

Short Story: Beyond

Level: A2-B1-B2

I met him. We didn't talk. I didn't want to. He didn't talk. Mute, Muted, Muted. Tongue-tied, voiceless, speechless. We felt comfortable in the silence. The silence that heals and elevates. The silence that soothes the soulless sores and brings solace to the unanchored soul. The silence in whose bosom we rest. The silence into which we delve in order to find the answers that we seek. The silence that finally yields those answers painstakingly, indirectly, interminably.

He offered to carry my suitcase. It was heavy, I told him. Too heavy for his flail shoulders to carry. We could take the trolley. It was time-saving and practical. This burden, this burden right there, he could avoid it. He had to set his priorities straight. In this life, he had to choose the kind of burdens he wanted to carry.

Therefore, we settled for the trolley. It was convenient, we agreed. It could take us anywhere.

We headed towards the check-in area. It was crowded. There were families. There were single men. There were women clad in bright attires. Children laughed, cried, ran about. The air was rife with excitement.

Our hearts beat with expectation, anticipation. The time had come. We were ready. We were ready to face whatever challenges that would come our way with dignity and pride. We were ready to take on those challenges with courage and determination. We were ready to deal with those challenges with unhampered confidence and belief in a bright future that nurtured our youngest ones and cared for the oldest amongst us. The time had come.

The airline representative was friendly and charming. She answered our questions with incredible patience and know-how. She wished us well as our checked baggage disappeared from sight, carried away by the conveyor belt. We thanked her and acknowledged that the process had been less stressful than we had previously imagined.

We braced ourselves for the passport control process. We prepared answers to questions we didn't know. We checked our carry-on luggage to see if there were things that were not supposed to be there. We threw away water or whatever thing that would appear suspicious to the eyes of those whose sole and unique stamp could put a lid on fifteen years of unquenchable dreams. Our tongues became stale. We walked on with laboured breathing, one foot after another.

There were two queues. We instinctively took the one that was meant for us. We asked ourselves why we tolerated this when we had paid the same price for the air ticket. We vowed to ourselves that this would be the last time we would be undergoing such treatment. Our hard work and prosperity would speak for us. Our dignity as human beings would be returned by the sweat of our brows. Our worth would be validated by the wealth of our hands, hearts and minds. Desperation wasn't an option, no. Desperation wasn't an option for us.

The questioning lasted two hours. Two whole hours of too much questioning. Where were we going? Why were we going there? How were we going there? What were we going to do there? Whom were we going to live with? How much money did we have? When were we planning to go back? Did we want to work? Were we going to get married? Were we going to have children? Gosh, it seemed their tongues would break loose and run away from the incessant battering, but we held on, we held on, we held on. We stood firm and we answered those relentless questions, repeatedly, courageously, thoroughly. We showed our passports, our boarding passes, our school admission letters, our affidavits of birth or birth certificates. Everything. We took everything that would convince the immigration officers that we were just students who wanted to get better opportunities elsewhere. Stop the nonsense. We wanted to work hard, damn it! We didn't want anything else, my, my, my. We sighed from exhaustion and frustration, but we never faltered. We never did.

They finally relented and let us through. We went past the security check in a shaken state but we did not fall because we knew what we were made of. We understood very well, really well, that our stay would be difficult but we'd make the most of those years, we promised ourselves. Those years wouldn't be wasted, no. This hassle, this senseless hassle of trying to go to places where we didn't belong wasn't worth our time. Not anymore, not anymore.

What if we spent the same enormous energy building the universities that we lacked in our communities? we asked ourselves. What if we turned this destructive energy into creative energy that would transform our villages into safe havens? What if, what if, instead of walking a thousand miles to a place we didn't know, we built roads that would lead us to an incredible future? What if, what if, we stopped drowning in unknown salty and murky waters and held on to our lives? These lives-those lives-so precious, valuable, priceless, irreplaceable! What if...We thought about all those things as we boarded the plane that was taking us to unfamiliar surroundings and faces.

When the plane took off, we held our hands firmly and looked around us. We knew. We knew right then, in our silence, that the sky wasn't the limit for us. We could touch it, right there, serenely, and never let it go. Not in this lifetime!



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