

Subira's Venture

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This is Mary, long-handle hoe in hand, struggling to bring order to our family maize plot. My youngest is with me, observing my slow advance against the stubborn resistance of the weeds, and making valiant efforts to assist with the aid of a crudely fashioned stick. Every few minutes she scampers towards a flock of birds searching for worms in patches of freshly disturbed, damp soil, shrieking with childish delight as they take to the air. It could be any day in the rainy season, except that while working I'm mulling over the unexpected events of last night, and asking myself whether I could have intervened more effectively to save my friend from her foolishness. What, I wonder, might befall our village next?

Yesterday evening started ordinarily enough. After I'd put the three girls to bed, I went to see my friend Subira. She hadn't invited me, but that's normal in this small village; you go to someone's house, and if it's not convenient you maybe try again another time. But mostly people welcome me, and why not? I hear their sorrows and their joys. I sympathise; I rarely judge. Their secrets are secure with me. I hear their matters of concern, and very gently give advice. Now and then, I have to warn. There are a few like me: we call ourselves The Shrewd Ones, a pretentious name you may think, but in truth rather appropriate, and we meet now and then to exchange information and discuss cases on which we need to work together. I like to think we are the glue which holds this community together. But there I go: 'like to think' indeed! There's no need for such modesty, for anyone can see the result: people here have their problems and disputes of course, but considered in the round this is a peaceful village.

I can only play my part in this because my husband, bless him, is usually content after a hard day's toil to stay home and keep an eye on the children. I can rely on him to see that John, our eldest, completes his homework – when you can only afford to send one child to school you want to make sure the family gets the most out of it. I'm fortunate to have such a caring husband; indeed, when I think of many of the wives in this village, I have to recognise that I'm fortunate to have my husband with me at all. What happens all too often is that a family finds it cannot make ends meet, and the man leaves home to look for work, promising to send money. Usually he discusses the situation with his wife and they agree it is best for him to go, but I've heard of a case where a man just told his wife he was going. The outcome is always the same. The man ends up so far away that rarely can he return to see his wife and family. If he is lucky he finds a steady if low-paid job – farm worker, cleaner, building labourer – something like that. Otherwise he has to accept whatever irregular work he can find, somehow surviving without pay the rest of the time. Whispers have it that some of the men turn to crime, and one or two are rumoured to have disappeared into the bush and joined one of those insurgent groups whose monstrous deeds we hear about from time to time. None of the wives receive much money: the husbands have their own living costs; and on top of that, what can you expect of a man who comes into a little money, lonely, far from home, and subject perhaps to the enticements of city night-life? – oh, and don't forget the fat commissions of the money agents. Some

wives don't even know whether their husbands are still alive. So yes, I'm one of the fortunate ones.

Now Subira is not so lucky: her husband left a few years ago. She lives with her one son, who is the same age as my John; they often walk together to and from their school in the next village. Subira is a friend, but ... let's just say she has her own way of thinking. I think she gets some strange ideas from people she meets when she goes to town to sell produce. Sometimes when I'm with her it seems she's speaking a different language. Take a simple word like 'we'. When I say 'we', it can mean my family, or a group I'm with at the time or have some connection with, or all the people of our village. But once I heard Subira say something I couldn't understand, something about improving our farming methods, and when it was queried she explained that by 'we' on that occasion she meant all the farming people anywhere in the tropics. To my mind that's crazy: the meaning of the word is broad enough already, so why stretch it even further? For other people we have the word 'they'. Please don't misunderstand: when we villagers refer to people outside as 'they', it isn't to belittle them; it's just how it is in the language we – or most of us - speak. When I explained this to Subira, she put to me this question: what word would you use for the people of our village together with the people of the neighbouring villages? I think she thought it was a clever question, but I had a very simple answer. I wouldn't use any word because that's not something I would ever want to say.

* * *

When I arrived at Subira's home she invited me in without hesitation. I had quite a lot of news for her, mainly gathered from other friends I had met with recently. She doesn't have so many friends herself, but is interested enough to hear what is happening in the village. I reported on several people who had become ill, on others who had been unwell but were now recovering, and on two happy events: an engagement, both parties from our village, and a birth to another couple of a baby boy. Well, I thought they were happy events, but Subira was of the view that a marriage outside the village would be more certain to produce healthy offspring. She also said that family connections between villages could be a source of help in times of difficulty. Perhaps she is right, but it also has to be considered that a spouse from another village will bring their own ideas and customs, which doesn't always make for a stable and happy marriage. What's more, bringing outsiders into our village could tend to weaken the sense of community that some of us work hard to maintain. They might even try to claim the same grazing rights as those born in the village.

Regarding the baby boy, Subira's reaction took me by surprise. "But they have three children already!"

As a mother of four myself, I wasn't sure how to take that, and after a moment's hesitation decided to change the subject. I'm not afraid of arguments, but I exercise discretion as to whether to pursue them and, more often than not, judge that the circumstances are not auspicious for a constructive outcome. Instead, I recounted the bizarre tale of one man, not especially known for his common sense, who had been working on his land when he saw a large snake approaching and decided to take refuge in a tree. He managed to climb some distance and then relaxed, believing himself to be safe; and indeed he was safe from the snake, for several people had heard his screams and rushed to assist – as people do in our village -, soon identifying

the snake as a harmless species. Unfortunately, while chatting to and thanking the people below he lost his balance and grip and came crashing down, bumping hard against several branches on the way, and had to be escorted to his home with multiple injuries that may put him out of action for a few weeks.

“Even children know that snakes can climb trees,” Subira said, “and that includes venomous ones.”

Subira had her news too, but of a very different kind: about the weather, and about crops and animals, mainly based on observations she had made while walking about the village and its lands. I don't take seriously her claim to be able to forecast the weather several days ahead, based on patterns of hot and cool and wet and dry days. She admits that she doesn't always get it right, but maintains that her forecasts are accurate more often than not. It seems to me that they're only as accurate as might be expected from luck, taking into account that some of them are rather vague. If she forecasts rain in two or three day's time, then she can say she was right if rain comes on day two, and also if it comes on day three. But when she reports on living things, I will certainly pay close attention, for her powers of observation do seem to be quite remarkable. If a leaf crop is just beginning to wilt or turn yellow, or bean plants are attacked by tiny insects, she will find it at a time when no one else can detect the slightest abnormality. Whether she has an extra sense that the rest of us lack, or just makes better use of the senses we all have, I cannot tell. Sometimes she draws such incipient crop troubles to the owner's attention, which does not always make her popular; their crops, they may say, are none of her business. There have even been times when a curious perverted reasoning leads them to blame *her* when – as it usually does a few days later - the trouble becomes clear to them. When it comes to her own crops, her powers enable her to take early corrective action: watering, spraying with soapy water to dislodge insects, feeding, or spraying with pesticide. Sometimes a little such effort at the right time keeps a growing crop on its way to a tolerably good harvest, whereas delay followed by more drastic action, even if it saves the crop – meaning just that it keeps it alive –, results in stunted plants and disappointing pickings.

So far as her animals were concerned, Subira mentioned that several of her nanny goats appeared ready to give birth over the next week or two, with the likelihood of sets of twins and possibility of even larger litters. Whilst this was a welcome development, it did create a problem in managing her time. Nanny goats, she told me, were usually good mothers, but it was risky after a birth to leave them entirely to their own devices among the rest of the herd. She always tried to be present, to ensure that the kids spent their first few days safe with their mothers in a separate enclosure, and on rare occasions when necessary to bottle-feed a kid. This made it difficult for her to go to town which she would need to do soon to buy feed for her chickens. It crossed my mind to suggest that my eldest daughter might be able to help, but no, she is not nearly mature enough. Perhaps in a few years' time she will be able to do odd jobs for people. In an effort to help Subira, I pointed out that some families feed their chickens on crop leftovers and fruit peelings, and sometimes just let them forage.

“Yes,” she said, “that's one of the problems here. People think it's fine because it keeps the chickens alive. But if you want a good supply of eggs, and good fat chickens to take to market, they need a proper diet including the special feed you can buy in town.”

Once she had concluded her agricultural news, Subira had a question. "Is there any news about the Omari family's land dispute?". She had heard some while ago that the family planned to raise the matter with a visiting government official.

My information was more up to date as I had been advising the Omaris, and I rather enjoyed recounting the story. "The official didn't hesitate to offer to help, and had his sales talk at the ready. He assured the Omaris that he knew someone in the ministry who was just the man to establish who is the rightful legal owner of any piece of land right down to the last square metre, that they would receive a certificate of ownership that would be accepted as valid evidence by any court in the land, or by any bank should they ever wish to pledge the land as security for a loan, and that it would include a full colour map prepared with the utmost care and printed on best quality paper."

Subira smiled and shook her head. "Don't tell me, he took an advance fee."

"He did. That was three months ago. They've heard nothing since, but they're still hopeful. I've told them, as delicately as I could, that they made a mistake. There was another case like this a couple of years ago. The family paid the official their money and never heard any more."

"You're right", said Subira, "the ministry has never sent anyone to do a proper survey of the land in the village. Even if they were minded to do so, they can't resolve issues about land ownership because they don't have the information. So what did you suggest?"

"I advised the Omaris to do what most people do when they have a land issue and go to the Elders. And one of my associates has given the same advice to the other family."

"That's all you can do", said Subira. "I don't know how strong the Omari's case is, but the Elders should be able to sort it out."

It's one topic on which she and I agree. The Elders can resolve disputes about land because they generally know, not just from a lifetime's observation but also from information passed down from their forebears, which land belongs to which family; and if they are not completely sure they can be relied on to make a fair adjudication. They also know where land ownership is subject to villagers' customary rights to graze animals after the owner has gathered their harvest.

"Talking of the Elders," Subira said, "what do you think of their attitude to water trading?"

I was at once aware that, while her interest in the Omaris' land was not much more than curiosity, water was to her, as to all of us, a matter of vital concern. Fortunately, though, I could anticipate that she would be happy with what I would say. "Ah", I began, "the Elders have long memories, and for questions about land ownership that's very useful. But for some other matters it is their very memories that seem to lead them into error. Consult an Elder about a water issue, and he will be pleased to inform you that water is a gift from God; he will pause after the word 'water', as if to convey that this is a truth of great profundity. Then he will tell you that water is something we have to share, not a commodity to be owned, or bought and sold."

Subira butted in to remark how odd it was that the Elders seemed to believe in one 'ism' – I've forgotten the words she used - for land and a different one for water.

"Their thinking," I continued, "seems to come from a time when one or two hand-dug communal wells served the whole village. Now, of course, there are quite a few wells: several families like yours have had deep modern wells installed on their land,

and some of them went into debt to meet the considerable cost. So the village is better supplied with water, but there are still problems ...”.

I could see that Subira was itching to speak, presumably to ensure that I fully understood the nature of the problems.

“None of the wells,” she said, “are completely reliable: the old wells are not very deep and can go dry just when they are most needed; the modern wells need maintenance from time to time and rely on diesel or electricity, which are expensive and not always available, to pump up the water. So in the dry season it can happen that we have some villagers willing to pay for water for their crops and animals, and others wanting to sell water to raise money to help pay off their debt.”

“Exactly,” I said, and proceeded to state what I knew Subira wanted to hear from me. “If people ask me about water trading I quietly advise them to ignore the Elders and discreetly go ahead.” I thought that would satisfy her, but she had a further question.

“Do they ever ask what the price should be?”

“They do, but I’ve learnt never to give any advice on a price even if people ask. I tried to help someone once by telling them what I knew, or thought I knew, about what other people had charged, and it got me into quite a bit of trouble – people said I’d misled them with bad advice. Now I just say you have to agree a price with the other party, and there is no right price as it all depends on the circumstances. If pressed I will add that I’m not good with numbers anyway.”

Subira smiled.

“Well, I’m not, am I?”

“But people come to you and your associates for help with all kinds of issues, don’t they?”, asked Subira.

“Yes, we’re often asked about incidents that that occur from time to time in village life: wheelbarrows borrowed without the owner’s permission; crops trampled by people taking shortcuts; livestock disturbed by noisy passers-by or their dogs; that sort of thing. To the police who occasionally visit our village these are minor issues, not worthy of their time, but they can still cause much loss and annoyance to the families affected.”

“What about the Elders?”

“If someone approaches an Elder with this sort of complaint, they will often suggest who might be responsible based on their memory of an incident that occurred many years previously. They may say it’s only a suggestion, but the damage is done: the complainant then starts viewing the other family with suspicion, and if we are not careful there is a risk of just the sort of ongoing feud our village does not need.”

“Having said that,” I said, “it’s important for all of us to treat the Elders with respect.” I felt I should say that as I can imagine Subira speaking her mind to one of the Elders. “We can listen to their opinion, show our appreciation, and then go away and do what we think is right.”

“So how do you respond?” asked Subira.

“What I usually do first is advise on prevention. I will encourage people to label their possessions in letters that really stand out and to ask for help if necessary in doing that; I never risk embarrassing anyone by enquiring if they know how to write their name. It’s far too expensive for people to completely fence their vegetable plots, but I will suggest that they put up fences at corners where trampling has occurred. When there is a need to find out who is responsible for a recurrent problem, I will

encourage observation. Very little happens outdoors in our village without someone witnessing it. This is where my network is very useful: we let each other know of incidents so that we can all keep alert for any indication of who is responsible, both from our own observation and from what people may tell us. Once we have a good idea who is causing a problem, we will arrange for someone to talk with them. We will consider who is best-placed to do this – if possible someone who is a friend of the miscreant and who can raise the matter in the course of visiting as a friend – and what they should say. Sometimes we have to explain why a certain behaviour has caused difficulty for others. But usually we try to focus on the future and establish guidelines, rather than dwelling on what has already been done.”

“But it’s all just talk,” said Subira, “you don’t have any real sanctions, do you?”

“Oh, but we do. It’s easy to underestimate the power of reputation in a small community like ours where almost everyone knows each other.”

“Yes, and easy to exaggerate it too”.

Subira likes to play with words, even when there is not much experience behind them. I could have told her how often our efforts do bear fruit, how many villagers have thanked us for our help with their difficulties. But I sensed it wouldn’t do any good, now at least. I don’t want to turn the conversation into an argument; nor I think does Subira, even though she sometimes says things that almost take us over the brink.

“Well, maybe”, I said, then looked quietly into space, focusing for no particular reason on a high shelf, sagging somewhat in the middle. On it stood a large tin of paint with white streaks running down its slightly rusty exterior, several bottles of a dark liquid, fertiliser I think, and a packet of a well-known brand of weedkiller, well-known in part as a rather effective means of taking one’s life for anyone so inclined. Subira was quiet too.

I am not one of those people who think it good manners to fill in a pause in conversation with some banal remark. I will wait until I have something worth saying, rather than treat the situation as an embarrassment to be ended as quickly as possible. Silence there was not, most obviously because of occasional clucks from Subira’s chickens just outside. But my hearing is quite acute, and I fancied – but could it be so, for the margin of the village land is not so far away? – that I could hear, very faintly, occasional distant howls and screams of creatures of the wilderness.

“You know,”, I began eventually, “many people admire the way you are coping”. I was trying to comfort Subira. She could put on an air of confidence and practical wisdom, but life is never easy for a woman who has, as we say, ‘lost’ her husband. And what I said was true, in a sense. Everyone in the village knew Subira by sight. Tall and lean, with a purposeful stride, and usually with a dark headscarf that flopped down around her shoulders, Subira was easily recognisable from a distance. People could see that she was diligent in caring for her crops and animals, and - so I understand from those who observe such things - the infestation which had ravaged last year’s bean crops across the village had affected hers much less than most.

“Ah,”, she replied in a subdued tone, “coping, that is all we aspire to. What is coping? A roof over our head, and food in our belly. Nothing more. And if we should succeed in coping for a whole twelve months, why then, we can try to cope amidst the challenges of another year.”

I had not intended to encourage such gloom. “But your son is doing well at school, isn’t he?” I already knew from my John that this was so. It was unnecessary,

I thought, to spell out the progression which everyone understood, leading to a well-paid city job and a transformation of the family's circumstances.

Subira didn't see things quite like that. She got up quietly and peeped into the next room, the only other room of her small house, to make sure her son was asleep. "Yes," she said, "he has been getting good reports. But he has a long way to go. Boys can change a lot as they grow up. And even the best students don't always go on to good jobs. Maybe there won't be any vacancies when the time comes; maybe the bosses will only want to appoint people from their own circles; maybe he'll be one of those people who are clever but not suited to working in a team. And that's not all. Perhaps, given the risks of trying to earn a living in the city, he will prefer to rely on the certainty of inheriting the family's land. Everyone wants to better themselves, but not everyone deals in the same way with the opportunities and risks they face."

"There are plenty of risks in farming," I said, "bad weather, pests, uncertain prices for produce you sell."

"Yes, of course, my point is that people deal with risk in different ways. Look at your family. You grow crops, and your husband also does repair jobs around the village."

"And we sometimes fish."

"I didn't know that."

"Yesterday, two of my daughters came back from the river with a fish the older one had caught. A big fat one, mind you," I said, demonstrating the size with my hands. "I cooked it and we all had some. Just imagine, eight years old and catching fish!"

"You sound quite proud."

"I should think so. What else would I be?"

"Apart from anything else, there aren't so many fish in that river. Your daughter did well, yes, but she was also lucky." I was minded to respond, but Subira continued to speak. "Now look at my family. I take my chance with my crops and animals. Life here is hard. My husband takes his chance in the city. Life there is hard too, but the risks are different."

"May I ask if he sends you money?"

"Last year he had a steady job, and he sent money several times. It helped me through a difficult period. But then he lost his job – not his fault, just a change in business - and could only find occasional work. My son understands all this; I don't try to hide bad news from him. The other week I had a good day at the market. There weren't many other people selling chicken or goat. Afterwards I sent my husband a little money."

"You sent money to him?"

"Yes, why not?"

"It's lucky," I said, "that it was possible for him to help when you were in difficulty, and then for you to help him in his difficulty."

"It is lucky," said Subira, "but it's not just luck. Sometimes we invite luck by the choices we make."

I wasn't sure what she meant. Was she reproving me? Did she consider fishing an unlucky choice?

Before I could respond, Subira had another of her questions. "Just suppose your eldest had been a girl, and the next had been a boy. Would you have sent the girl to school?"

Rather impertinent, I thought, and not a little strange. Suppose my eldest had been a girl? Well, he is not a girl. That is just how things happen to be. "Subira," I said, "we have to be practical. How things might have been – not might one day be, which I can understand, but might have been -, I have no time for that. Suppose my eldest had been a girl: well, if we are going to make suppositions, why stop there? Why not suppose he had been a lion or a buffalo?"

"Oh, but that's different: your eldest being a girl was an even chance."

"Yes it was, it was once, but now it isn't, now it isn't any chance at all."

* * *

Our discussion was interrupted by a knock at the door, quite firm and repeated three times. Subira stood up and, sensing possible danger, I followed just behind. She opened the door to find a young man whom I did not recognise. What first struck me was the wild, unkempt look of his hair. He was not tall, of slight build, very thin in fact. He wore a T-shirt that hung loosely, not especially clean, and a ragged pair of shorts. In his left hand was a heavy-looking object, the sight of which momentarily added to my anxiety, but whose nature became clear as soon as he spoke.

"Any knives for sharpening?". He followed with a short speech promising quick service and good value. From the way he spoke he was clearly not a local.

"It's rather late to be calling on business," Subira said.

"I hard worker," the young man replied.

I decided to intervene. "What my friend means is that you shouldn't call on strangers when it's dark and people are tired."

Subira looked at me intently as I spoke. Surely she did not disapprove of my support? I don't know whether the young man understood, but he more or less repeated his speech, not addressing my point.

"Well," Subira said, "as you are here, I do have one knife that needs sharpening. Just a moment while I get it".

I was very surprised. For safety's sake, didn't she want the young man to go away? Besides, had she forgotten that my husband can sharpen knives? But on second thoughts perhaps she was wise. Give the young man a small task to earn a little money and he will leave content and cause no trouble.

Subira returned holding up the knife and asked the young man how much he would charge? He looked at the knife and stated a price without fuss, no fancy sales talk, not even a 'for you' or an 'only'. But the amount was more I think than my husband would have asked.

"OK," said Subira to my astonishment, and handed the young man the knife. I don't know why she didn't haggle; around here everyone haggles. "Would you like to stand over there to do it?" she said, pointing some distance away from the door. "I don't want the metal filings on the floor here."

The young man obliged and started his work, but rain began to fall, at first a gentle patter, then quickly becoming heavy and making a din as the drops struck the roof of the house. Subira and I stood just inside the door as the young man got soaked, but he seemed unconcerned and carried on with his work. When he had finished he looked towards Subira.

"Come in out of the rain," she shouted.

It would have been rather inconsiderate not to have let him take shelter. Nevertheless, the danger was clear: she was inviting into her house a stranger with a sharp knife in hand. It could all have been avoided had she simply let the young man go on his way.

"Welcome to my home," she said. "I am Subira and this is my friend Mary".

"I Ahmed," he replied, letting Subira take the knife by the handle.

She took a cloth to wipe it dry, then ran a finger along one side of the blade, as if assessing the quality of his work.

"Careful," he said, "very sharp".

I began to feel that the young man was not without his merits and, although I don't find it easy to read Subira's mind, sensed that she might be of the same opinion. However, my apprehension of danger intensified when I heard what he said next.

"Is your husband at home? I do machetes too."

Perhaps he was simply seeking more business, but I looked directly at Subira, trying my best to put on a 'be careful' face. Of course her husband was not at home, but it was safer to leave the young man in doubt on that point. As for a machete, I didn't know if Subira had one, but if so the young man should certainly not be trusted with it.

The question seemed to provoke Subira. "I'll have you know," she began, slightly raising her voice, then stopped suddenly, as if realising that what she had been about to say would have been unwise. Perhaps my look had had its effect. Then she began again. "Do you hear that, Mary? The boy is not a one trick monkey. He does machetes too."

Oh dear, I thought. You can't invite someone into your home and then make fun of them. What is she trying to achieve? Fortunately perhaps, the young man didn't seem to understand.

"Monkey?", he asked quite calmly. Perhaps it's a compliment in his culture.

"Would you like to sit down and I'll get the money for you," said Subira to the young man. The rain had only eased a little.

"Where are you from, Ahmed?", I asked.

"I from cattle country in north."

"So you've come a long way. How did you travel?"

"I walked far. Also some men gave lift in lorry, in return for help load and unload".

Subira returned and gave him the money. "What was the lorry carrying?", she asked. I don't know why that was of any interest to her; certainly it was of none to me.

"Building materials," he replied, "bricks, blocks, bags of cement. Iron roofing, like yours", he added, pointing upwards.

Subira had more questions about his journey. Perhaps she was trying to test whether his story was genuine. Or maybe she just likes to hear about distant places. In any case I didn't pay too much attention. My thoughts were on the here and now. Was the young man on his own? Or was he from a group, camped just outside the village and planning who knows what? Perhaps they had sent their least threatening-looking member into the village for reconnaissance. Or perhaps others from the group were even now disturbing other households.

Eventually, Subira asked Ahmed the obvious question. "So why did you leave your home?"

"I look for new life, no future in cattle country."

“Mary and I are very interested to hear about your country and its problems”.

Subira’s assumption was incorrect, I reflected: she may be very interested to hear about the young man’s country, but it’s not a matter that much engages me. I can accept however that it’s polite to ask, and to listen respectfully to his answer.

“Why called cattle country?” Ahmed began. “Because good for rearing cows, you may think.” “No”, he said with emphasis, “not really, not any more. Just not good for growing maize, for beans, not even for cassava, not good for any crop. Not enough rain. Lucky any harvest at all. Most people not even try, not waste effort. Better keep cattle, maybe sheep, goats. And keep moving. Cattle can walk long way. Take to places with better pasture. Yellow better than brown. Green better than yellow.”

Subira asked about his family and their home. Did they all move together with their cattle?

“Yes,” he said. “Father, mother, sons, daughters, we all moved with our cows. Took tents, everything. But here is problem. Other families move too. Everyone goes to better pasture. Plenty land, but everyone goes to same places. Too many people close together. Not enough pasture for animals. Lots of trouble. Quarrels, cows going missing.”

“This land where everyone goes”, said Subira, “surely there is an owner, someone who controls who can graze their cattle?”

“No owner, no control, people treat as common land,” said Ahmed. “Maybe an owner long ago. Not sure.”

“So you decided to leave?” said Subira.

“Yes.” He paused, as if bracing himself. “One day men came with guns. Don’t know who they were. My brother was looking after our cows. Men shot him, led away about twenty cows. Left my brother on ground, lot of blood. We called healer man – not proper doctor. Did what he could. But my brother couldn’t be saved.” He paused again, looking pained.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly, finding myself beginning to take an interest in his story.

“And here is the thing, maybe strange to you. Those cows were poor, thin creatures. We’d done our best. But pasture just wasn’t enough. Only moved sluggishly. Heads tilted. Dull, impassive eyes. Ribs showing beneath their skin. Didn’t smell right. Lived with cows all my life, I can tell.”

Although Subira was evidently paying close attention to Ahmed’s story, any sympathy she may have felt was kept strictly to herself.

“Think what it means,” Ahmed said. “Why anyone steal cows like that? Only crazy, desperate men. No hope in such country.” We both remained silent when he paused for breath. “Ladies, you don’t know how lucky you are. Live in place with plenty rain.”

As I listened to Ahmed, it struck me even more forcibly than before that our village was like a small clearing of stability among an endless forest of disorder, and that we must redouble our efforts to keep it so. The rain may be beyond our control, but for other matters we have much agency.

“You seem to know a lot about cows, Ahmed,” Subira said. “Have you ever looked after goats or chickens?”

“Yes, we had some goats. I could milk goats when I was this high.” He held his hand flat, only just above table high. To his credit, he made the claim in a matter-of-fact manner, without any hint of pride.

“Let me ask you a question, Ahmed,” Subira continued. What a strange way, I thought, to carry on a conversation. “What would you do if two goats in a herd started fighting, ramming each other for example?”

“Just leave them”, Ahmed replied.

“Really? You wouldn’t do anything?” Suddenly, I realised what Subira was doing.

“Yes, best let them fight,” said Ahmed. “That’s what goats do. Separate them, might get hurt. And afterwards they just start again.”

Subira nodded: was she satisfied with the answer, or just indicating that she understood?

While this questioning had taken place, a darker thought had occurred to me. Ahmed’s family had suffered a physical attack. He had realised that the future of his homeland was bleak, and had decided to move away. But was that the only lesson he had learnt? Could that incident – and others he might have heard of - perhaps have accustomed him to violence, left him with the thought that it was sometimes the only way to get on in the world? Never mind Ahmed’s culture, would it even be safe to have him – as Subira seemed to be entertaining – working in the village? No, I reflected, the risk would be too much. Was it not she who had said that we make our luck by the choices we make?

I felt I should hint to Subira that Ahmed might be, at the least, unreliable. But any attempt to discourage her from her apparent course of action had to be made with delicacy. “After your brother had passed away,” I said to Ahmed, “what sort of discussions did you have in your family?”

“First there was the funeral,” he said, “very simple, all we could afford. But many people came. Some we didn’t even know. Event for whole community, not just for family. People spoke of critical moment. Much fear for future. Talk of leaving for another country.”

“So that’s where the idea came from?”

“Yes, but parents had to persuade me. Discussed many days. I said couldn’t leave them behind. Whole family should go together. But they said too old, too difficult. Told me go, let daughters stay.”

“They wanted you to go but their daughters to stay?” said Subira.

“Yes, needed someone look after them. For me, had to decide where go. Many opinions. No one really know what’s best. Eventually decided come south, find place with plenty rain.”

I reflected that my questioning hadn’t really achieved anything. Naturally he would present himself as a son who had shown consideration for his parents. Who knows what really happened?

I knew, in outline, what was coming, although the details of Subira’s approach came as something of a surprise.

“So, Ahmed,” she began, “now you are here and looking for work. Certainly you won’t make a living by sharpening knives. Most villages already have one or two men who sharpen knives as an extra to their main work.”

The young man lowered his head. It was perhaps a little mean of Subira to have encouraged him with a good price for sharpening one knife, and later to have delivered this unwelcome advice. But I have to agree that the advice itself was sound.

“If you are looking for a travelling occupation, why don’t you sell things, things you can carry that people in villages want to buy? Nothing which is heavy or quickly goes bad.” She mentioned milk powder, biscuits, dried mango, water purification

tablets, soap, washing powder, disinfectant, iodine and bandages – oh and string, thread, needles and pins, matches and nails.

Ahmed immediately saw the problem with that. “But need money buy things first.”

Subira did not try to persuade him further. I didn’t think of it at the time, but on reflection it was probably just a ploy to make the young man see that his options were limited.

“I tell you what then,” said Subira to Ahmed, as if an idea had just occurred to her. “I need a large bag of chicken feed. They sell it in town, it’s about two hours walk.” She added a few details about the route, where to go in the town, and the type of feed. “I would go myself, but one of the goats is about to give birth. Would you like to go tomorrow and buy it for me? I will give you some money, a bit more than it will cost, and you can keep the change.”

Ahmed didn’t hesitate. “I can do that. I reliable, you can very relax. And hope your goat kids well.”

I noticed that he did not query how much money the change might amount to. Of course he didn’t!

“Good,” said Subira, “now listen, if you can do a good job then I may have more work for you.” I thought she could make the point more strongly, and so she did. “In fact, I probably will have more work; there is a lot to do, but my husband is away and my son has to go to school.”

It seemed that the dubious deal had been concluded, but Ahmed had an idea. By now it was clear that he was far from unintelligent.

“I see you have trolley,” he said to Subira, pointing to a corner of the room. “With that could bring two bags, maybe three.”

It was a constructive suggestion on the face of it. But Ahmed surely knew that if Subira agreed to it then she would have to give him more money to cover the extra cost? Subira hesitated before responding; avoiding the need for a further visit to town – almost half a day for the round trip – was a not insignificant consideration. I looked her in the eye.

“Thank you for the suggestion,” she said, “but I’m going to need the trolley here.”

“OK,” said Ahmed with what I took to be a sigh, “no problem, I just buy one bag.”

It was late and I was tired, but I did not feel it would be safe to leave Subira alone with the young man, especially after she had revealed to him that her husband was away. I also considered that, after Ahmed had left, I should convey to her my view that she had taken a foolish risk, that the likelihood was that he would make off with the money and never be seen again. How can a clever woman have such poor judgement? As a friend I should give her, in a gentle way, the benefit of my opinion, just as I have advised other villagers on various matters. I also wondered whether I should point out to Subira the potential consequences if – contrary to my expectations – the young man should return and start regular work for her. The message that there is work to be had in our village would be bound to spread, to other young men who may have travelled with Ahmed, and to the people of his home country. Sooner or later others will arrive, seeking work, making trouble if they do not find it, and bringing their own customs even if they do. Our village will never be the same again. And there’s another thing. Why does Subira want to employ Ahmed, when she could have offered work to any one of our own struggling men? Surely she doesn’t – just on the basis of his story and answers to a few questions – consider him especially able? I wasn’t born yesterday: it’s because she expects that Ahmed will work for less pay

than any local. She may be right on that point, but where would it lead? Will local men who work for what is already not much more than a pittance find themselves undercut by new arrivals? I won't say this to Subira but it's probably for the best if Ahmed doesn't return. Talk about making our own luck!

Subira, understandably, didn't want to leave any possibility that Ahmed might misunderstand her intentions. "As well as work with animals, I am going to need someone to help on my land: digging, planting, hoeing, harvesting. Perhaps you can be the one?"

Probably deliberately, she did not ask Ahmed if he had done such work before; quite possibly he hadn't, given his family's reliance on livestock.

"I can do," he replied. "Like said before, I hard worker. And very honest too." It took an effort on my part to suppress a smile.

"Good," said Subira, "we will see what we can work out, after you bring the feed. Now then, just wait a moment and I will get the money for you."

While Subira was briefly away, I was on the point of asking Ahmed where he was planning to spend the night. I think I must have been very tired. Fortunately, I quickly came to my senses, realising that it would have been precisely the wrong thing to say, and the two of us passed a few moments without speaking.

On her return, Subira went over again with Ahmed the details of his mission, and he raised one or two queries – a nice touch on his part, I thought. As soon as she had finished, the very second in fact, he stood up and addressed Subira.

"Thank you for – how say – opportunity. Is OK shake hands with lady?" Subira readily offered her hand.

Then, as I had expected, he was ready to depart, but what did surprise me was the diplomatic manner in which he made his excuse. "Ladies, can see you tired. Should let you go sleep. I leave you now."

"Thank you", Subira and I responded almost in unison.

"Until tomorrow then," she went on, "if I'm not at home look for me at the back with the goats".

I stood for a while with Subira at the open door, noting with just a little relief that Ahmed, still clutching his sharpening stone, was heading away from the village. The rain had stopped, the air smelt fresh, and a relaxed Subira tried to interest me in some stars visible between gaps in the clouds as I watched the young man disappear into the night.

A list of sources on themes addressed in this story may be found at www.economicdroplets.com/2024/02/23/an-economic-story/