



# THIERO ISLAND

a short story

V. BAWA

# Thiero Island

V. BAWA

I saw two strollers on the bus. Well, two chairs that moved. One was a motorized wheelchair that carried an elderly man and had a country's flag flying high. The other was a baby stroller with a mother and her fussing child. The old man most likely had enough stories to keep those he knew stunned for hours on end. He had memories, too many to recall perfectly and too different from each to forget. Where was he going on this hot day? Where did he need to be, still, after everything he had been through?

I thought about the kind of life the baby would have when it got older. Infants, toddlers, kids, and teenagers that grow up on the bus live a different kind of life from those that grow up in cars and back seats. I thought about what kind of life I was living to be on this bus right now, at my age. I didn't grow up on the bus and I don't think I was supposed to still be here now. I was supposed to be driving, getting wherever I needed to be independently, without relying on anyone else. But the bus is great for thinking about life. Yours and everyone else's. I tell myself that I don't drive because I like the time I have to myself when I don't have to focus on driving. I tell myself that riding the bus has really helped me get back into reading. When I can't read, I look out the window and think about where I am and how I got to this city; how I got to sit on its buses and move around as I like. I learned so much about the city and its story from the bus. Its communities and roots. Its quirks and its people.

I saw something else that afternoon. I was looking out the bus window as I always do and there was a tall, skinny man in tattered clothes laying on the shaded grass on the other side of the road. It was hot outside and he was free.

~

It's another day and I'm going somewhere again. This time, I'm sitting by the window of a plane because flights are also great for thinking about your life. Not a lot matters when you're up there. Everything is moment to moment and the present is all that counts. Leon is somewhere on the ground trying to reach me, to no success. Of course, he calls my brother. Ha! He'd be the last to know. I thought Leon would know

that by now. I may be simple but I'm not simple-minded. They all know that. He calls my friend Dez and throws her right into his confusion. At least she will be helpful, she must be calling everyone that knows the current me.

I had to leave as soon as it happened. I don't know how people usually deal with this. It's all new to me and I had to do what I said I would always do. Run. Leave. Disappear. I hoped it wouldn't but I might have jinxed it. People betray each other all the time. They break the trust of those that love them the most. They break hearts even though it means breaking theirs in the process. I could never understand it. But yes, I had to disappear and leave Leon. Of course I had to leave.

Like on various buses, MTS to Greyhound, I cry on this flight too. I'm doing that more these days. Releasing the tension I hold in my body to make space for something else. Peace, silence, emptiness—anything other than the things that don't belong to me. This betrayal, this brokenness? It is all *his* ugliness, not mine. I try to blink my tears away and dab at my eyes violently with a handkerchief. It was from my father and I've had it for a while. Another man who has tried to pass on his ugliness. I love him and have tried to understand him, but my love is very conditional. Contrary to the teachings of the great apostle, I don't bear all things.

Sunrise makes its presentation outside the window. As always, it is beautiful. The clouds welcome the glowing orange sun into them with an embrace that says we will never be tired of this. I drift into sleep with my head facing away from the bright window and a small smile on my face, my eyes grateful for this rest.

~

Airport security isn't bad at all. I look through the shops to get a quick idea of what it is going to be like here and I feel a calm excitement.

“Are you here for vacation?” The store attendant asks me warmly as she rearranges some books on the shelf. I see paperbacks, planners, and journals, all bound and colorful with vibrant prints and patterns.

“Something like that,” I say and give a weary smile with my eyes doing most of the work. I lean a bit on my small black suitcase and tilt my head to the side.

“What do I absolutely need to do before I leave?”

She thinks about this for a minute or so.

“Definitely don’t miss Plains. It’s a well-hidden beach, need someone local to get there. No Maps or nothing like that.”

“That sounds beautiful, thank you,” I say and stroll out of the shop, rolling my way into the sunny streets of Thiero.

Thiero Island is just off the west coast of Africa. Known for kitesurfing and generally carefree, reckless behavior. It's been on my list since my early twenties. I always thought of it as a getaway destination but never quite pictured it as a getaway-from-my-husband destination. I pass a building of stones with a well-thatched roof surrounded by tall, green trees. My bed & breakfast is within walking distance according to my itinerary so I take in the light air. Much milder than my home but heavier than the city where I left Leon.

On a plane, any and every single thing is up in the air. It's all possible, limitless, and weightless at the same time. Like the days between Christmas and New Year, everything and nothing matters. As God carried the plane through the clouds and the sky, keeping it steady in the palm of His hand, I felt like God carried me. I felt heard as I talked fervently to myself about what I’m doing and why. I talked to myself then as if to Leon. *I can’t handle this. What am I doing? This is possibly the worst thing you could do to me. I don’t understand why. How am I supposed to look at you? What am I supposed to do? I have to go away for a bit.*

Checking into the B&B is a hassle. A receptionist doesn’t show up until after twenty minutes and explains that my room isn’t ready yet. I wait at the cafe. Bead art and large canvases line the walls. Bulky indoor plants take up the corners and make the place feel full and alive. I like it here. The barista—Helia, according to her name tag—is tired but friendly and makes my order fast. A beautiful family occupies a table right across from me and I watch them while I drink my chai. A little girl is deeply asleep in

the man's lap while he talks to the woman who is opening the straw of a Ribena for the boy. Suddenly, I notice Helia is attending to someone else. She wipes a little sweat on her forehead while keeping her eyes on him. I take him in too. Relaxed, faded jeans and a loose floral shirt somehow cling to his body without showing off much. He leans on the wall holding his croissant as he watches her prepare his coffee. After he collects the cup with a smile, he sits at the table right next to me and sips with a kind of gentle ease. Now that he's closer I see him better. His clothes fit so well and I can see the frame of a toned body. His head is full of long, tight curls that I imagine would be soft to the touch. He seems oddly familiar but I am unable to register his face. For some reason, I'm not even paying attention to it. Suddenly, mid-sip, he looks up and catches my eyes. He smiles and... something feels weird. I shift in my chair, smile, and turn to look elsewhere.

Have you ever forgotten a word that is so common to you when you have to write it? Looked at it genuinely in disbelief that you've spelled it right? As soon as I'm in my room I look in the mirror because I feel like really studying my face. It looks familiar but I can't seem to place it. When you know something so well, you can forget it and get tricked by the details when you get lost in them. It hits me immediately. The guy in the cafe seems to be... Leon. Or should I say was? Who I just saw could only be Leon around ten years ago. Around ten years younger because that's not him now. Especially because he is definitely not here and that guy I saw in the cafe is definitely unaware of who I am. But, right now, I don't know what I know.

~

"PLEASE let us know you're okay. Leon is going mad and your brother came to the house. Just let me know something."

Text from Dez. So sweet. She is such a great friend. I text back saying I went on a trip and I'm more than okay. She tries calling and I leave the calls to ring. Then she replies that she's glad I'm okay but I need to come home and talk to him. I don't really want that right now. The calm, morning breeze blowing through the curtains of my

window is calling me outside. My plan for the day is to go to Plains so I pack a beach bag. I have just started *We Were Liars* by Emily Jenkins and can't wait to finish it again. The receptionist calls me a taxi that knows how to get there and I get in and exchange greetings with him in my broken language. We're there in twelve minutes and my hike down takes about ten. I set up my little area, lay on my back, and try to rest my eyes. I'm drifting, then it gets dark. The sun is being blocked.

"Sorry, hey!"

Curls and Floral Shirt from the B&B.

"Wh—"

"I saw you some days back at the cafe right?"

"Hi... yeah." He isn't standing close, just happens to be perfectly angled to block the light from me.

"Yes hi, do you mind?" He gestures to the space next to me. I gesture back.

He puts down his towel and then his tote bag.

"Are you staying at the B&B too?"

"Yeah, I am. Taking a little solo trip," I answer.

"Me too actually, thought I'd introduce myself since we're staying at the same place. I'm Leonard," he says with a smile and takes off his sunglasses.

I take mine off since it seems rude to keep them on now, but I do it slowly while my brain scrambles.

"Manna," I manage to get out and quickly smile back.

It definitely is him. His eyes cannot be that similar and his name can't be a coincidence. We start to share some things about ourselves, where we're coming from, what we do, why here. I waste no time in telling him that I know what his future is like.

"Oh my God, and you'll go on to teach English all around Central America. About five years of that. You'll love Costa Rica."

"Why would I do that? I've never even thought about visiting anywhere below Mexico."

I pause.

“Things happen,” I say quieter, looking out into the water.

We talk more and I tell him about his grandfather, his Caucasian Shepherd, and how he won't be able to see without glasses anymore. After what seems like hours of conversation—my book left unopened—we decide to eat together somewhere around the beach. I'm playing a weird game. He thinks I'm something like a tarot reader that's a bit crazy and plays along with the predictions. He isn't getting much about me. I'm keeping things simple on my end while focusing on him. He might think we're simply flirting, and that could be it.

Technically, we're in love with each other.

~

Colors from the sunset settle on the patio of the Portuguese place we chose. Girls sitting at the bar giggle in their groups and talk earnestly about things I can't hear from where I sit at a corner table. I'm tipsy too and “Leonard” tries to dig deeper into me.

“I don't believe that there's no one waiting for you at home!”

I stack our plates and push them to the side.

“Okay, fine, yes, my husband.” I cross my arms and lean into the back of my chair and away from the table.

“And why isn't he here?”

“Becaaaauuse I needed some time, some time away, you know?”

He finishes what's left of his drink and leans back as well.

“I know. Do you run often?”

“I'm not running! Just need space. Need to clear my head and organize my thoughts.”

He tries to study my face and nods slightly.

“I needed some time away too. I feel like what I choose to focus on next will have probably the biggest impact ever in my life.”

Music starts from somewhere and almost everyone drags someone up to dance or gets up on their own. I look at Leonard, asking him with my eyes. He laughs and we pull each other up.

It's getting dark but the dance floor doesn't seem to be dying down anytime soon. I guess that's islanders for you. I, on the other hand, am ready to sleep so we go looking for a taxi. It has certainly been a day. As we ride through the evening breeze, we look out our separate windows, deep in thought. What is happening? Or, what is this telling me? Something crosses my mind.

“Hey... do you ever go by Leon?”

~

I'm on my way back and I feel lighter. The past three weeks were hell and heaven on earth. But I guess that's just earth.

My brother's car is in the driveway when I arrive at my house. He's still here and that makes me happy. We have a lot to say to each other. I take a deep breath before I let myself in and Leon is asleep on the couch with the TV on. As soon as I roll my suitcase in, he sits and looks up.

“Manna?”

~

We're sitting on the couch now and I am more rested. We're holding each other. His face shows the signs of age that I'm used to. His curls sit short on his head like they always do. He takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes.

“I'm sorry for not thinking of the effect that had on you. My mind was in other places, that was not okay though, I believe—”

“Shhh. Shh. It's okay.”

“No, I—”

“I know...” I lightly touch his lips with my fingers and we get quiet. My right hand moves up to cup the side of his face and I look into his eyes. I can see that they’re sorry but mostly fatigued. All I can think about is how he would never believe me if I told him. All that matters is how much I love him. And he loves me.

I kiss him. He takes my left hand in his and massages the base of my thumb. Moving his hands to the sides of my waist, he lays his forehead on mine and closes his eyes. I guess it has to be us after all.