

Short Story: Things

Level: A2-B1-B2

We saw the lorry way before our father did. It was filled with objects that we had never seen in our whole lives. The colours impressed us; the shapes beckoned to us. We longed to touch those mysterious things and hold them in our bosoms forever.

The vehicle advanced towards our house. It moved slowly, its metallic shine dazzling us, its ridged tyres making a way through the narrow path in a steady manner. Men, women and children lined the road, admiring its splendour. It was a rare sight.

We wanted to be near it so we ran alongside its belly, brushing our fingers against the hard metal. It was marvellous to feel the cold structure. It was heavenly to be in contact with this majestic creation.

Previously, the driver of the car (a woman!) had to stop to ask us if we knew anyone who spoke English in the village. She was wearing sunglasses and a white cap.

“Of course!”, my younger brother replied, dropping his ball onto the ground. “My father. My father speaks very good English. He is also our school headmaster. I will take you to him. He will be very happy to see you.” The other three occupants of the car had smiled and congratulated him for his good command of English.

“Where did you learn English?” A young man asked my brother.

“At school,” he replied. “English is my favourite subject.”

They asked to take our pictures and we posed and posed for the camera, shouting “Cheese! Cheese!” They clicked and clicked in our direction and we laughed our hearts out.

We couldn't believe our eyes when we saw the back of the lorry. They were many things but we did not really know their names. Derrick was sure he had seen a bicycle. Jack thought he had seen a TV set. I, myself, had spotted a plastic mirror.

It took about thirty minutes for the lorry to wade through the admiring yet bewildered crowd. When we arrived at home, my father was standing on the veranda. The noise had brought him outside. He took off his eyeglasses and peered at us as if that would make his eyesight better.

The visitors, two men and two women, got out the vehicle and shouted a hasty ‘hello’ to him. At that moment, my mother also appeared from behind the kitchen. Her wrapper was smeared with maize flour.

When she saw the people who had come to her house, she covered her mouth in mock embarrassment. She smiled shyly at us before retreating back to the kitchen, no word escaping her mouth.

“Welcome, welcome,” my father finally said. “Let us go inside the house and greet each other properly. I cannot let you stand outside like thieves. Let us go inside. Let us go to the living room.”

The young man who had previously spoken to my brother insisted that he wanted to stay outside. It was hot and the yard was inviting.

“We like it here,” he said, laughing lightly. “It is lovely, I must say.”

“No, no, no,” my father insisted. “You shall be received properly.”

The woman who had been driving cast furtive glances at the lorry.

“Don’t worry,” my father reassured her. “I will entrust your vehicle to two big boys whom I have raised myself. I will make sure they don’t touch a single object in that car.”

The visitors still weren’t sure if this was the right thing to do.

“Is it okay? Are you sure we can leave all this here?”

“Don’t worry,” my father repeated. “Everything will be alright.”

The party finally entered the house when my two elder cousins, Mwiza and Gomezgani, arrived. The latter had two long sticks and they whipped whoever wanted to get near the lorry.

“Go away you good-for-nothing-children! There are no goodies for you here!” my cousins bellowed. The curious children scattered in all directions as their mothers yelled at them too: “Come back you foolish kids! Why are you getting beaten for that nonsense? You don’t even know what’s in that car!”

The temptation was too strong though. Vehicles of such calibre never entered our village every day. Therefore, the kids came back but stood a few metres away from the car, watching hungrily, hoping my two zealous cousins would loosen their guard and let them have a peek at the hidden treasure.

There were two dining chairs on the veranda. I was asked to take them into the living room and place them next to coffee table. It was covered with the skin of a goat and it stood near our old green sofa and its pair of matching armchairs. There was a vase of plastic flowers on the sideboard. My father and mother smiled at us from a picture frame.

My brother was sent to buy four bottles of Coca-Cola and four bottles of Fanta. We hoped we would be able to have a sip. Christmas was so far away and there were no weddings to be held that year in the village.

If only the visitors would leave some of their soft drinks in their tumblers.

My father let me stay in the living room exceptionally.

“You want to be a journalist, don’t you,” he said. “Sit here with me and take notes of what these people would like to tell me. It might be important and I don’t want to forget anything. My memory is tricking me nowadays.”

I was proud to be given this task. I rushed to the bedroom I shared with my four sisters and three cousins. I took a blue ballpoint pen and a piece of paper from my Arithmetic notebook which our teacher had given us at the beginning of the school year.

When I went back to the living room, one of the young men was introducing himself and his friends. His name was John and his friend’s name was Steven. The young women were called Suzie and Alison respectively. I wrote down everything they said, asking them to spell their names because I was not sure how to write them. They looked at me inquisitively but never asked any questions.

Then it was our turn to introduce ourselves. My father said his name was Bright Nyirongo. He was a primary school headmaster. His wife was called Mary. She was a housewife. She looked after the kids, helped him in the fields and made sure he was a happy man. Steven and Alison laughed and my father continued to speak:

“This one here is Tawonga. She is twelve years old. She wants to be a journalist one day. Well, before you tell us the purpose of your visit, I would like to call my wife. She should also hear what you have to say. As the old adage goes, one head cannot carry a roof. We need to be together as husband and wife when important decisions are to be made.

I was asked to fetch my mother. She came after changing into a new outfit. She made sure to put on her favourite headscarf which she donned during special occasions.

She greeted the visitors, one by one, holding their hands firmly, kneeling, avoiding their eyes.

“Thank you for your visit,” she said. “You are most welcome here. How did you leave your parents back home? Are they alright?”

“I guess they’re doing ok. Anyway, they were fine when we left them,” John chuckled, looking at Steven. “That’s good my son, that’s good. Health should be cherished all the time. It is a gift we cannot ignore. I am happy that you left your old folks in good health. We must also thank them for letting you come all this way to see us in our humble village.”

The visitors nodded, laughing silently.

My father asked my mother if the soft drinks were ready. She said my brother was not back yet.

“Give them some water then.”

“Yes *Dada*,” she replied and stood up to get fresh cold water from an earthenware pot that stood near her bedroom door.

“Tawonga, go and help your mother. Bring some groundnuts for our visitors to nibble; I mean for Steven and his friends to enjoy.”

“Yes *badada*,” I said, pulling myself up from the floor and heading towards the kitchen where I would get some plastic plates and tumblers for our foreign visitors.

“Maybe you would like to drink some tea?” my father asked.

“No, thank you. Water is just fine.”

“Maybe you would like some *chindongwa*? *Chindongwa* is our traditional drink. It is made from a mixture of maize porridge and millet. Our Chichewa friends call it *thobwa*. It is very delicious. ”

The visitors hesitated for a few seconds before Alison finally said: “I would like that very much.”

I went back and brought the *chindongwa* in individual plastic cups. I also had a bowl of brown sugar and two tablespoons with me. They seemed to like it because they asked me to fetch some more. The Coca-Cola and Fanta arrived a few minutes later but our visitors refused the cold drinks. They said their stomachs were already full.

“Would you like my Fanta?” Alison asked me.

You will never guess how happy I was. I said “yes!” way too quickly, in case she had second thoughts. Derrick wouldn’t believe me if I told him that I had drunk a whole Fanta just by myself! My parents helped themselves to Coca-Cola and we took our time, enjoying the sweet elixir to the last drop.

During this time, John told us that he was from Sussex.

“The Duchess of Sussex!” I exclaimed. “I know all about the royal wedding. I read the whole story in the newspaper.”

Suddenly, Suzie took out a small object from her backpack. It looked like a miniature TV screen. There was a video recording of the wedding and we all watched it in awe.

“This is a beautiful wedding, *mwe*. Did you go there? What did you eat?” I asked her.

“No, no,” Suzie laughed. “I downloaded this video from the Internet.”

We didn’t understand what she said so we just nodded.

“Why isn’t she called a princess? She married a prince, didn’t she?”

“She was not born a princess so she cannot be called one.”

“Oh,” I said. “This is why Kate is called the Duchess of Cambridge.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“How do you know all these names?” my mother asked, laughing. I just know the Queen and his son Charles. I also used to know late Princess Diana. And when it comes to Africa, I know King Mswati from Swaziland.”

“Then you need to catch up on our Royal Family Tree then,” Steven said.

While he explained the intricacies of royalty, John went outside to check on the lorry. He came back and said that everything was alright. “There are too many people outside there though. There is too much excitement. Maybe we should get on with our business.”

“No, no, no. Sit down young man,” my father told him. “Your vehicle is in safe hands. Don’t worry.”

John sat down but we saw that his mind was elsewhere.

My father asked me to clear the table and reminded me to come back so that I could continue taking down some notes.

After living room was clean, we all sat down and resumed our talk.

“So my dear friends, tell me what is the purpose of your visit.”

John shifted in his seat and let Alison do the talking.

“Thank you Sir for receiving us in your house. Before leaving England, we saw a documentary about underdeveloped countries.”

“Oh,” my father said. “Underdeveloped countries? Who ever came up with such a foolish appellation?”

“We could not take our eyes off those poor kids,” she said, visibly shaken by her experience in England.

“We knew we had to do something. You know when you see such physical and mental distress, you cannot just sit down and do nothing about it. No, you can’t. We had to come as soon as the opportunity arose.”

“Oh, I feel your pain my daughter,” my mother said. “I feel your pain.”

“We told ourselves that people shouldn’t be living like that in the twenty-first century,” Mary added.

“We cannot let people live like that in what we call our modern times.”

“Oh,” my father said. “I understand you.”

“So we came up with this idea of raising some funds to buy things for the poor kids here.”

My father thought for a moment, his head resting in his right palm. He shook his head and then opened his mouth:

“I understand your concern. It is such an honourable thing to do, to think of other people’s pain or suffering. I can see your journey. You left your homes in order to do this. It is an honourable thing to do. Not many people in our own country will do such a thing. Not many people will lift a finger to help a poor child.”

“True, true. I agree with you *Dada*,” my mother said.

“However, let me tell you something our dear visitors. In our custom, we do not tell an adult that he is wrong in front of a child.”

“I agree.”

“We do not do such a thing.”

“No *Dada*.”

“But today will be an exception. Today, I will have to tell you where you have erred my dear visitors. Please do understand that my intention is not to offend you.”

“No, we aren’t going to be upset,” Alison said.

“You know, we can all learn from each other. I can teach you something and you can teach me something. Knowledge is a two-way process. No man is wiser than another, you understand that, don’t you?”

“Yes, we do.” Alison and Suzie said.

“No offence,” John said.

“*Namaste*.” Steven made a peace sign.

“I have thought about your honourable gesture and I think that it is not a reasonable thing to do. Not at all. If my neighbour sees that my children are crying because of hunger and he gives them a full chicken, do you think that those very children will want to stay in my house when they are fully aware that there is plenty of food just across the road?”

“No, I don’t think so. No, I think that your children will want to go to your neighbour’s house all the time,”

John replied.

“ I have another question for you John. Don't you have any poor people in your own country?”

“Yes, we do. We do, surely.”

“So why didn't you take those things that are in the vehicle to them?”

“The situation seemed more urgent here. I mean the children seemed poorer here. They had no shoes. They looked hungry. Some of them were just staying at home, not going to school.” “Oh, I understand.”

My father took off his glasses and put them on again. He thought for sometime and then finally asked my mother if she wanted to say something to our visitors.

“ I think the children will be happy with what these visitors have brought. I mean, I will never be able to afford whatever things these charitable people have brought,” my mother said emphatically.

I agreed with my mother. I didn't even want to think about what my father would do with the objects that were in the lorry outside.

“Well, I have another question for you dear visitors. What will happen when those things that you have brought to us come to an end? You know objects are not eternal. Where will we get the money to replace them? What will my children do if they see that I cannot afford to get them those things anymore? What will they do? Are they going to steal in order to have a taste of that life again?”

John shrugged his shoulders and looked at Steven. The latter said nothing.

“What is in that vehicle?”

Mary explained that they had mostly brought toys and games (dolls, toy soldiers, toy cars, fancy dress costumes, building bricks, puzzles, face painting kits, pretend play sets, styling heads, frisbees, etc). There were also some school bags, some shoes, some clothes and some fairy tale books to read. The more Mary listed the items, the more I became excited. We were finally going to be rich! We would be the envy of the whole village!

“How are you going to distribute those objects? You know, here, when one child has a mango, he shares it with all his friends. This will create a lot of jealous feelings. You think you are coming here to solve problems but in fact, you are a creating new ones. This is irresponsible behaviour.”

My mother nodded in agreement. Our visitors did not know what to say.

“I suggest that in the future, if you want to do a similar thing, come and see how we live first. Our needs are very different from yours. What might seem very important to you in England is something that we can live without here and vice-versa.”

Alison said: “ I understand what you are saying Sir, but it is really difficult for us to see images of children with big bellies staring at us. We have this strong urge to do something to alleviate their suffering. The children look unkempt and it seems like there is no one looking after them. We come with good intentions. Really, nothing else.”

“When our kids see that you are giving them free things, they think that there is more from where that came from. They think that you do not have to work in your country in order to earn a living. Do not be surprised when they come rushing at your borders. They think that you have an easy life but I’m sure that you have your own type of suffering. Life is not easy for everyone.”

After a lot of debate, we agreed that we had to rethink this whole issue of donations and aid. Our country had been free from colonialism for more than fifty years and we still seemed to be unable to take care of ourselves. The state of our hospitals was awful. Most of our schools were ramshackle buildings with no proper furniture and materials. Our roads were an eyesore. Our children were leaving us in scores, looking for greener pastures elsewhere. We were not economically independent. Complete strangers with no idea of what our culture, aspirations and hope as human beings would not be the ones to come to our rescue. How long would this last? Would Suzie, Steven, Alison and John be there in fifty years’ time again? No, this was nonsensical. It was time we pulled up our sleeves to create a safe future for our children and grandchildren. It was time to stop looking for scapegoats.

My mother said she was tired of cooking in a smoky kitchen. She didn’t want a cooker, no. There was no electricity in the village. Yet, she wanted a better life, better schools and better hospitals for her children. These were her basic needs. She also wanted to have more time to run a business and be able to look after her children. There were chores that were dreary, boring and repetitive that she didn’t want to do anymore: fetching water several times a day, fetching firewood, mending endless clothes, mending the thatched roof, as if there were no qualified engineers in the country! No, she could make better use of her time.

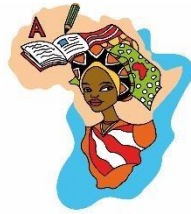
It wasn’t Alison’s role to save her though. She was the one to save herself. It was her responsibility, she said. It was her responsibility to look after herself. “We do not let our neighbours to come and raise our

children," she insisted. "Why do we think strangers that we have never ever seen before will come to solve our problems with objects that we don't really need?" My parents decided that our newly-met friends would take back what they had brought to us. Our family did not need all that. The village did not need all that. I almost cried. All those toys! All those clothes! All those shoes! Where would they go? It was good for me, he insisted. It was good for us, for everyone. I would understand, he said, I would understand when I became a parent myself.

What a huge disappointment! I didn't want to understand. I wanted those things. I wanted them so bad. After this incident, I did not talk to my father for days. I-mean-for-days. How could he do that? Even my friends could not believe it when they saw the lorry leaving with all those tantalising objects, never to come back. How could your father do such a thing to us? they said. How could he?

"Parents, oh dear parents," I told my mother. "I will never understand them. I will never, ever understand them. Never, ever."

"You will, my dear child," my mother said soothingly but firmly. "You will. Your mother is your mother even if she has one leg. She is still your mother. She is the person who brought you into this world."



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