

## Two Men Arrive in a Village

Zadie Smith

Sometimes on horseback, sometimes by foot, in a car or astride motorbikes, occasionally in a tank—having strayed far from the main phalanx—and every now and then from above, in helicopters. But if we look at the largest possible picture, the longest view, we must admit that it is by foot that they have mostly come, and so in this sense, at least, our example is representative; in fact, it has the perfection of parable. Two men arrive in a village by foot, and always a village, never a town. If two men arrive in a town they will obviously arrive with more men, and far more in the way of supplies—that’s simple common sense. But when two men arrive in a village their only tools may be their own dark or light hands, depending, though most often they will have in these hands a blade of some kind, a spear, a long sword, a dagger, a lick-knife, a machete, or just a couple of rusty old razors. Sometimes a gun. It has depended, and continues to depend. What we can say with surety is that when these two men arrived in the village we spotted them at once, at the horizon point where the long road that leads to the next village meets the setting sun. And we understood what they meant by coming at this time. Sunset has, historically, been a good time for the two men, wherever they have arrived, for at sunset we are all still together: the women are only just back from the desert, or the farms, or the city offices, or the icy mountains, the children are playing in dust near the chickens or in the communal garden outside the towering apartment block, the boys are lying in the shade of cashew trees, seeking relief from the terrible heat—if they are not in a far colder country, tagging the underside of a railway bridge—and, most important, perhaps, the teen-age girls are out in front of their huts or houses, wearing their jeans or their saris or their veils or their Lycra miniskirts, cleaning or preparing food or grinding meat or texting on their phones. Depending. And the able-bodied men are not yet back from wherever they have been.

Night, too, has its advantages, and no one can deny that the two men have arrived in the middle of the night on horseback, or barefoot, or clinging to each other on a Suzuki scooter, or riding atop a commandeered government jeep, therefore taking advantage of the element of surprise. But darkness also has its disadvantages, and because the two men always arrive in villages and never in towns, if they come by night they are almost always met with absolute darkness, no matter where in the world or their long history you may come across them. And in such darkness you cannot be exactly sure whose ankle it is you have hold of: a crone, a wife, or a girl in the first blush of youth.

It goes without saying that one of the men is tall, rather handsome—in a vulgar way—a little dim and vicious, while the other man is shorter, weasel-faced, and sly. This short, sly man leaned on the Coca-Cola hoarding that marked the entrance to the village and raised a hand in friendly greeting, while his companion took the small stick that he had, up to that point, been chewing, threw it on the ground, and smiled. They could just as well have been leaning on a lamppost and chewing gum, and the smell of borscht could have been in the air, but in our village we do not make borscht—we eat couscous and tilefish and that was the smell in the air, tilefish, which even to this day we can hardly bear to smell because it reminds us of the day the two men arrived in the village.

The tall one raised his hand in friendly greeting. At which moment the cousin of the wife of the chief—who happened to be crossing the long road that leads to the next village—felt she machete glorious in the sun, and raise her hand, though her whole arm shook as she did so.

The two men like to arrive in this manner, with a more or less friendly greeting, and this might remind us of the fact that all humans, no matter what they do, like very much to be liked, even if it's for only an hour or so before they are feared or hated—or maybe it would be better to say that they like the fear that they inspire to be leavened with other things, such as desire or curiosity, even if, in the final analysis, fear is always the greater part of what they want. Food is cooked for them. We offer to make them food or else they demand it, depending. At other times, on the fourteenth floor of a derelict apartment building covered in snow—in which a village lives vertically—the two men will squeeze onto a family's sofa, in front of their television, and watch the new government's broadcast, the new government they have just established by coup, and the two men will laugh at their new leader, marching up and down the parade ground in that stupid hat, and as they laugh they will hold the oldest girl watching television by her shoulder, in a supposedly comradely manner but a little too tightly, while she weeps. ("Aren't we friends?" the tall, dim man will ask her. "Aren't we all friends here?")

This is one way they arrive, though they did not arrive that way here, we have no televisions here and no snow and have never lived above the level of the ground. And yet the effect was the same: the dread stillness and the anticipation. Another girl, younger, brought the plates of food for the two men, or, as is the custom in our village, the single bowl. "This is good shit!" the tall handsome stupid one said, scooping up tilefish with his dirty fingers, and the little sly one with the face of a rat said, "Ah, my mother used to make it like this, God rest her shitty old soul!" And as they ate they bounced a girl each on their laps while the older women pressed themselves against the compound walls and wept.

After eating, and drinking—if it is a village in which alcohol is permitted—the two men will take a walk around, to see what is to be seen. This is the time of stealing. The two men will always steal things, though for some reason they do not like to use this word and, as they reach out for your watch or cigarettes or wallet or phone or daughter, the short one, in particular, will say solemn things like "Thank you for your gift" or "We appreciate the sacrifice you are making for the cause," though this will set the tall one laughing and thus ruin whatever dignified effect the short one was trying to achieve. At some point, as they

move from home to home, taking whatever they please, a brave boy will leap out from behind his mother's skirts and try to overpower the short, sly man. In our village this boy was a fourteen-year-old we all used to call King Frog, owing to the fact that once, when he was four or five years old, somebody asked him who had the most power in our village and he pointed to a big ugly toad in the yard and said, "Him, King Frog," and when asked why explained, "Because even my father is afraid of him!" At fourteen he was brave but reckless, which was why his wide-hipped mother had thought to tuck him behind her skirts as if he were a baby. But there is such a thing as physical courage, real, persistent, very hard to explain, existing in tiny pockets here, there, and everywhere, and though almost always useless it is still something you don't easily forget once you've seen it—like a very beautiful face or a giant mountain range, it sets a limit somehow on your own hopes for yourself—and, sensing this, maybe, the tall dim one raised his gleaming machete and, with the same fluid yet effortless gesture with which you might take the head off a flower, separated the boy from his life.

Once blood has been shed, especially such a quantity of blood, a kind of wildness descends, a bloody chaos, into which all the formal gestures of welcome and food and threat seem instantly to dissolve. More drink is generally taken at this point, and what is strange is that the old men in the village—who, though men, have no defense—will often now grab at the bottles themselves, drinking deeply and weeping, for you need courage not only to commit bloody chaos but also to sit by and watch it happen. But the women! How proud we are, in retrospect, of our women, who stood in formation, arms linked the one to the next, in a ring around our girls, as the tall, dim man became agitated and spat on the floor—"What's wrong with these bitches? Waiting is over. Any longer and I'll be too drunk!"—and the short, sly one stroked the face of the chief's wife's cousin (the chief's wife was in the next village, visiting family) and spoke in low, conspiratorial tones of the coming babies of the revolution. We understand that women stood so in ancient times, beside white stone and blue seas, and more recently in the villages of the elephant god and in many other places, old and new. Still, there was something especially moving about the pointless courage of our women at that moment, though it could not keep two men from arriving in the village and doing their worst—it never has and never will—and yet there came that brief moment when the tall, dim one seemed cowed and unsure, as if the woman now spitting at him were his own mother, which passed soon enough when the short, sly one kicked the spitting woman in her groin and the formation broke and bloody chaos found no more obstruction to its usual plans.

The next day the story of what happened is retold, in partial, broken versions that change depending very much on who is asking: a soldier, a husband, a woman with a clipboard, a morbidly curious visitor from the next village, or the chief's wife, returned from her sister-in-law's compound. Most will put a great emphasis on certain questions—"Who were they?" "Who were these men?" "What were their names?" "What language did they speak?" "What marks were on their hands and faces?"—but in our village we are very fortunate to have no rigid bureaucrats but instead the chief's wife, who is, when all is said and done, more of a chief to us than the chief has ever been. She is tall and handsome and sly and courageous. She believes in the ga haramata, that wind which blows here hot, here cold, depending, and which everybody breathes in—you cannot help but breathe it in—though

only some will breathe out in bloody chaos. For her such people become nothing more than ga haramata, they lose themselves, their names and faces, and can no longer claim merely to bring the whirlwind, they are that wind. This is of course a metaphor. But she lives by it. She went straight to the girls and asked for their account and found one who, encouraged by the sympathetic manner of the chief's wife, told her story in full, the end of which was the most strange, for the short, sly one had thought himself in love and, afterward, laying his sweaty head on this girl's bare chest, had told her that he, too, was an orphan—though it was harder for him, for he had been an orphan for many years rather than mere hours—and that he had a name and a life and was not just a monster but a boy who had suffered as all men suffer, and had seen horror and wanted now only to have babies with this girl from our village, many boy babies, strong and beautiful, and girls, too, yes, why not girls! And live far from all villages and towns, with this army of children encircling and protecting the couple all their days. "He wanted me to know his name!" the girl exclaimed, still stunned by the idea. "He had no shame! He said he did not want to think that he had passed through my village, through my body, without anybody caring what he was called. It is probably not his real name but he said his name was—"

But our chief's wife stood up suddenly, left the room, and walked out into the yard.

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Zadie Smith most recently published the essay collection "*Feel Free.*"

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