

WHIPS, TEARS AND BLOOD:

by Mercy Adhiambo

I huddled at the corner of the bed, holding my small transistor radio closer to my chest. I stroked it absent-mindedly and let its music fill up the whole room.

I'll tell the whole world

About the carpenter's son,

About thirty-nine strokes.

I'll tell the whole world

About flesh torn to ribbons

About the cross, sweat, whips, tears and blood...."

I shut my eyes, taking in the song completely. I hummed the tune and felt my entire self moving into the song. The room ceased to exist — I became one with the song. Arossi burst into the room clutching a big parcel under her armpit. Her perfume came in with her.

"For Heaven's sake, this is a bedroom, not a pub. Reduce that volume," she said without looking at me. She threw the parcel on the bed, and it landed next to me.

I sighed and turned the volume knob until the song became a whisper in the background. Her back was turned on me, but I could see from the mirror on the wall that she was applying a layer of lip balm on her lips. She dusted baby powder on her face and proceeded to rub her face furiously.

"Arossi, three people dropped messages for you on phone".

"Who did they say they are?" she asked without a trace of interest.

"Marriko, Fena and..."

She rolled her eyes in an exaggerated manner and said that they were bothering her with calls. I wished people would bother me with calls.

“Mama, come!” Arossi shouted, still dusting her face with powder.

Mama did not respond. There was clattering of plates in the kitchen.

“Mama...” she called, raising her voice.

“ Ehe!”

“Come, hurry!”

“What is it Arossi? Why do you shout as if the house is on fire?”

Mama came to the room wiping her wet hands on her skirt. Her eyes were fixed on the huge parcel on the bed. She did not look at me; she just looked at the parcel.

Arossi unwrapped it slowly but carefully. For some unknown reasons, I found myself wishing she would get through with it. A smile cracked her lips.

She pulled out a dress and they both let out a loud shriek of excitement. Mama hugged Arossi. They did not seem to notice my presence in the room.

Beneath the low voltage bulb of our room, the dress glittered. From my sitting position, I could see that it was made of expensive and unique material. I felt the urge to feel its smoothness between my fingers rise within me.

“Sammy and I ordered it from a boutique in Nairobi” Arossi managed to say. She was still squeezed in Mama's tight embrace.

“You will be very beautiful that day”

“Mama, I have always been beautiful”

Mama poked her in the stomach and they laughed playfully. They did not look at me. Arossi hummed a wedding song and Mama joined her. Holding hands, they made some dignified moves before the mirror on the wall. They were in their own world — a world of weddings, joy and beauty. They locked me out of their world; they always did.

“So, is everything ready now?”

“No Mama, there is one thing still. The maids”

“Who will you take?”

Arossi shrugged her shoulders and slumped herself on the edge of the bed. Mama settled next to her. There was a brief silence. They did not recognize my presence.

“Can I be your maid?” I broke the silence.

They turned and looked at me.

“Maid?” Arossi asked as if she was hearing the word for the first time. Mama stared at me.

“Yes, I want to be a maid at your wedding”

“You?”

“Yes.”

Mama whispered something under her breath. I did not catch it.

“But you cannot be my maid!” Arossi shouted.

“Why cant I? I am your sister.”

“Fariji, cant you see...please understand”

“Understand what?”

“That you cannot come to the wedding!”

A needle passed through my lungs. My breathing made the needle pierce deeper. I felt anger rise up within me but I determined not to cry. — I had cried enough. No more tears.

Arossi looked at me, probably expecting me to cry. I didn't.

Mama rose and walked out of the room. She did not say anything, she just walk out.

“Arossi, I am your only sister, I want to attend your wedding.”

I said trying to hide the tears in my voice.

“Surely Fariji, you cant come”

“Why don't you want me to come?”

“Don't make it difficult for me Fariji, I said you cannot come!”

“I want to see your husband, you have never introduced me to him, I want to know him”. I said, and I felt my lips fluttering.

Arossi clicked. I cold see that she was beginning to get angry.

Anytime I mentioned meeting her friends, she got angry.

Whenever her friends came to visit, she locked the bedroom's door from outside and went with the key. She had never let

me see her friends.

Once, when they were chatting in the house, I had heard her telling her friends that she was an only child to Mama. She did not mention my name in any of her conversation. Mama never mentioned me either. To them, I did not exist.

“Arossi, let me come and play my flute on your wedding day. I know how to play the flute...” I said and reached for my bag to show her the flute I had made of reeds. It was my companion. She drew deep breath and shot an angry look at me. I felt terrible under her gaze.

“Fariji, if you stay in the house on the wedding day, I will buy you a present”

“What present”

“A scarf, I don’t know... I will think of something. Please promise that you will stay behind”.

“I do not want a scarf or anything that you will think of. I want to come to the wedding.” My voice was beginning to get high.

“No, you cannot come. I will not argue with you anymore!”

“Why Arossi, don't you want me to see you as you wed the man you love”

“No, you will spoil my happy day, you will not come”

“How will I spoil it?”

“Fariji, you are my sister, but I hate you. You are ugly. You are an albino, that is why you will not attend my wedding. I am ashamed of you. I do not want to associate with you!”

Her words tore me to shreds. I had never seen Arossi so furious. Her powdered face became paler, almost ashen in colour. Her words reechoed in my head and everything before me swallowed up in some kind of yellow flash. My emotions were towered, and I could not contain it anymore. I felt hot tears sliding from my eyes.

“Arossi, whose fault is it that I am not who you want me to be? Whose fault...”

More tears. More pain. More bitterness. Severe headache.

"I would love to be as pretty as you; but tell me Arossi, what can I do to change myself? Just tell me now and I will do it. Tell me what I can do!"

The needle in my lungs got sharper. I breathed shallowly. Arossi's fierce eyes never left me.

"Mama!"

No reply. The clattering of plates in the kitchen continued.

"Mama!" I screamed until I felt pain in my throat.

"Ehe!"

"Mama, it is your fault! Mama why did you make me an Albino? Why didn't you give me colour like Arossi?"

There was silence. Deathly silence. My words bounced back to me, and they entered the depth of my heart. I was tired — fed up. Fed up of being hidden in the dingy bedroom. Fed up of being bribed with scarves so that I remain locked in the bedroom.

"Mama and Arossi, what am I to you? What am I?"

I asked them the question I have always wanted to ask them. My tears went it to the sores on my cheeks and it itched. I scratched my cheeks; the itching continued. I continued scratching and scratching. The itch got worse. I wiped my face with the back of my hand. The sores were bleeding. Just like the carpenter's son who they had put on the cross I felt Sweat, tears and blood on my face.

"Mama, tell me something, why do you treat me so?"

Mama leapt towards me and lifted my chin.

"Fariji, is this about the wedding? We did not know you want to come so bad..."

I pushed her hand away. She didn't understand. It was not about the wedding; it was about me. I wanted to be a part of them. I wanted liberty.

Arossi whispered something in Mama's ear but Mama's face remained expressionless.

"Fariji, don't you see that you will scare the guest at the wedding" Arossi said to me. Her words killed something in

me.

“Arossi, forget the wedding, I do not think I want to come. I will stay in the room.”

I covered my head with a blanket and shut my eyes, hoping I would fall asleep. Thirty-nine whips. Whips in my heart. My heart being whipped — thirty-nine strokes. My heart being stripped to ribbons, just like they did to the carpenter's son.

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Three years after the wedding, Arossi comes to visit. She is holding her two-year-old daughter. The little one is Clarissa. Her eyes are shy. She steals a glance at me and smiles. I stretch out my hand toward her and she hurries towards me. She is drawn to me. It is the first time we are meeting. Arossi is avoiding my eyes.

Clarissa is pretty, but not like her mother. She is pretty like me. She does not have colour like me, her hair is brown like mine, but I know she is pretty. Her smile is cute. I put her on my laps and she leans on my chest.

“When you grow older, I will tell you the story of the carpenter's son. About whips, sweat, blood and tears. It is a story of victory amidst suffering and pain”, I whisper to her and she holds me tighter, and smiles. The attachment has just begun.

I hear a sob. I look at Clarrissa. No it is not her crying.... it is Arossi.

“I do not know what to say to you”, she whispers.

“Do not say anything, Clarissa has already told it all!”

Arossi continues to cry, just like I had done on her wedding day!

