Africa’s Last Frontier

Ethiopia’s Omo Valley is still a place ruled by ritual and revenge.
But change is coming, from upriver.

His brother’s safety. He had an idea where Dunga had gone, and he was furious. The brothers had grown up as Kara boys do—chasing animals through the bush with bows and arrows. They pulled guard duty in the sorghum fields, sling-shotting pellets at thriving birds. They learned to beware of crocodiles during the wet season, when the Omo runs high and dark with sediment. And they learned the foundation of male responsibility: care for the herd.

Along the Omo, cattle and goats embody wealth and prestige. Without them a man is considered poor and, in most tribes, cannot get married because he has nothing to offer as a bride-price. In time of famine the animals can be sold for food or their milk, and blood can be slowly siphoned off, like interest. Abandoning your cattle is like dumping your family’s savings into the river.

Korean selected a slender stick, then marched to the nearby schoolhouse and found Dunga there. The brothers were close, but this! Leaving the herd for school! Korean beat Dunga until the boy wept. Some 15 years later Dunga teaches as he remembers the blows. The next morning, sure and chastened, Dunga led the cattle to water at dawn. But a few days later he ran away to school again. And Korean beat him again.

“I loved Kornar,” Dunga said. “He was a father for me, he was everything. But my mind was going to school.”

The beatings hardened Dunga’s resolve, but they seemed to soften Korean’s. He had been to school himself for a few years, and he eventually realized punishment wouldn’t dissuade Dunga. They struck a deal. The boy could go to school as long as he achieved good grades. If his performance fell below, he’d be back in the bush with the herd. Dunga was ecstatic. He advanced to a boarding school in a nearby town, each grade taking him deeper into a new world. He returned home less frequently.

Meanwhile, Korean had become a respected young leader. He had a wife, several children, and a reputation as an unyielding hunter. The wives of other men presented Korean with bullets and