

Tshimangadzo and Miss Kirunda climb a hill

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‘Come on, Tshi, you can make it.’

Miss Kirunda is employing her kindest tone for this girl lifting one heavy foot at a time up the path. Tshimangadzo. Top in the class, but a loner and a bookworm the rest of the class find strange. Her mother, who cannot have much money, sews her these terrible doll’s dresses with high waists which do her figure no justice. She is wearing one now.

Tshimangadzo stops, her frowning forehead beaded in sweat. ‘Those people were stupid to believe their kings lived for hundreds of years.’

The focus of the class trip is an ancient wall hidden in the bush behind the kraal of Tshisi-na-Vuthi. Legend had it that these walls hid the king from public view, so that several generations could be rolled into one immortal king.

‘Well, maybe their society needed to believe these things. They liked magic.’ Miss Kirunda secretly likes the word ‘magic’, though for her magic is something that is ignited between two people when they get close enough.

‘What’s a hermit, Miss Kirunda? Were the kings hermits?’

This girl is full of questions, Miss Kirunda thinks. That’s what makes her so smart.

‘Not really, Tshi. Hermits isolate themselves in caves. I think. And they are unknown people, not famous like kings.’

‘I was thinking of becoming a hermit.’

‘Ah, Tshimangadzo!’ Miss Kirunda cries out, distressed. ‘Why does a lovely girl like you want to become a hermit?’

Tshimangadzo does not reply, so Miss Kirunda ventures on. ‘You know, Tshi, you can talk to me if you’re having problems with the others in class. That’s part of my job as a teacher. To help you.’

Tshimangadzo emits a series of gasps, which at first makes Miss Kirunda think the girl is about to cry. But then she realises it is more a laugh, which she finds perplexing.

In silence, the two turn to peering into the valley below them. The traditional thatched roof rondavels are only partially visible through the morning haze. Modern zinc-roofed structures, on the other hand, catch the morning sunlight like

shreds of aluminium foil. A lone delivery van kicks up dust on a gravel road. Every now and then the faint salvo of a dog's bark can be heard.

It is Tshimangadzo who breaks the silence.

'You know, Miss Kirunda, you helped the class a lot when you told the school principal about Mr Jacobs touching the other girls.'

For Miss Kirunda it is as if the boulder she is standing on has wobbled. She almost puts her hands out to steady herself. 'Well I had to do it, Tshi. That's a teacher's duty to her pupils.'

'And Miss Kirunda,' Tshimangadzo proceeds, 'I think it was very brave of you to tell on Mr Jacobs when he was such a close friend of yours'.

Miss Kirunda feels a muscle within her throat constrict her airflow. She would like to have seen Tshimangadzo's face, but all she sees is a mesh of poorly constructed braids behind the head of this girl looking into the distance.

'Friends come and go, Tshi,' Miss Kirunda says, solemnly, and then immediately regrets having said anything.

They say nothing more as they ascend the path and reach the wall, where the rest of the class has been waiting for them.

At the wall, Miss Kirunda will relate to her pupils once again the story of Mapungubwe, and ask questions. The questions will be answered, mainly by Tshimangadzo, who will offer bits of the textbook cautiously, in drips and drabs, wary of the pool she is nourishing.

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