

Short Story: Mangoes for Lydia

Level: B1-B2

Lydia knew we were going to the lake for our Christmas holidays. Lydia didn't know we were going there *without* her. No one knew how to tell her to stop packing her bags; she wasn't coming with *us* after all. No one had the courage to break the news to this excited girl who had never set her foot on a beach before. It would be her first time, she shouted, and she was planning to enjoy herself to the fullest!

We didn't let her excitement dampen our spirits. We tried our best to share her joy even though we knew sorrow would replace it in the end. We talked about our future trip as if she were fully part of it. We talked about what we would do in Mangochi. We spent hours planning our meals. We salivated at the thought of eating fresh fish every day. We saw ourselves dripping with cool water as we emerged from the delicious expanses of the lake. We felt cold Fantas running down our throats as we waited for our dinner which would be brought to us by a real cook.

Lydia marvelled at our stories. Could we really drink as much Coke as we wanted? Would we bring full bags of baobab fruit back home? Could we share the bounty with our friends as we boasted about our real and imaginary adventures? Would we really sleep in a 'cottage', on clean white bedsheets and clean white pillows? Was it true that we could wake up whenever we wanted? Did we just say that there wouldn't be any housework for her? No housework?

Her questions never stopped and we answered them without restraint. We gave her comprehensive accounts of the houses we usually slept in. We described the contents of the fridges and our plates. We told her she could have anything she wanted once we arrived there. We gave her tiny details of unimaginable things and Lydia believed us without any hint of doubt. Our hearts were momentarily soothed. Each generous description chipped away at our guilt. We wanted to tell her the truth but the lies kept coming in and we couldn't stop them, *wouldn't* stop them.

Lydia's happiness grew as we neared our date of departure. We watched her pack and unpack her travelling bag, taking out sundry items and replacing them with new ones: a second-hand swimming costume, a notebook full of newspaper clippings of the lake, a second-hand bowler hat that she had bought from a street vendor in Limbe, *pata-patas* or plastic flip flops and two empty plastic bags in which she would put all her souvenirs. My sister and I looked away when she put her brown tattered bathing towel on top of her meagre belongings. We wondered how she would have been able to take that *out* in public, if she was coming with us.

'Why aren't you excited like me?' she asked us, puzzled that we didn't show off our enthusiasm. Really, who wouldn't be happy at the prospect of spending one's holidays on the lakeshore? We did not provide any explanations so she attributed our sighs to boredom and fatigue.

The night before we left, our mother came into our bedroom. Warmth filled my body at the thought of freeing myself from that heavy burden that had been encumbering me for days.

"Don't forget your swimsuits," my mother said.

"We won't Auntie," Lydia replied, her face beaming. "Look Auntie, my bag is already packed. I hope I haven't forgotten anything." She then stood up and embraced my mother, hugging her so tight and not letting her go for what seemed to us like ages. "Thank you Auntie, no one else would have done that for me. You are an angel."

I saw my mother squirm and fight to free herself from the uncomfortable position she had been locked into. When she finally stepped away, I found my sister staring at me and our eyes locked for a few seconds. I wrenched mine away from hers when I could no longer handle her pain. My mother left the room, reminding us once again to take everything we needed for our big trip.

At breakfast, my father chose to drink his tea in his bedroom. He hadn't slept well, he said. He needed to recover because he would be the one driving, wasn't it true? The soft cushy chairs of our dining room felt like they had been filled with prickly thorns overnight. We writhed and twisted and we hurried through our rituals in deafening silence. I spilled milk on my mother's favourite tablecloth and she said nothing. My sister drank her coffee with her eyes buried into a magazine. Even Lydia's usual chatter had disappeared, making room for this agonising silence that seeped into the food we ate and left deposits of shame in us. We felt the silence coursing through our entire bodies, gripping us in its jaws, tearing us apart and we looked at each other, helpless to stop it from breaking our family apart. We let cowardice overwhelm us, and rule us, and dictate what we had to do and *not* do to each other and to *ourselves*.

We let cowardice become us.

We let cowardice follow us to the car with Lydia trailing behind us with her fully packed travelling bag. We let circumstances decide our cousin's fate when 'there wasn't enough room' for her belongings. We let Lydia linger outside the door as she waited for us to make more room for her, she was finally coming with us to the lake, wasn't she? After long interminable minutes, we let Lydia understand and *decide for herself* that she wasn't coming with us after all, 'there wasn't enough room in the car for everyone.'

We felt relief, and unrestrained joy, when she finally uttered the words we all wanted to hear: "I will come with you next time, it doesn't matter."

"Really?" My father almost jumped out of his seat.

My mother went out of the car and engulfed Lydia with a huge hug. We saw Lydia's limp limbs as she failed to return the embrace. My mother's huge frame clasped her still. We looked away when we saw tears running down Lydia's cheeks. We looked away when my mother did not wipe those tears away.

"Wait a minute Lydia. You are a brave girl," our mother finally said.

We let our eyes follow my mother's figure as it went behind the car and opened the boot, taking out a big bag of ripe mangoes.

"Here, take all this. This is all yours."

We hoped that Lydia would jump with delight, mangoes were *her* favourite fruit after all. We instead saw Lydia's lifeless hands receiving the bag. We later learnt that she had given all its contents to our neighbour's children. Lydia.

We saw her standing slightly crouched as our car pulled away. Her eyes seemed to look beyond us. My father turned on the radio and we never talked about Lydia during the whole trip to the lake.

When we came back, we hoped that Lydia would be angry with us so we could eliminate our guilt in peace. Lydia welcomed us and did everything she could do to make ourselves feel comfortable. She was younger than us but she continued to wash our clothes, cook for us and wash dishes for us. We continued to tell her our stories and she

listened, giving a piece of advice here and there, laughing when she had to and getting offended when required. We continued to behave as if nothing had happened.

Nonetheless, Lydia had changed. Her face was covered with a tiny rash that refused to go away despite the myriad of lotions and medication that we smeared on her face every day. Lydia became less talkative too, preferring to spend more and more time on her own. She also sang quite a lot and we told her to stop doing that because we were annoyed by the noise she made.

One day, we found her gone. She had taken all the things she had brought from the village, leaving behind everything she had acquired during her stay with us in Blantyre. She had not left any explanatory note. My father did not report her disappearance to the police, these things happened all the time, didn't they?

A letter arrived from Lydia's mother after six months. She was apologising for her daughter's lack of gratitude. How could she run away, really, after all we had done for her? She reassured my father that Lydia had been well taken care of for her rudeness, she was sure not to repeat such despicable mischief again. Finally, as usual, she also asked for money from us which my father readily sent. The cleansing had been done. The future was up for grabs, but strangely enough it didn't look promising.

I am telling you all this because we just buried Lydia a few days ago after a long illness. Her two sons chose to remain in the village: their mother had left them a house and enough money to pay for their secondary school fees. Lydia didn't want to leave them in a state of dependence, of utter helplessness. I insisted that her two sons come with me. I live in a huge house and I can send them to private schools. They refused my generous offer. They prefer to stay in the village. This is where they were born and who said the village was a bad place?

My sister and I cried so much at Lydia's funeral and her sons had to prop us up. Mourners forgot who were the real bereaved family, I am ashamed we made such a ruckus and a fool of ourselves. We were surprised by Lydia's sons' strength and poise; we were surprised by their wise nature despite their loss. They looked so comfortable in their skin, any one could tell they didn't need *anyone*, they didn't need *us*, they didn't need *me*.

I would have liked to tell you that Lydia had triumphed over us in many ways. I would have liked to tell you a different story of how Lydia became a doctor or a lawyer, beating all odds after she had left our family. None of that happened. Stories like that are mostly found in books. We are talking about real life here; we are talking about real lives.

I wished I had gone to see her when she was ill. I wish we had talked about what happened during those Christmas holidays when everything changed, yes, even in our own family. I will spare you the details.

I wish I had gone back to the village and taken Lydia with her family to the lake. I imagine her stepping into the cool water, walking farther and farther, taming the waves and finally steeping her full body into such magnificence, splashing and squealing with childish delight, letting the deep blue waters of Lake Malawi envelop her into their warm and nurturing embrace.

Reading Comprehension

1. GENERAL COMPREHENSION

- a. What is the title of the short story?.....
- b. Imagine another title for the short story:.....
- c. Who is the narrator?.....
- d. How old can she be at the time of telling the story?.....
- e. Where does the story mainly take place?.....
- f. What are the other places that are mentioned?.....
- g. Pick out at least three main characters in the story and describe them:.....
.....
.....
- h. What is the story about?.....
.....
.....
- i. What is your opinion about this story?.....
.....
.....

2. DETAILED COMPREHENSION

- a. **VOCABULARY:** What do the following words or expressions mean: i) dampen our spirits ii) baobab fruit
iii) bounty iv) cushy v) delight vi) guilt vii) offended viii) rash ix) explanatory x) magnificence
- b. **TRUE or FALSE:** Say if the following sentences are TRUE or FALSE. Justify your answer.
 - i. Lydia is aware that she is not going to the lake with the rest of the family :.....
.....
 - ii. Lydia wishes to stay at home:.....
.....
 - iii. The two sisters feel uncomfortable because they do not want Lydia to be part of the trip:.....
.....
 - iv. Their mother is the only person who wants to break the news to Lydia:.....
.....
 - v. Their father would like to deal with the problem but he does not have the time:
.....
 - vi. Lydia is happy with the mangoes:.....
.....
 - vii. The narrator's point of view has not changed as an adult:.....
.....

WRITE FULL ANSWERS FOR THESE QUESTIONS

- a. Who is Lydia?:.....
.....
- b. Describe the narrator’s tone as she tells the story:.....
.....
.....
- c. Describe the different characters’ reactions to Lydia’s ordeal:.....
.....
.....
- d. What makes this story ironical in a dramatic sense?.....
.....
- e. What do you think about Lydia’s reaction when she finally understands that she is not going to the lake with the rest of the family?.....
.....
- f. How does Lydia behave after the family comes back from the lake? Why?:.....
.....
.....
- g. Why do you think Lydia finally went back to her home village?:.....
.....
- h. What do you think of her own mother’s reaction?
.....

3. WRITING:

- I. Imagine the story from Lydia’s point of view. How does she feel before the trip. What is her reaction after they leave her at home? How does she explain her departure from Blantyre? Write at least 200 to 250 words. Give as many details as possible.
- II. Imagine what would have happened if Lydia had gone to the lake after all. How would she have reacted? Write at least 200 to 250 words. Give as many details as possible.

POINTS YOU HAVE TO PAY ATTENTION TO

Correct subject	Teacher’s Notes:
Correct structure (paragraphs)	
Presentation (neatness, pictures, illustrations, etc)	
Punctuation (full stops, commas, question marks, etc)	
Grammar (correct tenses, syntax, etc)	
Vocabulary (simple, elaborate, varied, etc)	
Originality (interesting, unusual, etc)	

NOTES

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing notes.