

Short Story: I Will Not Learn Under a Mango Tree

Level: A2-B1

Today is the first and last day of school for me this year. I do not want to learn under a mango tree. My friends do not want to learn under a guava tree either. Even our teachers are shunning the popular baobab tree. 'FLEE THE TREES IN THREES, I BESEECH THEE', our headmaster jokes about it, but we know that this is not a laughing matter. We stopped laughing about such things a long time ago. We will not laugh about this today.

Last year, 312 pupils in Standard 8 sat for their Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination (PSLCE). They were from 3 classes. Out of those 312 pupils, only 13 were selected to continue their studies in a government conventional secondary school. 33 others were lucky enough to get a place in a community day secondary school. A select few went to private schools, dozens dropped out of school altogether and the stubborn remaining ones came back here to repeat. As if this was not enough, 3 experienced teachers left for greener pastures and were replaced with 3 unexperienced ones.

This year, I was supposed to start and finish my Standard 7. I did the first but I will not do the latter.

Before I go on, let me introduce myself. My name is Jack. I am the fourth-born child of Mr and Mrs Phiri. They are both from Dedza but we live in Salima now. I have two brothers and two sisters. My parents are small-scale farmers. They grow different types of crops such as maize and groundnuts that we mostly consume in our household. The little that is left is sold by my mother at the market when the days are good. My eldest sister also sells doughnuts in order to find money for buying school supplies and groceries such as salt, sugar and soap.

What are my ambitions? In the future, I would like to go to Bunda College to study Agriculture because I am very good at this subject. My teachers think I could easily become a doctor too. Who knows? I still have 6 more years to go before I start seriously thinking about such matters.

Today, I arrived at school in a jovial mood. I had everything I needed: a uniform, a new pair of shoes, 2 pens, a pencil with a rubber and a small container of soaked roasted maize. I was really looking forward to the notebook-giving ceremony too. I was eager to receive the clean and crispy exercise books and was planning to cover them with newspapers as soon as I got back home. I knew I would not get any textbooks because they always remained in the school library. There were too many pupils and those precious books would not be enough for everyone.

When we were at assembly in the school yard, a gust of wind, which came out of nowhere, sliced into the headmaster's speech and carried his words away into the blue sky. For a brief, recognisable and unforgettable

moment, thick clouds of dust billowed over our heads. I could not see anyone at all as dry leaves swirled senselessly around us in a mad but consistent way. We waited for the dust storm to abate. When it did, the trail of disaster in its wake could not be described with simple vocabulary. We were speechless, dumbfounded, tongue-tied, voiceless.

The teachers ran about, checking if everyone was alright. Then one by one, they started calling out our names: *Mercy Chisale, Misozi Mbewe, John Kamanga, Kondwani Banda, Justice Chidothi, Jack Phiri, Victor Kamanga...*The list went on and on and we listened carefully in case we missed something, someone.

We waited for the dust to settle but it would not. The headmaster decided to resume his speech all the same. We waited to hear the thunder in his words but all that we grasped was the thunderous crash of the biggest and oldest mango tree in our school. It was where my classmates and I were supposed to sit that very same morning. Our **classroom** was gone! Our beloved classroom was gone!

We all stared at our former classroom in wonder and awe. The broken tree trunk was lodged between two rows of desks and the branches had spread out into different directions. The remainder of the original tree jutted into the air ominously. Our eyes could not believe what we saw. Our mouths failed to describe the scene that was right in front of us.

“There will be no school today,” the headmaster finally announced in a deep solemn voice. He was trembling with fear, and anger, and pain. We stood there, not understanding his words, not understanding what he wanted to tell us.

“Go back home,” he repeated. “Go back home to where you are safe,” he said. “There will be no learning today, nor tomorrow, nor the day after tomorrow. Go back home until we remove this terrible thorn that is digging into our feet and tearing at our flesh. Let the birds and rodents reclaim their territory. **WE ARE HUMAN BEINGS AND WE HAVE A BASIC AND UNIVERSAL RIGHT TO EDUCATION.** My dear pupils, I want you to thrive and not survive. I want you to learn in a much better environment than we have right now. The ‘school’ we have here is a **mockery.**”

We listened and nodded. What a way to start our year! What would we do now? Where would we learn?

“My dear pupils, we will build **real** classroom blocks with the sweat of our hands because we are able to do so. When we do, going to secondary school will no longer be an impossible dream. When you have a thorn in your foot, you remove it yourself because it is you, and only you, that is feeling the pain. No one will do it for you.”

I imagined what it would feel like to learn in a **real** classroom with **real** walls and a **real** roof! I imagined being free from distractions and impromptu visits of the wind and rain. I imagined passing my PSLCE with flying colours and preparing to go to boarding school. We could do it! We were capable of doing it! We were smart and strong!



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