove her over, they looked confused, and she felt embarrassed in front of her new husband. She tried to get her driver's license, but traffic frightened her, and she kept failing the exams. Church members critiqued her parenting. When I was born, my mother was ready to leave Indiana. She was tired of the winters, which she said were windier than those in Finland. She was tired of corn. When my father began talking about the mission field, she didn't say no. In 1976, they moved to Uganda.

### ***Part III: The Dictator***

Idi Amin came to power in a 1971 military coup that was welcomed by most Ugandans. The deposed president Milton Obote had made himself unpopular by marginalizing Uganda's largest tribe, banning oppositional parties, detaining dissidents, and declaring himself Life President.

The West supported the "regime change," as coups we approved

of were called. Milton Obote was a socialist, and Idi Amin wasn't. Moreover, Idi Amin appeared malleable. Before Ugandan independence, he had served in the King's African Rifles and had ruthlessly fought with the British against the Mau Mau rebels in Kenya. He boxed and played rugby. He was charming. He had a wonderful laugh. Western leaders considered him not too bright, despite the four languages he spoke.

Idi Amin preached an Africa for Africans, and then, in 1972, he expelled the Asians who ran the economy. It was not a small thing. There were 40,000 Asians, as the expatriates of mostly Indian origin were called, living in the country. After business hours, so few ethnic Ugandans walked the streets of Kampala that the city could have been a suburb of Bombay. The Asians had ninety days to leave, each taking with them only two suitcases of personal items. Their houses, furniture, appliances, cars, livestock, shops, pharmacies, coffee plantations, cotton farms, and factories were given to Idi Amin's supporters.

Their bank accounts were absorbed by the National Treasury. Uganda's robust economy, a model on the continent, crashed hard. By 1976, you couldn't buy oats in a store. Yet that one move helped mitigate Amin's legacy with his countrymen. There might be nothing to buy in Kampala, but at least that nothing belonged to Ugandans.

The West came to view Idi Amin as a buffoon, and in private meetings, world leaders questioned his sanity. A popular theory was that he had syphilis-induced psychosis. Amin was surely aware of his reputation and might have seen it as an advantage. In any event, he was a man who liked a joke, particularly one where the West was the punch line. You laugh at me; I laugh at you. His official title-read in full before radio addresses-was "His Excellency President for Life, Field Marshal Alhaji Dr Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC, CBE," with the CBE standing for Conqueror of the British Empire. My parents laughed at that. They also laughed at the outrageous telegrams



he sent world leaders. In a correspondence with Queen Elizabeth, he sympathized with England's economic woes and volunteered to send "a cargo ship full of bananas to thank you for the good days of the colonial administration." In Uganda, the killings began nearly as soon as Amin came to power. Concerned about a coup, he purged the army of soldiers from Acholi and Langi tribes, two ethnic groups allied with Milton Obote. He established the State Research Bureau, an intelligence agency infamous for torture. He killed those who threatened his power. He killed those who might threaten his power. He killed those who didn't threaten his power at all. Bodies were tossed into the lakes, and the crocodiles grew fat. After fleeing Uganda, one of Amin's former aides told *Time* magazine, "'You are walking, and any creature making a step on the dry grass behind you might be an Amin man. Whenever you hear a car speeding down the street, you think it might suddenly come to a stop – for you. I finally fled, not because I was in trouble or because of anything I did, but out of sheer fear. People disappear. When they disappear, it means they are dead.'"



HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II  
of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Head of the Commonwealth



HIS EXCELLENCY GENERAL IDI AMIN DADA  
President of the Republic of Uganda

Archives of New Zealand: Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and Idi Amin.

Humanitarian organizations were unsure how many Ugandans had been murdered. Some groups estimated that 80,000 had been killed. Other groups estimated that 300,000 had been killed.

#### ***Part IV: The Archbishop***

On February 16, 1977, Janani Luwum – the Anglican Archbishop of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Boga Zaire – was murdered. The world had to notice.

Janani Luwum was a rare man, a warm individual – taking time to write letters to those he had met – and an innovative, effective leader. He encouraged theology students to take classes in Developmental Studies, and he promoted a Christian practice that looked African, not European. He was the most influential religious leader on the continent, and the first Ugandan to hold his position.

If Luwum had lived long enough to have a full career, he likely would have changed the Church. Instead, he became linked irrevocably with Idi Amin. They both were Ugandan men shaped by colonialism, both dynamic leaders, both capable of dazzling the camera with their smiles. These two men initially had a cordial relationship, despite the fact that Luwum came from the Acholi tribe, an ethnic group with sympathetic ties to the deposed president. The Archbishop used their friendship to temper the dictator's excesses. Parishioners came to him with names written on slips of paper, and he would carry those names with him, cajoling Idi Amin into releasing someone's brother, someone's husband.

At the beginning of 1977, Amin survived yet another coup attempt, or invented one. Observers weren't sure. What's certain is that in response, he ordered the slaughter of everyone in Obote's hometown. An entire town murdered and the

world looked away. In the same fit of spite or fear, Amin purged the army of the remaining Acholi and Langi soldiers. A witness described the carnage to *Time* magazine. "You would hear a short cry and then sudden silence. I think they were being strangled and then had their heads smashed. Next day the floors of rooms C and D – the elimination chambers – were littered with loose eyes and teeth."

It was too much. The Archbishop wrote Idi Amin an open letter and sent copies to government officials. Seventeen bishops signed the letter and Archbishop Luwum personally delivered it to Idi Amin. With the candor of an Old Testament prophet, he wrote: *We have buried many who have died as a result of being shot and there are many more whose bodies have not been found. The gun which was meant to protect Uganda as a nation, the Uganda citizen and his property, is increasingly being used against the Ugandan to take away his life and property.*

Few in Uganda were surprised when the Archbishop was arrested for "smuggling weapons," fewer still when Radio Uganda reported that the Archbishop had died in a car accident on the way to the interrogation center. It was whispered that he had been shot. Some claimed that Idi Amin had pulled the trigger.

### ***Part V: The Trip***

After the Archbishop's murder, even expatriates were anxious. The thing to do, the missionaries all said, was to be unobtrusive. Don't make waves. It went without saying that you shouldn't travel unless you had to. Any time you drove, you risked getting stopped by soldiers or by carjackers, soldiers being preferable of the two, but with the country on edge, who knew? It felt melodramatic to speak about getting killed. It felt presumptuous to clutch your passport and assume you were above it all.

For months, my father had been planning to drive into Kenya to attend church meetings. My mother had always intended to stay

with us on the hill because it was safer and because she had little patience for the border crossings. She had created a shopping list for my father that might as well have said: *buy all the things*. Now this.

“No one expects you to still go,” my mother said. “No one.”

“I’m not that kind of missionary,” my father said. It was his favorite line.

My mother could feel the tug of their old argument. She sometimes veered away, setting her mouth and saying nothing further. More often, she railed. *Why can’t you just once put your family before the church?*

On the morning my father left, she was cheerful. My mother might shout during a fight, but she didn’t stew. As my father dashed through the house – “Where’s my Bible? Where’s my passport? Have you seen my glasses?” – she pointed him toward the items he needed, and when he was ready to leave she handed him a stack of aerogrammes that had accumulated on our table. For the past week, missionaries had been dropping off letters for my father to post in Kenya. Mail sent from Uganda was opened and read by someone, we all knew.

My father said goodbye to us in the yard. I sat in my mother’s arms and watched him go. It was a familiar sight. He left, and then he returned, often with presents. The best were matchbox cars. Sonja and I loved them because we loved him. At night, he would get on the floor with us and push cars around the legs of the dining room table.

“You better get going,” my mother said. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

She didn’t have to say that we’d be fine. Of course, we’d be fine. If you didn’t count snakes and malaria, life on the hill was uneventful.

## ***Part VI: The Press Conference-February 23, 1977***

My father was in Kenya when Jimmy Carter held the second press conference of his presidency. Reporters wanted to know how Carter's campaign promises were holding up to the realities of office. No one anticipated that Uganda would be mentioned or that the press conference would have international consequences.

Halfway through, a reporter asked Carter: "What if anything, do you plan to try to do to help victims of political repression in these countries?" The countries in question were Iran and the Philippines, and the reporter noted that despite human rights abuses by both regimes, the United States was aiding their governments. Carter spoke vaguely about changes his administration was making and then pivoted to Uganda. Uganda was a small, politically inconsequential country, one the United States was not supporting either covertly or overtly; still, the Archbishop's murder was shocking.

"Obviously, there are deprivations of human rights, even more brutal than the ones on which we've commented up till now," Carter said. "In Uganda, the actions there have disgusted the entire civilized world, and, as you know, we have no diplomatic relationships with Uganda. But here is an instance where both Ambassador Andrew Young and I have expressed great concern about what is there. The British are now considering asking the United Nations to go into Uganda to assess the horrible murders that apparently are taking place in that country, the persecution of those who have aroused the ire of Mr. Amin."

It was a throwaway line. The press conference, broadcast live on television and radio, continued for fourteen more questions, none of them about Idi Amin. Jimmy Carter didn't mention Uganda again.

The next day, Idi Amin announced that Americans couldn't leave

Uganda and were to report themselves to Kampala on February 28 for a personal meeting. No one was quite sure what this meant. It could mean nothing. It could mean we'd be deported. It could mean we'd be imprisoned or held in Kampala. There were only 240 Americans in Uganda. Most were missionaries like us, who had ignored the State Department's travel warnings. There were also a handful of airline employees, oil workers, and technicians. Sonja and I were some of the youngest Americans. With our father in Kenya, we were likely the only American children without an American guardian in the country.

"Goddammit. Why couldn't our first crisis have been a more dignified one?" a White House adviser reportedly said.

### ***Part VII: Singing in the Dining Room***

News of the house arrest, as the missionaries called it, moved swiftly through campus. There was news, and then there was news. What were the Fordhams going to do now? Would they be deported or worse? What was Carter thinking? The other missionaries were relieved that the leaders of their respective nations – Australia, Canada, and the Philippines – had sense enough not to irritate Amin, and it was fortunate, they all said, providential even, that Gary was in Kenya. They knew my mother was Finnish, and they speculated on whether or not Sonja and I were dual citizens. We weren't. That my mother was the last to hear the news said more about living on the hill than anything.

"Please, can we have some peace and quiet?" my mother said. "We're trying to talk here." Her voice was sharp, and I began weeping. "Oh, for goodness sakes," our mother said. After the midday rain, a missionary hustled up to tell us. She called out "*Hodi*," and my mother's heart lurched. "Gary's fine," the missionary said, as she sat on the couch. In the dining room, Sonja and I were building a puzzle. We began singing because we liked to sing and because we finally had an audience, even if she was only a missionary. The women spoke as if we weren't

there, and so we responded in the only way we could: we raised the volume. "God is so good. God is so GOOD. God is SO GOOD. HE'S SO GOOD TO ME."

To the missionary she asked, "What does this mean? What's he thinking?"

After we went to bed, my mother turned on the radio. She confirmed the date and time we were to present ourselves in Kampala and wondered whether or not she should take us. Who would even drive us? Surely the Ugandan government wouldn't seek out two children. Did anyone even know we were here? Who kept track of these things?

Termites flew against the glass with steady pings. A few had gotten into the house, where they fluttered on the floor, lattice wings propelling thick bodies. They were a delicacy. When they came flying out of the ground, children would leave whatever they were doing and run out into the fields to gather them. The termites were roasted and eaten. My mother carried the mugs into the kitchen and set them in the sink. She stood in the green darkness, water running through her hands, and cried.

### ***Part VIII: The Letter***

My father sat down to write his mother and stepfather. Despite attending meetings all day, he must have felt like he was on vacation. No teaching, grading, or lessons planning. And the food! In Uganda, we only spoke of such meals: toast with marmite, potatoes and green beans, spaghetti and peas, cake.

My father dated his letter February 24, the day after Jimmy Carter's press conference. Either he hadn't heard the news or the detention hadn't yet been announced.

*Dear Mother and Gordon,*

*Wanted to let you know all is well with us. There is trouble*

*in the land, but we have not been bothered.*

He filled the front page of the aerogramme with the minutia of our daily lives: mail in Uganda was censored, the dairy farm was down to six cows, wages for Ugandans were only fifteen cents an hour, fellow missionaries were requesting transfers.

Four days later, my father, fully aware of the events in Uganda, returned to the letter. He had left the back flap empty and so he turned to it and wrote in the date. February 28. So much could happen in four days.

*I am still in Kenya (Union Session finished yesterday) and Americans are detained in Uganda. We are not sure what to do because Kaarina, on a Finnish passport, can leave more easily if I'm not there. We expected to get an indication today, but now the meeting [with Idi Amin] is postponed until Wednesday. I may go in tomorrow to be there for the appointment with the president and I may wait.*

*I wish I could contact Kaarina, but the phones are cut at the border. We know the Lord will watch over us, but feel it may be wiser to see what's going to happen before complicating matters. The Lord Bless you. Love, Gary*

My father was a phlegmatic man who liked to say, "Don't make a mountain out of a mole hill." After hearing we were under house arrest, he had continued attending meetings. He was a delegate, after all. Let the world burn around him, Gary Fordham would fulfill his duty. The letter to my grandmother, however, suggested that my father had identified a mountain as a mountain. Over and over, he used the pronoun *we*, as if he and my mother were in consultation. *We are not sure. We expect. We know. We feel.* Unable to contact my mother, he was conversing with her in his head.

Two decades later, after my mother died of cancer, he returned to this unconscious habit. *We think. We hope. We feel.*



"Who is this 'we'?" I finally asked. "You and mom?"

"Yeah," he said, and smiled. He never used *we* in the same way again.

### ***Part IX: The Soldier***

The soldier came in the morning. We were on the verandah when we heard the crunch of tires on a road that led to us and nowhere else. The rumble was a back and forth sound, a jostling of vehicle against washed out road, against mud, against potholes. My mother set down her Bible and the three of us watched the Land Rover jut out of the jungle, roll across the yard, and stop beside the frangipani tree. A soldier, dressed in green, sleeves rolled past elbows, climbed out, and there, from the passenger's side, emerged Joseph, my father's student.

"Good morning, madam," the soldier said.

"Good morning, *bwana*," my mother said. "Morning, Joseph." The soldier was tall, or so he seemed to us, and dashing. His eyes followed our chickens, Rebecca and Sarah, as they snatched termites in the yard. "Can I help you?" my mother said. "If you came to see my husband, he's not here."

"Can we come in?" the soldier said.

My mother led them up the cement steps and through the verandah. She removed her shoes at the door and asked them to do the same. "All the mud," she said. She motioned toward the couch and as the men sat, she asked Joseph how he was enjoying his classes. He answered that he was liking them very much.

Sonja and I scooted behind her. A soldier was sitting next to Joseph on our couch. Any other day, Joseph would have been the occasion. I would have climbed into his lap and demanded a story, but Joseph was not the point. There was a soldier in our house. He was wearing a beret and there were holes in his

socks.

In the kitchen, our mother made cherry Kool-Aid out of water she had boiled the night before. We hadn't had Kool-Aid in months, or as my mother liked to say, not in the memory of man. Sonja and I hoped the visitors wouldn't drink it all. My mother hummed as she moved, reaching for our tall cups, then opening a Tupperware of dried finger bananas. She carried the Kool-Aid out first, giving a cup to both Joseph and the soldier. Then she brought out the dried finger bananas and held them out, and they each took one or two. Bananas were, well, bananas, but the Kool-Aid had made an impression.

"These are my girls," my mother said. "Sonja and Sari." We ducked and smiled. "What do you say?" she said.

Sonja stepped up to the soldier and said, "Hello." The soldier took her hand and shook it. "You are welcome," he said. I pressed my face into my mother's waist, and they laughed.

"Okay," my mother said. "You can go outside and play. Take the cat. Stay near the house, and for goodness sakes, don't get too muddy." And so we went, the reluctant Kissa looped through Sonja's arms.

### ***PartX: Inventory***

Our mother frowned as we left, feeling what exactly, I shouldn't know, but I've heard this story so often I can't separate my memories from hers, my feelings from hers, and so I see her standing in our house, irritated. She was irritated at the excitement of her daughters, irritated at their father for being gone, irritated at Jimmy Carter for opening his big mouth, irritated at Joseph for accompanying the soldier, irritated at herself for not smiling more pleasantly, irritated that she had to smile. Underneath all her peevishness was fear. Quite absent was the triumph she later had while telling this story.

She sat in the La-Z-Boy we had brought from the States. It had come in a great shipment of things that had taken a year to be released from customs and only then, after my father had overcome his scruples and bribed the custom official. Opening those crates had been like a bad Christmas. So much bounty, so little practicality. Better to have brought more soap, more children's cereal, more watches for bribes. Instead, there sat our La-Z-Boy.

My mother now looked at the soldier with as much pleasantness as she could muster. Even if she could remember where my father kept the watches, she didn't dare bribe an official. It might be exactly the wrong thing. She wasn't going to give Idi Amin any reason to throw her in jail. "If there's even a speck of mud outside, my girls will find it," my mother said. "So today, forget it. Mark my words, they'll be filthy when they come back in. Do you have children?" When the soldier nodded, she rattled off her Questions For Soldiers With Kids: *How many do you have? How old are they? What are their names? Are they attending school? Do you like being a father?* If we had been at a roadblock, she would have concluded the conversation with a small present for the children (a pencil or a nub of soap), but today she was too anxious.

"Where is your husband?" the soldier asked. "Where is Gary Fordham?"

"Joseph didn't tell you? He's in Kenya." It was not lost on her that the soldier knew my father's first name. She was certain she hadn't told him. "He's attending the East African Union meetings."

My mother hadn't expected this visit, but now that the soldier sat across from her, his visit seemed inevitable. Of course, he was here. But what about Joseph? Why had he come?

The soldier explained that he had been sent with orders from Idi Amin Dada himself. All Americans were to appear before Idi

Amin on Monday and couldn't leave the country before then. He was here because the Ugandan government wanted a list of our family's valuables. There was nothing menacing in the soldier's voice. It was the message itself that was menacing. Soon we would be separated from all that we owned. If we were lucky, we would only be kicked out of the country like the Asians. If we were unlucky, well, no one wanted to consider it.

"This is a misunderstanding," my mother said. "I'm European, not American." She excused herself and returned with her Finnish passport, which she handed to the soldier.

He flipped through it, giving the pages a cursory glance. "Gary Fordham, he is American? Your babies, they are American? Madam, why is your husband gone now? Why are you all alone?"

My mother smiled blandly.

"Thank you," the soldier said, handing her the empty cup and the passport. He was polite. She was polite. "I must inventory your belongings now," he said. He had brought a clipboard with him into the house.

"The furniture doesn't belong to us," my mother said. "It belongs to the school. A fine Ugandan school, as you saw driving in. That couch isn't ours. The table and chairs aren't ours. The refrigerator isn't ours. If you take them, you'll only be hurting the school." She shot a look at Joseph.

"This one is Ugandan?" the soldier asked, nudging the La-Z-Boy.

"Oh, goodness," my mother said. "Of course, you're right. That's ours. Actually, it's mine, and I'm not an American citizen. It's not an American belonging."

The soldier looked at her, pointedly, though he didn't write anything down. He walked into the kitchen.

"The stove is the school's," my mother said, "But the pots and

pans and dishes are mine. The Tupperware is mine.”

The soldier began to pull open drawers. “Does the silverware belong to the school?” he asked.

“No, it belongs to me,” my mother said. She claimed everything in the kitchen. She claimed the rice cooker my grandmother had sent from the States and the transformer that allowed it to work here. She claimed the cheese slicer, cutting board, and ceramic bowls (which actually were from Finland), and the can opener, dishtowels, and colander (which weren't). In the back room, she claimed the washing machine. She smiled and nodded. Mine. Mine. Mine. They went through the bedrooms, attempting to separate the property of the school from the property of the Fordhams. The beds belonged to the school, as did the mosquito nets, the dressers, and the bookcases. The sheets and blankets and books were ours. The typewriter was ours, as Joseph pointed out. So were the matchbox cars, the Fisher Price toys, our Sabbath dresses, my father's ties, a Swiss Army knife, an old perfume bottle, the radio, our hens, the dog. My mother claimed them all.

The car, our most valuable possession, was in Kenya, but Joseph suggested that the bicycle should be here. “Pastor Fordham bikes to campus every day,” Joseph said.

“Yes, Joseph,” my mother said. “He needs the bike to get to campus.” She wanted to hiss in his ear-Whose side are you on anyway, brother Joseph? “It's in the garage,” she said to the soldier. Bicycles were impossible to buy in Uganda. Everything was hard to come by. Even our pots and pans would be snatched up on the black market. But the bicycle? Well, people had been killed for less. “I can show it to you if you think it's necessary.” The soldier nodded. “But I think you should know, it belongs to me.”

“Your husband's bicycle?” the soldier said. His incredulity sat between them.

"Yes," my mother said. "I bought it, and I'm European." Let them prove she didn't own that bicycle.

"Madam, what is your husband's? What belongs to him, eh?"

My mother said nothing.

### ***Part XI: The Misunderstanding***

Jimmy Carter set up a command center to monitor the crisis in Uganda and redirected a nuclear aircraft carrier to the coast of Kenya, along with five naval vessels. The ships, which had been cruising the Indian Ocean on routine missions, were not prepared to rescue us. *Time* later reported that between all of them, there were fewer than 200 Marines. Still, the message was delivered. "The President will take whatever steps he thinks are necessary and proper to protect American lives," the White House Press Secretary announced. So much promised effort, so few endangered lives. Of course, every life is precious to its owner.

Idi Amin must have felt conflicted. When a British professor had insulted Idi Amin in 1975, Queen Elizabeth had apologized personally, and England's Foreign Secretary had come to Uganda to secure the professor's release. After a much more public criticism, President Carter was offering nothing but a show of force. Moreover, if Amin had seen the inventories taken by his soldiers, he must have been happily considering the political support he could secure with all those washing machines and cars.

But Idi Amin had learned what even a small country might do for its citizens. A year earlier, Palestinians had landed a hijacked plane at the Entebbe Airport and held Jewish passengers hostage. Idi Amin had played host to both terrorists and hostages. He was a Big Man, courted daily by Israeli negotiators. And then the raid happened. Israeli commandos freed most of the hostages, killed the terrorists and the Ugandan soldiers on duty, destroyed the Ugandan air

force, and left Idi Amin looking weak and inept. He might not survive another such fiasco.

Idi Amin sent Carter a telegram stating that “the Americans in Uganda are happy and scattered all over the country” and that “Uganda has the strength to crush invaders.” He postponed meeting the Americans and then a few days later, canceled it. The fun was over. Idi Amin assured us we could leave the country if we wished. But why would we? Uganda was a beautiful country, and he had just wanted to thank us for our service.

My father was in the Finnish embassy when the final announcement was made. The clerks were creating counterfeit Finnish passports for Sonja and me, which they planned to smuggle into Uganda through a diplomatic pouch. It was as James Bond as anything we would be associated with. On hearing the news, my father thanked the clerks. Now for his errands. Of course, the Fordham family would stay in Uganda. The crisis was over. Why make a mountain out of a molehill?

My father walked to the nearest *duka* and bought two matchbox cars.

### ***Part XII: The Foreign Government Dances***

For years, the only accounts I had of the house arrest were my own memories and my parents' stories. I looked for confirmation in Ugandan histories, but amidst the atrocities of the Amin years, the event was too small to matter. Then one day, I stumbled upon *Time's* archives and discovered articles written in the midst of the crisis. Once I found one piece of coverage, I found more and more. I listened to Carter's press conference and watched an ABC news report that was broadcast during the crisis. Experts called Idi Amin a “butcher” and said that while Amin didn't usually kill foreigners, nobody knew what to expect. My American grandmother likely saw the news story weeks before my father's letter arrived.

For most of my life, I considered this my mother's story. My

mother stood in the living room and made a rash decision. She hadn't known, until she claimed that first item, what she would do. She was angry and that was part of it. A soldier was informing her we might lose everything we owned. She had grown up poor, and possessions mattered to her, never mind that she was a missionary. She was also anxious about us, her American daughters. When we were born, she hadn't wanted us to be dual citizens or even to learn the Finnish language. She wanted us to be fully American, unable to return to the land she had left and still missed terribly. Our US passports were to be talismans, offering protections and opportunities that we, as Americans, would never fully appreciate. As she stood across from Joseph and the soldier and claimed everything we owned, she felt utterly alone, and so she did what she did. She was courageous. I think this, still.

My mother stood across from a soldier who carried his own stories and fears. He held all the power in their interaction, and yet, he must have known that he was far more likely to be killed by Idi Amin than she was. Surely, there had been whispers about what had happened to the soldiers at the Mugire prison. They weren't just killed, they were killed with sledgehammers because bullets were too costly. If Idi Amin stayed in power, this soldier might join the disappeared, and if Amin was overthrown, he might be killed as retribution.

Standing beside the soldier, inexplicably, was Joseph. Joseph had no obvious reason to be at our house or so helpful. My father was a popular teacher who often ate breakfast in the cafeteria with his students. He was a hard grader to be sure, but he was also funny and kind. I don't think Joseph came because he was angry at my father. His anger – if it was that – was probably broader. Why should expatriates have so much and Ugandans so little? Upon graduation, Joseph would likely be hired by the Adventist church and assigned a district that covered hundreds of miles and included multiple churches. He would work more than forty hours a week, but he wouldn't be



able to afford a car, and if he owned even a bicycle, it would be through charity. A rural church in Ohio or North Carolina might send money for one as their "mission project." They would expect a thank you note and photographs. Where was the dignity for the Ugandan? Where were the opportunities?

My Finnish grandmother knew that some people were more valued than others. The church might teach that God loved everyone equally, but in this world, citizenship determined worth. My grandmother had tended cows as a child, and as she stood in the dung, warming her bare feet, she decided that if she had children, she would urge them to move away and to matter. In Uganda, an entire town was murdered and my parents didn't hear about it. How many residents lived in that town? There were surely more than 240 people, but they had no advocates. Even today, the only record of their existence is their annihilation.

After the detention of the Americans, *Time* put Idi Amin on the cover, titling their piece "The Wild Man of Africa." One of their sources, a Ugandan who had self-exiled to Tanzania, described Idi Amin's foreign policy: "He always acts the same way. He threatens a group of foreigners, and then he says everything is okay. Then he threatens them again, and then he says everything is okay. The foreign government dances back and forth-and everyone forgets about the thousands of Ugandans who are dying."

### ***Part XIII: The Matchbox Car***

We were the foreigners, or some of them. We weren't thinking about political dances or how Idi Amin might be using our presence in Uganda. Officially, my parents were thinking about God. In addition, my father was thinking about teaching, and my mother was usually wondering whether there would be any letters in the mail. We were all thinking about food. And with my father gone, I was thinking about matchbox cars.

Believing my father would be home soon, my mother used the last of the whole-wheat flour to make *piirakka*. It is a Finnish pastry, and for months, Sonja and I had been begging her to make it. She had waved us off, saying it was too hot here or that we didn't have enough powdered milk or that *piirakka* wouldn't taste right without rye flour. She stood over the stove, stirring the rice, stirring the rice. If she let it burn, she would feel even more foolish than she already did. "We'll see," she told us. Who makes *piirakka* in Uganda? Well, she was making it now, and we would see.

My father had originally planned to return that day and my mother expected that he still would. "He has class tomorrow. He'll be back," she said. Sonja and I spent the morning arguing about who would tell him about the soldier. We sat for a while on the patio steps, giving each other shoves.

"I'm telling."

"No, me."

Our mother poked her head out the door. "Daddy's probably sitting at the border right now, just wishing he could hear you two fight. Oh, boy. He doesn't know what he's missing." And then, "As long as you're out there, keep the monkeys off the tomatoes."

By the afternoon, Sonja was building a puzzle and I was pushing my matchbox cars around the kitchen floor. "Daddy's bringing me a car," I told my mother. "Maybe orange."

"Don't count on it. We'll be lucky if he brings flour. And, good grief, if I step on one more car, I'm taking them away."

By supper, my father still hadn't come. My mother set the table. "Never mind, he still might come. Or he might stay the night in Kampala and come in the morning. We can wait another day, right, girls?"

She put the *piiraka* and some finger bananas on the table and told us that it was probably the first time they had been served together in the history of mankind, making us feel very important indeed. The *piiraka* had a salty, creamy bite, and though my mother had been complaining about their looks, she smiled after trying one. "This is a nice change of pace."

We were almost done eating when we heard a car. We ran for the door. My mother was out of the house first, bare feet even, but once she got outside, she slowed to a walk. She kissed my father and asked how the border went. Sonja and I were jumping and shouting, *soldier, soldier, soldier*, and also, *Kool-Aid*.

"What's this about a soldier?" my father asked. "Did you have any problems? Did you get to meet Idi Amin?"

"Nothing like that," my mother said, "Someone came to the house to find out how rich we are. The girls are dying to tell you. But," and she lowered her voice, "you'll never guess who came with the soldier. It wasn't Idi Amin, I'll tell you that." She turned to us. "Okay, girls, let's go inside and you can take turns telling. Let's not talk out here."

My father picked me up, and I whispered in his ear, "Did you bring me something?"

"Do you mean oil?" he said.

"No," I said. "A present."

"A present? Like a matchbox car?"

I nodded.

"Oh, man! I just knew there was something I was forgetting. I was driving all day today, trying to remember what I had forgotten. At least, I think I forgot it."

Each time he came back from Nairobi, he did this. Sometimes, he said he forgot to buy matchbox cars and other times that he

forgot to pack them. When he finally found them in some obscure corner of his luggage, I would be near tears or full out crying. "Gary," my mother would say.

"This is just terrible," my father said now and smiled at me.

I looked into his eyes and believed him. I was sure that it was the worst thing in the world.

That night, we sat at the dining room table, the four of us. Sonja and I were still damp from our bath, and my mother was still cheery from my father's arrival, though he had already confessed that he had been unable to bring back flour or oil or any of the other staples on her list. Never mind, that was tomorrow's problem. Sonja described the Kool-Aid and how the soldier had drunk it, glass after glass. I nodded my head, as if it all meant something grownup and important and that I had noticed it, too. In my lap, I held an orange matchbox car. I ran my thumb over the silver chrome. My father asked what flavor the Kool-Aid was and if there was any still in the fridge. It was past our bedtime and soon our mother would send us to bed. She would tell us that our father had to teach tomorrow and that we would see him at breakfast. He would carry us to our rooms, one by one, and have prayer with us. Then, we would lie in bed and listen to our parents talking, to the hushed turn of their voices.

The house in Uganda was red brick with a metal roof, a rusted water tank, and a screened-in verandah that had once been painted green. At night, I would pretend that we lived in a boat. The jungle was the ocean and the thrumming frogs were the waves and we were far away from everyone else in the world. I would close my eyes and listen for the water, and I would imagine that we were completely safe.



Sari Fordham on a return trip to Uganda.

*“House Arrest in Thirteen Parts”* originally appeared in the print journal [Isthmus Review](#) No. 5, 2016.