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Home Sweet Home

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"Progres" spluttered lazily down the long, dirty road which stretched before us like the coated tongue of an ailing man. She bore a precious and varied cargo of rice, salt and beans, cartons of soap and sugar, some yams and cassava; a basket of fowls tied by their legs loudly protesting their temporary imprisonment; a few goats too stunned to bleat; and men and women pressed together on the wooden benches in the body of the lorry like fish hung on a string to dry. I sat in the front seat beside the youthful driver who wore his cap facing backwards.

"Progres" was Dukana's pride, its only fast link with the modern world of the brick town where ships berthed and foreign goods were bought and sold. It made the journey daily and was much valued by all. It was proud witness to the progressive and co-operative, modern spirit of Dukana. In spite of the ominous warning on its tailboard, 'Look B4 you put head', I was happy it was available; but for it, the journey to Dukana would be intolerable. I would have had to ride pillion on a bicycle for some distance and then walk to Dukana.

The arduous journey to Dukana was not one to which I normally looked forward. I had to do it once a year when I returned home from college for my annual holiday with my mother. What made the bumpy, dirty ride worthwhile was the thought that at the end of it, there would be Mama, smiling

and happy to see me, embracing and hugging me and walking me home by the hand.

I always looked forward too to seeing my childhood friend Sira, who, though our paths had diverged, was still my best friend. We had attended school together and we loved each other, even as sisters. Like most Dukana girls, her education had been terminated abruptly; she now had four children and was again pregnant when last I had seen her. Sira was always the one who regaled me with tales of the buffoonery of Dukana's wags, Duzia and Bom. And she was full of the latest town gossip. I had, as usual, bought some sweets for her children.

On this particular day, I had reason to be more excited than usual about returning home. I had concluded my studies at long last, and I was returning home to teach in Dukana's only school, St Dominic's, my alma mater. I cherished the idea that I was going to give back something to my home and I was glad that I was going to live in Dukana and be part of the community. For Dukana is home, and as everyone will proudly tell you in these parts, 'home is home'. This cryptic saying means that it is far better than all those places you have visited or read about, that the dirt in which it wallows comfortably is to be preferred to the paved streets of the best cities of the world and its mud houses greater and more beautiful than the palaces of kings and queens of other lands. And how could anyone disagree? For to disagree was to be disloyal to communal wisdom and to be disloyal to that wisdom so carefully distilled through the ages was arrogance. And arrogance is a deadly sin in Dukana.

Therefore, Mama had advised me often to get to understand Dukana, to know all the men and women, the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak, the juju priests and the Christian

evangelists, the wicked and the kind, the very genie of the town. This is because it was only in this way that I would know what to do, what to say, when to say it and to whom, and thus be saved from the sin of arrogance. Mama's counsel was law, the more demanding of obedience because it was given in a soft, kind, reasonable way against which it was impossible to argue.

Of course, I knew Dukana as well as any young girl who had been born there might be expected to know it. But as I grew older and travelled, its delights had diminished in my eyes and comparison had dimmed its supposed qualities. Some, taking a cursory look at it, would have considered Dukana a clearing in the tropical rain forest peopled by three or four thousand men, women and children living in rickety mud huts and making a miserable living from small farmlands in the forest or from fishing in the steamy creeks around the village. Some such, not being of Dukana origin, would hold that the absence of a health clinic, of a good school, of pipe-borne water, of electricity, was a blight on the town, and would think it primeval.

Such ill-informed, malicious people might look at its emaciated, illiterate population and assert that there was malnutrition, that disease was rampant, that life for its inhabitants was brutish and short. And they would dismiss it as doomed in a modern world where man was headed for space and science had transformed man's ability to control his environment.

No one worthy of his or her name and who owned any allegiance by birth to Dukana could be expected to agree with such a viewpoint. And I, for one, could not agree. The Chief of Dukana, we all knew, lived in a palace. The occasional letter from the District Administrator was addressed to the Palace.

Our elders sat in a Council of Chiefs handing out justice according to pristine and unwritten laws. And if anyone dared suggest that Dukana was not a kingdom equal to any other on earth, we poured scorn and contempt on him.

Had not Dukana fought, and won wars against neighbouring kingdoms? Had she not preserved her independence from time immemorial? And did the people need anyone to feed them? Was there not peace? And did not people go about their daily chores in tranquillity? And if anyone thought Dukana was not progressive, what about the school they had established which had been duly approved by Government to present pupils for the elementary six certificate?

And what of their lorry "Progres" which was the only vehicular transport serving Dukana and her neighbours? And for water there was Maagum, a narrow stream, full of vegetation, flowing lazily between the stems and roots of giant trees. It came fully alive in the rainy season. To ensure that she continued to flow in the dry season, Dukana had deified her, finding in her lean thin watery harvest, the breasts of a goddess whom the sacrifice of a chick would pacify. If she did not respond charitably in one year, the next year would be better. And so on and so forth.

Such were the thoughts which crossed my mind as "Progres" gathered speed and careered dangerously towards Dukana. Its driver was a 'son of the soil', that is to say, his umbilical cord was buried in Dukana. He wished everyone to know the fact. 'Don't talk when a freeborn is talking,' he would gruffly shout at the conductor. I could see that he wanted to impress me. He yelled at his brakes, he exhorted "Progres" to move like a lady, a fine lady, an educated lady. He cursed the goats and chicken which crossed the road leisurely, oblivious of the power of "Progres" and himself to inflict instant pain and death.

And every village on the road to Dukana at which he was forced to stop so that passengers could disembark and embark, was described as 'this bush town'. I must have exasperated him by my silence and studied indifference to his antics. And he took it out on me by pressing harder on the accelerator. And when the passengers at the back of the lorry complained and wailed aloud for caution and care, he drove even more furiously, whistling noisily the while, careless of our limbs and lives.

We drove past sleepy little villages hacked out of the forest, fondly embracing the earth and foliage. We drove past farms planted with a mixture of yams, cassava, maize, pepper and melon, mostly stunted and crying for fertilizers. We went swiftly past men riding rickety bicycles and women with large bundles of firewood or huge white basins on their heads and babies tied to their backs with dirty rags. Once in a while, a building of modern construction, properly painted and maintained, would peep out of the bush, a reminder of other possibilities. Now and again, we would drive past a gas flare reminding us that this was oil-bearing country and that from the bowels of this land came the much-sought-after liquid which fuelled the wheels of modern civilisation.

I felt then that excruciating pain which knowledge confers on those who can discern the gulf which divides what is and what could be. And my mind drifted to the men and women of Dukana acting out their lives against a backdrop of great forces they would never understand. I thought at length about them, the men and women whom I knew were awaiting my return because they were my relatives – aunts, uncles, cousins, my kin. And I felt for them.

I must have dozed off because when I opened my eyes, "Progres" had screeched to a stop. We were in the Dukana

town square, an opening in the middle of the town where the motorable road abruptly stopped. On all sides of the opening were mud houses, of a square construction covered by raffia palms. Now and again, in the confusion of houses was the odd mud house covered with rusty corrugated iron sheets and, much more rarely, a brick house, unplastered and unpainted, its windows boarded with planks or old newspapers turned dull yellow.

For you must understand that building a brick house in Dukana is the task of a life-time. When its proud owner finds some loose change he buys a bag of cement, makes bricks and adds them to the existing structure. In this slow, laborious way, the block work might be completed over five or ten years. Then a bundle of corrugated iron sheets is added each year until the entire structure is roofed. The doors and windows might come later or not at all, for after all, is not a house the roof over your head to keep out rain and sun? Once there is a roof, and there are walls, the owner moves in. This might be ten years or more after the commencement of construction. Time does not matter in Dukana.

As I expected, Mama was waiting when "Progres" arrived. She had been waiting all afternoon. I climbed out of my seat and fell into her arms. We cried for joy. Duzia, the lame one who never misses a scene of this sort, was there, reporter-like, taking in the scene and obliging us with a running commentary.

"That's what I have always said," says he. "There is nothing like having a beautiful, educated daughter. That's the way I always hug mine when she returns from a long journey. I say, young woman, I could do with a bit of a warm embrace myself." Everyone knew that Duzia had no children. They greeted his words with derisive laughter.

"Eh, you good-for-nothing man, Bom, come here and help our young Miss.

You don't expect her to carry her box home, do you?"

In the twinkling of an eye, a small, lean man in a tattered and dirty singlet had stepped forward to help bring my portmanteau from the back of the lorry. He made quite a show of carrying the box, pretending that it was very heavy.

"Bom, say, our young Miss has arrived heavily laden with all the good things of this earth. I should think Dukana will soon be floating on a sea of wealth," Duzia interposed.

"I should think so, Duzia," Bom said. "I won't say any more till we get home and I see our young Miss open this box and share her wealth with us."

"Ah, there you have things wrong. Don't you see her mother hovering hawk-like around her? You think she'll allow anyone to touch a pin of her daughter's? You don't know that woman."

"Go to Duzia," Mama said. "You know a lot more about me than I know about myself. I wonder what you'd do if you could walk upright like the rest of us." "I shouldn't be here with you, then. I'd just take your luscious daughter away to the end of the world."

We all laughed. We were already on our way home. Mama and I. Bom carried my portmanteau on his head in front of us.

By the time we got home, just a few hundred yards away, a small crowd had already gathered in Mama's sitting room. They came in the usual assortment of rags: gowns picked up from the stalls of second-hand clothes traders, singlets bearing the words 'Oxford University', mildewed blouses. Some women wore shirts that were meant for men; one of them was in a printed cotton nightgown that had faded beyond recognition. The men tied loin cloths round their waists; some had neither shirt nor singlet.

They kept up a stream of conversation, chattering excitedly and laughing. They either stared at me, or politely bade me welcome. There was pride in their eyes, I think. Pride that I had gone out to the world to acquire the new knowledge, new treasures; and that I had returned to plant some new seeds in the 'Dukana earth'. It was Duzia who put it most succinctly when he finally crawled up to us and ordered me out of my seat, so he could sit down.

"Daughter of mine," says he, "you don't know what your arrival means to us."

"We are poor and we are ignorant, but we know a good thing when we see it, even though it is beyond our reach. You're going to change the life of the women in Dukana. But whatever you do, don't teach them to disobey their husbands. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life judging cases of wife-beating."

I laughed.

"Ah, so you laugh. And laugh you may. The advice I give is good and it's free.

I say I hate all wife-beaters and I hate beating wives. I won't touch them with the smallest of my flabby toes."

The crowd giggled.

"What I want to know is, when is Miss going to open her box? I could do with a few of those goodies from the township," Bom said.

"Go then, you good-for-nothing fellow," said Duzia. "You should be giving her gifts, and here you are begging for dogs' droppings for your wide nostrils. I say, Woman, give us a pinch of snuff." This latter to my mother.

Mama had already prepared for this contingency. She opened the door to her room and after rummaging in there for a while, returned with a bottle of gin and a snuffbox. The

snuffbox passed from hand to hand and was soon emptied. The house was filled with the noise of sneezes and nose-blowing with mucus generously spread on the floor followed by the hard rubbing of bare feet on the screed floor. Then the tiny glass passed from hand to hand, the hard liquor lubricating the innards of the men and women.

Soon the men and women turned to song and dance. They composed extempore, praying to the gods that there be happiness, that they send their blessings so that a new day might dawn on Dukana. And they prayed the gods of Dukana that they bid the waves of the mighty ocean be still so we could cross the seas together to the realms of peace beyond.

As they sang, they danced their prayers, their wishes and their hopes. In the twirling and twisting of waists and shoulders, in the rhythmic beating of the simple drums, I heard the call of nativity and I saw what united me with them inextricably, a bond which neither education nor distance nor time could destroy. And I leapt to my feet and joined them in their expression of joy.

It did not last long, that spontaneous outburst of joy. Gradually, the song died down, the music ceased and the room thinned out. Night had begun to fall. Dukana slunk off noiselessly, the surrounding darkness swallowing them as they disappeared from Mama's house.

Mama and I had dinner together. It was a simple meal - pounded yam and hot peppery fish broth. I was tired and did not speak much. Mama said how happy she was I had returned and how delightful that Dukana had turned out to give me a fitting welcome.

We had hardly finished our dinner when Waale, Mama's best friend, came in.

She was a small emaciated woman with a pointed nose and

small, sharp teeth. She came in, almost ghostlike, out of the enveloping darkness into the wan light of the hurricane lamp. I did not recognise her immediately, but when she greeted Mama, I knew the voice could only be hers. I sprang to my feet and fell into her outstretched arms. I could feel her arms tighten around me as a sob escaped her involuntarily. And when she held me gently away, the better to see me against the light, I noticed how much she had aged. Her face was wrinkled and grizzled and there were many grey spirals in her hair.

"Ah, my beauty, my lovely girl, the song in my heart, the joy of my life, you are back. How you've grown. The baby of yesterday is today's elegant woman," said she half to me and half to Mama.

"It's incredible," Mama said with a hint of pride.

"She's going to make a grandmother of you sooner than you realise."

"The sooner the better. I've waited long enough as it is. I should love to hold a grandson in my arms before I die."

"Don't think of death. Life is what matters. Your life. When you see her, you should pray for long life."

"Amen," Mama said.

My friend, Sira, was Waale's only daughter. As I said, we had grown up together, and had attended school together. She had not been able to complete her elementary schooling, although she was a brilliant girl. It was said that her mother could not pay her fees. But that was only an excuse. Her parents had wanted her to have children, to procreate so that the family would not die off. And she had had to obey them. She had not married and her four children were by four different men. I suspected her fifth pregnancy was by a fifth man.

I had not seen her all evening and I wondered what the

matter was. It was most unlike her to be absent on the day of my arrival in town. I asked her mother after her.

Her face fell immediately. 'She's travelled,' she said evasively.

"Where to?" I asked.

"I don't actually know."

"When is she coming back?"

"I'm not very sure."

Mama kept looking hard at me. I was at a complete loss as to the meaning of Waale's evasiveness and Mama's evident distress at my questions. I decided against asking further questions. Mama offered her friend some supper. She sat down to eat with a 'There, there that's a darling. What would I do without you?'

I watched her as she dipped her fingers into the food and took the morsels into her mouth. She did not eat much, and took her leave as soon as she had finished, slinking into the night like a cat.

When she was gone, I asked Mama about Sira. I could see that Mama did not want to answer.

"Is she dead?" I asked, anxious. "No, she's not dead."

"Is she ill?"

"No, she's not ill."

"Then what's the matter?"

"The questions you do ask! You must be tired after your long journey. Why don't you go to bed? I've laid your bed already in the spare room and your box is in there."

I won't go until you tell me what's happened to my friend.

Mama saw I was determined to know; then she said, enjoining me to secrecy. 'Well, you remember her last pregnancy? She had twins. She could not stay in the town anymore. She went away across the river.'

I looked at Mama very closely. She averted her eyes from mine. 'She's not dead?' I inquired.

"Oh, no, she's not dead."

"And the twins?"

"I believe they died. And don't ask me any more questions." The words I wanted to say came flooding into my lips, but died there. I got up and walked heavily to my room and lay down. For a while I could not sleep and lay staring into the darkness.

And out of the bowels of the night came the rhythm of drums in the distance, the hooting of owls, the swooping and beeping of bats, the burping of toads, the humming of night birds and the words of a mournful song welcoming me to the embrace of the spirits of my home, my sweet home.