

Short Story: My Daughter from France

Level: B1-B2

My daughter came back a few weeks ago speaking another language. Not Chichewa, not Chiyao, not English, as you would probably imagine since she went to France. *Bonjour Papa*, were the first words she said when she saw me after five whole years. She did not kneel down as it is our custom. She did not drop her eyes onto the floor, averting her gaze, as our ancestors would require. No, she looked straight at me with her charcoaled eyes, painted lips and sleek hair, a bright red handbag dangling from her bare arms, her feet squeezed into pointed steel shoes. I could almost hear NyaChirwa's strangled groan from her grave.

"*Bonjour Papa*," she repeated when she saw my narrowing eyes. "Aren't you happy to see me?"

You see, my daughter left us during the year of the drought. I think you all remember that time when the maize refused to grow and our thin cattle refused to live, falling one by one like Vimbuza dancers. You know the year when the river dried and we could see its bare intestines. It was the year when NyaChirwa and many others left this world, the year when we had to find another graveyard to welcome all those departed, wrenched from our hands by the fatal alliance between hunger and Aids. This was also the year Tamara decided to leave us, only to return as this cheap, diluted version of herself, a stranger in her own land, a stranger to her own ways. For all I know, the Tamara I knew left with that senseless drought that robbed us of all we ever had.

The Tamara I knew will never come back. The Tamara I knew is gone forever. The Tamara I know now goes into people's homes and lectures them on how they should live, how they should dress, how they should eat, how they should treat each other. She says that it is not normal to see children running around in bare feet. She says it is inhuman to let them walk in torn clothes and wallow in dirt. She even says that men should help their wives everywhere, even in the kitchen. She has seen it done in Europe, why not here? "Those old days are gone *Papa*. *On doit s'adapter au monde moderne*. We have to adapt ourselves to the modern world." This is why her respect has become conditional: those who produce deserve her attention, those who don't, even if they can't, are given her utmost contempt. Why? When she left five years ago, she never did such things, never asked such questions, never back-talked to me or shouted nonsense at elderly people for that matter. What has happened?

Perhaps it is because of her man-friend who calls her every day on her cellular phone as if she was the most important thing in the world. Every day, without fail. I can tell that she has fallen stupidly in love with this man, from the way she stops doing whatever she was doing in order to take his call. They speak in that foreign language for ages and I cannot even understand a single word.

My daughter has really changed. She has got odd habits that make people laugh and shake their heads but I cannot help feeling sad for her. Can you imagine that she refuses to eat *sima* in the afternoon because she says she is on diet? Ha! Has she forgotten how we almost died for lack of food during that fateful year? And now she says that she wants to have a flat stomach. There are too many carbohydrates in *sima*, it's bad for the tummy. NyaChirwa *mama* we, listen to your daughter talking. Shut her mouth with your sharp talk that I remember too well. Scream from that clay hole and let your extinguished voice bring common sense to your daughter. Let that dry earth wring out its disapproval.

Tamara just drinks bottled water, like the type we sell to tourists, I am telling you the truth. She thinks that our borehole water is contaminated. I would have said that this was the work of witches if she had been in this country.

But it is common fact that those people do not practise common sorcery. What can you make out of those aeroplanes, cellular phones, cars and all their inventions?

Instead of spending her time going to fetch water, she says that she is on holiday. She says that the men of the village should have invented a device that would free their wives from such a gruelling chore. She says that the women deserve to rest. "They are also human beings *Papa*. They also deserve to sit and rest on the verandah like you do in the afternoons. They are not machines or beasts of the field *Papa*. *La vie est trop courte Papa*. Life is too short. One day those women will wake up and ask themselves where their life has gone."

She thus takes her camera and goes around in the village, taking pictures of people, telling them to stand this way and smile that way. She even photographed NyaKumwenda's skinny dog. Why would she do that? I thought cameras were meant to capture beauty. We put on our best clothes for the photographer. Why would she want to immortalise indignity? She says that these are the photos her friends back in France want to see. "Eyes are happy when they see something new *Papa*. Variety is the spice of the world."

Sometimes she talks to plants, whispering, and even stroking the leaves, as if they were human beings. "We have to be gentle with nature." This is why she glares at me when I bring back stacks of wood from the hills for our cooking. "What father's doing is really wrong. He just takes without giving back." I do not know if this was deliberately said in a loud voice so that I could get the message. This is not right. What should I do? What can I do? She eats raw food instead, insisting that it is good for her health. She ignores the symptoms of her recklessness. "'It's normal *Papa*. It's just a matter of time. My bowels will get used to this."

Ha! NyaChirwa, I can now see how strong and resilient you were. You braved it all in that smoky, tiny kitchen that collapsed barely a month after your burial. *Chiuta mwe*, what a stiff punishment you dished out to me when you took my wife away. NyaChirwa! You were my pillar, my strength, my angel on earth. What a cruel lesson you taught me NyaChirwa with your untimely departure.

I have learnt, NyaChirwa, the hard way, but I have learnt what it feels like to be a village woman. I have tried to carry metal pails full of water on my head. I have tried to cook in the dark. I have pounded bags of maize in the mortar, looked after Mwiza day and night, swept, mended and traded. It is difficult NyaChirwa, it really is. I don't know how you managed it all. I have cried. I have cried from sorrow and I have cried from rage. I have also cried from utter hopelessness.

I will carry on though, NyaChirwa, I will, with dignity and pride. I still honour your memory NyaChirwa, I still do. It grieves me to see how my daughter is no longer the Tamara I knew. She has not become a bad person. No. She brought us a lot of medicine, bandages and food. I could open a small shop with all that she gave us. She sends me money through Western Union even though she lives so far away. She has not forgotten us. No. She still remembers our poverty. It would have been perfect if she had kept her original behaviour while doing all these good acts. At least, I would not feel as if the heavens had fallen on my head.

I tried to talk to her to understand why she has become another person, but she did not give me a satisfactory answer. The family that took her away from us, turning her into a five-star maid, is not to blame either. At first I did not understand why they never called us, why they never wrote to us, why they never bothered to know Tamara's family, Tamara's customs. With time, I understood. Why would they? We are too different. Why would they want to talk to a useless old man like me? What do I have to offer them? What do we have to offer them? Our broken pots? Our empty stomachs? Our cracked limbs? Our sorrow-laden smiles? Tamara was enough to serve them, they didn't want any further burdens.

She now thinks that their lifestyle is better than ours so she copies everything that she sees. "Imagine *Papa*, electricity is all over the place, even in remote villages where my boss's parents live", she boasts. "We have machines that wash and dry clothes; big toys that clean the house; magic doors that spread wide open without anyone touching them." She goes on and on about this land that she calls Eden on earth. She can live on honey or milk, if she wanted. There are shops that are as wide as a mini-football ground. "You can have anything you want there. Anything *Papa*."

What about the people? Were they kind to her? "It's different there. Everyone minds their own business. In health or in sickness, the motto is fend for yourself. I really like that *Papa*." Poor Tamara. She does not know yet. You can get on by yourself with Malaria. When those pitiless afflictions such as Aids strike you, the warmth of another human being is more than welcome. When old age knocks at your door, robbing you of your strength, another man's words are not wasted. She does not know that yet so she can brag about a gossip-less free life where she can fulfill her dreams.

What about the people who were sent back home unceremoniously? Mr Nyirongo's son was now locked up in a tiny mud hut, afraid to show himself to the world in his cloak of tattered dreams. Wasn't she afraid that the same thing would happen to her? No, she felt safe. Of course, some people were not so kind to her, in supermarkets for example. She always managed to find an escort in the name of a uniformed guard, who accompanied her through the aisles, checking if she was not slipping a deodorant into her handbag. On buses or in queues, people inched away from her automatically, even when she was well dressed and smelled nice. She was enraged by such cheap suspicion but that was all right *of course*. The constant humiliation was a small price to pay. It was that or Aids, or hunger, or poverty, or the insecurity at home. She was ready to brave the permanent feeling of being an intruder, of being unwanted, of being expected to play cheaper and lesser roles even though she knew that she could do much better. When she put herself into her hosts' shoes, her predicament became a lighter burden to carry. What dignified person leaves her burning house without repairing it and seeks permanent shelter in her neighbour's home?

Oh, Tamara. I don't know if I could live such a life. Are material things enough to mend a broken heart? Are material things enough to patch broken relationships? Are material things enough to bandage the wounds of a maimed country? I do not have the answers.

The day when my daughter lives for France is slowly approaching like judgment day. I feel the weight of her departure on my heart. I know that this could be the last time I might see her. My brother suggested that I should keep her passport so that she never goes back. I am still weighing this option. This would be the easiest solution. Or I could have some rich person marry her. But where will I find him? What will I do with her? What will I give her?

Force will be the only way to obtain what I want. If she remains home, then gradually like the change of seasons, that powerful influence will disappear. She will come back to us. She will be just like us. But I just cannot decide to do such an extreme act. I am afraid she will never be able to forgive me. I cannot live with her wrath over my head. I wish I had straight answers but I do not. I know NyaChirwa would have been able to help me. I talk to her, more than often, and people think I am losing my mind. Am I?

I cannot bring myself to go to her bedroom, search among her expensive belongings until I find what I am looking for. And I just realised that if I keep her with me, where is the money going to come from? I have to choose between bread and my daughter, between her presence and her presents, between respectability and love. It is such a difficult choice to make. Help me NyaChirwa.

VOCABULARY

1. DEFINITIONS: Find the meanings of the following words in a Dictionary

- a. Charcoaled:.....
- b. Graveyard:.....
- c. Vehemence:.....
- d. Meek:.....
- e. Resilient:.....
- f. Sorrow:.....
- g. Demeaning:.....
- h. Ultimate:.....
- i. Enraged:.....
- j. Belongings:.....

2. SYNONYMS: Find the word that has the same meaning as the word on the left

Word	Synonym	Word	Synonym
Groan		Talk	
Useless		Fetch	
Understand		Stiff	
Chores		Rely on	
Easy		Expensive	

3. ANTONYMS: Find the opposite of each word

Word	Antonym	Word	Antonym
Bright		Remote	
Fatal		Kind	
Heavy		Discard	
Gentle		Disappear	
Bring		Honour	

4. WRITING: Make sentences with the following expressions

- a. To prove one's point:.....
- b. To be on diet:.....
- c. A five-star maid:.....
- d. Sorrow-laden:.....
- e. To brave it all:.....
- f. Honour somebody's memory:.....
- g. Lose one's mind:.....