

A Guide to Going Home

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Ntinyari Miriti

Before you go, don't become too anxious. And no matter what you do, don't set any expectations. There won't be room for them. Not in your suitcase or in most of the houses you will sleep in because they are already pretty crowded. After all, you are going somewhere thousands of miles away to visit people (tons of them) you can't remember because now you are an adult and last time you were a toddler. But those people are family, so when you meet again for the first time, pretend not to be strangers.

"Welcome home", the first of the six aunts you meet on the trip will say. This aunt with a shiny straight-haired wig and wide smile will request that you call her "Mama" followed by either of your two cousins names. Try to mask your uneasiness with a smile and a firm handshake. As soon as you enter the house, substitute your sneakers for one of the many pairs of neon-colored flip flops by the front door. Shake the wet hand of the houseworker who just finished washing dishes. Yes, she is a cook and a housekeeper, not a member of the family. She is well respected and jovial even after midnight when you arrive. Be conscious of the way you answer when she asks you for your name so you don't pronounce it incorrectly. Think of the way you have always heard your dad call you: the accent, the inflection, the precise emphasis on the second to last syllable. Use it as a guide to practice so she doesn't laugh at you.

“You don’t speak Swahili?” your grandmother will ask you upon meeting her for the first time in 13 years. When you shake your head with shame, know this won’t be the worst you feel about this matter. However, your cousin will be more accepting. “Swahili was my worst subject in school. I don’t know it very well either”, she’ll say. You’ll remember that only an hour before, when you met her, your dad bragged to everyone how she was the at the top of her class and got one of the highest scores on her national exams. But just take her word for it.

“Which one of you is the musician?” your grandfather will ask you and your sisters. This will be after hours of sitting in his rustic home sipping chai and listening to endless conversation unable to comprehend anything but facial expressions and changes in tone. Tell him that you aspire to become a music teacher when you graduate from college. Contrary to your dad’s predisposition towards your career goals, your grandfather will exclaim, “Teaching is a noble profession!” Even though he is an alcoholic and despite the fact your father and him don’t have the best of relationships, appreciate him and the words you share. He will be the only one you meet who appears the slightest bit curious about who you are apart from being your father’s daughter.

“Do you think you’ll come back on your own?” your dad will ask you when it’s just you, him, your mom, and sisters in the car driving from one of his siblings’ houses to the next. Resist the impulse to respond with attitude even though your person and feelings have been suppressed by the very people that are supposed to be a part of you. Try your hardest to ignore the feeling of your stomach sinking after you snap at your dad for the first time in your life during one of the few conversations the both of you have shared throughout the entire trip. Sit in silence for the rest of the ride.

Don't try to forget, but make your best effort to not get upset or cry when you recollect how your dad became unrecognizable. Forgive him for neglecting to show his siblings and parents that you are worthy of recognition. He gave up being around everything he knew just for you. You know that right? Be grateful for him and everything he endured to create the life you know. Be grateful for the opportunity to take a glance at the place and people that made him who he is. What once was a puzzle with just a frame and very few pieces will begin resemble a picture. Can you see where you fit?

Accept that you don't, at least not yet.

This will remain unspoken between you and your father, but it's okay. He'll return to being his reserved self. He'll go back to spending evenings watching CNN and college sports in the months afterward. You'll return to your school and music studies and he'll acknowledge your hard work after not doing so at the time when you expected it most.

Again, it's okay. Everything will revert back to normal when you return to the home you know.