

Twilight

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I.

YOU STOOD NEAR THE CURTAIN. You saw the big black jeep coming down the road. You knew there was a big man sitting inside. As it came nearer, your face broke into smiles. You saw others, too, peeping from their tents. Everyone is excited when the jeep comes with the big man inside, because it never came alone. Another vehicle trailed it, a pickup van driven by a not-so-good-looking, bald man, who always had a cigarette between his lips as if it were oxygen without which he won't survive. The second vehicle was always stocked with food and provisions for the starving occupants of the camp.

But when the jeep stopped, the man who disembarked from it was not the big man, but a slim man with an unfriendly demeanour and a dusty-brown beard. He surveyed the camp like a hunter, lifting a hand over his eyes to shade them from the burning sun. He sighed, brought out an umbrella, and opened the door of the backseat where his master sat. The big man did not come out immediately. He took his time. Big

men take their time. They have all the money, all the power – why would they hurry? He finally came out.

He wore a starched babban riga, as usual. The driver held the umbrella above him. The children spilled out to meet the men, and soon, there was a ring of small boys and girls marvelling and saying all manner of things to the visitors. Some tugged at the men's attire; some just stared, sucking their thumbs, nursing hunger. Most of the children were without clothes. But you were one of the lucky ones who had, because your mother was held in high esteem. So you got better things than the other children.

Three women emerged and herded the children away. One of them was your mother, Zaitouna. She smiled at the big man. He smiled back, so wide you wondered how his cheeks did not explode. Your mother and the big man walked towards the tent, which no child was allowed to enter. Not even all the women had access to it.

The big man still wore a wide grin. What was there to smile about? The dying children? The constant hunger? Last week, a boy died. You did not know what he suffered from. Even though you all were bones and emaciated, the boy's case was worse. His skin was pale and scaly, the outlines of his rib cage prominent. He lay there, unmoving, while his mother wept. You shrieked and ran out of the tent. That night, the boy entered your dream. He said things you could not understand. He pointed to things you could not see, things shrouded in darkness.

II.

You didn't understand why your mother undressed before him, this man you once liked but for whom hatred has now found its way like a pathogen into your body. You knew that there were certain things adults did which a child should know nothing of, see or hear about. But there you were. The more you saw, the more you tried to make sense of what unfurled before your eyes, the more senseless it became.

You felt thorned in the chest. The man's naked body resembled

nothing you imagined yourself loving, loose flesh hanging everywhere. And his tummy made him look like a pregnant woman. You shut your eyes. Why would your mother permit this Alhaji to touch her with his fat fingers? What was he doing with his mouth? Why did she gasp? Was she ill? She lay beneath him, and he hovered over her like some god. Was he examining her?

You watched them. The way your mother continued to gasp. Her fingers on the man's shoulders, urging him on, her fingers, like claws, digging into the mattress, like she was in pain. How she writhed, tossed her head about.

You wanted to crawl out from your hideout and end the madness. You wanted to stop this man whom you now despised with every ounce of your heart from torturing your mother. You wanted to grab something and hit him on the head. But you did not move from your position. Maybe because, even as a child, deep down, you knew that it would kill your mother if she knew that you were watching. Or maybe because it was shame you felt for both yourself and your mother. Your inability to help her, a nasty feeling of betrayal, her own helplessness.

III.

Since you and your mother came to this place, you felt that she had changed, that she no longer loved you the way she used to. Most days she sat by herself, silent, gazing into the distance. A kind, dull fire burned in her eyes. The veins on her neck were taut, her voice sounded metallic, like someone possessed. She grew distant and it scared you, so you withdrew from her.

But you could not understand all the things she had seen and become with the coming of the war. A child could easily shrug off horrors and return to play on the sands. But an adult's punishment was destined by consciousness.

Two months ago, you were down with malaria. On the second

night, your condition worsened. It was as if an unseen force glued your eyelids whenever you tried open your eyes. Your breathing was haphazard.

Your mother hovered around you, troubled. You drifted in and out of slumber and dreamt strange dreams. In your dreams you saw Habeeba running toward you in an undefined darkness roaming with angry clouds. When she reached you, she vanished, munched up by the darkness. It happened again and again. Sometimes she got close, very close, and even touched you, her sandy fingers coarse yet tender. The darkness assumed hideous shapes: giant floating ships and houses, apparitions with contorted and missing body parts. Sometimes, you saw your father and Halira, your sister, standing headless before your house. You saw trees harassed by strong wind, strange birds registering sinister sounds. You screamed. Your mother wept. She held you to her chest as you fought. The other women stood, confused, saying words of comfort. Some brought in cold water to dab your burning skin.

‘Stay with me! Stay! You are going nowhere!’ She fought with you.

‘Umma, I want to go to her! Can’t you see her? I want to go to her! Let me go!’

Your mother held you firmly, tears streaming down her face. She whispered things into your ears: prayers, verses from the Qur’an, constant pleas, all jumbled up in her own panic. ‘You are going nowhere, son. You are going nowhere. You are mine. I can’t lose you. Ya Ubangiji, come to my aid!’

The struggle continued until Mallam Halidu, the kind doctor, arrived late in the night. It was he who gave you injections which put you out till the following morning. At dawn, though very weak, you felt better. Your mother was still all over you. It took two days before you were able to walk without trembling. When you were able to string meaningful words together, you told her you saw Habeeba in your dream walking away, dejected. Your mother held her chest, as if your revelation signified that her storm was over.

IV.

Your mother, she would sit up, deep in the night, and weep. At times, she cleared a little patch of your tent and offered nafil prayers. She no longer prayed as much as she used to back then in Anguwar Dan'ya, when your lives were still normal. Not after fleeing, not after the ghostly silence of night and the panic from sporadic shooting. The tiredness in your bones as you all stumbled on. The moments you were told to hurry because danger lurked close by. The constant cries of a sickly child who eventually did not survive the journey. Your mother's swollen feet. The hunger rumbling in your stomach. The way you almost choked at the stream whose water was the colour of dust. It remained fresh in your memory how you all ran into bandits. Your group scattered when shots rang in the air. Your mother grabbed you and slipped into the bush until twilight. She kept running until you slipped out of her arms, and she fell flat on her face, exhausted, unmoving.

Maybe you would have died. All of you. Out of twenty-four women and children, only eight persons survived. You and your mother were lucky.

V.

Whenever you asked your mother about your father and your sister, she told you they would soon return. That they were in some distant land without fighting, that your father was working and trying to save enough money. That he would return and take you both to that peaceful place. And that you would live in a big house with bright lights. Where there was no shooting or smoke curling into the sky from burning houses. No decaying bodies. No flies. No malnourished children too weak to play, crying for food and water. Your new house would have a garden where you could run around and catch butterflies

and moths perching on brightly coloured flowers. And your mother told you that you would find another Habeeba with big, bright eyes to play with, and who would stay with you forever.

You loved to hear your mother say these things. But how soon? How well do you have to endure all these?

‘Very soon, my dear. Your father will come. Very soon.’

And you believed. And waited.

VI.

Habeeba. You always dreamt of her; her apparition haunted you. Your lives were intertwined like a twisted helix. In the dreams, you both were always on the sands and she always built the best and sturdiest sand houses with her tiny fingers, caressing the damp sand, shaping it into her vision. Her nose was never dry, always running. And her bulgy eyes, you loved them, especially when they focused on you.

Her hair was dark, charcoal-black and smooth and long, too long for her age. You loved her singing, too. Her voice was mousy but sweet; it tingled in your ears. You loved it best when she sang the yara song:

*Yara, yara, ku shigo;
yara, yara ga abinci ya zo.
Yara, yara, ina ku ke,
yara, yara, ba kwa jin zafinan ne?*

But you never forgot that evening when the chaos was still brewing and some vigilante men brought a lifeless girl to her father. They brought her tray, too. It was empty. All the groundnuts she hawked were gone.

VII.

‘Mama, what happened to Habeeba?’

‘She went to a faraway place where there is peace.’

'When will she come back?'

'I don't know.'

'Why did she go away?'

'She had to.'

'Who took her?'

'Allah took her.'

'Why did he take her?'

'Because He loves her.'

'But I love her, too!'

'Of course, you do. But Allah takes whomever he wants, whenever he wants.'

'I want him to take me too so that I can be with Habeeba. So that we can play together again. Will Allah take me?'

'Yes, Allah will take you.'

'When will He?'

'When the time comes.'

'When is that?'

'I don't know.'

'But will you tell Him to take me?'

'Of course, I will.'

'When will you?'

'When I pray to Him later.'

'Will you tell Him to hurry?'

'Yes, I will.'

VIII.

It was one of the big man's visits, and they told you and other boys to stand before a cameraman. A short, stubby man with small, peanut eyes. The big man towered behind you with those ever-bulging cheeks. When you turned to look at him, the cameraman growled at you. 'Look at me! Why are you all standing as if you have seen a ghost? Have you never taken pictures before? You don't know how to smile?'

You, don't move! Kai, smile for me, mana!

The orders never ceased.

You all showed your array of toothless gums. Your umma hardly said anything about the big man. The women said he was a politician. You thought it was an important profession. One which brought in a lot of money. Money to kill hunger and grow bulging cheeks. Money to buy big black cars, to own a driver who opened the car's door and held an umbrella for you under the sun. You heard he was eyeing an important position, so he began to do all these good things for the refugee camp, to gain Allah's blessings and garner popularity.

Two days after the pictures were taken, Mallam Halidu, the doctor, came with a newspaper. On the front page was a picture of you and the other children and the big man. You did not know how to read, so you couldn't make out the words. You were all smallish in the picture. The big man all moon and stars. Your teeth shone in the paper. It was a phantom to you, all of you children in that picture. But you were overjoyed to even see yourself.

The newspaper went around. The women who formed a half ring behind your mother grinned helplessly. Mallam Halidu said the whole country was talking about you camp people, and, most importantly, the big man's philanthropy. Your mother hissed. She was the only one who was not impressed. You wondered why. She could read. She was one of the very few in that camp with such rare talent, which was one of the reasons she was respected in spite of her youthful age.

'Shege!' she muttered. 'He is only using us for campaign.'

She stood up and left the crowd.

Mallam Halidu gave a wan smile and began to ask the other women about the health of their children.

IX.

You watched as the madness ended. You watched their bodies disentangle and lay exhausted, side by side. You watched as the big

man sat on the edge of the bed, a hand scratching his extended pouch. It broke your heart that your mother was weeping. The big man picked his trousers from the floor and fumbled for something in one of the pockets. He brought out a cigarette and a lighter. You saw the glowing end of the cigarette. He drew in breaths and smoke wafted through his mouth and nostrils. He spoke to your mother in a gruffy tone. You didn't understand some things said, but you listened.

'Ina da ciwon kanjamo. I have HIV,' he said.

Your mother, who'd sat up, did not reply. You watched her. Her face expressionless.

He turned to her. She gazed at him.

'I'm already dead. I died the day they gutted my husband like a guinea fowl and threw his body into our house, which they went ahead to set ablaze. I died the day they snatched my daughter away from me. I've died many times. What more can kill me again? What more?' She let out a short, crude laugh.

You understood what she revealed. You felt numb. Tears pooled in your eyes. A sob began to rise in your throat.

It had all been a lie. The sweet talk of your father's return, the toys he would bring, how he would take you all to a peaceful place. A big house with fluorescent light, food, a garden full of flowers. Away from the cold, diseases, deaths and fear. All had been a lie.

The big man took a long look at your mother, then shrugged, and continued smoking.

He flung away the cigarette stub and turned again to her. He took her hand in his. He spoke softly.

'Zaitouna, let me take you to the city. There is no hunger and running there. The insurgents can't get in. It is well-fortified. I want to take good care of you. By Allah, I want to take good care of you. Come with me. You will not regret it. You will have a good life. Ke da yaron ki. You and your boy. Wallahi!'

She watched him with sadness in her eyes. 'What of the remaining women and children? How will they survive?' she asked.

He stared at her, then let her hand slip away, and turned away.

‘This disease of yours, your four wives and the two you drove away, are they aware?’ your mother, who seemed to know much about this man’s private life, asked.

‘No. None of them,’ he replied.

‘For how long now?’

‘A year and half.’

‘And you have not told them? What kind of a man are you?’

‘I’m yet to decide how to go about it. It’s hard. It’s very hard, Zaitouna. You’ll not understand,’ he said with frustration.

‘Haba! A year and half.’

‘It’s my business. Is it because I told you?’

He stood up and began to wear his clothes. He smoothed them with his hands. At the door, he paused and turned.

‘Come with me, Zaitouna. This war. This war. I don’t know when it will end. No one knows.’

‘With people like you around, wars never end. There are wars that can’t end. Everywhere. In this room, in your heart, inside me. When I look into the eyes of my son, I see war.’

He let out a deep sigh of resignation. The door closed after him.

Your mother sat still for a while. You wondered what she was thinking. You knew she liked him. You wondered if she feared that leaving here would put an end to his kindness. You thought about so many things until a fuzziness surged in your mind. When she left, you crawled out from hiding and sprawled yourself on the coarse floor. You ached all over. Your breathing lacked rhythm. You had taken in so much in a short space of time, like someone without swimming skills caught up in ocean currents. You wept. You remembered you had to leave the room before anyone returned and found you.

The air outside was in sharp contrast to the mouldy, suffocating dampness of that room.

People unloaded the big man’s gifts. His jeep and the small car sped away, trailed by chants of gratitude and excitement from the women and children. A nauseating feeling enters you. You suddenly despise everything, even the air you breathe. The noise of the other children

who run about with the little energy they had. The ones who cried and cried from sickness or hunger or both. The women who chatted.

You moved away to the dogon yaro tree. Your stomach rumbled and you retched. You leaned on the tree and closed your eyes. You wanted to still the burning clang in your head, the rapid, painful throbbing in your chest. You saw Habeeba.

When you opened your eyes, it was dark. You were in a tent, lying on a wrapper-padded mat. The yellowish glow of a lamp introduced your mother's worried face. You did not know what happened. You could not tell how you left the comfort of that tree. Your mother began to cry. Your body shivered and fire licked your bones. Two other women came into view, arms folded, watching you.

'How are you feeling? Are you hungry? You must be hungry. You have to eat. Mallam is on his way.'

You stared at your umma as if she was speaking a strange tongue. She was close and yet far. She receded. Her voice a gradual, distant echo. She would not let you slip away from her just like that. You, the only thing she had left. She shook you until your bones raged, until the pain in your head grew a thousand-fold and made you bite your lips. The drowsiness left your eyes.

'Son, you can't leave me! You can't leave me like this!' She shook you.

You cried. You told her all you wanted was to see Baba and Halira and leave this place for good, and play with Habeeba again. She held you tight to her bosom, her tears falling freely on your head, onto your face.

'D'ana, everything I do, today, tomorrow, I do for you,' she said.