

Yours sincerely, from Kenya

by Raylyn Husistein

Gold award at Commonwealth Essay Competition, 2025

“Come on, kids, let’s go!” Father lugged our suitcases onto the conveyor belt at the check-in counter. I groaned and rolled my eyes. Why couldn’t we just go to Korea like all my other classmates? I shivered at the thought of the sweltering sun and the bumpy roads. I’ve heard of exotic holidays, but who in their right minds goes to *KENYA* of all places?

As soon as we landed, we picked up our rental car and headed to our AirB&B. The moment we pulled up at the foyer, a teenager – barely a few years older than me – came running over to open our door. I drew back in shock, “lock the door, Dad, he might be a thief!”

To my surprise, Dad simply chuckled, “I recognise that badge – he’s from our tour company!”

“Greetings everyone, I’m your tour guide, Juma!” The young lad flashed us the widest smile I had ever seen. I frowned – I wasn’t used to such warmth from strangers. “May I take your bags, ma’am?” he asked politely, beaming brightly again. There was something so charming and sincere about his manner, that I soon got over my initial discomfort.

Soon, we were on our way to the village, driving down bumpy dirt roads, and speeding past wild zebras grazing gently in the open savannah. Eventually, we entered the village, and Dad stopped at a traffic light. Seeing us, a group of children ran over to the car, barefooted and clad in nothing but over-sized, ragged t-shirts. In their hands, they bore mountains of snacks and souvenirs, clamouring desperately, “Two shilling! Two shilling! Very good!”

“Why are there so many kids? Why aren’t they in school?” I asked Juma. He explained that the government was not investing enough in education. Thus, most of the children did not have access to education, so they ended up dropping out of school and digging for food and water on the streets. Some even lived on the street.

Before I could ask any further questions, Juma glanced at his watch and exclaimed, "I am so sorry but I need to go now."

"So soon?" my father interjected, "do join us for lunch, my friend!"

Apologetically, Juma smiled, "I would love to but I have to attend school and it is a 5km run from here."

We all gasped in unison when we heard this. "Oh, we've got the car!" My father offered, "we can drop you off!"

Although Juma refused initially, we all continued to persuade him until he eventually relented. As we reached the school, I was shocked as I saw the condition of the building. It was a simple, temporary structure constructed of bricks with straw roofs. Inside the classroom, there was only a black board. Outside the classroom was a big pot and numerous children queuing up with plates. When a little boy and girl saw us in the car, they ran up to us. I noticed that they were only skin and bone, and they looked so malnourished that their cheekbones protruded prominently. I did not understand what they said, but I saw the girl was holding up her plate and pushing the food towards me like she wanted to give it to me. Meanwhile, the boy ran somewhere. He soon returned with an adult whom I assumed to be his teacher.

"They want give food. You eat! You eat!" The teacher had the same wide smile as Juma and gestured energetically as he spoke. By now, more children had gathered, curious about these new visitors - they all scrambled to offer their plates to us.

I was so touched that I had to fight the tears that were threatened to spill. Even though they did not have a lot of food, they still shared it with us!

Hesitantly, I accepted the plate from the girl, and she watched me eagerly as I ate. It was a mix of simple vegetables and rice, but I pretended to like it. "It's great!" I forced a smile. On hearing this, a smile lit up her face.

In a surprising turn of events, I was grateful to have come to Kenya instead of Korea. I may not have visited a Korean Michelin restaurant, but what I had was better – a meal of love and sincerity. That was something money could not buy.