

## 2. THE DARK CONTINENT

The scene takes place in Kenya shortly after the country gained its independence. A white supervisor comes to assess a black schoolmistress.

A shy, young thing with pimples<sup>1</sup> and thin legs. Lois had taught at the village school and was everybody's good example. [...]

Suddenly Lois became heroine of the village.  
5 She went to jail.

It was a General Knowledge class. Lois put the problem word squarely on the blackboard. The lady supervisor who went round the schools stood squarely<sup>2</sup> at the other end, looking down the class. Lois swung her stick<sup>3</sup> up and down the class and said,

“What is the Commonwealth, children? Don't be shy, what does this word mean?”

The girls chewed their thumbs.

15 “Come on! All right. We shall start from the beginning. Who rules England?”

Slowly, the girls turned their heads round and faced the white supervisor. Elizabeth, they knew they should say. But how could Lois bring them  
20 to this? England sounded venerable enough. Must they go further now and let the white lady there at the back hear the Queen of England mispronounced, or even uttered<sup>4</sup> by these tender things with the stain of last night's onions in their breath? Who would be the first? They knit their knuckles under the desks, looked into their exercise books, and one by one said they didn't know. One or two brave  
25 ones threw their heads back again, met with a strange look in the white queen's eye which spelt disaster, immediately swung their eyes<sup>5</sup> onto the blackboard, and catching sight of Lois's stick, began to cry.

“It's as if you have never heard of it.” Lois was losing patience. “All right, I'll give you another start. Last start. What is our country?”

30 Simultaneously, a flash of hands shot up from under the desks and thirty-four breaths of maize and onions clamoured.

“A colony!”

35 Slowly, the lady supervisor measured out light taps down the class and having eliminated the gap that came between master and servant, stood face to face with Lois.

The children chewed at their rubbers.

Then the white queen slapped Lois across the mouth and started to the door. But Lois caught her by the hair, slapped her back once, twice, and spat into her face. Then she gave her a football kick and swept her out with a right.

40 When at last Lois looked back into the class, she only saw torn exercise books flung on the floor. Thirty-four pairs of legs had fled home through the window [...] to spread the formidable news of their new queen and heroine.

Leonard Kibera, *African Short Stories*, “The Spider's Web”, 1985

1. boutons 2. (ici) était campée sur ses deux jambes 3. baguette 4. prononcée  
5. (ici) retournèrent leur attention



Ben Osawe, *African Woman* (1986)