

Star Crossed Villagers

Recounts from Anthropologist/Videographer Amy John-Terry on her exploration and documentation of the Amazon Rainforest in 2020. Translation by Mande-í and amalgamation of oral stories by Amy John-Terry and National Geographic editors. Over the course of months, Amy amassed hundreds of stories from the people of Brazil from Rio De Janeiro to the last members of the Piripkura tribe. This story serves as a symbol of hope and inspiration for people everywhere. We are running out of time. At the point of no return. The Amazon is the lungs of the earth, and the people who reside within the trees must be preserved and protected along with their culture. Societal norms have to be questioned in a society that boasts overconsumption and wastefulness. To save this planet, we as a species must shift our attitude towards both the planet and its first inhabitants.

Kauê.

It's not difficult to imagine what a city looks like. The tall skyscrapers itching the edges of clouds, the flashing lights that illuminate the sky through the dark, and the myriad of people and their differences who inhabit the city's streets. I think that I live in the most beautiful city of all....The Pantanal. The trees reach into the sky, itching the edge of the galaxy and the stars in my village are brighter than any fire I've ever seen. Thousands of species of animals are my neighbors, and we all make up our beautiful home, The Amazon. The best thing about my city is that we can see the stars and talk to the animals and we don't need fancy pipes and plumbing to get our water. The city I live in is better than any city I've ever seen in my books. It's more beautiful than Hong Kong, New York, and Los Angeles! Recently, however, my city isn't so clean. There's trash in the water and our neighbors are disappearing. Instead of gunshots, I hear

falling trees. The sounds of heavy machines in the distance, bulldozing my skyscrapers and squashing my friends. The animals don't speak our language but I can still hear their cries for help. No one seems to be hearing mine though. I've seen my older brothers screaming at the people to stop cutting but they just shrug and walk away. They have no respect for the trees, the stories they tell, the families they house, the change they've seen. They just don't seem to care. My village has had to move many times. Our ancestral land is barren now. The graves of my ancestors were replaced with crops to feed people in completely different countries. Now my land can barely feed the village. Sometimes people come in and give us supplies, and try to "help us". My family calls them white vultures. Feeding on our helplessness to fill their guilty conscience. We wouldn't need supplies if they weren't cutting down our trees and killing our animals. The only thing we need is for them to leave.

Sadiki

The bus ride to the forest isn't very fun. At first, I thought it was like a roller coaster, with all the bumps and harsh turns. I would close my eyes and imagine that I was having the time of my life as my stomach flew up and down. Now the wooden seats have been made by butt sore, and my butt is bruised purple and red from the constant jolting. The hot humid hair chokes me and my hair frizzes up into a bird's nest afro. The sun beats down on my skin and they don't give us hats, they usually don't even give us water. Just axes. When I first started, my arms would give out after a couple of hours in the sun and I used to pass out on the forest floor. I would wake up with a watcher spitting and screaming in my face shoving the ax back into my small, underfed limbs. As I chopped the bugs would attack my skin, causing red welts and sores to spot my dark brown skin. I'm tougher now, and I'm thankful for that. My muscles have grown and my hands and

arms are calloused so it doesn't hurt as much. I'm still thirsty, and hungry, and pretty skinny, but thick muscles support my fragile bones. I wish they didn't expect so much for me, I'm only 12. I started working in the forest when I was 10. The officials came to the village in Rwanda and took all the men and boys. I was packed like sardines in a can onto a small ship and sailed somewhere far away from my village. Not much of a village was left. In Rwanda, we were some of the last of our people. War, disease, and famine had taken most of the souls away. Somewhere better I hoped. My family had died due to ethnic conflicts the year before I was taken so there was no one to mourn my disappearance. I long for my family. I long for my village. For home.

Kauê.

My little sister died today. We don't know the name of the disease, and our shaman didn't know what medicine and rituals to do. This happens quite often now, so many new diseases in our forest. Not enough medicine to save my people. I watched her frail thin body hanging in the shaman's arms. Her eyes kept rolling side to side but her face was limp and her tongue kept falling out of her small pink mouth. The village sat around and sang for her, old folk songs from the days where we were free as the shaman gently anointed her face with blood from a chicken. Hours passed in front of the fire until the sun started to creep through the trees and the shaman said there was nothing more he could do. "Night had taken her," he said. So we gave her back to the night. I began to wonder when it would give us something back.

Sadiki

The bus didn't come today. The workers looked around helplessly and eventually just grabbed some leaves and curled up under the cover of the leaves. My body itched and ached as bugs flew

in and out of my ears and danced along my legs. I never actually fell asleep but I awoke to sounds of screaming and crying and singing. At first, I thought that the delusion had finally crept in, but as I listened closer I was reminded of the songs my village used to sing when our people got sick. A wave of nostalgia coursed through my body as I tentatively stood and began walking towards the sounds. I walked slowly avoiding glistening eyes in the night and low branches poised to trip me up. After an hour of searching, I saw the fire. It was small now, and surrounding it was huts made of pudgy vines. I didn't see anyone except a small silhouette sitting at the edges of the flames, rocking back and forth chanting under his breath. I approached slowly, with fear in my heart and caution on my tongue. He looked up and saw me standing there and he just... smiled. I was in shock. A feeling I had forgotten had flooded my body as I went to sit down next to him. He opened his mouth and sounds started coming out but I could not understand them. I tried to speak my language and he shook his head and looked down. We sat in silence for a while breathing in the heat of the fire. Even though I could not say anything to him and him to me I felt safe and understood. I felt as if our eyes were speaking the same language.

The pain in his mirrored mine and I knew that I had found

A friend.

Author's Note:

I was lucky enough to capture the beautiful friendship of Sadiki and Kauê during my time in the Amazon Rainforest. While I was originally there to protest deforestation and lobby with the government for protected lands for indigenous groups, I ended up spending much more time in the forest and villages than the city streets. I recorded many interactions between myself and individuals I met along the way, but two little boys stood out to me the most. In a time and trip

filled with misery, corruption, poverty, and death; in a country that can barely take care of its urban population, let alone their rural ones - this story shows that even in the most abysmal situations friendship, understanding, and love can survive. Sadiki was adopted into Kauê's village and the entire village has relocated onto land in Brazil bought by private companies for indigenous people. While both these boys were ripped from their ancestral land and home, they adapted and found belonging in one another. We must learn from them. Our differences cannot be the things that define us. If we want to live on earth, we must learn to respect all of our neighbors, even when we don't understand their language.