

# Short Story: The Handbrake

**Level: B1-B2**

She has broken three glasses within a week; she thinks there is more to this story than meets the eye. The first time was an accident. The second time was a coincidence. The third time was neither an accident nor a coincidence. It was a premonition— a message from the universe—a warning that she had to open her eyes wide and pay attention to her surroundings.

Each incident was unique but the consequences were the same: deafening noise, shattered glass, momentary mayhem, frantic attempts to bring everything back to order, normalcy.

Lately, sleep has become elusive. She dreads the times when the bedroom is plunged in darkness and she cannot see anything. In those moments, time seems to drag by slowly. She is happy when dawn finally creeps in, softly, reminding her that the world is beautiful and that her fear is unjustified.

There is a knock at the door.

“Good morning Madam, the charcoal seller is outside. He says that he has come for his money.”

“Good morning *aMbewe*. Alright, tell him to wait a little. I will be there in a minute.” As an afterthought she adds:

“Give him some of the porridge from the pot but don’t put sugar in it. Things are becoming so expensive nowadays and we cannot afford to waste food in this house.”

“Okay Madam,” he says. “I will do that. Which plate should I use?”

“The plastic one *aMbewe*! How many times should I remind you that the ceramic plates are only for adults and visitors?”

“Sorry Madam, I forgot. I will be in the kitchen if you need me.”

*aMbewe* is their houseboy. He is not a ‘boy’ as such. He is a married man with three children. His family is in the village and this job allows him to look after them in a more dignified way. He can pay school fees, buy seeds and fertiliser and purchase a few clothes and shoes once in a while. In exchange for his salary, he cooks, washes the children’s clothes, cleans their house, takes care of the garden and protects the house from thieves when the owners are not around. She does the shopping herself because it is wiser to do so. When it comes to money, you should always trust your instincts.

She takes a bath; the charcoal seller can wait. When she is ready, she goes outside to meet him. He is sitting on the veranda. It looks like he has already emptied the contents of his plate. She sighs.

“Good morning *aPhiri*,” she blurts out from a distance. “*AMBewe* told me that you have come for your money. Do you people think that we grow *Kwachas* on trees? Do you think that we eat mouth-watering chicken every day?”

As a response, *aPhiri* kneels and greets her: “Good morning Madam. How are you today?”

“Let’s not waste time with greetings *aPhiri*! Don’t pretend to be polite; I know what you want. I’ve already told you that the government hasn’t paid my salary yet. Do you want me to steal? Have you ever seen me going to the government offices to ask for some money?”

*aPhiri* does not say anything but he has a pleading look in his eyes. He sits down defeatedly and implores her:

“Please Madam. My wife is sick and I need the money to buy her medicine. What can I do Madam? You have been promising me this money for three months, Madam. I need this money Madam, otherwise I wouldn’t have waited for so long.”

She has no time for this. Next time, he will say that his son has lost his leg. He always invents these stories so that people should feel sorry for him...No, she is not buying his story now...

“*aPhiri*, we all have problems and yours are not bigger than mine. Do you see that car over there? It needs to be serviced (as if he understands). You see that roof over there? It needs to be repaired. My bank account is empty and I have no money to do that. Where on earth do you expect me to find your money?”

“Madam, you promised. You have been taking charcoal from me without paying. I need the money to look after my family. I told you that my wife is very sick and I need money to buy her medicine. Madam, it’s hard work selling charcoal. I am not begging; I am just asking you to pay me for my sweat.”

She sighs and calls her houseboy.

“*AMBewe*. Prepare a bag of maize flour and give it to this man. Tell him to come back at the end of the month.”

“But...,” *aPhiri* tries to say something.

“*AMBewe*!”

The ‘houseboy’ rushes to the scene. He had been listening to the whole conversation. He thinks he should support the charcoal seller. He knows the wife because she comes from the same village as he does. She indeed

went to the hospital to treat a powerful cough two days ago but they had nothing to give her there. She has to pay for both medical tests and medicine. He wonders what is the role of the Ministry of Health.

“Madam, it’s true.”

“What’s true aMbewe?”

“His wife is very sick and he needs money to buy her medicine.”

She cannot believe it. The cheek! They are siding with each other. Do they think that she owns a silo full of Kwachas? She will tolerate this no longer.

“You know what aMbewe? Don’t even give him the maize flour. Tell him to leave my property right now. Enough is enough!”

There is a long silence. APhiri is still sitting on the ground. He looks as if she has beaten the life out of him. AMbewe casts comforting glances at him but does not say anything.

“Leave!”

APhiri does not flinch. He remains seated. She cannot believe this! She thinks that they are taking advantage of the situation because her husband is not around. She has to put a stop to this. Period. She will teach them a lesson.

“ I will call the police.”

AMbewe is startled and wants to say something. APhiri has the lifeless look of the hopeless.

“Did you hear me? I will call the police!”

AMbewe tells her it is a bad idea. She doesn’t know what they might do him. Besides, look the children are awake. She wouldn’t want them to witness the ugly scene to come. No, Madam should be reasonable. The best thing is to give aMbewe some flour and let him leave in peace. He means no harm. He is just a poor man who wants his money back. He did not commit a crime; he did not steal from anyone.

However, Madam wants to prove a point. She is tired of these people harassing her. She wants him locked up for some time. How dare he come to her house so early in the morning to bother her about such a little amount of money! She could pay him ten thousand times!

Madam is adamant. She wants justice.

She takes out an iPhone from her skirt’s right-hand pocket and dials the number of the police. The phone rings several times but no one answers.

“I will go there and fetch them myself. This man should be locked up for what he has done to me.”

She goes inside the house to fetch the car keys. When she goes out, she has a couple of used shirts. She throws them at *aPhiri*.

“Here, take these. Don’t bother me anymore.”

*APhiri* grabs the clothes. He is leaving.

“Where are you going?” she asks. “You are now scared, *ha?* Stay where you are. Stay right there so you can face the consequences of your actions.”

“I don’t want any problems Madam. Keep the money. Thank you very much for the shirts. God will take care of my family as he has always done.”

“You know that you did something wrong *aPhiri*. That’s why you are running away. *AMBewe*, make sure this man does not leave this place. The police will take care of him.”

*AMBewe* does not move. She glares at him.

“Did you plan this together with him *aMBewe*? I am starting to get suspicious...”

*AMBewe* does not know what to do. The problem with Madam is that when she is angry, she never listens to anyone. He might lose his job if he is not too careful. He should leave *aPhiri*. He also has a family to fend for back home. One should always be prudent in such situations.

“I am sorry Madam. I will get back to work. *APhiri*, please leave this property; don’t come back please. I will lose my job if you do. Please leave.”

Madam has no time to lose. She gets into her car and turns the engine on. *AMBewe* opens the gate for her. *APhiri* slides past the car stealthily and starts running after he hits the street. Unfortunately, she spots him way too soon. Without thinking, she yells: “THIEF!!!!”

A crowd quickly gathers around the supposed culprit.

“What did he steal?” someone asks.

“Shirts,” another person replies. “I think he stole some shirts from that house.”

In no time at all, the mob renders its justice senselessly — without checking its facts, without taking a closer look at the face of the person they are judging. Is he a father? A son? A brother? Maybe a friend?

The air is filled hate and anger. Men and women cheer. Children cry. *APhiri* is on the ground. He can no longer talk. He can no longer breathe. He was a good man. *APhiri was* a good man.

Where is *aMBewe*? Where is Madam?

After some time, she drives past the charred remains of the charcoal man and does not say anything. Her eyes are gleaming with contempt. Her job is not yet done. She wants full justice.

In front of her, there is a hill. The engine stops. She tries to rev it back into action but it won't flinch. What's wrong?

A few men notice that she is in trouble. They offer their help. They push the car and kick it back into life. She presses on the accelerator. She is going too fast now. The streets are crowded. She presses on the brake but they won't work. The car keeps on moving. She is now going downhill. Her heart is racing and beads of sweat gather on her forehead. She hoots frenetically to keep the children off the streets. Outside, people are shouting: "Use the handbrake woman! Use the handbrake for God's sake!"

The handbrake, of course! Why didn't she think of it???? She pulls up the lever and the car comes to a complete halt. She gets out. A crowd is gathering in protest.

"You should never leave a powerful engine in the hands of people who don't know how to drive!" She cannot locate the exact whereabouts of the person who uttered those ominous words but he sounds very angry. She has heard this voice before. It is the voice of a desperate man who is ready to take matters into his own hands. She starts crying: "Please, forgive me Sir! You must understand Sir! The car just got out of control; I didn't do anything wrong."

The bloodthirsty crowd will hear none of it. They want to mete out their own kind of self-professed justice. When the police finally comes, there is nothing to save. Both the woman and the car have been reduced to charred dust and metal. Shards of pointed glass remain ominously on the ground. The police carefully avoid them. The soles of their shoes are full of holes and they cannot afford surgery for their feet after all...



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