

The Girls

Less than a week after the girls had gone missing they began to reappear in the silent, dust-red streets of their village. The man who swept the streets was the first to see them. He saw them in the timid grey light of dawn as he squatted at the side of a street riddled with plastic bags and shattered glass, crushed cans and cardboard containers and paper wrappers, savaged corn cobs and chicken bones, drinking from the thermos he had salvaged from another street, another morning, trying to keep his mind on safe things. Afterwards he talked about how they drifted in a single line towards him, six or seven or eight of them, each keeping the same pace and the same distance apart, as if they were dolls of shiny black wood and pale green cloth strung upon a moving wire. When they were several feet away they turned into a side street and passed from his stricken sight; he would have followed them, he said, had his legs not turned to stone.

No one listened to him, for everyone knew he was a drunkard and the only reason there was even a post of street sweeper for him to abuse was because his sister had married a cousin of the village headman and prevailed upon her husband to help her brother. But the next day the man who rode to the closest city each week to collect the mail and deliver it back in the village saw the girls as well, and he was a stout, sober man who discharged his duty in all conditions: the withering heat and sudden, soaking rains of summer, the winter sandstorms that stung one's eyes and filled one's ears and nostrils and mouth, the folds of one's clothes, with the white sand of the Sahara; the very day after it happened he had rumbled his scooter through the streets of the village, his mailbag collapsed between his feet. He said he saw the girls fluttering in pairs away from him around the corner of each home he brought a delivery to—but not hiding from him, he said, he thought they simply didn't know he was behind them. His niece was one of the girls, and each time he caught sight of the loose green robes, the uniforms they had been wearing when they were last seen, his heart leaped like a frog against the wall of his chest.

After that the women on the streets who fried yam cakes in the morning and grilled skewers of

beef intestines in the evening began telling their customers that they saw the girls too, walking past their carts when there was no one else around. The girls looked like they were dreaming with their eyes open, they said.

The parents of the missing girls came out of their shrouded houses then, and walked through the streets in search for their daughters.

That was how the newspapers and the radio and television stations of the capital referred to the loss of the girls: *gone missing*, suggesting that they had simply vanished into the swirling Harmattan haze, for reasons and to places unknown. The official number of the missing varied depending on which government representative was being asked, and how aggressively. The first time the government issued a statement on the matter, it referred to the ‘approximately one hundred to one hundred and fifty missing school girls’. Three days later, a spokesperson for the President’s office said at a press conference, very confidently, that fifty *remained* missing, triggering an avalanche of questions from the foreign journalists present about when the fifty to a hundred girls (based on the government’s original figures) had been found. In the melee a second, heftier spokesperson emerged from the side of the stage and marched to the podium; the first one, looking somewhat panicked, retreated. He shouted at the assembled journalists: ‘What we mean, obviously, is that as few as fifty girls may be missing. We just do not know, right? It is important not to overreact!’

In the meantime the international media, to the great disgust of the government, reported that over two hundred students at a girls’ secondary school in the northeast of the country had been abducted by separatist militants and were being held captive in the militants’ stronghold in nearby forests. The school was located on the outskirts of the village that gave the school its name; however, because it had been one of the very few operational girls’ schools in the region (the others having been shut down as a result of action, actual or threatened, by those same militants, who had at some point announced that educating women would be detrimental to their cause without quite clarifying what their cause was or why it was desirable), its students had included girls not just from that village

but from neighbouring villages as well, accounting for the large number of abductees. As one journalist concluded at the end of his soundbite for an international radio broadcaster, his voice sonorous with righteous indignation (as much on behalf of the villagers as at his having had to travel to this godforsaken hellhole to interview them): ‘The families of the kidnapped girls are now waiting for their government to respond.’

The government, remaining true to its concerns about overreacting, did nothing for the next two weeks. Then a number of the girls’ relatives and their supporters organised a march in the capital to protest the absence of any action being taken to rescue the girls (the radio journalist, having escaped to Johannesburg where he was researching a piece on Africa’s beer industry, was sent back to cover it). That evening the President appeared live on television to reassure ‘my children’. His gaze was fierce, his voice booming and his gestures stately. He addressed the parents of the girls directly. ‘We know where the girls are,’ he said—a claim that shocked his own administration as much as it did the parents, and the international journalists, who had been rather enjoying the incompetent-government angle. He continued: ‘They are in the forest, and we are working to rescue them. But in order to do so, we need you to give us their names. How do you expect us to rescue them if we don’t know who they are? You have to tell us what the names of your daughters are.’

In the village, theories abounded as to what the sightings meant. A number of parents insisted that they were a divine sign—their children were still alive, they should not give up hope, the girls would be safely returned. Others drew the exact opposite conclusion: these were the girls’ ghosts haunting the village, unable to rest until their bodies had been found; or perhaps until revenge had been exacted.

Yet others were impatient with all the talk about the sightings. What did it matter why they were seeing these things when, at the end of it all, the girls themselves remained kidnapped? A shifting group of these people gathered in front of the provisions store each morning to pool their money for gas and drive out into the forest behind the village, six to eight men and boys in a car, carrying wooden sticks and kitchen knives. They would search the forest square by square until they found the

girls.

There were also those who thought they were lucky it had been their daughter instead of their son, that now they had one less burden to bear, that what was the point of girls going to school anyway? The girls never appeared to such people, and they believed the ones who saw the girls to be suffering from some strange sickness of sorrow that they were grateful they could avoid.

The governments of other countries were eager to chime in with their condemnation of the kidnapping after the incident had been picked up by their news agencies and raised to a certain level of awareness within their own populations. Unlike many other political events of the day, the rescue of these schoolgirls presented no moral or any other ambiguity (save for the questions of where exactly the militants were hiding and how such rescue would be orchestrated) and so was an excellent cause to support. Global leaders quickly mastered the unfamiliar conglomerations of syllables that made up the names of the militant organisation, its apparent ringleaders and all relevant geographic locations, vigilant about how any mispronunciations might open them up to charges of ignorance, disrespect or neo-colonialism. They competed with one another to offer up the help of experts in a stunning array of specialties: intelligence, investigation, surveillance, hostage negotiation, information-sharing, victim assistance, criminal rehabilitation, stress management, and public relations. Resolutions calling for the release of the girls were passed by various regional and global organisational permutations of countries seeking to distinguish and align themselves from and with other countries. There was talk of utilising state-of-the-art surveillance aircraft to pinpoint the militants' location, sending in military personnel to take part in the eventual rescue operation, holding summits to resolve larger issues raised by the kidnapping. With such an abundance of resources being channelled towards the eventual rescue effort, it seemed inconceivable that the girls' rescue would not be imminent; or even that it had not already taken place, the girls plucked right out of the vicious green heart of the jungle by the sheer force of the attention and discussion and emotion surrounding their captivity.

English Short Story – Honourable Mention
The Girls by Jane Pek Li Shi

When twenty-two of the kidnapped girls turned up in the village one afternoon, they were treated at first as a new variation of the sightings. They had to explain several times how they had escaped, on a day when the majority of the militants had charged laughing and shouting away from the camp to raid another village for more boys to train into soldiers and more girls to use as slaves; how they walked through the thorny undergrowth, trying to orient themselves by the slanting light of the sun, taking turns to keep watch for men and animals through the night; how each of them secretly believed they would all die in the forest but pretended otherwise for the sake of the other twenty-one girls; how somehow they reached the edge of the forest and then a village similar to their own, from where the village head brought them to the nearest police post seeking to claim some kind of reward but was instead accused of being a militant himself and beaten into a gibbering, leaking swollenness (and the girls had not said anything to stop the beating because they had not liked the way he looked at them); and how, after questioning them for hours, the same useless questions, the police loaded them onto the bed of a truck and sent them back to their village. The twenty-two girls had tried to convince more of their classmates to join them—but some had been too frightened, of the forest or of what the militants might do to them if they were caught again; and others, it seemed to the twenty-two girls, had already forgotten that this was not what their life was.

At last their parents allowed themselves to believe that these girls, lost in the black heaviness of the robes the militants had insisted they wear, their shoulders sloping in an unfamiliar way, their eyes cast upon the ground as if constantly watching for snakes, were their daughters—their daughters!—and not spirits seeking to torment them by inciting from them something that might be construed as joy before disappearing again.

In other countries well-off, well-meaning individuals with unshakeable faith in the power of social media to topple unjust governments, broker peace among peoples, end poverty and roll back global warming, began a campaign to *Free the Girls!* Many of them were mothers and fathers themselves, at once appalled by the kidnapping and grateful that the same thing could never happen to their own

dimpled, soft-skinned, querulous children. Overnight such people created a short film, a website, a blog, a Facebook page and a Twitter account. Their efforts racked up millions of hits, hundreds of thousands of followers; famous faces, their sober eyes and razor-sharp cheekbones and grimly plumped lips, appeared on the campaign's assorted portals demanding: *Free the Girls!*

When the militants heard about the campaign (for a number of them maintained Facebook pages themselves, flooded with pictures of their grins, their six-pack abs and their Kalashnikovs, and enjoyed commenting on each other's posts) they thought it was hilarious.

The international news media eventually exhausted its political analyses and human-interest stories and photo essays and editorials on the topic. There was only so much to be said about the families' plight, the continued absence of action by the government, the latest village to be pillaged, the origins and rise of this militant organisation which overnight (or so it seemed to the foreign news agencies, who prior to the kidnapping had never heard of the group) had taken de facto control of a northern swath of territory—all of it true, and meaningful, and important, but unfortunately no longer novel and therefore, as confirmed by their monitoring of web traffic patterns, just not that interesting to audiences anymore.

Foreign governments, as well, became preoccupied with other matters: their own ailing economies, their discontented voters, the rise of viable opposition parties, other military conflicts that threatened their strategic interests in ways that the girls' kidnapping did not. Their bevy of experts returned to their home countries, arguing that in today's day and age they could work just as well anywhere there was an Internet connection and so there was little need for them to be physically based in the capital (with its high crime rate, its traffic impasses, its blackouts, its bomb scares, its contaminated tap water and its subpar sewage system)—especially when, they might have added, the government seemed to be in no hurry to resolve the situation.

The *Free the Girls!* campaign, facing dwindling donations and celebrity interest over time, began to sell blouses, bags, scarves and costume jewellery online. Its items were described as a

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celebration, in their bright colours and geometric designs, their blend of functionality, comfort and style, of the culture and heritage to which the missing schoolgirls belonged. At first sales were negligible, leading to much anguished discussion among the four remaining active managing members of the campaign about whether it was time to wind down operations, concede defeat, perhaps switch focus to another equally worthy but higher-profile cause. Then an actress who had been receiving a lot of media attention for recently coming out as gay was photographed at an awards ceremony carrying a *Free the Girls!* bag and wearing a chunky *Free the Girls!* bracelet around her slender wrist, and orders skyrocketed—first from her fans, then from lesbians who interpreted her choice of accessories as a fashion statement and were eager to prove that lesbians too could be fashionable, then from those who viewed this as a way to support gay rights; and finally from people who neither knew nor cared about the campaign or the fact of the actress at the awards ceremony, but began noticing these distinctively colourful clothes and accessories bobbing past them on the streets and wanted to be able to say they had spotted the trend before everyone else did and it effectively ceased to be a trend.

Within two months the campaign was approached by a private equity fund flush with capital which made it an offer a majority of the managing members (which had rebounded back to its peak of twenty) could not refuse. The fund's lawyers converted the non-profit organisation that was the legal entity behind the campaign to a corporation, set up a shell limited liability company owned by the fund, and then executed the sale of the former to the latter for a sum of money twenty times the total amount of donations received by the campaign thus far. Once the transaction had been completed, the now-corporation's campaign activities were shunted into a social engagement division and the company was renamed FTG! Apparel & Accessories in anticipation of a lucrative IPO within the next few years.

When he was confident that the rest of the world had ceased their, in his opinion, hypocritical criticism of his government's conduct, the country's chief police commissioner announced that all

demonstrations related to the missing schoolgirls would be banned, with immediate effect. This would include cleaning up the public square in one of the capital's lush neighbourhoods, home to a high concentration of diplomats and expatriates, which the protestors had invaded and turned into a filthy, indignant bristle of signs and banners, blankets and corrugated cardboard shelters, and makeshift stalls selling pungent foods and lackadaisically pirated DVDs. The police had received information, the commissioner explained, that dangerous elements were seeking to infiltrate such demonstrations and possibly set off explosives, which would embarrass the government.

Asked to comment on the fact that the only girls to have been freed so far were those who had escaped on their own, he said, impatient with the stupidity of the question, 'This is an issue of terrorism. It cannot be solved in one day.' He added, 'People have been protesting for months now—it is becoming a nuisance. It is time to stop.'

A reporter with a renowned international newspaper, recently transferred to the newspaper's office in the capital after a stint in the Middle East, heard about the sightings from a local source she had been cultivating. (The source insisted the girls who appeared to the villagers were ghosts, it was foolish to hope otherwise, and refused to say whether she herself had ever seen them.) It took some time for the reporter to recall the events of the kidnapping itself, with the help of Google and her newspaper's archives, but once she had she convinced her editor that a piece on the phenomenon of the sightings would be fascinating in its own right and would also revive interest in an issue that should not have fallen by the wayside of the global community's attention.

To prepare, she interviewed, via Skype: a psychiatrist who talked about grief-induced mass hallucinations; a historian who lectured her on notable cases of mass hysteria through the centuries; and an anthropologist who discussed local customs and traditions relating to apparitions, spirits and ghosts (including the subtle but vital distinctions between these three terms). Then she travelled up north with a driver, a translator and a bodyguard to talk to the villagers. They welcomed her at first, for by then the trickle of foreign journalists into the village, with their competence and furrowed sympathy

and promises to tell the girls' stories to the world, had long ago dried up. But when they heard that she was here about the sightings, they told her translator that they could not speak to her.

'They are afraid that if they talk to you they will no longer see the girls,' the translator said.

The reporter, her head pulsing with a migraine after the rattling, mud-spattered seven-hour drive, rife with fumbling, folded bribes to soldiers at blockades who would otherwise insist that it was too dangerous for them to proceed, snapped: 'But what the hell does it matter?'

The translator turned back to the shifting mass of men and women, their dark, crumpled faces and fragile limbs, crowding before him. He felt an equal cold gravity of contempt for them, trapped like fossils in the sediment of their poverty and ignorance; as well as for the reporter, who obviously viewed herself as a crusader for social justice or some similar catchphrase but would never understand anything about the way the people she wanted to believe she was helping thought or behaved or carried out the filthy, futile routines of their lives. The translator told the villagers that the reporter understood and respected their fear of losing the only comfort they still had. He then suggested to the reporter that they begin the drive back in order to reach the capital before dusk, for then they would be more vulnerable to attacks by the militants.