

Short Story: Don't go there

Level: A2-B1-B2

"Don't go there."

"But you've been there."

"You can't go."

"Why?"

"It's not worth it."

"Sister, I don't understand. Surely, you must be hiding the truth."

The middle-aged woman stands up from the reed mat. She yawns and stretches her back. There is a cracking sound and then silence. She unwraps her *chitenje* and ties it again around her sagging waist. Her eyes wander to the kitchen and then back to the younger girl.

"I will tell you."

She starts walking with rickety steps, her shadow trailing her as she advances, slowly, and then a little faster, a little faster for she must reach her destination. She owes it to her sister who looks up to her. She owes it to herself. Dragging her feet, she trudges. You think she will not make it, but she *will*. She **must**.

"Do you want something Sister? I will get it for you. You shouldn't be walking around with those legs."

"Don't worry Sister. You should rest after your long trip. I still have my strength, you know."

She lifts her feet. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. She stops. After a few interminable seconds she resumes her walk. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven... She enters the small mud hut that looks like a chicken coop. It is the kitchen.

This windowless room is the place where she spends most of her time. This airless room is the place where she nurtures her family. This suffocating room is the place where she wastes her life, but she doesn't know it. The smoke she inhales daily, sitting by that makeshift fireplace, that smoke is poison for her. It draws out her breath by the second and shortens her life by years. She doesn't know this. It is difficult to imagine that she would like that fire, those charred pots, those broken wooden spoons, those rusty plates and pails. You can't imagine that.

When she comes out, she is carrying an old metal tray. In it, there is a bowl of groundnuts and two cups of steaming black tea that have already been sweetened.

"Oh Sister, you shouldn't have done that. Let me carry the tray."

The younger woman relieves her of the load. "Thank you," she says.

She follows behind, rubbing her red eyes and wiping away the black tears. Her clothes reek of smoke. Her face looks older, uglier. Her body is in pain, a pain that she masks with a smile. An old trick that has always worked for her and her friends. She reaches the mat and sits down, making sure not to spill the tea on the tray.

“ Thank you Sister,’ the younger woman says. “ You really shouldn’t have done that.

“ Don’t worry, what are sisters for?”

There is silence.

The younger woman breaks it after some minutes.

“ Sister, I’m sorry to talk about this again but why shouldn’t I go there? Look at you Sister. You should go back there too; you would live much better abroad. What are you doing here, wasting your life in this God-forsaken place?”

“ You really want to go there, do you?”

“ Of course, I do.”

“ Then think carefully of what you will lose when you go there.”

“ Lose? Sister, lose what? What can I lose here? I’ll be so glad to get rid of this poverty. Given the opportunity Sister, I want even think twice. Do you know what I’ll do when I reach there?”

The middle-aged woman shakes her head.

“ I’ll burn all the old things from here to have a fresher start there!”

The middle-aged woman continues to shake her head.

“ What will you do there? Do you have any plans?”

“ I’ll work Sister.”

“ Where?”

“ I don’t know Sister. There are plenty of jobs there. Any type of job will do for me. Any.”

“ Are you sure? Do you really mean what you are saying? Will any type of job suit you? Any type? Even a job that you wouldn’t even consider having here?”

“ Any sister, I’ll be alright. Iiii Sister, you are asking too many questions, why?”

The older woman coughs and starts to say something. She is interrupted by a peep of chickens that strut past, pecking at the ground in an orderly way.

“ Do you realise that you will have no family there?”

There is silence.

“ Do you realise that people here will have no sympathy for you? They will think that you are enjoying yourself abroad all the time. You will have to buy their sympathy and love but for how long? How long can you buy people’s sympathy?”

A fly lands on her cup and she shoos it away with an impatient hand. She continues her series of questions.

“ Do you realise that you will be alone most of the time there?”

The younger woman answers: “ Loneliness can be good sometimes.”

“ It is not the loneliness that you imagine,” the older woman says, wincing as if she is battling some encrusted pain. “ This loneliness is unimaginable. It is that type of loneliness that makes you watch television all day because you want to be in the company of others.”

The younger woman stares at her, through her, past her. She sees herself in one of those huge well-furnished houses. "Why do they make their houses so big then?"

"Don't even dream of that. Do you think that cleaning jobs will get you such a house? The truth is that you will struggle there. You will suffer. You will cry all the time. You will spend evenings alone. You will be on your own during holidays. You will give birth alone and you will raise your children alone. You will do EVERYTHING alone. Is this the type of life you want?"

"Surely Sister, there must be some good sides to this life. I'll be so glad to escape the gossip here."

The older woman grabs her hand and rests it in one of her rough palms. "Listen."

"I am listening Sister."

"It's not a life for you. You have so much here; you just don't know it yet. We know the value of things when they are gone. You have so much here; you really have to understand that."

"I'm fed up of this life; I just want to go away."

"What can you do to make your life better here? Remember that you will never be able to retrieve what you will lose by leaving this place."

"I know."

"So why do you still want to abandon all your life treasures for unknown ones? Why?" The younger woman's hand is still in her palm. She presses it gently and continues speaking: "You will no longer exist as yourself there, do you know that? Those people will not be interested in your life, in your past, in your culture, in everything that makes YOU, do you know that? You will sit with one buttock on the sofa and stand with one foot outside the door. You will survive and not live. You will walk with a hunched back and speak quietly to avoid taking too much space, if you are allowed to speak at all!" You will learn to disappear and be a nobody." Her voice is firm and coloured with emotion.

"How can that be possible?"

"I don't know, but it is. I have seen it with my own eyes. When you are there, you will do your best to learn their ways but you will never be good enough for them and you will become too good for the people here. You will always be a copy there, do you understand that? A copy, a cheaper version of yourself. You may go there if you want but I think you will pay a huge price for that. You might not even come back."

The younger woman is startled. She doesn't know what her sister means. She wonders what it feels like to be a copy of someone, to live under the shadow of her former self, to no longer exist as herself, to lose her ambitions, to live a second-class life, to perform another person's script and not be able to achieve the desired goal, to lose her identity.

"Your life will be a perpetual struggle, a fight against time, a fight against prejudice, a fight against misconceptions. You will experience the type of despair you have never experienced here, I am telling you. Their lack of concern for you will make you angry, and then very angry, and then sad, and then very sad, and then desperate. They will give you medicine for your sadness. This medicine will take away your sadness but you will feel nothing else afterwards. I do not want you to go through that Sister. I do not want that.

Depression, they call it. You will be at the hospital and they will rarely come to see you. They will not care if you pull through. They will not want to know your problems; they won't. You will gradually learn to fill your emptiness with objects that you don't need. Those objects will overwhelm you in no time and you will learn to get rid of them to make space for some more. You will be sick for home."

" liii Sister, how do people survive?"

" They are used to it. They are used to being mistreated themselves. Maybe they don't have a choice. Let me tell you one thing though Sister. If you still want to go there and go through all that, don't forget one very important thing. You are worthy. You have worth. You are capable of doing SO much with your life and no one can take away your dreams. Everyone is born with a purpose in life. We all have something to achieve so don't ever think that you have no right to live a dignified existence on this earth because someone else has said so. Always believe in yourself and in your abilities."

" What would you do if you were in my shoes Sister?"

" If I really had to leave, I would do so with a specific plan and purpose. I would not allow myself to be blown by the wind. The best thing to do would be to study and gain some real skills. Afterwards, I would come back. I would surely do because there would be absolutely no future for me there. I would prefer to struggle in my homeland and contribute to the development of my country, instead of wasting my life in some foreign land, wandering and drifting with no purpose at all."

Her eyes are clouded with unwanted memories. Memories about lonely childbirths and memories about lonely celebrations. She wants to forget the unsolicited advice and the unsolicited insults. She yearns for the time when she will no longer wake up at night, haunted by the taunts of teenagers who knew nothing about her life but decided to hate and hurt her anyway. She remembers the shell she was when she finally decided to go back home. She remembers how her children struggled to cope in their new land. She remembers how her relatives had changed, how she herself had changed. She remembers how she could no longer find the space she had left, despite momentous efforts to do so. She remembers the agony at realising that she could not find this space back. It was gone forever. She remembers wishing she had never left at all.

" Oh sister, what a life. I didn't know."

" How could you? You just saw the planes, the clothes, the phones, the money. You didn't see the desert inside. No material things can replace your home, do you understand Sister? Nothing can replace your real home. Why do we all want to leave? Isn't this land good enough for us? If we all flee, who is going to take care of it? Who, I ask, is going to take care of our bleeding land?" She grabs a corner of her wrapper and wipes the tears that are starting to well in her eyes.

" Let us take care of ourselves and our country. We deserve much, much better. Why do we let ourselves suffer in faraway lands when we have a beautiful land with plenty of resources, why Sister? We can't spend our entire lives begging and grovelling as if we have no dignity Sister. They don't give us their love and turn us into radicals. No Sister, we deserve much, much better than their love. We need to start loving ourselves."

Her eyes dart to the kitchen and she gives an impatient sigh. She stands and is momentarily surprised by the energy in her legs. She has so much to do, so many projects to realise. The future can only be better. She grabs the younger woman's hand and helps her to her feet. They walk together towards the mud hut to do what they know they must do. With powerful strokes, they bring down the shack, taking pleasure in felling the rickety walls. They laugh as they throw away the broken pots. They jump with glee as they remove the dirt, the twigs, the blackened fireplace stones, the rusty pails, the rusty plates. They don't care. They will have new ones. They will build a new kitchen that they deserve. It will be modern with ample windows and ample room, smoke will be chased out of their lives forever. They will be free, finally!