

Short Story

When Birds Come To Roost

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“Come and greet your grandfather Ramsey,” Mrs. Kanthunkako advised her nephew when her father arrived.

“What are you talking about aunt? Do I have a grandfather?” Ramsey queried innocently. He was genuinely surprised by his aunt’s invitation. His own mother had never told him about a grandfather being available somewhere.

“You have one. Come over and stop arguing,” Mrs. Kanthunkako continued.

Deep down her heart she appreciated the surprise displayed by her nephew. In fact, she was laboring to be calm herself because she knew that she was faced with a very uncomfortable situation – yes, one she never thought would occur too soon.

“Are you really dead certain that I have a grandfather of my own?” Ramsey continued.

He was clearly confused as he followed his aunt to the sitting room where his uncle had initially been alone watching television. Ramsey had come to this house on holiday at the kind invitation of his aunt. She was the one who paid school fees for him—fees his poor parents based in Dowa could ill-afford no matter how hard they worked as subsistent farmers without the financial capacity to buy the farm inputs they badly needed.

“Here, that one is your grandfather. He has come to visit us,” Mrs. Kanthunkako announced.

“Who is this boy?” the grandfather inquired without interest. He did not seem to be amused to see the young man in his daughter’s house.

“This boy dad is your grandson,” Mrs. Kanthunkako informed her father with a straight face and with utmost politeness.

“Can’t you be more straightforward than this?” the old man asked impatiently.

Meanwhile, his son in-law who knew him very well was watching the unfolding drama calmly. He did not want to get involved in all this too early.

“Dad, he is a son to my elder sister who lives in Dowa. I called him to be with us during this holiday so that he can collect his school fees,” Mrs. Kanthunkako provided additional information.

As she did this, she had naively hoped that her father would get impressed with the contribution she was making to the future of his grandson.

“Did he really have to come here just for the fees? For all I care, he should have been with his parents in Dowa? His father and mother must learn to take responsibility for their own children,” the old man argued without any tinge of emotion.

“What nonsense is this aunt?” Ramsey was charged and could not contain himself anymore—not when his parents were being unfairly insulted for nothing they had done wrong.

They had not chosen to be poor. For all he cared, they could not even be blamed for being lazy. In fact, they worked hard indeed. It just happened that their garden big though it was had lost its fertility over the years. Consequently, without farm inputs, it could not produce much in terms of yields. His eyes were popping out of their sockets as fury gathered momentum inside him.

“Why should a man I have not offended in any way handle me callously like this? By the way, I am not here aunt because of his courtesy. After all, from what we have seen, he has nothing of the sort. Furthermore, he neither pays my school fees nor provides for my pocket money. Why is he behaving like this?” Ramsey was infuriated.

He was also relentless in his onslaught.

“How dare you insult me like this young man!” the old man fumed.

He was now sitting on the edge of his seat fully animated. His body language was belligerence itself. He was not one who would easily accept to be outdone by an upstart.

His mouth was foaming as his eyes threatened to leap out of their sockets. He was one who wanted to be in full control of situations.

“If you are wise at all grandfather, you should shut up. Continuing to speak will not help matters. I owe you nothing. In fact, you are a total stranger to me. If you were decent enough, you should have felt ashamed of yourself. I cannot imagine that after you abandoned my aunt and my mother when they were young and vulnerable, you can now afford to add insult to injury by

handling me shabbily like you are doing without being remorseful. To be honest, I have nothing but contempt for your unbecoming behavior. How dare you speak not to me but at me from a high moral ground when your behavior has not been very exemplary at all? You abandoned your responsibility over my mother and aunt here. You are now shamelessly happy coming to see the daughter you neglected because she is well to do. At the same time you do not want to hear about my mother because she is poor. What you have forgotten is that you did not make it possible for her to realize her potential fully because you ran away from her. That is why her children now, me included, have to be educated by other people. Instead of being grateful to such good Samaritans, you are expressing anger at my being here to be assisted by them. What kind of man are you, I wonder? Count yourself lucky that my aunt and uncle have opened their door to you. Thank God that they have forgiven you where others would have kept you at a distance because you are a disgrace.”

The young man was visibly angry now and relentless. There was no doubt that he relished this impromptu but necessary show-down because it afforded him the opportunity to vent his anger with impunity at a grandfather who had the heart of a hyena.

“Enough of that rubbish. I cannot take it anymore. I did not come here to be looked down upon by an arrogant imbecile. This is my daughter’s house. You cannot therefore behave like this towards me. You have no manners idiot. You have no respect for you elders. How can you offend me like this in the presence of my own son-in-law? Is this what you came here for leaving your parents back home?”

The old man was not ready to give up the fight he had unintentionally ignited. He was determined to remain in its consuming flames whatever it took. He was keen to assert his patriarchal authority.

“Ramsey, please go back to your room. This must stop now. I never contemplated that your first meeting with your grandfather would take this ugly direction. What will our neighbors think of us upon hearing the loud altercation that has rocked this home? Come on, behave yourself. You should be able to control your anger.” Mr. Kanthunkako who had hitherto observed events quietly decided to intervene as the situation threatened to get out of hand.

He was not one who enjoyed confrontation. Born in a big family from which he learnt the importance of interdependence among siblings at an early age, he believed in compromise and accommodation anchored in his deep Christian values.

However, he never noticed that neither his nephew nor his father in-law was in a compromising mood. Each one of them was ready for a spirited verbal tussle. They looked like they had been dying for this duel. They seemed to have been itching for this wrangle. Both were conspicuously temperamental.

“Father-in-law, calm down. Take it easy. Leave the young man alone. Confrontation will not take anyone anywhere. Let the past be water under the bridge. Our focus should be on the future.” Mr. Kanthunkako pleaded diplomatically believing that he would douse the raging fire.

On her part, Mrs. Kanthunkako was really annoyed. She could not believe that her father could spoil her day which had begun well just like that. She felt embarrassed and depressed by his unwarranted hostility towards a teenager who had committed no wrong at all other than expressing disbelief at the fact that his mother and aunt had a father. What hurt her most was the fact that this was not the first time her father had created an awkward situation in her house just because he lacked the civility to hold back his hot temper. She hated herself for having opened her door to him. His acerbic disposition was toxic to tranquility.

Mrs. Kanthunkako noted with displeasure that her father had arrived uninvited to begin with and without warning. And yet he had a mobile telephone he could have easily used to inform her about his intention to visit. This notwithstanding, her family welcomed him into their home kindly. This was done out of politeness. Shamelessly and rudely now he had turned a tranquil home into an inferno. This happened because he wanted to claim ownership over her, a person he had neglected but now wanted to possess. How disgraceful indeed! She was disgusted.

“What was wrong with this man?” Mrs. Kanthunkano wondered loudly. She could not comprehend the genesis of his outburst.

She had grudgingly forgiven him after he had deserted her and her elder sister—leaving their poor mother to shoulder the onerous task of fending for them on her own when she did not have a reliable source of income. When he discovered that unlike

his other children with another woman, she had gone to college where she was doing very well academically, he quickly identified with her. Now, he came to greedily reap where he had not bothered to sow, this was not fair. She was put off by this attitude particularly because of the naked aggression with which it was displayed.

Up to now, her father who wanted to behave like a king in her house had only heard about her elder sister—mother to Ramsey—through her basically, because he had never bothered to check where his own daughter was. He was also not interested in her story because she lived in a low-density area—a measure of financial liquidity. He never considered his own grandson as a desirable because his mother did not have money to be extended to him in his retirement. In fact, he viewed the poor boy as a competitor for resources only she herself was capable of providing. She was disturbed by this level of greed and selfishness. She could not believe the bitter words she had heard her father utter carelessly. She now appreciated in retrospect why her own gentle mother had to Part Company with this ruthless man. The world in as far as he was concerned, revolved around his interests only.

But what she found most unacceptable was how her children who were quietly studying in their rooms and their father who was recovering from the stress of the week that had gone by, were inconvenienced by the tantrums of a father who had emerged from nowhere to be a nuisance in an otherwise peaceful home where order was highly valued as a hallmark of decent living. As these thoughts congested the labyrinths of her mind, Mrs. Kant-hunkako felt the gentle touch of her husband on her shoulder. By this time she was sobbing helplessly wondering what had become of her life. In fact, as her husband calmed the storm that had been raging in her living room, she had gone to her bedroom distressed by the unwarranted exchange of harshly barbed remarks involving her father and his grandson.

“Stop crying my wife. Your father has decided to leave out of his volition. He refused to stay on for lunch. I suppose it came as a surprise to him that Ramsey would challenge his thinking. Even when I asked him to wait for you to come out of the bedroom so that together we could see him off, he turned my offer down without second thoughts. I suspect that he discovered that he had botched up everything. But never mind. You and I at least know

how he behaves. I really do not know what our children have made out of his conduct. But I still remember how during your undergraduate graduation he turned our house topsy-turvy when he decided to pick a quarrel with your mother out of nothing.”

Mr. Kankhunkako paused. “Now that you have reminded me, the whole scene and its ugly impact comes back to me in full force,” she responded. She was still shaken at this point and was wiping her tears.

“I have never understood why he feels more entitled to receive financial assistance from you than from your mother. After all, he never cared for you as much as she did. In all fairness, he only knew you when you were in your third year of university,” Mr. Kanthunkako explained gently to sober up his dear wife.

In his thoughts he could not understand how any man with a moral spine could claim ownership of a daughter he had not raised to the point of expecting regular assistance from her. It boggled his mind.

But over the years and as a family man, he had come to accept that marriage was about meeting challenges squarely together with his partner no matter where those challenges emanated from. He was convinced that situations like the one gone by were a classroom in the University of Life. Those who survived in such a classroom also carried the day.

Recovering from her whimpering, Mrs. Kanthunkako found her words.

“But how could he do that to me?” she protested.

“His orientation is different love. Come on forget him and what he has done. Those are not questions that should bother you. Some people are just impossible,” he counseled his wife with unwavering affection.

He knew better than to tell her that she never chose such a difficult father.

“My husband, dad has been irresponsibly disrespectful towards you. Surely he could have checked himself before stooping so low in the name of asserting himself before a young man he does not know,” she argued. There was unquestionable conviction in her voice.

“My wife, learn to accept that your father is different. You cannot change him. However, rest assured that I am not bothered

by his attitude. His stubborn streak is his major weakness about which we can do very little.”

He reasoned with the pragmatism of the level-headed man he was. When Ramsey sobered up, he went back to the sitting room. He was torn apart by a sense of guilt within himself. Throughout the occasions he had visited the Kanthunkakos, he had never been involved in anything as disturbing as this.

Addressing his uncle and aunt apologetically he said, “Please forgive me for going over the top. I did not mean to cause you distress. I just got frustrated by my grandfather. In my mind, I never thought that my first ever meeting with him would be a fierce collision of the type we witnessed. Honestly, I had not intended to be sour towards him. It just happened that I could not stomach everything he said. It was outrageously wrong. As a result, the more I tried to control myself, the more I became uncontrollably volcanic. I could not understand, let alone believe that my own grandfather would hate seeing me in my aunt’s house.” He broke into tears.

“You have nothing to apologize for Ramsey. I would be the first to admit that your grandfather as an adult was at fault not you. What was wrong with my wife, your aunt, introducing you to him? Look, up to now your mother in Dowa does not know who her father is because she has not met him. And yet the man she does not know continues to live and walk this earth. What kind of a person is he who does not show interest to meet his own daughter? True he parted company with your grandmother but this is neither a cause nor a justification for ignoring his own children.”

He stopped for a while and swallowed saliva. “Everything said and done, please forgive him. Thank God that you have an aunt who wants you to be different from your grandfather by empowering you with decent education. By all means, work hard at school so that you may escape the trap of poverty holding your mother back through no fault of her own. Make sure that you become your mother’s savior as you create a promising future with education. We bring you here now and again on top of paying your school fees basically because we realize that that is the best way to teach you what hard work can do to our lives.”

He cleared his throat briefly and then resumed his remarks. “Two decades ago nobody knew we would own a house here in Mawira. No one imagined that we would have two cars in our

backyard. But through education, we have become the best professionals we could ever be in our individual fields. Previously we were thought to be too poor to progress in life. With hard work, we are able to send our children to good schools including you. That is why you should never give up no matter how hard the going may become. If we are all images of God, that is the more reason he should want all of us to do well in life,” Mr. Kant-hunkako explained. He was composed.

“I have nothing to add to what your uncle has said. Take advantage of the opportunities we are giving you. Grow your own wings so that oppressive and exploitative grandfathers like yours do not become a stumbling block to your progress. With a proper supply of necessities your mother could have become anything she wanted to be in life. But as you know, her story is one of misery because there was nobody to support her when she needed help most. That is why we took over her responsibility over you. We have faith in your ability. Hence, we do not doubt that you will succeed eventually. What with your solid performance at school!”

“Thank you uncle for that vote of confidence.” Lunch followed.