

A Toy Story by Catherine Stewart

Zanzibar a magical, mysterious name conjuring up ancient stories of sea travel, explorers and spice markets.

The day began like every other day in the tiny village of Matemwe on the north-east coast of the Island. By six o'clock the sun was already climbing in the sky. Sparkling white sand glistened in the bright sunshine all the way to the south, as far as the eye could see.

The sea was a kaleidoscope of blues ranging from deep azure blue with tiny puffy white crested waves breaking on the reef to the beautiful delicate turquoise at the shore line. Every possible shade of blue and pale pale green.

Already fishermen waded out into the lagoon hauling their nets behind them. Already the hand made wooden tree trunk Mashua boats, with gleaming white sails were appearing. Simple symbols of wealth for their owners. Fathers and sons sat companionably in the hull of their boats while slowly mothers and daughters awakened in the village.

As the temperature rose, the smell of wood smoke, turmeric and saffron drifted from the village huts towards the beach. Men stumbled out of the village, walking slowly with their tin cans to the sea edge to perform their daily toilet.

Some with sticks, some with crutches and some with cataracts. All with burnt leathery skin stretched tight over their sinewy lithe bodies. All looking much older than their chronological ages.

In contrast to the mens' semi-naked bodies, women and girls appeared from the houses wearing traditional dress. The adult women in black niqab, completely covered, and even little pre-pubescent girls as young as five or six fully dressed and wearing head scarves.

There is no school for these children, no chat or laughter as the little girls busy themselves. Their chores consist of sweeping, cooking and gathering wood.

Tiny bare feet, stringy little bodies carrying huge bundles of firewood on their heads.

The huge sun climbs further into the cloudless sky. The heat is searing. The sand impossible to walk on.

Towards mid-day the village appears deserted as everyone takes shelter from the sun. Old men doze quietly in the shade. Women and children sleep in the doorways of the huts. The only signs of life are the relentless flies and the insistent chirp of cicadas.

Several hours later the village starts to come to life. It is still sunny and hot but now temperate. The fishermen return with their catch. Naked boys tumble out of the boats and swim and dive in the sea. They laugh and chase each other, wrestling on the sand.

One older boy appears on an ancient rusty bicycle and the boys all jostle to take turns, wobbling, giggling along the beach. Some as young as six or seven are already proficient on the ancient adult size bike.

Bigger boys peddle along with two or three little ones on the bar and on the mudguard. Someone produces a burst football and an energetic and fiercely competitive game begins.

From the back of the beach the girls watch enviously, still swaddled in modesty, still not permitted to swim. Then suddenly a commotion breaks out. All the boys are running as fast as they can to one end of the beach. "Me, me my turn Let me do it" they shout in pigeon English.

A tall gangly white American is running backwards towards the sea pulling skilfully on a myriad of chords. Above him a beautiful brightly coloured kite swoops and dives against the clear blue sky. The boys whoop with absolute glee and argue enthusiastically to take control.

The man's daughter signals to the girls. "Would you like to try it?" she says in English with appropriate gestures. The little girls look in disbelief.

“Come on” says their new friend. Cautiously first one, then two saunter down the beach. Soon all the children, boys and girls are screaming in sheer delight and awe as the kite polkas above them. They have never seen anything so beautiful.

One little girl is persuaded to take control. Nervously she giggles and then squeals with pleasure as the kite soars above her. The children yell, scream run, squabble, tumble over each other in their enthusiasm. Complete and idyllic joy apparent on every beaming up - turned face.

Gender differences disappear for a few precious minutes. Chores and hardships are forgotten. Headscarves slip as boys and girls together tumble into the tepid water, chasing the kite, chasing and splashing each other.

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