

# Short Story: Uncle John has come to stay

Level: A2-B1

Uncle John arrived on a cold Monday morning.

He looked like the beggars we always met outside the PTC when we went to do our weekly shopping. He had the same battered look, the same nauseating stench, the same aimlessness that brought out our restlessness and gave us permission to judge, chuckle or taunt as our moods allowed.

“Uncle John has come to stay,” my father told us in the solemn voice he used when talking to other adults.

“Greet your uncle,” my mother asked and we did though we made sure to wash our hands with Dettol as soon as we went back into the house.

We giggled as we described Uncle John to the maid: “ We’re not joking anaMbewe. Go and see for yourself outside!” She came back in stitches, laughing so hard that we joined her until our bellies hurt and we couldn’t laugh anymore.

“Is that your *father’s* brother? Really? You must be pulling my leg.”

“We’re telling you the truth anaMbewe. That’s his real brother. Same blood, same womb!”

“What *happened* to him?”

“We...hic...hic...don’t know...hic, hic, hic,” we said in between hiccups. “ He just turned out that way. My father says Uncle John was daft at school, hi, hi, hi.”

“Noooooo. This is not the way things are done. You know what kids? That man should just have stayed where he was. Why did he come here? As if Daddy doesn’t have enough problems already!”

We also invited our friends to come and see our uncle from the village and loved their reactions. “*Aise*, that one should just choose a spot outside Limbe PTC. Why does your mother even allow him to sit on *your* verandah? Are you sure he is your uncle? Be careful *Aise!*”

In fact, Uncle John was allowed to enter our house only after he had taken a shower in the Boys’ Quarters. He was given some old clothes and ordered to burn his tattered ones in the rubbish pit outside. They also shaved his head to prevent a lice infestation and gave him *pata-patas* and Vaseline for his cracked feet.

You must be asking yourselves why Uncle John had left the comfort of his village to come to our house in town and brave our ridicule.

Well, where do I start?

His was a common story. A dead wife after a long and soul-shattering illness, five under-five children, no woman to look after them, Gin sachets day in and day out, helplessness, more helplessness and then flight.

*So where were his children?*

Where were his children? *Where were his children?* He didn’t know! At least he had a roof over his head! He didn’t mind sleeping on the floor in my brother’s bedroom as long as he had somewhere to live. Anyway, we all knew that he didn’t have any reason to complain. I mean he had no dust; he had clean blankets, clean bedsheets and a pillow, come to think of it. My brother *had* reason to be unhappy. He sulked for weeks after Uncle John’s arrival until his anger had to be placated with a new pair of sneakers.

We didn't know when Uncle John would leave so we took advantage of every opportunity to make fun of him when our parents were not around. We laughed at his rough village manners. We imitated the way he ate *nsima*, taking full handfuls of the thick white paste, dipping it into the relish, stuffing the mixture in our mouths and swallowing it in one single gulp. We pretended that we didn't know how to use a flush toilet. We watched TV the way he did, staring at the device and commenting on the pictures all the time. We didn't know if he knew that we were mocking him but he never reacted to our jokes in a negative way.

Two months passed and he still hadn't left. My father said we had to give the man some time. He had been through a lot of hardship, we couldn't expect him to pick up the threads of his life in such a short period of time.

Another four months passed and Uncle John showed no signs of leaving.

"Uncle," he said, talking to my father, his younger brother. "Uncle, life is tough in the village right now. Please bear with me. I will try to find a job and save a little money so that when I go back, I will have some cash to start with."

My father relented.

To keep his promise, Uncle John found a job as a night guard (my brother was delighted ☺). Uncle John worked every day of the week from five p.m. to six a.m. He slept the rest of the day and only woke up for quick baths and meals. He soon bought himself a bed and asked if he could put it in the Boys' Quarters. My mother agreed and told anaMbewe to move out. She would be sleeping in our bedroom (we were not happy ☹ but my brother was) but we knew that it wasn't our maid's fault. Poor anaMbewe. She had been kicked out without ceremony.

We doubled our barbs at Uncle John (well, he had asked for it) and he continued to act as if he didn't care (maybe, he really didn't...) until after eight months he announced that he was getting married. He had found a widow not far from the place he worked. Did my father mind if he could bring NyaNyirenda (the widow's name) to the Boys' Quarters? She would make no trouble. Anyway, it was just a temporary solution. Soon, they would both be on their way to the village. City life wasn't for them. Could my father lend him some money to help him settle his future wife in his humble abode (the Boys' Quarters)?

My father agreed; my mother didn't; our opinions didn't count; my father gave Uncle John the money he needed and in no time, NyaNyirenda, mother of three, was now a member of our family. Uncle John was now a proud father of eight children, five in the village and three in the city. He couldn't wait to add another child to this horde. There was only a slight problem: there wasn't enough money for school uniforms and exercise books. Could my father lend him some Kwachas for that? He would pay off all his debts at the end of the month.

My father kept this new request as a secret. My mother was blissfully unaware of it. Uncle John got his way without a struggle. Everyone was happy.

Two years passed and Uncle John was still with us. His wish about a fourth child in the city had been granted. He was over the moon. He would go back home soon, he reassured us, it was just a matter of time and funds. *Why was he drinking away his money then every weekend*, my mother asked quietly. Why was his brother's wife not minding her own business? Be careful Auntie, remember where you came from! *Why were his kids coming to eat with us every day when their father had a job?* Why not, his brother was a General Manager! Did she want to eat

the money alone? Did she know how their parents had suffered just to send his younger brother to school? Why would she be the only one to enjoy the fruits of that labour?

A year later, Uncle John was elated when he was blessed with yet another child. He now had double digits children. It was reason to celebrate with his friends.

“Enough!” my mother said. “Leave my house, you have taken advantage of my kindness and hospitality. Where are your other children by the way?”

“NyaMoyo, shut up!” Uncle John waved an angry fist at her.

My mother shut up; my father shut up; who could blame them?

Uncle John stayed with us for two more years until my father found a job in South Africa. This was a God-sent gift really. We left in the middle of the night when Uncle John was still at work and his wife and seven children were still asleep. A friend of my father’s came to fetch us. In our hands, we carried four suitcases and a travelling bag. AnaMbewe bid us goodbye as she walked towards her home village.