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THe *OTRACO* train suddenly ejected from the green rocky mountain. It graciously proceeded on the railway straight section, as far as the eyes could see, in the blue-gray valleys, betraying their fields of corn trees, manioc and a variety of other types of cultivation undergone by hardworking farmers.

That train, for reasons unknown to anyone, gave out a warning signal taken by the locals (people full of sense of humor) for a true song composed by the collective imagination, which seemed to say, « Stay aside! Stay aside! Stay aside... »

From time to time, as the train approached a dangerous crossing or an irregular twist of the region, the song changed to a chorus going as follows, “Yes, look out! Yes, look out! Yes, look out! »

This chorus, the locals, as well as the car and truck drivers, pay it great attention; for, it announced an incalculable force, a grave danger not to ignore.

The train, pulling a noisy convoy, had just left Matadi, one of the most prosperous cities of Central Zaire.

However, the greater noise came, not from the rubbing of its metallic wheels on the rails, not from its signal confused with generation of locals’

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imagination with a starting song seeming to say, “Stay aside! Stay aside! Stay aside!” but rather from thousand students who headed towards northern cities of the country with a view to pursuing studies.

Rolande Malweki, of fifteen years of age, counted among those students going to Mbanza Ngugu, a big city in the central zone of the country, loved by tourists and indigenous alike for its marvelous countryside, its temperate climate, the importance of its centers of learning and its numerous trade activities.

The Malwekis always wished “their daughter” the best, as she had emerged as a child with great acumen, to such a par that she knew how to read and write (to the primary school authorities’ surprise) at the age of four.

Then, her parents thought to act for the greatest good of their beloved child by entrusting one of the most prestigious learning centers in the whole area with her education.

That Rolande, despite her youth, betrayed great beauty and charm!

To start with, she had dove’s eyes, which expressed certain tenderness.

Additionally, as if that was not enough, two sunburns spread on each side of her face, which offered a pleasant contrast of skin nuances

Being of average height, she gave the impression of a lovely dole fashioned, with a view to enhancing the ebony beauty.

The challenge

She grew up fast, and, and in a flash, she almost looked like a blossomed woman.

As she grew up, parents, friends and visitors, often compared her with the most beautiful female stars in the world and thought that she would give other lovely females a hard time in the context of a beauty show.

In spite of Rolande, she joined the other students to shout, to sing, to talk nonsense, to say confusing and meaningless ideas, and to imagine wild projects...

Yet, she appeared a little concerned.

Why did she?

She wasn't sure herself.

Alone for the first time in her life, far from the wonderful sites in which bathed her village and far from familiar faces, she had a disturbing intuition that an unpleasant situation waited for her around the corner.

Nevertheless, she had no idea of the nature of such situation and couldn't either describe it.

Would it take her straight to despair, to suicide, to a hellish context, to the shattering of her dream of becoming a respected professional, at the service of her country (or maybe of the entire planet)?

She tried hard to distract herself from such somber thoughts, by giving herself up to the noisy and exciting train atmosphere; however, she

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couldn't get rid of this vague premonition of an indescribable and imminent danger.

She looked at herself and didn't notice any change in her person.

She had no other plan of action but to go and complete her secondary studies. She shouldn't have any worry about anything else.

Yet, she felt as if she was on the verge of violating a supreme taboo, an ultimate interdiction. .

A supreme taboo!

How could she identify it?

She didn't have a catalog of taboos or anything like that to look into, until her heart would palpitate, on seeing one of them as the culprit.

All things being equal, she hadn't entertained any idea of rebellion against anyone.

Actually, she had just left behind the local traditions, as well as their rigidity. She would go back to the village during the vacation time.

As she thought about them, these traditions, taken as the sole guiding lights to action, belonged to the past and tried to force their way on the line of generations by means of coercion, threat of punishments.

They turned obstacles to her female inspirations, in the new era.

Speaking of traditions.

Ah! She had reason for worries.

She literally showed an expression of sadness on her face, as she was remembering a not too lucid event happening shortly before her departure.

The challenge

To speak earnestly, her tribe traditions troubled her deeply, above all those that gave her uncles, on the mother's side, too much power.

« Why don't they grant similar power to her uncles on the father's side, which would put a limitation to the traditional harshness?

“Indeed, why children, even those who have reached adulthood, must behave according to these uncles' wishes? Many of the latter are uneducated and know less than their nephews and nieces who me have formal education?

“Where these stupid traditions come from?

“Nobody knows.

“Maybe they date back to the appearance of first human beings, while feeling their way through the dark ages of history.”

Rolande did not like some old habits that keep standing up to her.

Actually, these maternal uncles behaved in a sadistic, troubling fashion, and, unfortunately, had the right to interfere with all the aspects of her development as a person, a dynamic entity, going from the kind of study she would pursue to the career she should choose.

Actually, they didn't happily approve their “beloved niece's” trip to an urban center that rather betrayed a *shaky moral orientation*.

These grouchy uncles had thought for month about Rolande's departure to another city to complete her secondary studies and about the ways they would recourse to with a view to controlling any risk that trip might entail.

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Following days of deliberation, to offset such uncertain *adventurism*, they had recourse to initiating “their niece’s” engagement to a local “gentleman”.

As a good girl of the tribe, Rolande had no other alternative but to swear faithfulness to his future husband with whom she had no intimate relationship, no kind of familiarity.

Fortunately, the maternal uncles, despite themselves, had allowed the niece to go to Mbanza Ngugu to complete her schooling. Then, she would go back to the native village to get married and confirmed their choice.

The tribal customs wanted it this way.

Yet, one of the uncles, namely a certain Matudo Ngangan, usually adamant and inflexible in his decisions, had raised the following question, during the tribal meeting concerning their niece’s departure, “My dear brothers and sisters, to tell you the truth, I don’t see the rationale behind a woman aiming at accomplishing higher education.

“Do you?

“She wastes her time and defies our tribal customs. As a woman, she will never fulfill important functions in society, whether she is educated or not. Then, with regard to Rolande and all the village girls, our local school should provide them with enough education needed by a woman to become a good wife and make her husband happy. »

The challenge

Yet, that day, such negative, outmoded opinion didn't make the girl's parents change their mind. They held fast their decisions, according to which, Rolande, extremely intelligent, had to climb up all the steps leading to a type of education only provided by important urban centers.

Moreover, according to the parents, their daughter wouldn't only have the status of a local, ordinary citizen, but the status of a woman of the world, who would succeed, following the example of stars, business women, high-wage earners, and corporate chairpersons.

"Why don't you help Rolande put her dreams in concrete forms?" asked the father, that day. "Frankly speaking, my brothers and sisters, we must shatter our tribal customs, which takes us nowhere.

"As an example, despite my education, I have spent my time here vegetating.

"I don't see any hope coming to my direction. I am at the mercy of luck.

"No, my beloved daughter must enjoy a better life in this world..."

At the dowry remittance, Rolande, totally confused, had burst out crying.

The maternal uncles, to appease the fiancé's worries, had rushed saying that she was crying for joy.

Only Georgette, the youngest child of the Malweki family, had an idea of Rolande's rather bitter tears: she had felt greatly frustrated to see that her parents having decided on her distant future, without taking her

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personal opinion, her deep tendencies, her unexpressed taste and the voice of her heart into account.

By the way, did she really love Gabriel Nzadi, her designated fiancé?

How could she feel any emotion, which she had never experienced before?

At the age of fifteen, like many female adolescents, living under parents and older persons' omnipresent guidance in the village, she hadn't had the time and the right to get involved in love affairs.

Actually, she had often crossed the path of that presumed fiancé and had never lost such opportunity to tell Georgette, "This man looks funny".

Poor Rolande!

She had completely forgotten the tribal traditions according to which, some point in time, a female manianga had to take a male manianga for her husband for the better or the worse, and that Gabriel Nzadi, although he looked funny in her eyes, was chosen as the elect of her heart .

"No!" she said. "My destiny depends on me. I want to become a respected professional in my country and all over the world..

"Well, I would rather die and defy the Bambutas' anger (1), than marry someone I don't love, a perfect stranger in the very sense of the word."

Fortunately, the deadline for the final phase of the wedding wasn't imminent

The challenge

In the meantime, Rolande tried to put others at the false scent and to have a nice time with her fellow student travelers, who were singing together the alleged train song saying « Stay aside! Stay aside! Stay aside!”