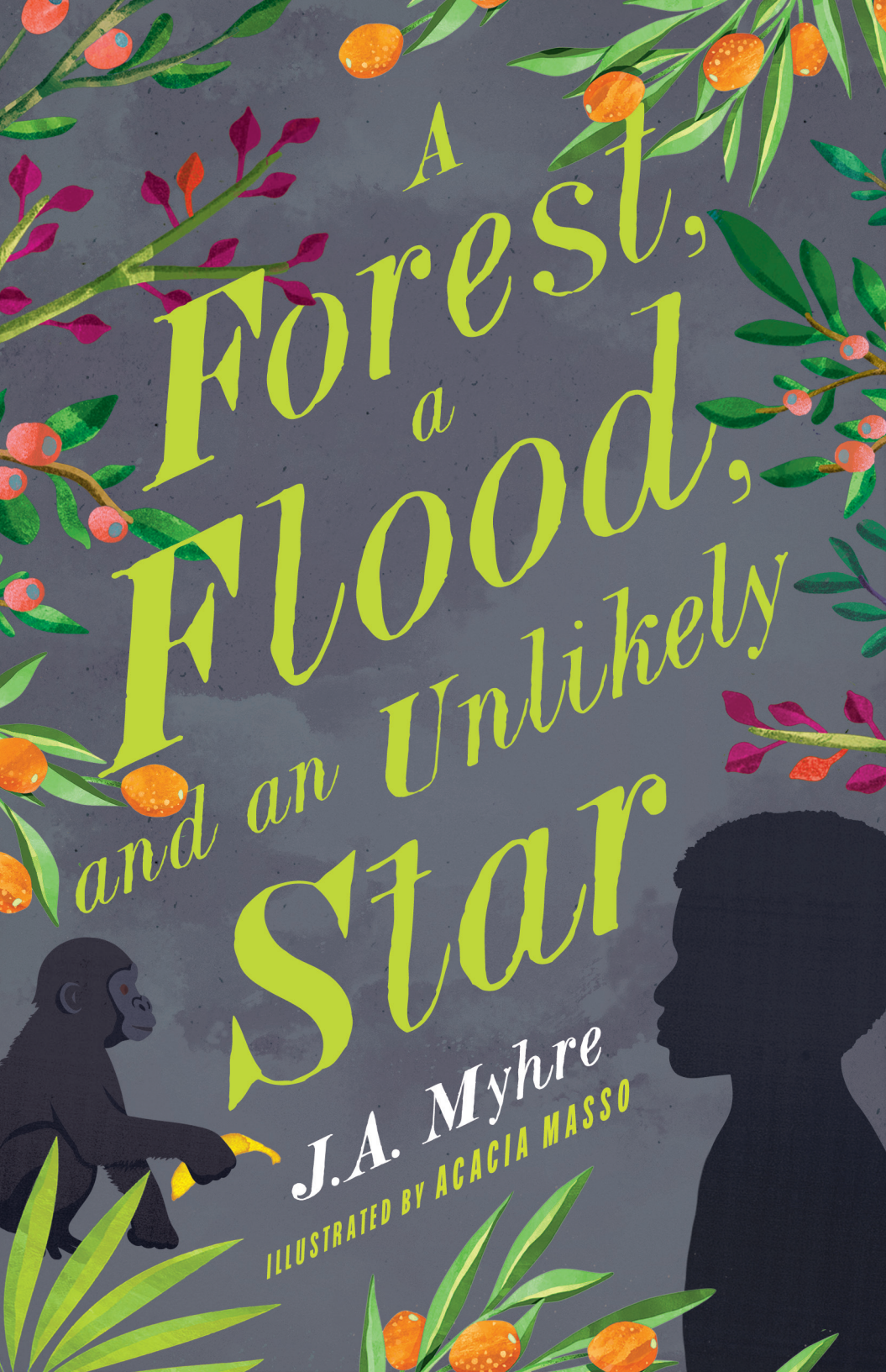
A Forest, a Flood, and an Unlikely Star
J.A. Myhre
ILLUSTRATED BY ACACIA MASSO

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Poem on pp. 48–49, "Grass Will Grow" by Jonathan Kariara, from *Growing Up with Poetry: An Anthology for Secondary Schools*, ed. David Rubadiri (Harlow, UK: Heinemann, 1989), 39–40.

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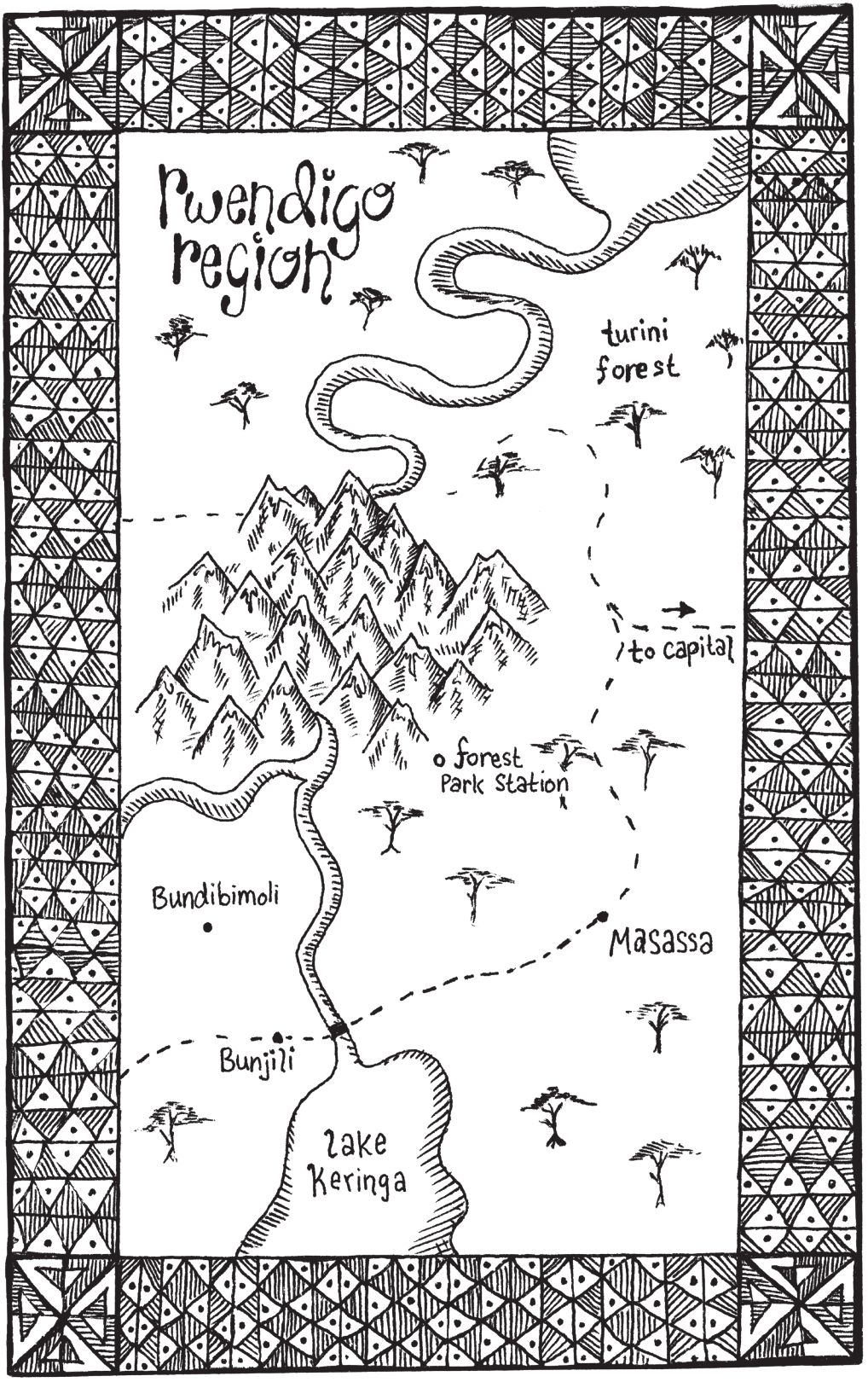
For Luke, Caleb, Julia, and Jack,

African Adventurers
&
Readers Extraordinaire

(but mostly Caleb on this third book, whose determined courage, brotherly kindness, musical lilt, sharp wit, and keen memory leant flavor to the main character. And with a nod to Acacia for her love of donkeys and goats.)

— CHRISTMAS EVE 2007


Rwendigo region
turini forest
to capital
o forest Park Station
Bundibimoli
Masassa
Bunjili
lake Keringa

Dear Reader,

You are about to enter the world of Rwendigo, near the center of the continent of Africa. Events in this book have their roots in the real lives of real people who love each other and raise their families in places increasingly affected by the same injustices the boy in this story struggles with: loss of those he loves, disease, poverty, deforestation, poaching, and rebel movements. It is my hope that you will connect with these characters in a way that respects their resilience, and you will let this story inform your own story as you make your way into this world of adventures armed with a readiness to forgive and an expectation of wonder. That is why I wrote the *Rwendigo Tales* for my own children, as Christmas gift read-alouds for four consecutive years. The world is a beautiful place, and even the most broken lives shine with a glint of unseen glory.

J. A. Myhre

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PROLOGUE

A gorilla troupe moved quietly across the steep, forested slope of the Rwendigo Mountains as park rangers took up their positions behind trees, keeping upwind and out of their line of sight. This group of animals were not habituated to human interaction, but with tourist passes bringing in a lucrative boost to the economy, the directors of the wildlife service sent instructions from the distant capital: track more gorillas and expand the number of tourist permits available.

The silverback gorilla walked ahead, alert to the sounds of red-tailed monkeys screaming and scampering through the canopy below them toward the river, but so far unaware of the rangers. His size and strength meant that he normally focused little attention on dangers to himself, but lately he'd been seeing signs that two unfamiliar adolescent male gorillas had moved across the river. They were a potential threat to his most recent offspring, a young male that was currently clinging to his mother's belly as she followed behind, her swinging gait rocking him side to side. Another female stopped to preen insects off the coat of her adolescent, so the silverback paused. All three adults settled into pockets of variegated shade, casually breaking off thin stalks of the ubiquitous greenery, stripping the bark and chewing the wet, sweet, inner vegetation. The infant dropped down from his mother's belly to play at her feet; a few moments later, he was scooped up to nurse.

The lead ranger motioned his trainees to hang back while he and his partner edged forward, heads bowed in submissive

postures. They sat in view of the gorillas, but attempted nothing more for now. One of the trainees looked bored, but the other could barely contain her excitement. She never dreamed she would actually *see* gorillas in the wild; most of her classmates from secondary school mocked her desire to join the park service when she had the grades and drive to do something really prestigious, like law or medicine. *You'll be sitting behind a desk and bringing tea to the boss men, you're too small and pretty to face wild animals or armed poachers*, they had said. But here she was.

Now that her training was nearly complete, within a week she'd be heading away from this excitement. She'd been posted to an obscure station further south in the park after the previous ranger there quit to start a business in Masassa, the nearest town. She grudgingly acknowledged that this first posting was probably some sort of test; it was an isolated station with zero tourism potential, where she'd be spending her days writing reports on tree density. Tedious. But she was determined to excel, so that one day she'd be posted back here.

Today was just a glimpse of her future as a park ranger, but she wanted to remember it forever. The hum of flies, the slant of the sun's rays, the pungent smell of the gorillas as they burped, their slapping sound as they walked, the rustle of leaves, a rising cloud of tiny bright yellow butterflies. This glory of Rwendigo was what her work was all about–preserving this beauty, sharing its wonders.

The peaceful grandeur of this day steeled her resolve to ignore her nagging doubts about rumors she had heard in the dorms last week. People were always imagining rebels and poachers and mixing the two up. There weren't any poachable animals at her first post anyway, and the rebel stories were just meant to scare children into obedience. What would bring anyone intending evil into a place that obscure anyway?

If only she had known.

CHAPTER 1

"Is Money Raining from the Sky Now?"

Most days, it was only Kusiima's voice that calmed his sister's irritable crying. She would lapse back into her listless gaze and stop her grating whimper as soon as he entered the compound, singing. His song's power to stop Ngonzi's crying bonded him to her in a way that he found difficult to explain. Few people could see much to love about Ngonzi. She was almost two but had never taken a step. She sat on the smooth, swept dirt under the eaves of the hut where the two children lived with their grandmother. Sparse, coppery strands of hair emerged from the flaking shininess of her scalp. The only clothing she wore was an oversized T-shirt whose color had long since been forgotten in the dimming of repeated soiling and washing. Bony shoulders and thighs gave way to disproportionately swollen hands and feet, as if the inner contents of her body were slowly dissolving and settling into

her limbs' extremities under the force of gravity. Kusiima could not bring himself to look at the open sore on one of her ankles, although the sight was not unusual–most of the skin on her legs was discolored from the scars of old wounds. Ngonzi was a pitiful sight, but one that he and his grandmother and the neighbors had come to accept as inevitable. She caused them little concern except for the occasional bouts of prolonged crying. She rarely demanded food or attention and never wandered away; for those small blessings at least they were grateful.

Kusiima patted his sister on the head as he ducked inside the hut, temporarily blinded as his eyes lagged in adjusting from the bright equatorial glare of midday to the dim shadows indoors. Their two-room home had only one door and one window, and the window was cross-hatched with the reeds that formed the support for the mud walls. A window frame and shutter were luxuries they could not afford, so the inside of the dwelling stayed permanently muted. Once inside he carefully pulled a twist of fabric from the waistband of his well-worn shorts and unwrapped from it three coins. In the cool darkness of the hut, he felt the weight of the metal in his hands, and he ran his finger along their ridged edges.

"*Mamba*!" he called after a few moments, ducking back out through the door again. Ngonzi looked up at him briefly, but the effort was too much for her, so she let her eyelids fall to half-mast again. A tiny woman came around the hut just then, waving a paddle-like wooden spoon that was covered with *kahunga*, a sticky, cream-colored staple food. When Kusiima first came to live with his grandmother at age twelve, he was already taller than she was. Now a year later, despite being a thin person himself, he dwarfed her.

"*Mwise*, *mwise*, come, come, the food has been ready for some time now. Ngonzi and I were waiting for you. Have you washed?"

She might be less than five feet tall and weigh less than ninety pounds, but she still commanded Kusiima's obedience. She hoisted Ngonzi onto her hip, which caused them both to wince in pain, and then she walked around to the back of the hut. There, Kusiima had constructed a lean-to of poles tied by banana fibers to support a shade of dried banana leaves, under which his grandmother cooked, partially sheltered from sun and rain alike. Three stones, blackened by generations of cooking, supported a steaming *sufferia* of *kahunga*. A dented aluminum pan smaller than the large curved *sufferia* sat on the ground beside the cooking fire; it held *supu*, a watery broth that may have contained hints of dried fish and a tomato.

Kusiima sat down on a low stool while his grandmother poured water over his hands to wash them. Then they both dipped their fingers into the *kahunga*, breaking off small globs to roll into pasty balls and dip into the broth. Every few bites, each of them tried to interest Ngonzi in sharing some, but she accepted only a bite and then turned her head away. Kusiima felt vaguely guilty that he was eating most of the food, but his grandmother refused to touch the scraps of fish, saying the bones were too dangerous for Ngonzi and that, as the man of the house, he needed the energy for work. He had left the house at dawn, and this was his first meal. They would eat one more time just after dark. He was so ravenous he could feel his bones longing to stretch and lengthen, calling out for more food. Out of politeness he tried to leave some *supu* for his grandmother and sister, but when they hesitated he found himself finishing every last drop.

Kusiima and his grandmother rarely talked while they ate, for they were too absorbed in the task of nourishment. But when the last bit of food was gone and hands were washed, the grandmother leaned back against the house with Ngonzi on her lap and asked

Kusiima about the news from town. She worked hard, trudging a kilometer out of town with Ngonzi on her back every morning to wrest some food from the steep and rocky garden land that her nephew allowed her to cultivate. Lately she had felt so dizzy some mornings that she considered leaving Ngonzi alone at home– Ngonzi who would merely sit in the shade, waiting for life to march on by. But the one time she walked out of the compound without her, she found the weight of her guilty heart more debilitating than the weight of the child, so she came back for her. That day Ngonzi had not whimpered at all, as if she realized how tenuous her claim to care was, and needed to be as undemanding as possible.

When she asked for the news, Kusiima proudly pulled the coins out to show her. To his surprise, she did not look pleased.

"Kusiima, you are not supposed to hold back any of the money. Mr. Mugabe will know; he will sniff the money in your pocket, or he will demand that you give an account for his missing shillings, and then we will have nothing, nothing at all!"

"*Mamba*, please, do not be angry with me. This is not Mr. Mugabe's money. I swear to you that I would never steal his money; I always give him the full amount. When I sell the charcoal in small heaps and only make a few hundred shillings, I give it to him. If I sell the whole bag for a full *mitwalo*, I give it to him. This money did not come from charcoal."

Kusiima could not stop himself from smiling. His grandmother relaxed a little. "Well, is money raining from the sky now? The clouds this morning seemed dark enough to hide a treasure of coins, but then they blew away. Where did you get that money?" He could see she was no longer angry, but rather intrigued, enjoying the mystery.

"Well, I've been wanting to tell you." Kusiima now wanted to make his little moment of triumph linger. "You know, dear

Mamba, that I take our goats every morning when I leave to sell the charcoal, and I look for a good patch of bushy space to tie them where they won't get us in trouble by eating someone's garden. But these days there is less and less bush because the people are spreading everywhere. That is good for the charcoal business but not for the goats. So I had the idea about a month ago to make a stake attached to a good rope and tie them up on the football pitch of the secondary school. It is just behind my stall, so I can even keep an eye on them while I work. I made a deal with the groundskeeper who is supposed to slash the grass. If I rotate my goats so that the grass stays even and presentable, and I get them out of the way before classes let out each day so that he is not caught . . . then he would pay me a thousand shillings a week from his salary for the work I was saving him." Kusiima began to laugh. "I would have asked for more, but the old man only makes ten thousand a week. Yes, *Mamba*, he is paying me to feed our goats!"

As usual, Kusiima's laugh was contagious. His grandmother began to chuckle. Encouraged, and because he was a clown at heart, Kusiima jumped up and imitated the headmaster of the school congratulating the groundskeeper on the fine appearance of the lawn. They both laughed harder, and Kusiima then acted out the surprise of the ladies in the market when he returned this afternoon to buy two cups of beans with his new wealth. His grandmother slapped her knees and shook her head, and Kusiima was so glad to take the burden of responsibility from her frail shoulders for a minute that he forgot the pangs of his never-satisfied stomach, forgot his indefinitely suspended education, forgot everything but the joy of the moment.

But then they both looked at listless Ngonzi, wilting into sleep on her mat, even while they were enjoying themselves. And their laughter quickly died against reality.