



Two Sisters

Life is not much fun if you work as a typist in an office, and you earn so little that you can't even buy yourself a nice pair of shoes. A girl needs shoes. A girl needs a boyfriend with a nice fast car, and a nice fat wallet.

So Mercy finds a boyfriend who suits her needs. The trouble is, her big sister - sensible, married Connie - won't like it at all...

As Mercy puts the cover on her typewriter, the thought of the bus ride home goes through her like a pain. It is her luck, she thinks. Everything is just her luck. If she had one of those university boys for a boyfriend, wouldn't he come and take her home every evening? Certainly, Joe would love to do exactly that - with his taxi. And he is as handsome as anything, and a good man, but you know... A taxi is a taxi. The possibility of the other man actually coming to fetch her - oh well. She knows it will take some time before she'll be brave enough to ask for things like that from him. But it's hard not to think about it. Would it really be so dangerous? Doesn't one government car look like another - the hugeness of it, the dark glass, the driver in uniform? She can already see herself stepping out of the car to greet the other girls, who look at her with eyes like knives. To begin with, she will be a little more careful. The driver can drop her under the neem trees in the morning and pick her up from there in the evening... anyway, she will have to wait a little while for that and it is just her bad luck.

So for the meantime it is going to be the local bus with its dirty seats, unpleasant passengers, and rude conductors... Jesus! She doesn't wish herself dead or anything as stupidly final as that. Oh no. She just wishes she could sleep deep and only wake up on the day of her first car ride to work.

The new pair of black shoes are more sensible than their owner, though. As she walks out of the office, they sing: Count, count, count your blessings.

Count, Mercy, count your blessings Count, Mercy, count your blessings Count, count, count your blessings.

They sing out of the office, along the road, and into the bus. And they start singing again along the path as she opens the front gate and walks to the door.

'Sissie!' Mercy called.

'Hei Mercy.' And the door opened to show the face of Connie, her big sister, six years older, and now heavy with her second child. Mercy dropped into the nearest chair. 'Welcome home. How was the office today?'

'Sister, don't ask. Look at my hands. My fingers are dead with typing. Oh God, I don't know what to do.'

'Why, what is wrong?' asked Connie.

'You tell me what is right. Why should I be a typist?' 'What else would you be?'

'What a strange question. Is typing the only job there is in this world? You are a teacher, are you

not?' said Mercy.

'But... but...'

'But what? It's my fault - is that what you're saying? I didn't do well enough in the exams, so I can't be a teacher. Or even a secretary.'

'Mercy, what is the matter?' said Connie. 'What have I done? Why have you come home so angry?'

Mercy broke into tears.

'Oh, I'm sorry, Sissie. It's just that I am sick of everything. The office, living with you and your husband. I want a husband of my own, children. I want... I want...'

'But you are young and beautiful. And marriage - well, it's you who are delaying it. Look at all these people who are running after you,' said Connie.

'Sissie, I don't like what you are doing. So stop it.'

'Okay, okay, okay.'

And there was a silence.

'Which of them could I marry?' said Mercy. 'Joe is - mm, fine - but, but I just don't like him.'

'Little sister, you and I can be truthful with one another. I am not that old or wise, but I can advise you a little. Joe drives someone else's car now. Well, you never know. Lots of taxi drivers own their taxis in the end, sometimes more than one.'

'Of course. But what a pity that you are married already. Or I could make a date for you - with Joe!'

And they both burst out laughing. It was when Mercy got up to go to the bedroom that Connie noticed the new shoes.

'Ei, those are beautiful shoes. Are they new?'

From the other room, Mercy's voice came and went as she undressed and then dressed again. But that was not the reason for the uncertainty in her voice.

'Oh, I forgot to tell you about them. In fact, I was going to show them to you. I think it was on Tuesday I bought them. Or was it Wednesday? When I came home from the office, you and James had taken Akosua out. And later I forgot all about them.'

'I see. But they are very pretty. Were they expensive?'

'No, not really.' Mercy's answer came too quickly.

And she said only last week that she didn't have a penny on her, thought Connie. And I believed her because I know what they pay her is just not enough to live on. I've been thinking she manages very well. But these shoes... And she is not the type who would borrow money just to buy a pair of shoes; she would just wear her old pairs till things got better. Oh, I wish I knew what to do. I mean, I'm not her mother. And I wonder how James will see these problems.

'Sissie, you look worried,' said Mercy.

'Hmm, when don't I? With the baby coming in a couple of months and the government's new controls on pay. On top of everything, I have dependable information that James is running after a new girl.'

Mercy laughed. 'Oh, Sissie. You always get dependable information on these things. But men are like that.'

'They are selfish.'

'No, it's just that women allow them to behave the way they do instead of taking some freedom themselves.'

'Well, if I had the chance to behave the same way,' said Connie, 'I wouldn't make use of it.'

'But why not?'

'Because I love James. I love James and I am not interested in any other man.' Her voice was full of tears.

But Mercy was amused. 'Oh God. Now listen to that. It's women like you who keep all of us down.'

'Well, I'm sorry but it's how the good God made me.' 'Mm. I'm sure I can love several men at the same time.' 'Mercy!'

They burst out laughing again. And yet they are sad. But laughter is always best.

Mercy complained that she was hungry and so they went to the kitchen to heat up some food and eat. The two sisters alone. It is no use waiting for James.

'Sissie, I am going to see a film.' This from Mercy. 'Where?'

'The Globe.'

'Are you going with Joe?'

'No.'

'Are you going alone?'

'No.'

Careful, Connie.

'Who are you going with?'

Careful, Connie, please. Your little sister's eyes are looking angry. Look at the sudden lines around her mouth. Connie, a sister is a good thing. Even a younger sister. Particularly when you have no mother or father.

'Mercy, who are you going out with?'

'Well, I had food in my mouth. And I had to finish it before I could answer you, no?'

'I am sorry.' Connie's voice is soft.

'And anyway, do I have to tell you everything?'

'Oh no. It's just that I didn't think it was a question I was not allowed to ask.'

There was more silence. Connie cleared her throat and waited, afraid.

'I am going out with Mensar-Arthur,' Mercy said.

As Connie asked the next question, she wondered if the words were leaving her lips. 'Mensar-Arthur?'

'Yes.'

'Which one?'

'How many do you know?'

Something jumped in Connie's chest and she wondered what it was. Perhaps it was the baby.

'Do you mean that politician?' she said.

'Yes.'

'But, Mercy...'

Little sister only sits and chews her food.

'But, Mercy...'

Chew, chew, chew.

'But, Mercy...'

'What?' said Mercy.

'He is so old.'

Chew, chew, chew.

'Perhaps, I mean, perhaps that really doesn't matter, does it? But they say he has so many wives and girlfriends.'

Please, little sister. Your private life is not my business, but you just said yourself that you wanted a man of your own. That man belongs to so many women already...

That silence again. Then there was only Mercy's footsteps as she went to wash her plate, and then left the kitchen. Tears ran down Connie's face. She heard Mercy having a bath, then getting ready to leave the house. The shoes. Then she was gone. Connie hadn't meant to start an argument. What use is a sister, if you can't have a talk with her? And what would their parents say if they were alive? They were good church-goers. They feared God. Running around with an old and evil politician would horrify them.

A big car arrived outside the house, a huge machine from the white man's land. The sound of its super-smooth engine was soft and gentle, unlike the hard banging of the girl's high-heeled shoes. When Mensar-Arthur saw Mercy, he reached across and opened the door to the passenger seat. She sat down and the door closed with a smooth little sound as the car slid away.

After they had gone a mile or so from the house, the man started a conversation.

'And how is my darling today?'

'I am well.' But everything about her said bad news.

'You look serious today, why?'

She remained silent and still.

'My dear, what is the matter?'

'Nothing.'

'Oh.' He cleared his throat. 'Eh, and how were the shoes?'

'Very nice. In fact, I am wearing them now. They feel a little small, but then all new shoes are like that.'

'And the handbag?' he asked.

'I like it very much, too... My sister noticed them. I mean the shoes.' Now the bad news was out.

'Did she ask you where you got them from?'

'No.'

He cleared his throat again. 'Where did we agree to go tonight?'

'The Globe, but I don't want to see a film.'

'Is that so? Mm, I am glad because people always notice things.'

'But they won't be too surprised.'

'What are you saying, my dear?'

'Nothing.'

'Okay, so what shall we do? Shall I drive to the Seaway?'

'Oh yes.'

He drove to the Seaway, to a part of the beach they knew very well. She loves it here, with the wide sandy beach and the old sea. She has often wished to drive very near to the end of the sands until the tyres of the car touched the water. A very foolish idea, as he said sharply to her the first time she mentioned it. It was in his 'I-am-old-enough-to-be-your-father' voice. There are always disadvantages. Things could be different. If she had a younger lover... Handsome, maybe not rich like this man here, but with enough money to afford a fast car. A car like the ones she has seen in films, with tyres that can do everything... and they would drive to exactly where the sea and the sand meet.

'We are here,' he said.

'Don't let's get out. Let's just sit inside and talk.'

'Okay. But what is it, my darling?'

'I have told my sister about you,' said Mercy.

'Good God. Why?'

'I couldn't keep it to myself any longer.'

'Childish. It was not necessary at all. She is not your mother,' he said.

'No. But she is all I have. And she has been very good to me.'

'Well, it's her duty. A sister's duty.'

'Then it's my duty, a sister's duty, to tell her about something like this. I may get into trouble.'

'Don't be silly,' he said. 'I normally take good care of my girlfriends.'

'I see,' she said, and for the first time in the one month since she agreed to be this man's lover, the tears which suddenly rose into her eyes came there naturally.

'And you promised you wouldn't tell her.' It was Father's voice now.

'Don't be angry. After all, she was sure to hear it one day.'

'My darling, you are too wise. What did she say?'

'She wasn't happy.'

'Don't worry. Find out something she wants very much but cannot get in this country.'

'I know for sure she wants an electric motor for her sewing machine.'

'Mm. I am going to London next week on government business, so if you bring me the details of the machine, I shall get her the motor.'

'Thank you.'

'Oh, and let me know as soon as you want to leave your sister's place. I have got you one of the government houses.'

'Oh... oh,' she said, pleased for the first time since this awful day had begun.

Down on the beach, the old Sea slides up and down the sands. He takes no notice of humans. He has seen things happen along these beaches. Different things. The same things. He never does anything about them. Why should he? People are unimportant. Here is a fifty-year-old 'big man' who thinks he is somebody. And a twenty-three-year-old child who chooses a silly way to fight life's problems. As they play with each other's bodies on the back seat of the car, the old Sea shuts his eyes, bored. He moves further up the sands, but the car is parked safely away from the sea, and the rising water cannot reach its tyres.

James has come home late. But then he has been coming back late for the past few weeks. Connie is crying and he knows it as soon as he enters the bedroom. He hates tears, because, like many men, he knows they are one of the strongest weapons that women have.

'James.'

'Oh, are you still awake?' He quickly sits beside her. 'Connie, what's the matter? You've been crying again.'

'James, where were you?'

'Connie, I have warned you about this. I won't let you question me like a prisoner every time I am a little late.'

She sat up. 'A little late! It is nearly two o'clock.'

'Anyway, you won't believe me if I tell you the truth.'

She lies down again and turns her face to the wall, and James throws himself down beside her.

'James, there is something much more serious.'

'You have heard about my newest affair?'

'Yes, but that is not what I am talking about.'

'Jesus, is it possible that there is anything more important than that?'

And as they laugh, they know that something has happened. One of those things which, with luck, will keep them together for some time to come.

'But James, what shall I do?'

'About what?'

'Mercy. She is having an affair with Mensar-Arthur.'

'Wonderful.'

'James, we must do something about it. It's very serious.'

'Why shouldn't she?'

'But it is wrong. And she is ruining herself.'

'Since every other girl she knows has ruined herself and made money out of it, why shouldn't she? Her friends don't earn any more than she does, but every day they wear new dresses, shoes, and so on, to work. What do you expect her to do?'

'The fact that other girls do it doesn't mean that Mercy should do it too.'

'You're being very silly. If I were Mercy, I am sure that's exactly what I would do. And you know I mean it, too.' James is cruel. Terrible. Mean. Connie breaks into fresh tears, and James puts his arm around her. There is one thing he must make her understand, though.

'In fact, tell her to stay with him. He may be able to speak to someone in your government office so that after the baby is born you can keep your job there.'

'James, you want me to use my sister!'

'She is using herself, remember.'

'James, you are terrible.'

'And maybe he would even agree to get us a new car from abroad. I shall pay for everything, but that would be better than that old car I was thinking about. Think of that.'

'You will ride in it alone.'

'Well...'

That was a few months before the coup. Mensar-Arthur did go to London and bought something for all his wives and girlfriends. He even remembered the motor for Connie's machine. When Mercy took it to her, she was quite confused. She had wanted this thing for a long time, and yet one side of her said that accepting it was wrong. She could not discuss the whole business with Mercy, and James always took Mercy's side. She took the motor with thanks; the price she paid was her silence about Mercy. In a short while, Mercy left the house to go and live in the government house that Mensar-Arthur had managed to get for her.

Then, a couple of weeks later, the coup. Mercy left her new place before anybody could throw her out. James never got his car. Connie's new baby was born. Of the three, Connie was happiest with these changes. In her eyes, Mensar-Arthur and everything that went with him meant trouble for her sister and for her own feelings too. Now things could return to normal. Mercy would move back to the house, perhaps find a man who was more - ordinary, let's say. Then she would get married and these terrible times would be forgotten. God is good, he brought the coup before her sister's affair became widely known and ruined her name...

The arrival of the new baby has ended all the difficulties between James and Connie. He is that kind of man, and she that kind of woman. Mercy has not been seen for many days. Connie is beginning to get worried...

James heard the baby's loud cries the moment he opened the front gate. He ran in, holding the few things he had bought on his way home.

'We are in here,' called Connie.

'I certainly could hear you. If there is anything people in this country have, it is a big mouth.'

'Don't I agree? But we're well. He's eating normally and everything. You?'

'Nothing new. More stories about the ex-politicians.'

'What do you mean, nothing new?' said Connie. 'Look at the excellent job the soldiers have done, cleaning up the country of all that dirt. I feel free already and I can't wait to get out and enjoy it.'

James laughed bitterly. 'All I know is that Mensar-Arthur is in prison. No use. And I'm not

getting my car.'

'I never took you seriously on that car business.'

'Honestly, Connie, don't you want me, your husband, to be successful and get rich?'

'Not out of my sister's ruin.'

'Ruin, ruin, ruin! Christ! See, Connie, the funny thing is that I am sure you are the only person who thought it was a disaster to have a sister who was the girlfriend of a big man.'

'Okay; now all is over, and don't let's argue about it.' 'Was it you who arranged the coup, I wonder? Just because of your sister? It wouldn't surprise me.'

And Connie wondered why he said that with so much bitterness. She wondered if...

'Has Mercy been here?' asked James.

'Not yet, later, maybe. Mm. I had hoped she would move back here and start all over again.'

'I am not surprised she hasn't. In fact, if I were her, I wouldn't come back here either. Not to listen to endless good advice from big sister, no thank you.'

'Mercy is my only sister. I can't sit and see her life going wrong without feeling it. I'm grateful that something put a stop to that. What worries me now is that she won't tell me where she's living. She talks about a girlfriend but I'm not sure that I know her.'

'If I were you, I would stop worrying because it seems Mercy can take care of herself quite well,' said James.

Then there was the sound of a car stopping outside the house. Ah, but the footsteps were unmistakably Mercy's. Are those shoes the old pair which were new a couple of months ago? Or are they the newest pair? And here she is herself, the pretty one. A happy, smiling Mercy.

'Hello, hello, my people!' And she goes straight to the baby. 'Dow-dah-dee-day! How's my dear young man today? Grow up fast and come to take care of Auntie Mercy.'

Both Connie and James cannot take their eyes off her. Connie says, 'He says to Auntie Mercy he is fine.'

Still they watch her, horrified, and wondering what it's all about. Because they both know it is about something.

'Listen, people, I brought a friend to meet you. A man.'

'Where is he?' from James.

'Bring him in,' from Connie.

'You know, Sissie, you are a new mother. I thought I'd come and ask you if it's all right.'

'Of course,' say James and Connie, and for some reason they are both afraid of what is coming.

'He is Captain Ashley.'

'Which one?'

'How many do you know?'

James still thinks it is impossible. 'Eh... do you mean the army officer who has just been given the job of... of...'

'Yes.'

'Wasn't there a picture in The Crystal over the weekend of his daughter's wedding? And another one of him with his wife and children and grandchildren?' said James.

'Yes,' said Mercy.

Connie just sits there with her mouth open that wide...

- THE END -

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