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A Silent Cry

Chowa Chikumbi

Her lithe body lay on the floor, badly bruised. The little white dress she wore was torn, pulled all the way up to reveal her navel. A white dress mixed with streaks of red, all that red, from all the blood flowing from the inside of her. Next to her were pink panties with blue patterned butterflies on them. Her hair, in a big up-do before, was now a disheveled mess, brown specks of dust covering the blackness that was her hair. It was strong, thick hair. Thick but soft at the same time. Beautiful natural hair that cascaded the length of her back.

Just last week, she turned four years old.

We prepared all manner of food to celebrate her birthday, fried maize kernels, goat meat roasted over roaring braziers, dried and fresh cassava, chicken that had bathed and soaked in spices and its own juices for days on end. Traditional cakes baked over hot coals, baked in old blackened pots that added to the flavour. We roasted groundnuts and covered them in burnt sugar, sweet potato flour mixed with lots of Manuka honey that we rolled into donut rings. The adults that had escorted their children to the celebration sat around in a circle drinking sour wine and singing the songs from the olden days. They

were songs about

death, life and

it's fragility about

time and it's elusiveness. These were sad songs that struck an unquenchable cord in the heart that was hard to shake off. I remember

thinking at the time

how odd it

was that they chose

to sing songs that unearthed such despondency of soul at a birthday celebration, it was as if they had sensed the impending tragedy that was to befall us.

The little ones chased each other happily around the yard, raising the dust were their feet stumped; their tummies bloated with juice that had been made using the wild fruits we had plucked from behind the house.

She is not a nameless girl. Her name is Lweendo. Between her legs, she had been violated. My mother had found her lying there. I had asked her to babysit as I had a friend's wedding to attend. Mother stepped out for a few minutes to chat with a neighbour that lived two doors away, leaving Lweendo alone in the house with her father. She came back to find the living room door wide open, ran to the bedroom when she heard soft muffled cries, Lweendo was on the floor, her arms wrapped tightly around herself, hopefully providing her with the comfort she desperately needed at that moment.

Mother screamed at the unimaginable scene in front of her. So much blood, it flowed in a perfect stream, creating a map on the floor. Mother went momentarily blind, then came dread, shock, anger, disbelief, denial, intense denial, nausea, and more denial. Those emotions, if nausea and temporary blindness were emotions. Those are the emotions she felt.

Lweendo's Dad, he had done it. A very tall man I had won him like a prize. All the neighbourhood spinsters had been eyeing him, but it was I he had chosen. My mama was so proud, "you bagged yourself a looker" she would say, "an educated one at that". "This one will change your life for the better", she said.

The whole 6 ft. of him, my husband, the epitome of a handsome man, saw it fit to rob his daughter of her precious flower. I imagine she was sick to her stomach with disappointment that the man that was supposed to protect her was instead hurting her. Did she beg? "Daddy no!

Please, please daddy," while he found his way through her hymen. Did he have to look away to avoid looking at her small innocent face, so wet from the tears streaming down her face, tears that were not

innocent anymore? Tears of someone that had just been prematurely forced into experiences of a woman. My baby girl had been molested.

I WANTED TO DIE.

I WANTED TO KILL HIM.

I wanted to get a knife and slit his throat, to hear him gasp for breath, painful, labored, slow breaths, over his moans and groans begging me to spare his life. How could I begin to recover? When I first saw her, I threw up. A dark cloud hovered over my being, the darkest cloud. My

feet became numb,

my hands grew cold

and clammy, I tried to swallow the saliva, but there was hardly any, and my larynx felt like it had swollen to double its size. My mouth had never been drier, perhaps not as dry as the Kariba dam had gotten over the years, but dry none the less.

She is the sweetest little girl, as innocent as the very first flower budding from an exotic fruit tree, the very first bud, just as she is the very first fruit of my womb. Her big round eyes always looked on with wonder, a lightweight when you carried her, as light as a feather, so fragile it's as if she could break. Anyone's first instinct would be to want to hold her tight, to protect her from the evils of the world.

Why would a grown man choose her lithe frame over any other beautiful lady in the township? Any of those ladies that paraded around in the dusty gravel roads, in their second-hand mini-skirts, eager to be spotted. The attractive young ladies whose supple dark skin glistened to a glow in the African summer sun. They swayed their large hips and firm buttocks when they walked, their buttocks danced and shook to the rhythm of every step they took, boom booty, boom booty, boom booty, those young ladies, even I wish I had their envious figures.

This happened to other families, not ours. My husband was more educated than the rest and had a well-paying job by our township standards. Not ours, we were too civilized a family, this only happened to poor families, the ones with dull husbands with no

morals. This was too much shame. What would the neighbour's think when they found out. The picture-perfect family had been shattered. I couldn't allow that to happen, our family legacy destroyed over a few minutes of lunacy, surely there had to be a good explanation, it had to be a demon. Yes, a demon. We needed to take him for prayers, they needed to cast out this vile demon. Maybe put him on a 21-day prayer fast, yes, that could help. My anger began to dissipate.

But then again, it could be that man Kajuna, the Sangoma, the one that lives further east of the township, near that stream with the weird yellow tadpoles in it. He lives in a weird shack made out of heavy-duty plastic, the most colorful plastic, pink branded plastic from down at the local bakery shop, large orange plastic with pictures of lions on them, stripped plastic, neon plastic, white plastic, green plastic, all sewn together and wrapped around tall wooden branches. The little house sits atop a hill surrounded by gardenia trees, the roof has pieces of corrugated roofing sheets nailed together that have started to rust and look like they are about to give way and cave in at any moment.

Kajuna heals the ailments that the local clinic fails to treat, the ailments of the body, of the mind, as well as ailments of the heart. He brings back the lovers that no longer want to be with you, the ones that have left you for a "younger fresher" madams. He can give you sticks and portions to break up a happy home, a happy marriage that you cannot stand because it grieves your envious heart and reminds you so much of your own miserable marriage, they deserve to have their homes broken apart some of those happy couples, no one should ever have to gloat that much. I hear he also heals the incurable diseases. The ones brought into our land by the white settlers' and by the white settlers' food, by their vaccines. He heals the STDs, the ones that mutilate the genitals till they look and smell like minced meat.

Men go there in droves, all sorts of men, semi-educated, the uneducated, all lined up outside his house hopeful that their various troubles will be abated, and Kajuna tells them about this pure blood. This innocent blood that's "untainted" by sexual experience. The blood of a virgin. Not just any virgin, a young girl, a pre-pubescent girl.

That foolish old man tells them to go there with a wad of cash and two Chickens, the other of which they leave with him, the other is reserved for the Sacrifice to the Ancestors. They are told to find a

crossroads and go

there in the

black of the

night, stand in

the middle of the crossroads, taking off their clothes, raise the chicken to the heavens and turn around a hundred times. Carrying their sharpened knives, they were to slit the chicken's throat and spill the blood on the ground. They were instructed to leave the chicken and their clothes right there in the middle of the road, to retrace their steps from where they came, walking backwards, looking at the chicken and their abandoned clothes, only to turn when the poor chicken was out of sight.

That is who they were off to find, the young girls.

These men, the ones with a sliver of a conscious would target a neighbour's child, she already called him uncle, and he was familiar. He had given her sweets ever since she could eat and gave her a few more over the years, he was safe, and then he went in for the kill. The ones without a conscious, the ones birthed by the devil himself, would look no further than their own flesh and blood, their helpless nieces, and their own daughters.

I had heard countless stories of these horrific happenings around the township. I wondered how these women kept

quiet about it,

betray their own

daughters by choosing

to stay with

these monsters. Yes, they did not have a penny to their names, and their mothers could not stand being the talk of the town on how their daughters had failed to "keep" a home. Only to return from a failed

marriage, with two plastic bags full of stained clothes and a broken child. To be a burden on an old woman who was barely making ends meet. The women that attempted to leave their perverted husbands were sent back because marriage is not for the faint-hearted, you had to be strong, you had to endure. What then if you left your husband, say you found a new husband, and he did the same, would you leave him too?

I am one of them now, these women that wouldn't stand up for their daughters, the ones I was so insistent on judging. The ones that cared more about facades and being called "Mrs." than doing the right thing, rendering justice to whom justice was due. The ones that placed more importance on shame and honor than their own daughters broken hearts, broken parts and ruined childhoods.

I will nurse my baby girl back to newness. I'll wash her broken parts with warm salty water every day. Massage her dislocated bones back into place till she heals. She'll be ok. Our family honor is important. I have to protect my husband. The community respects him, my mother is right, who will provide for us if I report this to the police? What kind of shame will it bring upon the family?

Lweendo, 4 years old, pretty black girl.

Virginity lost to her father, her blood is a cure. Pure, untainted blood. A cure for all those diseases they catch from the brothels.