

## Contrasts

by Joshua Guthrie

Thomas grimaced as his father hit a large pothole in the asphalt road. Sighing, he glanced up from his Nintendo DSi distractedly. "*It's so far to granddad and grandma's house in Nashville; two whole hours! Why couldn't everyone come visit us for a change one year?*", he thought angrily to himself. It was Christmas day, and his family was on their way to Nashville, Tennessee to celebrate with all of the relatives on his dad's side of the family.

"Dad, how much *longer?*" Thomas asked in a strained voice to his father who was sitting in the driver's seat, who then told him that they were only half way there. Thomas groaned; what would he find to do in that time?

"Why don't you play 20 questions with your sister?" his mother suggested. Thomas glanced sideways at his twin. His 17 year old sister Sarah was rapidly texting on her cell and looked to be in an irritable mood. It would be best not to set her off at the moment... He grimaced; siblings could be such a pain!

At long last, the family SUV pulled into the driveway of a large, beautiful, two story brick house in a wealthy suburb of Nashville. Everyone hurried inside and the usual greetings went around; Uncle Ted and Aunt Ruth were watching football on a huge plasma screen TV while their two younger children were playing a noisy game of UNO nearby. Granddad came in from the kitchen and hugged Thomas and Sarah while at the same time slipping crisp new twenty dollar bills into their hands. Grinning at each other, the two hurriedly thanked him, pocketed the money, and hurried into the kitchen.

"Come on in!" Grandma exclaimed. "Would you like some cookies dearies?" she asked, gesturing towards a tray of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. The two quickly snatched up a few of the treats with excited exclamations of, "Of course!"

"Grandma, don't you have any Coca-Cola?" Thomas asked as he rummaged through the huge refrigerator.

"Oh! No dear, I'm afraid I forgot to stock up." his Grandma answered apologetically.

"Aww, man! I guess I'll just have to settle for a Sprite then..." He sat down at the counter top with his cookies, soda, and a look of dejection. No one seemed to notice however, for the adults had all gathered and were chatting happily, and Sarah was texting again.

Just then, Uncle Dan and Aunt Beth arrived along with their five children. Thomas glanced up from his snack and watched as everyone else shook hands, hugged, and exclaimed how very much all of the children had grown! Pretty soon, however, the oldest son of the new arrivals detached himself from the crowd and made his way over to where Thomas was sitting.

"Hiya Thomas! How are you doing?" said Nathan, a smiling boy with freckles who was roughly the same age as Thomas. He offered his cousin a handshake.

Accepting the shake, Thomas said, "Well, I've just gotten over a cold - don't worry though, I'm not contagious." he said reassuringly. "It was so annoying; I felt so crummy!"

"Ah, I'm sorry to hear about that," Nathan replied. "Besides that, what's been going on with you in Jackson?"

"Oh, nothing much. Just boring school, for the most part." Thomas responded.

"The standard answer." Nathan winked. He looked at Thomas a little more intently for a second though, and followed up by asking, "You seem down. What's the problem?"

"Oh... well, it's nothing really." Thomas answered. "Grandma just forgot to get Coke-a-Cola for me like she always does."

"Is that all?" Nathan asked with a look of "*Really?*" on his face.

"Um... yeah." Thomas responded.

"No offense, but you had best be thankful that you have anything to drink at all! I've been reading lately about the global water crisis, specifically Sudan in Africa, and there are people in third world countries who have to walk four or more hours just to get to *contaminated* water! It's so sad, because the only water available has pathogens and bacteria in it which cause deadly diseases... It's so bad, one child dies every *fifteen seconds* due to water related diseases around the world!" Nathan shook his head sadly.

"That's, that's very interesting..." Thomas replied in a somewhat shaky voice. Just then, Nathan got called over by one of his uncles for an update on how school was going, so he quickly left. For the next ten minutes or so, Thomas sat in silence at the end of the counter contemplating what he had just heard. "*Is it really true that so many people die every day?*" He did some quick calculations in his head and came to the sudden realization that about 5,700 children die per day, providing what Nathan said was true... "*Heh, and here I am complaining about the lack of my favorite soda.*"

Pretty soon, however, he was called out of his reverie by his Grandmother announcing that it was time to eat. All of the cousins eagerly jumped up and everyone gathered together in the kitchen, where they then proceeded to fill their plates with all of the many dishes available. There was a magnificent holiday ham, turkey and dressing, sweet potato casserole, green beans, cranberry sauce, and fresh rolls all to be had, and plenty of it. Soon Thomas couldn't fit any more on his plate, so he went and sat down at the huge oak table. Once everyone had been seated, Grandpa said the blessing, and they all dug in.

As the food began to disappear and Thomas's stomach began to fill, he thought again about what Nathan had told him. It did not take him very long, however, to come to the conclusion that such conditions just did not exist. For he reasoned to himself, "*How could such poverty exist in the world while there is so much bounty elsewhere, such as in the USA?*"

It was just... impossible. And with that, he dug into his mound of sweet potatoes, laughing with the rest of the family.

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Many thousands of miles away and half way around the Earth...

Yekina grimaced as she scrapped her bare foot against a jagged stone on the dirt path before her. Scolding herself, she refocussed on the task at hand; hauling the large five gallon barrel to the watering hole. A twinge of pain pulsed in her foot, but she just ignored it; she was used to such suffering.

The sun beamed down upon the long line of young dark skinned women as they walked single-file down a narrow path which led through the Sudan wilderness. It was a

path that they all knew well, for they walked it every day. They had been walking for two and a half hours and were only half way to their destination. Everyone walked through the dust, the heat, and the humidity; no one spoke.

After five hours of walking, the familiar grove of trees appeared in the distance which signaled life to them all. Upon reaching the trees, the women walked into a steep hole about three yards across. Within the pit there was a small ledge around the bottom which surrounded a small body of brown, muddy water. This was their life source; they knew no other.

Mechanically, each one went down, filled up their plastic barrel with water, balanced it gracefully upon their heads, and climbed back out. It was now close to noon, and once everyone had acquired their quota for the day, they fell back into single file to make the long walk back home. Yekina sighed to herself as she mourned her people's lot in life, as she had done so many times before.

At long last, as the fifth hour of the afternoon approached, the welcome sight of Yekina's village appeared over the hill. Yekina's hut was to be found on the far side of the village, and as she walked through she took in the sights of the squalid poverty which her tribe lived in. The children were clothed in scanty rags and were running and through the reeking filth which permeated the streets.

Soon she reached her family's hut and stepped inside. Instantly the familiar smell of hot bodies assaulted her nose, but she paid it no attention. Gingerly lifting the plastic barrel from her head, she set it down in its usual place beside the door. Turning around, she took in the usual sight of her home. The hut was circular in shape, very small in size, and consisted of one room. Around the outer perimeter were a series of simple beds made from mats of grass and straw. Aside from these there was only a small crude table against one wall; the cooking was all done outside in the open.

Her two younger brothers, Makuae and Malik who were 9 and 12, were sitting in a corner playing with a small ball made of leaves and mud. There was another figure within the enclosure aside from them, however. In the farthest corner of the hut, kneeling away from her, was a white haired woman. "Yekina, dear child, is that you?" The elderly woman enquired of the girl without turning around. Her voice cracked with emotion.

"Yes grandmother, it is I." Yekina responded in a tentative voice. She knew what was coming.

Her Grandmother paused, but then said, "Your brother, Rakua... he is dead."

Yekina bit her lip and closed her eyes as a lone tear found its way down one of her dark cheeks. After a minute of silence, she walked gently over to her grandmother and knelt by her side, patting her on the shoulder as she did so. She thought of the many family members the cruel fates had decided to rip from her... Her father had been forced into military service some six years ago, her mother had died of AIDS three years after that, her older sister had been abducted in a tribal raid last year and was undoubtedly made a slave in the sex trade soon after. And now, her oldest brother had left them due to a severe pathogenic water borne disease, leaving herself, her grandmother, and her two younger brothers. She grimaced; siblings were one of the most valuable possessions in the world!

She was only sixteen; how could they continue on? Rakua had been the main bread winner in the family, but now... She sighed, but quickly firmed her chin. They

would just keep fighting; they had done so for many years now. But... *what for?* she asked herself. Just to live one more day?

Shaking her head in frustration, she asked her grandmother, "Has his body already been buried?" more to distract herself from the nagging questions than anything else.

"Yes, dear. He died not two hours after you left this morning." came the reply.

Yekina nodded. "I had best get the meal ready then." The young women stood up and began to prepare their daily meal; it was their only meal of the day because there was not enough supplies in the village for more.

As she began to mix beans and a scant amount of vegetables into the brown water over a small open fire, Malik walked over. "Sister, I was listening to one of the herdsman today and I heard about this amazing place!" he began with a look of wonder on his young face.

"What was it?" Yekina asked him, giving the soup a few stirs while smiling at him. *Which of my brothers will be the next to go?* She asked herself sadly.

"He was talking about the land of... America, I think." Malik responded eagerly. "There, everyone has more than enough to eat, and there are even magical shiny sticks which pour out water in their very homes!"

"Wouldn't that get everything muddy inside?" the girl asked quizzically.

Malik shook his head. "Oh no! Their houses are made of brick and wood; no dirt can get inside! Also, because they can just get water right there, everyone is able to go to school and work!"

"That's, that's very interesting..." Yekina responded in a somewhat shaky voice. It had always been her greatest and life-long dream to go to school, but she never had the time or means. "Where did the man say this land was?" she asked.

Malik frowned. "Somewhere very far away... I guess we'll never visit it, will we sister?"

"No... I doubt that we will." Yekina said shaking her head sadly. Very soon the meal was ready, and the small family of four sat around eating the meager meal in silence.

A little while afterwards, it was time to sleep for the night. Grandmother placed a screen made of straw at the front door to ward off mosquitoes, though Yekina knew it wouldn't help very much. As she lay in bed, the young girl imagined the land that Malik had described to her. It seemed magical; too good to be true. If only she could go there; if only someone would help her. There was such a fine thread holding all of them from death, and it was only a matter of time before they all fell into the void...

It did not take her very long, however, to come to the conclusion that such a land as America could not exist. It was a myth, for She reasoned to herself, *"How could such luxury exist in the world while there is so much poverty elsewhere, such as here in my village?"*

It was just... impossible. And with that, she dug into her sleeping mat, crying with the rest of her world.....

It doesn't have to be this way. She can live to see another day.

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