

# A pleasant surprise

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Mary and Jessica planned their trip, but they weren't ready for what they got along the way.

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We felt we were doing the right thing; earlier on we had motivated ourselves, patted each other on the back, helped each other pack, but as the day wore on with the constant drone of the unbearably loud car engine in our ears, the sweat dripping down our faces, threatening to enter our eyes, we'd begun to rethink our plan, our strategy. We'd begun to wonder if it was such a spectacular plan after all. Mary, my younger sister and sole partner on this adventurous trip, shifted a little in her seat. She had whispered in my ear over an hour ago, complaining about the fat woman beside her whose fat behind and thick legs didn't allow her any wiggle space. I could sympathize because a thick metal protruding from the car door where the handle should have been, was digging into my side and not allowing me any fun either especially when the car got into a pothole on the road, and that was only about every ten minutes, considering the road was riddled with holes of all sizes, and none of them small. I rested my head on the window that was wound down halfway and bit on my lip. How could something that promised to be so much fun, end up like this? The horror had started when we got to the motor park and realized that about ten or eleven of us were going to be crammed into one station wagon that looked a lot like an old man with his mouth permanently open. I'm not counting the hours we had to wait for the car to get full because that was on home soil, and as long as I had Mary with me, I felt nothing could go wrong. I couldn't have been more wrong. There were two men sitting in front with the driver, two other ladies in the middle with Mary and I and we might as well have been five because the fat lady could have easily counted as two. There were three ladies at the back as well, the one directly behind me couldn't stop talking at the top of her lungs in a language I didn't understand or recognize, and for some reason beyond my comprehension, we had a man in the boot along with some of the luggage. I wiped at my forehead with the back of my hand. On top of all of this, who knew that there would be anyplace hotter than Manta in Benzi State, at this time of the year? I wanted to scream, I wanted to jump up and cry, but my sister was sitting beside me and with my knees so tight they were almost climbing on top of each other, there wasn't room to jump, let alone scream and cry. It was getting quite dark and I sat hoping we were almost at our destination when an argument began to ensue up front between the driver and the two men sitting with him. Mary pulled her earphones out of her ears and strained to listen. We had both worn loose fitting tank tops and shorts when we left home, but now the tops were sticking to our backs with all the sweat. I stared

at the back of my sister's head. She had pulled her full, long hair into a rough bun on top of her head when the heat had gotten worse and the vehicle had gotten slower. At this point I was thankful for the short crop of hair on my head, but still envied her mop nonetheless. She turned to me. "The driver's saying he can't get us to Jaja tonight." I frowned. "What? He must be joking." She continued. "He's saying we'll have to sleep in this town tonight and meet up with him in the morning, says he can't drive in the dark, that it's dangerous." "Oh, God." I wailed, burying my face in my hand. Everything counted on us getting to Jaja today. Jaja was our village and we'd never been there. We'd gotten home from boarding school to realize our parents had left us for the holidays. They'd gone to the village for our grandfather's birthday and instead of staying home and having fun with our friends like normal teenagers would, we had concocted this plan to go for the birthday party on our own. We'd called our cousin Abdul, and he had approved of it. He'd even sent us the money we needed and promised not to tell mom and dad and he'd said he'd pick us up from the motor park. It had taken us one day, one day to decide and then to pack and in a flurry of excitement say goodbye to the maid in the house. Father would be mad when he saw us but we knew mother would be overjoyed and that's what mattered. We'd never been to the village because father never approved of it. Every time we asked to go we got a sure no. But this time, we had decided it was going to be different. We hadn't seen Granddaddy in a while and we couldn't wait to see the joy on his round, wrinkled face. Everything counted, the extra tight taxi, the faint sour smell of people's armpits wafting in and out of my nose, the bumping in and out of potholes that kept the metal digging more and more into my side, everything, just so we would get to Jaja on time and now this? Mary wriggled closer to me just as we entered another pothole that almost landed her in my lap. The other passengers were getting noisier as news of our collective problem spread. "This is the worst holiday ever," she said, hanging her tiny satchel on her neck and nervously perching her sunglasses on top of her head. "I hope it's the worst, Mary," I said, peeking out the window at our strange surroundings. "At sixteen and eighteen we're still young, there be many more holidays in our future I'm sure." I turned suddenly to the chatterbox behind me, cutting off her conversation with everyone around her. She stared at me with large beady eyes, in fact they all stared, even the man in the boot; his eyes were tiny and button like. "Please do you know this area quite well? Do you know any hotels we can sleep in tonight?" I asked. She nodded eagerly. "Yes dear, my sister lives here, we have lots of hotels in the area." The man in the boot stretched forward and as he did I realized it was his armpit I had been smelling all evening. "Plenty hotels," he said. "There's the exotic hotel, the state hotel, the grand hotel. Just get bikes, they'll take you around." "Thank you." I sighed, settling back into my seat. Soon as I heard bikes, I mentally thanked God that Mary and I had carried backpacks and not boxes. At a point the taxi stopped moving and refused to go any further. People began to get down; they were reluctant, but they got out of the car all the same. While we stood, getting our bags, mine from the boot and Mary's from on top of the car, bikes, with young men on top of them appeared as if out of nowhere, ready to take us wherever we wanted. By the time I got it, it seemed the boot man had been hugging it all day. My backpack literally stank. "What is that smell?" Mary asked, pulling the arms of her bag over her shoulder. "Don't ask," I told her, as I gestured for two of the bikes to come our way. I had seen some

of the other passengers doing the same and I knew our situation would be much worse if all the bikes were gone and we didn't have any to take us around. The last thing I wanted was to sleep in the car. Little did I know that in an hour, I would be wishing I could be back there, sleeping in that very car. The bikes took us around all right. They took us to all the three hotels in the town; correction, village. As we went around on those bikes I realized that even though I had never been to a village before, I could recognize one if I was in it. The roads were not tarred; the earth was dark red and clay like. It stuck to our sandals like glue, and everywhere we went people came out and stared at us like we were aliens and we weren't even white. Every hotel they took us to was a no. It was even a joke calling them hotels in the first place; their conditions were abysmal. There was one we didn't have to enter; as we approached it on the bikes, Mary took one look at me and I began to shout at the men. "Turn around, turn around." The hotel was big, but it looked incredibly old and haunted. One other one was just an unkempt, empty house. It looked like a place where we could be kidnapped at night. There was no one there, not even a receptionist to attend to us and eventually, the only occupant, a cockroach, sent us flying out. I looked at Mary. "We're in trouble." Mary shook her head. "I can't stay in this village Jess, maybe we should look for another taxi that'll take us on to Jaja this night." I glanced outside, at the bike men waiting for us on the dirt road. "There wasn't a single taxi in that motor park the driver dropped us off at, Mary. If we go back there we'll be stuck, and look at this place, we don't know anybody here." "That does it," she said flipping out her phone. "I'm calling Abdul, he'll get us out of this mess." She dialed and after listening for a while, pushed it into her pocket angrily. "His phone is switched off. God, what a mess!" "C'mon," I said, walking towards the bikes. "We only have one option now." After going round and round again and almost getting the bike men dizzy, we decided to return to the very first hotel we'd set our eyes on. The exotic hotel. Whoever gave it that name just had to have a talent. The place was exotic all right in the fact that it was striking and unusual especially if you were going to sleep in it. It was a house just like the last one; it was dirty, they all were, and as soon as they took us to our room, Mary began furiously punching in her phone, dialing Abdul's number again. "He has to come and get us," she said. "He has to." The bed in the room they took us to was seedy and looked like it would have bed bugs crawling all up in it. The floor wasn't much of an option either because it looked like the cockroach from the other place would have its cousins and siblings accommodated here and it came to visit quite often. There was a couch, but it was the same dirty shade as the walls, one of its arms was dislocated, and I couldn't decide if it was better or worse than the bed. The only thing that brought me sharply out of my reverie and into reality was the sound of Mary crying. She just burst into tears and I couldn't blame her because I was near tears myself. "I can't reach Abdul." She sobbed. "His phone is still off." I went over and hugged her and we just stood there for a while, two girls standing in the middle of a disaster. We were so sleepy, and tired and sticky and we couldn't even bear to lean on the wall of the room; we hadn't been prepared for this. Over Mary's shoulder I could see a bit of the bathroom and the sight of that almost brought a tear to my eye, but right there and then I decided that it was just one night, and we had decided on our own to do this without mom and dad so we were going to be brave about it and do the best we could with what we had and hope we would laugh about it all later. After

giving my pep talk to myself, I gave it to Mary who just sniffed and wiped her tears. I immediately squared my shoulders, and went in search of water, my backpack still on my back. I hadn't decided which part of the room I could set it down on yet. After a little searching and bumping into a few of the other passengers from our taxi, the receptionist followed me back to our room with a pail of water because just as I had guessed, the exotic hotel had no running water and needless to say, the pail was in the same condition as the rest of the place. I couldn't be sure if it was the pail that made the water look dark or if the water was just dark, but like I told Mary a little later, it would be better to take our baths at night when we couldn't see the bathroom very well than in the morning when the sun would assist the dim light bulb brighten up the place. So we had our baths. It wasn't easy, and we were standing more in the room than in the bathroom and we were standing back to back, but it was good to feel all the stickiness and grime wash off our bodies. We had set our bags in a corner of the room close to the windows so we brought out fresh clothes that we would wear through the night and even on the journey the next day because we were sure we wouldn't be taking them off. This time we wore tee shirts and shorts that were cut off below our knees. Our next agenda was food. If we were going to get through the night, we needed food in our tummies so we didn't wake up in the night thinking our ordeal was worse than it really was because of all the hunger. We asked the receptionist for directions to a restaurant or shop because we were sure that room order would be a laugh. We set out on our way; a little breeze was blowing, reminding us that there was hope after all. "Do you think maybe this is why Dad never wants us in the village?" Mary asked me. "Nah!" I responded. "I'm sure ours is a city compared to this place. "Haven't you seen the pictures? Jaja is pretty, this place is a dump." "It's called Alfasa. I heard the people in the car talking about it. Some of them are from here. They were sounding so proud of their town." I looked around at the decrepit houses and streets. "Someone has to be proud of it, I guess. All of this is home to some people; they have to be proud of it. Just the way we're proud of Manta." "Manta just seems worlds away right now," Mary mumbled. "C'mon," I said pulling on her hand and leading her. "That shack over there looks like a restaurant. We weren't long. Within forty minutes we were back at the exotic. The food we found could have kept us all night in the toilet we didn't want to use so we ended up buying biscuits and cokes; we even bought extra to carry in our bags for the trip the next morning. My phone began to ring the minute we stepped in the room. I brought it out of my pocket. It was Abdul. "My God, where have you girls been?" He shouted into the phone. "I've been worried sick, trying to reach you all night. Where are you?" "We're at....." I turned to Mary for help and she shouted, "Alfasa." "Yes," I said into the phone. "We're at Alfasa, our taxi stopped here for the night. We tried to reach you too, Mary called twice but your phone was switched off both times." "My phone has been on all bloody day and I've been trying both your phones every five minutes. Are you sure you girls are okay?" I could hear the fear in my cousin's voice and as I glanced at Mary who stood biting her nails, I spoke to him calmly. "We're fine Abdul, we're safe. We're just in some seedy hotel, but we'll find a way to sleep off and be on our way in the morning." "Yeah, Alfasa's really backward but it should be safe," he said, sounding calmer as well. "And it's roughly two hours away so if you guys get back on the road quite early you'll get here before the party starts, so everything's still on track. Can I talk to my darling Mary now?" I laughed

into the phone and gave it to Mary. It was really good and reassuring hearing my cousin's voice. We weren't alone after all. While he and Mary talked, I tried to find a solution to our sleeping palaver. I had a wrapper folded in my bag that I carried on every trip. It was almost big as a bed sheet so I folded it in two and placed it on one side of the bed where I presumed we could sleep. I made a mental note to put it in a separate part of my bag in the morning along with my dirty clothes so they could be washed soon as we got to Jaja. We were finally about to get into bed with the lights on a few minutes later, when suddenly all of the electricity went off and we heard someone shouting along the corridor that if we were too hot in our rooms, we should carry our mattresses into the courtyard to sleep. That made this place even more exotic than we thought. We slept on that edge of the bed, holding tightly to each other. Mary slept behind me because if it was me behind, her hair would have been tickling my nose. I slept off dreaming that the bugs in the bed had formed an army while we were away and were beginning to climb our bodies and get into our orifices. I woke up with a start. There's only one thing that comes after the worst night of your life, and that's the best morning ever, because you're happy the night is over, you're glad to see the sunrise and know that you made it. You're grateful for the little things like the uncomfortable taxi you hated the day before, the familiar face in the boot and the metal protruding from the side of the door that won't stop digging into your side but isn't so uncomfortable after all. I was grateful for all of these things because without them we wouldn't get to our destination and the reason for this journey in the first place. We had fresh clothes on our backs and Mary had tied her hair in a neater bun. The day was full of promise. Abdul was there to pick us up just like he said. We stood searching for him at the motor park hours later from behind our sunglasses, and soon as I heard my name; "Jessica!" I smiled and ran towards his voice. As I buried my face in his shirt and Mary joined us in a group hug, I knew the journey had been worth it, I knew our holiday would be the best yet and we would laugh at that night for years to come. I knew we had done the right thing.