

## **NO SILVER LINING?**

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Jebarwet sat silently in the corner of her dark, smoky round, kitchen, nursing her wounds. It hurt both in her body and her soul. She was not sure if what she felt was real but it felt like her heart was in an excruciating pain. Every part of her body ached. She listened to the flow of her blood in the veins and wondered if she had any left. She had bled so much that it scared her.

It was not the first or the last time he was beating her. He had beaten her when she was two days old in his house. He had beaten her till neighbors screamed on her behalf. He had beaten her when she was pregnant the first time, causing her miscarriage. Porot had beaten her for years. He was not going to stop.

She wanted to lift her head and look at her daughter whom she knew was watching intently. Her daughter's rapt eyes burned the festering bruises on Jebarwet's yellowish face and scalded the darkened ones on her arms and legs. She had not walked through the kitchen door for two days. Jebarwet was not sure if she could walk. She did not want to limp across the room and have Cynthia asking her to see the village nurse. She was quite something, that little girl of hers, and she adored her.

"Mama, you need to eat something," Cynthia tried to cajole her mother once more.

She had been doing so since the previous day but her mother could not budge. She sat still and stared blankly, shook her head as if in disbelief and let out a heart wrecking moan with a flood of tears in her face. Chiri, as all the people in the village called her to mean Chepchirchir, is Jebarwet's only daughter. Her heart went out for her mother. She wanted to cry with her, growl and shake violently like she did before on such days but Chiri knew better not to join mommy. Someone had to be strong for both of them and that someone was none other than her little self. She blinked away her tears and left the piece of Ugali from the previous day besides her mother then rushed to school, hoping she would later find her better.

In her heart, Jebarwet had prayed for a daughter when the village nurse declared her pregnant that hot afternoon. . She needed a confidant. Someone who would allow her rest her head on her laps when Porot, her husband, drummed it with abuses and blows. She wanted a little hand that

would hold hers which was layered in hard dead skin as result of scaling fish for the fisher men on the shores of Lake Kamnarok. Hands that had ploughed the hot rocks, forced seed of sorghum and millet in them, watched them as they struggled to suck on the little moisture that the scorching sun spared in the soil, till they managed to be little bushels of grain, which sustained her family. Hands that had grinded flour between rocks, split thorny pieces of wood for the fire, scrubbed blackened pots with sand near the lake.

When the baby came, she had washed her in herbs, *lelekwe laptano and soget* leaves and made her little girl drink some more for good health and a steady stomach. She had watched her choke and gulp the strange content, shrilling like a siren. Mother had rocked her baby to sleep, never taking her eyes off her.

“Maybe, you did not love me as much as sister Jemma said, God, but please spare my daughter, she is all I have,” she would earnestly pray marveling at how termites never ate the rosary for all those years.

It had been as good as new when she found it lying in the rocks, years after she had thrown it away.

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Porot never bothered to look at his child. It was a girl anyway, maybe if it were a boy, he would have bothered. He, short and sturdy with hardy features, a small mean mouth that hurled abuses at anything that passed by him, ensured that Jebarwet and her daughter had no peace. He came home charging like an offended elephant, tearing down any healthy feeling around them, with his long trunk, trumpeting abuses and later stamping on Jebarwet, to pulp.

She had refused to allow any seed from him reach her womb. That morning the nurse had smiled and asked why she did not want another child.

“I can only take care of this one sister,” she had said innocently.

“What about the father?” sister, as the women in the village called her, persisted amused at the intelligence of Jebarwet though she looked like she had never stepped in a class.

Jebarwet’s eyes had glistered. Her throat had filled up with something that felt like a boulder. The nurse quickly understood, when she saw her struggle to push the boulder down her throat

that she was not willing to talk to her about the husband so she changed the subject after asking her to stay steady as she tied some tubes inside her.

“Your daughter is growing very fast,” sister said in almost a whisper.

Jebarwet looked at her daughter, smoothly breathing in her arms and smiled at sister.

“She is so beautiful,” sister went on.

The village had never seen such a light skinned girl. They called her *kopot birir* - mother of the brown girl. Her eyes were always sparkling, her lips wet and juicy, and the silky bush on her head was nothing like the goat droppings most children had on their heads in the village.

Jebarwet, sat alone one evening, after visiting the clinic, antagonizing over her ill fate. She regretted not jumping off Porot’s pick-up truck that day and just disappearing into the bushes. Her friend Sister Jemma would have saved her. Maybe she would have been a nun like the ones she admired in her childhood. She envisioned what her life would have been away from Porot but shook her head in disagreement with her fantasy. Her father would have easily paid off the poor nuns and have them fish her out of the convent. She would never have had Chiri.

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Jebarwet’s home, is beautiful. The tinge of green that is splashed all over the villages by the vast tea farms, is breathtaking. One never tells whether it is the neatness on the almost perfectly square tea bushes, or the different shades of green from the mature deep green leaves to the baby leaves with a shade of florescent green. Despite the wetness and the cold, Kericho is bright and the dew glisters on the tea leaves like shuttered glasses on a tarmac road on a sunny day.

She missed the fresh air that came wafting down from the Nandi Hills. She missed the smell of soil after rains, the smell that had filled her almost too narrow nostrils, flowed down her lungs, making her mornings burst with freshness. She never imagined finding herself in a worse place, dry and horrid with nothing growing except ill-omened shrubby trees. Not until she met Porot.

It was said her mother had delivered in the tea bushes while picking because her father, the rich village villain never let his pregnant wife rest even in her pregnancy.

“He had forced her to work and earn her living on the estate,” one would whisper.

Another one would chip in still in a whisper, “sometimes he refused to pay his wife and counted the favors he had given her like allowing her filthy kind, to live on his estate.”

“But it was her estate?” another one would hide the words in a fake cough.

Rumor also had it, though no one really clarified or substantiated the idle talk amongst the rich villain’s workers, that he had killed his wife’s father with poisoned brew to get the estate. Some were sure that his late wife was the true heir that’s why he mistreated her.

“He forced her to abort every time she got pregnant,” another would chime in after the supervisors have gone.

“But why?” another concerned rickety chirp, “she was very beautiful, her children would have been the most beautiful things.”

“What about this one?” a new picker might chime.

“She forced herself on him and hid it till it came. No wonder she died in the process,” a more experienced one will say in a haunting tone.

Jebarwet would be busy chasing butterflies and smelling the wet soil, capturing every tale the workers told about her mother. Her father had told her a different story. He said she had another lover and had killed herself when he found out. She knew he lied. She hated him for being cruel to her mother and vowed to make him pay dearly one day. She grew piecing every gossip she heard from her father’s estate till a whole picture of cruelty and brutality that her father had perpetrated against her mother stood clearly on the walls of her mind. She understood why mother had to escape after she was born. Death did not steal her, it saved her.

“It feels like she left to be born afresh in you,” an elderly woman she was so fond of once told her.

She was admiring her long hair and tender light skin that would later be scorched by the sun in the valleys of Kerio, to darkness.

“You have her eyes,” the woman would go on handing her a piece of boiled maize.

She was a famous medicine woman and people called her *Gogo Dawa*.

“Your future is full of darkness my girl...” the hoary woman would sometimes go in a trance and talk like she talked to herself.

“But from you there shall be one of your kind, who will wipe away your tears and paint your future white” she whispered.

*Gogo Dawa* looked like she was sixty years old but she was way above eighty. People said her herbs kept her young and energetic. Some called her a prophetess. *Gogo Dawa* told people what she saw in her dreams. On the tea farm all workers regarded her with respect. Some said she was related to Jebarwet’s mother that’s why she grew fond of the girl. She felt safe around her and when father found them together, it seems like the old woman sucked all the Venom from his spirit. He greeted her with the humility of an ill-mannered child.

Jebarwet’s step mother did not want anything to do with her. She focused on her dark, fat triplet sons that looked like tea-leaves plague. They were cunning and naughty, with the slit eyes and huge nostrils of their father. The rough scattered hair on their heads that looked like rat droppings made them look like a team of Rasta thieves.

From her escapades in the estate, she gathered that her father had a lover, the mother of her sons but was too poor to afford her dowry. Like any other young man in love, he had worked on Jebarwet’s grandfather’s Tea Estate, *mokoryon kap Chai*, with the zeal of a donkey. *Kap Chai*, owner of tea, loved his hard work and promoted him to be the next in rank after him. The old man was only blessed with one daughter, meaning he had no heir. Jebarwet’s father saw an opportunity. It did not take any effort to convince the old man to let him marry the girl. Jebarwet’s mother’s fate was sealed over a cup of local brew, *maywek!*. The cup that later ended the old man’s life. Like the biblical Essau, he sold his generation’s rights to a poor man, with a brain and a mission, for a cup of local brew.

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Porot had come to give her father information about the other farmers who were trying to secretly sue the villain, when Jebarwet first met him. Porot had spoken in whispers and caution throwing glances at Jebarwet who was busy cleaning her father’s office. That was her work. Cleaning the office and arranging the documents that her father threw all over the place when he

talked to the workers in furry. Her father dismissed his concerns by motioning to him not to worry about her.

“I will chop off her tongue if she lets anything she has heard out of this room,” he said with ease like some bitter tongued comedian.

Jebarwet saw Porot’s lips quiver in fear. He might have wondered what could happen to him if the Villain could say something of the sort to his own daughter. She saw the fear get absorbed under his armpits soaking his maroon shirt with sweat giving it a sickening darker shade of maroon.

“Hurry up and leave,” father barked at daughter who was staring at the man who was willingly putting his head on an axing board risking it being chopped off.

She hurriedly picked the mop and pail and fled the room but hanged around the verandah just to capture the names of the farmers whose necks would be dangling in a noose in few days.

That night, the night she met Porot, he never left her mind. She thought about what would happen to him if her father finished the business he had with him. The village Villain used young men like him and hanged them when he was done. He would do anything to protect his interests.

Porot came again and again in one day and later he came daily. She lay in bed and thought about his foolishness. How he did not see that he was being used. She thought of him receiving money from her father in brown envelopes, folding them and stashing in his pockets that she thought were too shallow. She would hold on her mop and watch him grow an inch taller in confidence at every stash of a brown envelope.

On the fateful day, he had in stayed longer than usual. She mopped every part of the verandah. She repeated the front part, trying to capture what they were saying but they just whispered. They exchanged envelopes and scrutinized them in whispers. When the doors finally opened, Porot almost knocked her teeth out.

Father sat behind his desk, surveying the papers Porot had brought so keenly that she thought his eyes will light them up! She lingered there as if waiting to figure out what was going on but nothing formed on the sweaty fatty forehead of the villain. What deal had he struck? Was it time for Porot to disappear? She just could not figure out.

In her whirl of thoughts, a hand grabbed her. She thought it was her step mother but the smell was familiar. Porot!

“We are leaving,” he sounded like a ghost.

“What?” the word left her mouth before she could catch it.

“Yes,” she did not notice her father coming towards them, “go make that one happy with your golden innocence.”

“I have bought you from your father,” Porot shifted between a ghost and an ugly ogre with several eyes.

Her world was suddenly spinning.

One minute she was trying to figure out what the villain had discovered on her mother’s inheritance and before she could blink away the worry, she was being whisked off to a place she had no idea about.

There was no warning, no packing of clothes, no suggestion, no guesses, no goodbyes...

Like she was some kind of garbage that one just disposes off with no regrets. She looked up the sky and wondered if God really existed.

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She was not a foolish girl with long hair and an egg-soft face like most people thought. At the age of fourteen her father had started auctioning her away to any depraved rich man who cared to have a juicy snack in his bed. She had survived most of the nights by drowning the men in alcohol and jumping through windows, earning her beatings from her step mother and abuses from her father.

“You are so foolish that you cannot make a single lousy old man happy! All you had to do was lie down idiot!” he would roar, spraying spittle on her face.

She knew her thin escapes cost him deals in the tea factory and it made her happy. Every time she made her father angry, her little heart danced with joy.

On such occasions, she would fix her gaze on the floor and thank God for protecting her. Jebarwet learnt the secret of trusting God from the tea pickers. The Rasta Bandits, their mother and her father never talked of church or God. The workers on the other hand trusted their lives in God. Every day before picking, they would gather in a group and have the elderly woman who always sung with passion, lead them in prayer. They even prayed for her father. It taught her in silence that even if you did not like someone, you had to pray for them. She joined them in secret, hiding among the bushes and singing alongside, closing her eyes and saying amen with them when they were done. Jebarwet in addition to praying among the tea leaves, would sneak out on Sundays and sit on the walls of the Catholic Church and admire the beautiful nuns in veils and white long robes. She dreamt of being one of them.

One day, sister Jemma saw her and brought her a rosary. They became friends.

She dreamt about herself, sitting in the convent, wearing a white robe with a veil covering her long silky hair, sinking her teeth in the apples and yellow oranges that grew on the convent farm, smiling at children whenever they came to borrow oranges. She wanted to be kind to the children, teach them about Jesus, who sister Jemma said had died on the cross to save us from our sin. She had secretly wondered if that blood was enough to wash away the sins of her father. Such people, sister Jemma had said, risked going to hell, the place of eternal burning if they did not repent their sins before they died. Sister Jemma had also assured her that God was the father of Orphans and even if no one loved her, God did.

That morning, when Porot whisked her away, she had doubts. She wanted to ask if God really existed. If He did, why would He not save her from Porot? Why did He allow her father to treat her the way he did? Where had God been when the two planned to destroy her life? Were the dreams she had about her future real? Sister Jemma had said that God talked to people through his word in the bible but she could not read. Sister had said, He talked to people in their dreams and in their hearts. Sometimes through other people. How comes God sent no one to warn her? That night she had not dreamt about anything!

“Say something to me God!” She had suddenly burst out, tears of desperation stinging her eyes.

Porot turned to look at her.

“What did you say?” he whispered.



They had not said anything to each other since they left Kericho. She didn't have to be told that Porot was running away from something. It was all clear. She just wondered if that was what he wanted when he started working with her father. With him, you never come out alive. Something inside you must die if not the whole of you. When they left her compound, they had abandoned the factory car in the tea plantations, one of her father's pick-ups had picked them and rushed them to town, where they boarded an already full matatu. Porot had paid their transport from a large envelope that had huge wands on notes. People had looked at them in puzzles and Jebarwet was really bothered.

"Nothing," she said wiping her tears.

A lump rose in her throat when Porot looked ahead and said nothing else. Her fingers played around the pebbles on her Rosary, hating the fact that she had believed in God who never existed.

"Maybe He only belongs to people like sister Jemma," she thought loudly.

"What are you saying? Your father never mentioned that you have a mental problem," Porot smirked.

The froth that formed around his mouth when he pushed out the words from his thin lips warned Jebarwet of a temper in waiting. She had seen her father froth at the mouth when terrorizing the workers. On such days, most of them ended up fired with no benefits or the day's wages.

"I am sorry," she whispered.

Apologizing is an art she had learnt from sister Jemma. She had said it melted anger away. It had worked with her step mother sometimes but it never worked with her father. She watched Porot's eyes and she knew that it will never work for him as well. There was always a dangerous blaze in there.

They had arrived at Porot's home late at night. He had opened something that looked like a house and shoved her in then locked from outside.

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That night was scary. Things flew by her. Mosquitoes bit in her skin like they had laid ambush waiting for someone to walk in the house for them to attack. She figured out a chair and eased herself in it. It was hard on her frozen backside. Her stomach was groaning in hunger and her throat was dry. There was an inner room, she could see when her eyes got used to the darkness. There was a table and some things hanging from the wall. She later discovered that they are pictures of political icons from the locality.

She had not parked anything for herself, so she reached into Porot's bag and pulled out something that looked like a sweater. She covered herself, rested her head on the wall, and drifted into silent prayer. Midway, she felt so angry at God, walked to the door and threw her Rosary in the bushes. She will find it sunken in the stones years later.

A stumble outside woke her up. She had drifted into a shallow sleep. Porot was back. It was still dark but there were streaks of light stealing into it. Jebarwet wished it was morning.

"You are still awake? Good wife," he belched. "Waiting till your husband returns."

The dusty air in the room was replaced with a stench of local brew. It was all over her face. She wanted to move away, but he was standing right in front of her, blocking the feeble rays that were struggling to get in the house.

"Come here now, let's see that purity your father was talking about! It costed me a fortune you know? I had to pick you or go to prison," he grabbed her by the hand.

She walked through the dark opening that led to the inner room in a stoop tears flowing freely, willing and surrendering to fate. Her life had been shattered. She did not mean anything to anyone. As she lay there, suffocating in the stench of his feet and brew, staring on the grass thatched roof, watching the hanging soot swaying from side to side, as the morning breeze blew through the cracks on the walls of the muddy hut, she will call home for the rest her life.

