

26th June, 2022.

Incognito

You are no longer a toddler, you are eight or maybe nine, no one keeps precise records. Anyways, your parents treat you like a toddler because you are their last child and their only son. You are not their only last child though; you have a sister, a twin. You don't like her; you and her don't get on well, even when you were still in your mother's womb.

'Boy!' Your older sister would yell at you. 'Stop fighting with your sister.'

The three of you are coming from church, it's late afternoon on a Sunday. You have left the rest of the family talking to the pastor. The pastor is new in the village and your mother thought it wise to introduce her five unmarried daughters to him. Your older sister, the one you are walking home with, is still too young to get a husband and she was sent home along with you toddlers.

'Boy!' she yells again, 'I told you to stop hitting your sister!'

'She started it first.' You tell her.

'No, I didn't!' your twin sister interjects, 'He is the one pushing me away from the road.'

It's not a road, it's just a well-trodden footpath. There is no single road in the village. There are dozens of them, footpaths, connecting hundreds of huts in the village. It's an old village hundreds of kilometres from the nearest town. The bus only comes once a week from the city. The nearest school is in another village, five kilometres away. Not that it matters much to you but the only man who has a wireless radio in the village is not your father and at your age, you are yet to see the magic called electricity.

'Girl, stop nagging your brother now,' your older sister screams somewhere behind you, 'and apologise to him now!'

Your foe shakes her head, refusing to be defeated in that manner. She is short, dark skinned and as thin as a stick. She has black hair and is donning a plain blue dress. She is bare footed; your parents can't afford to buy shoes for you all.

'He started it,' your twin starts, 'I won't apologise to him'.

You are angry at the disrespect your sister flings at you. She doesn't listen to what your mother says, about you being their only brother and will be her father-figure when your own father passes on. All those Sunday School Bible Teachings about her submitting to a man are stupid to her. You are very angry at her.

'Boy, come back here!' Your older sister commands, 'Where do you think you are going?'

You don't answer her or turn around; you continue your way off the footpath into the bushes. You decide to go to the kopje and cool off or else you might end up hitting your twin. You don't like hitting her, your mother told you never to hit women.

The kopje is where you and other boys of your age hang around when you have done your house chores. It's quite far from the village. On the kopje, you can see the entire village, all the way from the grocery store to the billboard. The billboard is next to the river. The White men put up the billboard and wrote that they were going to turn the river in to a reservoir in March of 1967. You can't read or write; it was your sister who told you what was written on the board.

There is no one at the kopje. You expected it anyways, your group doesn't hang around on Sundays. After church no one is expected to be seen roaming about the village. It's a rule every parent gives their child for no good reason at all. You sit by yourself and watch the sun dip its toes into the earth.

You don't want to arrive late, so you spring up and head home. You decide to take a shortcut, the one that pass through your neighbour's orchard. Your neighbour has the finest banana trees in the whole village, it would be wrong not to pluck a couple and eat them on your way home.

'Boy?'

You are startled by the hesitant feminine voice. You slowly turn around. It's not the owner of the orchard, you are relieved a bit, but you don't know who she is.

'Boy is that really you?' the girl asks taking a step towards you. You take a step back. You don't know her although she looks familiar. She is a teenager and looks like any one of your seven sisters. You know your sisters well, but she is not your sister. You turn and start running away. You only glance once to see her running towards your own homestead. You realize then that's what you should have done, run home not back to the kopje.

You sit on the kopje, mesmerised by the beauty of the cloudless sky. You have gazed at the stars a hundred nights before but on this night the constellations call to you. You huddle between rock and try to sleep but the face of the girl who tried to capture you haunts your mind. You don't think much about the reason she ran to your homestead, maybe to wait for you there?

It's morning; you don't remember when you dozed off. It was maybe during your prayer to God from church or maybe when you were begging your ancestors to protect you from the chilly night, but morning is finally upon you. You have to rush home or else your mother will be worried. She is already worried, you know that, but she might be easily persuaded to give you fewer whips if you were to arrive home early. This is not your first time of not sleeping at home, you already know the drill.

You rush down to the river to wash your face. You are still in your Sunday best and it's better you arrive home presentable. You wash your face in the chilly waters and start making your way home. You see your mother coming down to the river, there is a bucket in her hand. She sees you coming from the riverbank.

'Boy?' The woman who looks like your mother asks. "Is that you Boy?"

You don't know this woman, she might be your mother's sister or relative, but you have already been warned by your parents not to talk to strangers. You flee from the mad woman screaming your name. You run through the orchard towards your home. You only took a quick look in the orchard to see if the teenage girl from the previous night is still there. If she finds you, you are afraid she will not let you go home.

You see her picking up green mangoes. A sigh of relief escapes your mouth, it's not the girl but an old woman. She is probably one of the wanderers who beg for food on their way to nowhere, you are not sure.

'Will you help me here, my grandson?' she calls to you. You move closer to help her; you feel pity for her. You pick a couple of mangoes and place them into her plastic bag.

'Help me to sit on the ground young man.' She commands you and you follow. 'I have waited for this moment for a long time Boy.'

You look at the old woman who calls you by name. She looks familiar but you can't place her. You don't know what to make of her.

'I knew you would come back again boy to see me before I die.' The old woman sobs. You are confused.

Few days after her mother's burial, Santa was sitting under the avocado tree shade in the late afternoon when she saw a stranger walk towards the house. The stranger did not do the customary wailing for the dead as expected of her, she just walked up to the gate and knocked. Santa stood up and dragged her feet to open the gate for the stranger. Although she was in her fifties, Santa could feel old age taking hold of her bones. How could she not look old, she had borne twelve sons in her prime.

The visitor who was at the gate looked out of place. She wore a pink dress and high heels, like the one the school mistresses wore. She was definitely not from the village. No one from the village wore heels to walk in the muddy and cow dung infested streets. The visitor looked young, maybe thirty, but Santa wasn't sure; pretty dressed people always look young.

'Sisi Santa, it's me Rujeko,' the stranger peering at the gate said, 'I have come back home'.

Santa opened the gate for her younger sister and gave her a hug. She smelt unfamiliar and foreign, the way someone new smelt like. She was like a stranger after all, Rujeko hadn't been home in twenty years. Last time Santa had seen her younger sister, Rujeko was still a teenager. It was few days after their father had died, Rujeko had an episode. She left home days later when everybody on the village coerced their mother to take Rujeko to a nearby Witchdoctor who would treat Rujeko's mind.

Between the hugging, tears fell, and mouths blabbed how they had missed each other.

'If only you had come earlier,' Santa said under her breath. She wasn't about to start a fight with a sister she hadn't seen in decades, 'if only you had come back a week earlier to ask for mother's forgiveness before she had died'.

'How are the rest of our sisters?' Rujeko asked after condolences had been passed back and forth.

"They are happy and in good health." Santa lied. Santa wasn't sure if Rujeko could take the crushing disappointment and anger of her six older sisters. Santa had always known Rujeko as the bullied youngest daughter. Despite Santa being only a year older than her, they seemed not family.

‘We have a lot to talk about but first let me go to the river and fetch bathing water, I had a long journey from the city,’ Rujeko said as she grabbed a bucket and made her way to the river. The river wasn't far, maybe a hundred yards or so from the house.

Santa sat down under the tree again. Her gaze was fixed on Rujeko who was making her way to the river, with a yellow bucket in hand. The river was downhill; however, the bank was covered with the shrubs and tall grass. The moment her sister disappeared out of sight; Santa started wondering how she would tell her prodigal sister that their mother had left the house to Rujeko. In a way, she was thrilled to have her back, however a lingering fear of losing her again made her tread carefully on what she would talk to her about.

Before she had time to settle on her thoughts, Santa saw a mad woman running from the direction Rujeko disappeared to. No, it wasn't just a random mad woman. It was Rujeko racing along with the wind back to the homestead.

Santa took a quick glance in the neighbours' house to see if anyone were out and about to witness the spectacle. Fortunately, the September scorching sun overhead had kept everyone indoors.

‘Sisi Santa, come and see quickly!’ she shouted as she approached the gates

"What is it Rujeko?"

‘I saw him.’ The words came out between her breaths. ‘I saw Ranganai washing his face in the river.’

‘Don't do this again.’

‘It's true Sisi!’ Rujeko begged.

‘Please don't.’

Once Upon a time, the two sisters had a brother. His name was Ranganai and was Rujeko's twin. The two were close, a special bond that the rest of the family could not understand. One Sunday afternoon when the trio, Santa, Ranganai, and Rujeko were coming from church, Ranganai disappeared into the woods and was never to be seen nor heard from again. The whole family was devastated, Rujeko took it the hardest, more than their own mother.

After five years of searching to no avail, their father gave up and died. He left an already grieving wife and seven daughters. Few days after they buried their father; Rujeko who was fetching some mangoes from their neighbours orchard, came back home screaming and shouting that she had seen Ranganai picking bananas in the same orchard. The family accompanied by

half of the village went to search. They found nothing, not even a footprint. Rujeko was punished severely, their mother wasn't allowed to let her go freely. Rujeko insisted that it was not a prank, no one believed her. Some village elders encouraged their mother to seek help from a witch doctor who was an expert in diseases of the mind. Rujeko begged their mother to believe her, but she looked the other way. Rujeko then packed her things and left.

‘Rujeko, please don't do this.’ Santa pleaded again.

Santa could see her sister slumbering on the gate, desperately wanted to be believed. It didn't matter, she wanted Rujeko to stay. Santa lied to her, convinced her to stay, and whispered in to Rujeko's ears that the ghost of their lost brother wanted to visit her at their birth home.

The end.