

Going to America: Excerpt from a Novel titled: *So That the Path Does Not Die*

A. Onipede Hollist

There were several anxious moments in the plane as Kizzy fumbled with the overhead bin. Then, as the plane accelerated for takeoff, he had shouted in alarm: "Misis, please, my buckle will not buckle. Ai tink it is broken!" The air hostess smiled knowingly. She picked up both ends and in one deft movement had Kizzy snugly belted. The incident left Kizzy perplexed. How could he not figure out something which seemed so simple?

The airport's control tower, terminal, hangar and fire station blitzed by his flattened nose against the cabin window. The jet roared into the air, sharply banked left and then right, noisily retracted its landing gear as Kizzy stole furtive glances through the window, dug his fingernails deep into the armrest, and recited Psalm 121. Later, when the jet had settled into its flight, Kizzy marveled at the carefree way a couple of white kids pranced around the cabin: Ah weyt man, dem pass wi, he heard himself say. He looked around guiltily to see if anyone had heard him. It seemed no one had.

Kizzy's anxiety dissipated somewhat when he is served a lunch of baked chicken and vegetables. Ravenous, he wanted to eat the meal the African way: mix the chicken and vegetables together like rice and soup, scoop large spoonfuls and throw them down his throat; but he didn't. He was going to America now; he had to leave behind his African ways. The plates had been divided into compartments obviously because the food was not to be mixed. So, Kizzy decided he would eat like Americans: one item at a time: first, a small piece of chicken. "Tasteless!" Then, the round, red, bloody-looking things & "Ugh!" Next, the mash potatoes. "Not bad"; and, finally, the long, green beans. Instead of gulping water from his porridge basin like he was used to doing back home, he would now sip from the small transparent plastic cups. Kizzy *was* apprehensive that he would be condemned to perpetual thirst with such tiny cups, but he reasoned that because America was mostly cold, people there did not need large quantities of water like in Africa.

Pleased at the rational way his mind had already started working, Kizzy adjusted his pillow and settled down to sleep. But a turbulent shake of the plane banished such thoughts and sent him into a recitation of more Psalms. Afraid to sleep, he planned the hours and days ahead.

For the six-hour layover at England's Gatwick airport, he would take the tube, not the train, to London to live out some life-long fantasies. In his borrowed winter coat, woolen socks, and hobnailed boots, he would visit 10 Downing Street, talk to one of those British bobbies in his bell-shaped helmet and take a picture just as he had seen on postcards. Next, he would go to a store, pay for some candy and wait for the female attendant to say "thank you luv!" Oh, English people; they are soooo polite! Then he would go to a restaurant and order all at once whimpy, fish and chips with plenty of vinegar, and steak and kidney pie--served on those plates divided into compartments for a real English meal, with, of course, tea and crumpets for dessert.

Finally, he would arrive in America: Oh! how he would eat hamburgers and drink orange juice. He would completely, totally, stop drinking water. He had heard the water in America tasted badly. Not as badly as the water in England tasted, but badly enough that he would not drink it regularly like the sweet water of his beloved Sierra Leone. Instead, he would drink orange juice, Florida orange juice! Yes, orange juice would be his drink, and he would drink it at every hamburger meal and snack, and every time he is thirsty. At parties and socials, he will say "ohrange jus pliz," when asked what he would like to drink.

He had been mightily impressed when he first learned of England's three television stations but was skeptical for a long time when been-tos spoke of America's television stations numbering into the hundreds. Why would you want so many stations in one country? When will there be time to watch them all, he often wondered? But as he had learned more of America's size and the technology used to work the medium, he became less skeptical. But none of that mattered now that he was going to be living in the land of televisions, in the country where people put television sets in their latrines.

He never owned a television set in Freetown, so he was determined to make up for thirty-eight years of lost viewing. He saw himself watching television till late at night, all night if necessary, orange juice in hand. He would watch all the stations. After all, what was the point of having so many stations if you weren't going to

watch them? Yes, he would watch "The Dakotas" and "The Lucy Show," two programs he loved watching on the twelve-inch black and white TV with the wobbly signal that his neighbor owned in Freetown. However, in America, he would watch a color television with a strong signal and live in a skyscraper with an address like Waterside Plaza. Yeah, that's an American address! He would make sure he lived on crescents, courts, circles, boulevards and plazas and, maybe, avenues, but definitely not streets and roads. And, oh! the day when he would post his first letter to his grandmother with his plaza address, his very own zip code, and the abbreviation of his state. "La-i-la!" he exclaimed, unable to contain his excitement. He looked around to see if anyone had heard him.

He would not be going to America to drive taxies and work in restaurants as he understood many Sierra Leoneans were doing. No way! He would be going to study at an American university, a good one like the university of the Virgin Island, (or was it the Channel Island?) where he will study Molecular Biology and do research on spermatogenesis in rats.

Kizzy pictured himself in a white lab coat, notepad in hand, entering a big, immaculate laboratory. Oh god! he intoned as he looked through the glass doors of the upper level cabinets. He saw tens and tens of flasks arranged neatly from biggest to smallest, tens and tens of Corning beakers and volumetric cylinders all lined up like ceremonial guards, waiting to serve their turn in the march of science on behalf of human progress. Kizzy walked toward the drawers and pulled one out. He saw ten or fifteen of every size and shape of test tubes. In another drawer there were batches of glass pipettes capable of measuring ten to the minus three. Then, he saw it! An automatic pipette, one that could accurately measure small volumes up to ten to the minus sixty-one. He picked it up tenderly, caressed it, looked it over and imagined what he could have done if he had had one of them at the University of Sierra Leone.

He turned around and saw shelves of chemicals all neatly arranged in alphabetical order and color-coded. He ran his finger lightly against each label. What he would have given to have this bounty at the University of Sierra Leone. Though no one seemed to appreciate it, his job had a lot of pressure. He had to deal with the secondary school science teachers who came to him because the one place they could be sure to find chemicals and other supplies for their classrooms was, naturally, at West Africa's oldest, most renowned, university. Pssh! How wrong they were. And he remembered the frustration of putting in purchase orders that

would sit in the office of those incompetent Accounts Payable people for months; he recalled the anxious wait for supplies he had ordered; then, the relief when they finally came. How good it felt to know that for a month or more he could supply all the labs with what they needed. On some occasions, the chemicals arrived late or had been compromised. These were the supplies he kept in storage for the secondary schools. Only god knows what results the pupils got from their experiments. But at least they got to perform some, even if they yielded wrong results. No wonder Sierra Leone has not been able to produce any sober scientists.

Kizzy continued his virtual tour of the lab. In the next five drawers, he saw what was, for him, the most important development in scientific research. It was the invention that defined American ingenuity, the invention that would have made his life so much easier and would have saved him countless hours of washing beakers and test tubes. There it was: The disposable product! He saw them. Rows upon rows. Tens, hundreds, even thousands of them, some individually wrapped, others in bunches; bunch after bunch, drawer after drawer, lying there, a sterile armory, each item waiting for its brief tour of duty and a certain death.

For Kizzy, more than any other invention, the disposable product defined America's greatness, her ingenuity, innovation, bounty, prosperity, civility. What other human mind, except the American, had the ability to invent something that can and should be used only once and then thrown away. And then he wondered at the African mind, the Sierra Leone mentality in particular, with its disposition to keep doing things the same old way, day-after-day, year-in, year-out and then defend outdated practices with rubbish talk of tradition and culture. Shooooo! We Africans don't want life to be easy for ourselves. We like things to be hard. Only then do we think they are good. While white people make elixirs so medicines are easy to swallow, we force bitter herbs down our children's throat and then tell them it is good for them. White people make machines to wash their clothes, cook their food, and clean their houses. We still cook with wood and charcoal, pound foo-foo in mortars. Shit!

Sure, some would say it is wasteful to use something only once and then throw it away, especially when others don't have enough for themselves. But those who want to criticize should try dipping their ungloved hands into industrial strength soap solutions and acetone everyday to wash stained cups, cylinders, funnels, flasks, Petri dishes, spatulas, test tubes, troughs and other equipment. Their hands will quickly rebuke them.

Instinctively, Kizzy Bacchus rubbed his hands, and the coarse, dry, callused surfaces reaffirmed his appreciation for disposable products. He picked up a disposable Healthline latex glove. He was going to determine if the sperm of rats carrying the X chromosome can swim faster than the ones carrying the Y chromosome by putting a radioactive tracer on a portion of the Y chromosome. He dipped the latter into the bluish Benedict solution and performed a test for protein on an egg yolk. After, he wiped the drops of Benedict solution from the countertop with a swab, he tossed the used swab and glove over his head toward the trash can. He continued repeating this process, his pace increasing with each change until a pile of latex gloves and cotton swabs gathered around the trash can. Soon the pile grew to surround his feet. Kizzy frenziedly continued to use, change and discard the gloves and swab. With each change, he felt years of chemical encrustation peeling off his hand.

Yes! in Amerika he would work in a well-equipped lab, and, using high performance liquid chromatography, he would extract the sperm cells of rats to determine the chemicals in them. The discovery would enable him to develop a hormone which would be injected into the rats to stop them from developing sperm. In effect, rats would be wiped out as pests and this in turn will promote food production and storage. He would graduate top of his class: Dr. Kizzy Bacchus, summa cum laude!

He would be sought out by the UN and a host of other international and national agricultural and scientific organizations to head multi-million dollar projects. But he would turn down these high paying offers with excellent benefits to return home to serve his country, to help in national development. He would restore dignity to the trampled African personality and bring pride to the motherland. Yes, he would sacrifice personal glory for the national good, though, just as a little something for himself, he will take back to Sierra Leone a big American car, like a Lincoln Continental, one that would show that *he* had arrived! Then, he too would be known as a "been-to." People will talk about his great research, spermatogenesis in rats; invite him to give lectures about his patented hormone therapy Bacchanalization which has eliminated rats as pests; invite him to their homes where, with his American twang, he will talk about plazas and shopping malls, television stations, drive-thrus, eight-lane freeways as long as the whole of Sierra Leone, and, of course, orange juice; still many others would just see him in the street, talk about him or call his name: "That's him, Dr Bacchus, Sierra Leone's

most famous son," they will say. "Dr. Bacchus," "Dr. Bacchus," they will call him. "Professor Bacchus," "Please Sir," they would plead.

"Mr. Bacchus,"

"Kizzy Bacchus,"

"Bacchus"

"Hey, Bacchus, you bloody fool, stop daydreaming and get your ass over here man." It was his boss. "How do you expect students to complete their experiment when you don't give them the right chemicals. You're incompetent man. When are you going to do your job without being reminded every step of the way? If you're not careful, I'll fire you. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Sir," Kizzy Bacchus replied respectfully, landing back on the tarmac of the parking lot with a trepidation equal to the exhilaration of his imaginary take off.

Ordinarily, Kizzy Bacchus would ignore Prof. Williams' insult or file it away in his mind in the remote hope that someday he would have an opportunity to get back at this man who so consistently belittled him. He realized a long time ago that he had very few options to deal with his boss' blatant bullying and arrogant exercise of authority. He knew that the Dean would not take any meaningful action against a fellow freemason, and he also knew that he would only be opening himself up to recriminations. So he often held his peace.

Prof. Williams' statements this day were no more venomous than the

thousands he had previously heaped on the lab assistant. But this particular morning his words were like salt in the fresh wound of Kizzy Bacchus's self-esteem because the professor demeaned him in front of two stately female students who were walking toward the Zoology Department.

A. Onipede Hollist is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Tampa, Florida.