

It's Nice to be Nice

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A MAN AND A WOMAN ARE WALKING THROUGH A CROWDED MARKET. THE ALLEYS of the market are narrow and twisting. To move, they must edge past stacks of cinnabar-coloured smoked catfish, rolls of multicoloured fabric, round lettuces piled like decapitated heads, bowls of raw, labial oysters steaming in the open sun. The air, blood-hot, is tinted orange by the fine dust that rises from the busy roadside and hangs over the city. The smell of rotting fish and feces swells with the heat and clings to the net of dust.

Because there are no other tourists, the vendors clamour for the couple's attention, blowing the dust from wooden carvings and holding them up for inspection like newborns. The man holds himself apart— "Very nice, no thank you... Yes, no, maybe later"—while Maria tries on a pair of sandals here, fingers a span of material there. They are surprised at the prices; everything is more expensive than they had anticipated. Their deflated hopes of living large in this country have collapsed, and they hold tightly to the colourful banknotes in their pockets.

"Toubab!" a passing child shouts into his face. "Toubab!" says another. "Toubab!" cries a smiling woman. White man! White woman! He was told to expect this harmless appellation, but he senses something darker behind it. This word, derived from his ancestors, who landed on these same shores crying Convert! Convert!, strikes him like the point of a spear.

In the marketplace, the word is unavoidable. Nevertheless, they are here, in the market, because it is the thing for visitors in this city to do, because wandering and gawking through such labyrinths of foreign goods is what Toubabs everywhere do.

Through the tangle of iron and breeze block, he spies, as though through a keyhole, a polygon of blue. The ocean. Space. They make for it, stepping past women offering oranges, ballcaps, and bolts of cloth, finally shooting out into the open air of the beach like a cork popping from a bottle. The ocean breeze is cool on their tender skin. A

clear view of ships, ferries, small fishing boats adrift at anchor set below a horizon line made indefinable by a veil of windswept sand.

A powership, a giant floating generator draped in an immense Turkish flag, is moored off the coast. The muscled hum of its inner workings pumping electricity to the city sends a low and steady tremor through the air. It occurs to him that it, like them, this ship has come from afar to provide some light in the darkness. It through actual light, them through their volunteering.

The old man appears as though he has crawled from out his back pocket. He wears a dirty black sweatshirt, the hood drawn up around his face. A blue medical mask is slung under his chin. The smell of old sweat hangs from him, wafting with his swinging arms.

“What is your name?” the old man says.

They tell the old man their names.

“Where are you staying?”

They say the name of the medical clinic where they volunteer, above which they have a little room. As they talk, they continue along the beach, eager to shake off the old man as they have shaken off countless such men since they arrived in this country.

“Don’t you recognize me?” the old man says, pulling down his hood to show his dark, sallow face.

It is an effort not to stare, but he looks at the old man more closely. Scarlet cuticles cradling wet eyes. A lip spiked with sparse hairs. Mottled gums from which jut four bony teeth. “Don’t you recognize me?” the old man says again. “You pass me every day! I am Lamin! Your gardener!”

He does not recognize the old man, but if he is being honest with himself, he doesn’t recognize anyone as well as he might here. Unfamiliar facial patterns blend together. The searing heat limits his cognition and patience. He is hailed too many times each day to remember who he has and has not met. There is, too,

the chance—he must be honest with himself—that he has not truly looked at anyone, but rather beyond them, to any route of escape away from their company. Now, faced with Lamin’s challenge, he does not wish to appear rude or superior. “Of course,” he says. “Of course, I remember.”

“Every day, the others are always walking by me,” Lamin says. “Dutch, Americans, they walk past with their eyes down. But not you two. You always stop and say hello. Do you know Fatou? We are always saying how you are so nice. It’s nice to be nice.”

“That’s true.”

“And it doesn’t cost anything to be polite.”

He is relieved to hear Lamin say this, because, not only is it what he believes, it is something he has longed to hear in this country. He is tired of feeling like a symbol of some otherness, of wealth, of privilege. He is tired of the hanging threads of conversations, offers of guidance, references to cousins selling tour packages, all for a good price, a very good price, a local price, a price to be nice. Free politeness: it is the altruism he can get behind.

“Where were you yesterday?” Lamin says.

“What happened yesterday?”

“It was my wedding day! Where were you? I was looking for you.”

He racks his memory for some mention of a wedding at the clinic, but finds nothing. He turns to Maria, who looks doubtful. “Congratulations,” he tells Lamin, who touches his chest in reply.

“Thank you, thank you. You are giving me good feelings.”

They stop and watch a pirogue, hand-painted in reds, blues, and greens, alight on the beach. A crowd rushes forward and fishermen begin to pitch lustrous guitarfish into waiting hands. The creatures, one after the other, are dragged across the sand and flung onto a rubbery pile of disintegrating nature.

“Fish,” Lamin says, kneeling beside the slumping hill of flesh, and slapping a wet fish-back. “It’s good. Good fish. Why aren’t you smiling? This is the smiling coast. You must smile.” The fishermen stare at the couple with bloodshot eyes, long muscles wet from handling the fish. “Do not worry about them,” Lamin says, standing. “You are safe with me. You must come to my village. We are poor people, but we like guests.”

They do not want to go to Lamin’s village. They have seen poverty. Not much, but they have seen it. He, for one, is aware of its effects on society, on himself. It is their job, and today is a day for relaxation. A relaxing walk on the beach. What good will him looking at poverty do anyone now? He has no desire to see flies drinking from the pools of children’s eyes, to walk past women with their arms stretched out in search of alms. He only wants to be left in peace, to walk along the beach in peace. But, here again, he does not want to appear rude or ungrateful in this country where they are guests. After all, he reminds himself, is the darkness of poverty not what their work would have them illuminate? “Come,” Lamin says. “Come. It is not far. You are safe with me. Together we will meet my new wife.” And so they go.

They reach a complex of corrugated tin. “This is my village. My grandfather is the imam here. Very respected man. You are giving me good feelings. Thank you so much. It’s nice to be nice, isn’t it?”

To enter the village, they must pick their way around a pirogue in the throes of construction. The bevelled tree trunk is scored with chisel and burn marks, the brand of a circular saw. Saw in hand, the carpenter eyes them dispassionately, his foot against a thick plank. “Mahogany,” Lamin says, tapping the long wooden keel. “Good wood. Local wood.” As they pass, the saw screams to life.

As they enter the village, he slows his step to feel the reassuring presence of Maria against his back. Beside a

stream of silver water cutting a tunnel through the dirt between a row of tin shacks, two small children with runny noses bunch the dirty necklines of their shirts between their fists. One child squats, dips his cupped hands into the water, and drinks.

Lamin leads them further into the maze of shacks, finally stopping before several women communing around a bowl. They watch dumbly as the women palm masses of wet flour into fist-sized balls. In a pan of hot, sparkling oil, several of the soft white spheres crisp and brown.

“Doughnuts,” Lamin says. “Local food. Traditional food.”

Together, they nod appreciatively, as though these doughnuts are the first they have ever seen, and the only ones they may well ever see.

“I will show you my wife,” says Lamin, leading them to a small shack where, at his command, a woman emerges. She is young, much younger than Lamin. Though she is slight, her belly bulges with the smoothness of a natal bump. With her hands folded over her abdomen, her eyes averted, she holds herself apart.

Smiling his loose smile, Lamin waves them down onto a long plank of mahogany. “We sit, we sit.” The lower themselves down while Lamin squats beside them on the sand. Passersby smile at the couple, say “Toubab” or “Hello Toubab,” and ignore Lamin.

A moment of silence passes.

Lamin stands suddenly. “I will tell Grandfather you are here. It is *respect*.” At this last word, he plucks at the air, as if catching it as it passed by, invisible to the couple. He shuffles into a nearby shack, the entrance of which they cannot see.

With Lamin out of sight, he feels Maria’s grip firm and strange on his arm. “I want to go,” she says. “We don’t know him.”

“It’s fine,” he says. “We can’t just leave.” To leave now, it seems to him, would be a declaration that they

can come and go as they please; as though this village, these people, the entire country, exist solely for them. No. They must see this through to its conclusion, wherever it leads them.

Lamin returns to squat beside them. “Grandfather is very happy. He says you are very welcome. He says you are bringing good feelings to the village.” They can sense something in him has shifted. His voice is jagged, as though he has been choked. “Many, many Toubabs come here,” Lamin says. “Toubabs who come here, they buy a bag of rice for the village. They buy a large one or a small one. You can choose.” He names two exorbitant prices, corresponding to the large and small bags. “You can choose.” There is silence, into which he says again, “You can choose.”

By which he, the young man, understands there is no choice. He knows this is the social contract he agreed to, at least in part, upon arriving in this country. That he takes these moments in stride, and takes them with good grace, is expected of him. He must acquiesce. But he does not want to acquiesce. He is tired of holding himself ready for this moment, the drop of the other shoe, the reveal of the transaction. He is tired of affecting amazement at doughnuts, of being led from place to place and groomed for sympathies. He feels the affected amusement of the tourist coursing through him like a sickness. He is tired. He wants a relaxing day of walking along the beach. “No,” he says.

Hearing the word, Lamin suddenly begins to jerk up and down on his haunches. “No?” His new, throaty voice cracking. “What do you mean? Big or small. It is your choice.”

“We choose no. We choose to not buy any rice,” Maria says, squeezing his arm.

Lamin’s hands begin to shake profoundly. His muscles twitch. His lips quiver, his voice judders, grows louder. “What are you saying?”

“We’re leaving,” Maria says, as they all stand together.

“It doesn’t cost anything to be polite. It’s nice to be nice.” Lamin says, sputum forming on his lips at the rush of words. These words have ceased to be a shared aphorism, and now hang in the air between them exposed for the threat they are. If to be polite is free, there is a price to be paid for disagreement. “You know me. I am your gardener. You are giving me bad feelings.”

“There are no bad feelings.”

“You are giving me bad feelings. Don’t give me bad feelings!” Lamin yells, his chest pumping hard and fast. He rips the blue medical mask from his chin and crumples it in his fist. Spittle shoots from his mouth. “You are giving me bad feelings!”

“There are no bad feelings.”

“You are giving me bad feelings!”

They begin to move away, but Lamin blocks the path. He is slight, but his anger adds width to his shoulders, length to his arms. “You are disrespecting me.”

“We mean no disrespect.”

“You must choose.”

“We can talk about this at work,” he says. It is a weak tactic. There is now no doubt this old man is not the gardener.

Desperate, they turn and follow the silver stream deeper into the village, or the slum, as he allows himself to think of it now. Maria squeezes his hand, pulling and pushing him all at once. Lamin is fast behind them, trotting at their heels. “You are giving me bad feelings.”

They pass the shack into which Lamin had ducked to receive the grandfather’s blessing. There is no grandfather; from floor to ceiling the shack is stuffed with columns of bulging grain sacks.

He knows Lamin’s poverty absolves him of some measure of sin. But how much? By the same token, he knows that he carries some measure of his ancestor’s sin. But how much? Here, now, they are two men on either side of a wide gulf filled with sin. What grace

can he bring to bear upon them both?

He wants to treat the old man squarely, to take him at the value of this act, his threat. But he is a poor man, weak and unprivileged. Just the man who they are here to help: a poor, old, rheumy African who once said, "it's free to be polite."

But can he not also be a liar, a cheat, a man not above using physical threats to get his way?

He can already hear the voices on the other side of this moment, telling him he should have bought the rice, or that he should have fought the man, or run, or have been smart enough not to be led into the shantytown. That Lamin's claims—his job, his wedding, his rice—are the usual tricks one must become accustomed to brushing off in places like these. "That is the way in this country," the voices say. "That is how they are."

He has read Kant. Kant says that caring is a duty that arises from universal moral laws. Specifically, he argues we would be in breach of our nature as rational human beings if we claim we have no duty of care toward others.

He has also read Hegel, and knows offhand rudeness, the kind he so often metes out, stems from laziness, that people are only as moral as their needs allow them to be, that morality and principles are made and upheld on full stomachs. Stripped of what normally keeps them in denial about how kind and just they are, can one prevent a descent into easy, monochromos shortcuts?

A dead end. The slum terminates against a chain-link fence, on the other side of which hum the onshore mechanisms of the Turkish powership. The ship not only gives light, he realizes, but also power: power for saws, drills, any number of machines that cut and hack. He turns to see that the carpenter, the circular sawblade still gripped in his hand, has joined a small group come to watch them argue with Lamin. What good are his dead philosophers now?

From out a nearby shack run a group of children. "Toubab! Toubab!" they cry, latching onto the couple's legs. "No," Maria says, the word a single cry of protest. A fisherman appears, a potful of limp, stinking fish in his arms. "Can you please help us?" Maria says. The fisherman casts an eye over the fray, and moves on.

"Do you think they will help you?" Lamin says, a bony finger crooked at her. "They don't know you. They know me. They don't know you." The old man has moved in close, his primitive body-smell—sweat, urine—rises to their nostrils, gnaws at their minted hygiene.

As Lamin moves in closer, fear slips over him like a shawl. It is familiar, this fear. It is the same fear he has carried since his arrival. Fear of the water in the tap, fear of the emaciated pariah dogs on the street, fear of the men who lounge outside the clinic, fear of everything with the potential to change his world. "Please," he says, breaking a child's grip on his pantleg. "We want to leave."

Lamin's red-rimmed eyes flare. "Do you want to leave in peace?"

His skin prickles at these words. To leave in peace is all he desires. To leave and never return. It's nice to be nice. Maria's hand tightens on his, pinching his flesh.

"Do you want to leave here in peace?"

The old man will have a knife, he thinks. Or he will sink his teeth into my neck, my arm. He can already feel his skin giving way to blade and tooth, can feel his lifeblood draining from the thick fissures torn into his body. Their wrestle will cease to be a joined battle against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places, and will become one of flesh and blood. Is that where they will meet in fraternal bond? What troubled stream must flow within this old man? What poisoned well of generations past is about to surge over into the bruised lip of the future? And, if not now, when?

He and Maria will die here, he realizes. Here

among these people, who will watch them writhe with an impassive gaze. Their spilled blood will thicken the dust under their gaze heavy with history and reckoning. If he was to lie down of his own volition, allow himself to be sacrificed for these people to do with what they will, what would happen? Would they strip him clean, pick him to the bone of everything his life has afforded him: his money, his clothing, the physical manifestations of his luck? Or would they find him lacking, pathetic? Would they find he was neither what they needed or wanted? Do they even want him?

“Do you want to leave here in peace?”

He is merely Toubab. No matter how long he stays here, he will forever be a Toubab. Because he is here, in this country, everything he does is a sign of how little he understands. Because he is here, he must overly admonish every bad thing he sees, overly praise every act of goodness. Because he is here, he must not be blind to anything. He must be a receptacle of

good and evil, a divider of everything into these two camps because here in this country where he does not speak the language, where he does not understand the government, or the roads, or the people, he is still considered a wellspring of knowledge and power.

And where is his privilege now? If he knew where, if he knew how, he would grab it with two hands and let it bear him far away. Wouldn't anyone?

“Do you want to leave here in peace?”

He doesn't want to think. He doesn't want to change anything, to choose anything. He no longer wants to be anything. He wants this all to be abstract, to believe that he was chosen at random, that if anything, anything at all, had been different, he would not be the one facing the old man, this crowd, this place. But he is the one here. Here of his own volition, with his neck exposed. His torso ready for the blade. It costs nothing to be polite. It's nice to be nice. The light has gone out. On the smiling coast, the teeth are grinding.