

Honour is thicker than blood

Mamma was in the kitchen kneading thoughts and dough. I kissed her face. She wore a grey kemis with a netela in deep plumb wrapped around her slim shoulders. Dark liner surrounded her almond eyes and her hair, black as coal with a few silver strands, was pulled back tight, allowing ringlets to tipple from the sides. I threw my bag into the corner. She tutted, smiled, and carried on whilst staring out of the steamy kitchen window.

On the stove the big wat bubbled gently, a crimson sauce dripping down the sides. I breathed in lamb, chilli, tomato and cardamom when she tapped my behind.

“That’s for tomorrow, we’ll get Nando’s tonight”

I couldn’t keep the smile from my face. In two days we were going to my family’s home, to learn about family traditions. I was always enamoured by the tales Papa would tell of home, cooking injera together round an open fire, stories of past traditions, sun and fun!

Condensation crept down the windowpane, as nanna Aanak, stood at the doorway. Above her a thin wispy spider, its legs caught in a thick web, was giving up its fight for freedom. She looked me up and down, her hard dark eyes showed years of toil. We all knew the story of her coming here, escaping civil war back home and facing near death. Here we go again I thought! I tried to get past but she blocked me.

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“You are growing up my Aida, time to meet your family in Ethiopia. You will be celebrated that you are turning into a woman’

“I’m only 11 Aanak.” I laughed and ran past up to my room.

The night before, I had heard them arguing. Mamma had been sobbing, beseeching him. Papa’s voice was serious but calm as he went in to a whispered vitriol.

“We are an embarrassment, it’s time, tradition, honour”, his tone was serious.

That evening our family arrived for the farewell party. Aanak helped me, and my little sister Habibi with makeup and jewellery. Mamma hennaed my hands, beautiful swirls and traditional symbols, whilst her dark pained eyes welled and swelled throughout.

Music surrounded us. I danced along to Ethio-Jazz with my cousins whilst my brother Kaleb played his Kebero along with Uncle Taye, who sat in the corner watching me a little too much.

Tables were piled high with sambusa and shiro, tibs with injera, lamb wat with rice, mango slices, banana, grapefruit segments and pastries arranged on enormous painted plates. It felt like Christmas. Warm evocative scents, aromatic spices, garlic and chilli, familiar, homely and traditional.

Kaleb’s drumming echoed long in my memory, a tribal beat, like a song you couldn’t get out of your head.

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Bibi and I received an abundance of presents, jewellery, scarves and kemis. Tunics with bright summery patterns, sequins, silk thread, lots of pinks and reds, no skimping.

That night as I washed dirty dishes, Aanak's eyes lingered over me again. I felt her stare pulse through the steaming water as I scrubbed the bright paprika and berbere smears from our plates, the dye staining my fingertips. The kitchen was stifling, leaving us the dishes, and an uncertain air permeating.

Bibi was like a wind up toy, bouncing all night, but the battery was starting to tire and her eyes were winding down.

“Let's get the packing finished then bed, it's late”.

We packed our best clothes, while across the hall Aanak packed her dreary tunics and her first aid kit, bandages and antibac.

She was what the English called a character!

That night I could hardly sleep. Teenagers shouted in the street. A group of young men were laughing and messing around as they ate their takeaway, and I was fizzing like the pop we were allowed to have at the weekend, desperate to escape.

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We landed in Dire Dawa.

Departing the plane, a humid spicy air engulfed me, forcing and invading my privacy. I wound the window down on the way to Megala, allowing the warm breeze to reach my damp face. The dusty town was alive with calls from market sellers, and drinking holes with midnight doorways lit by flashing neon lights. There was a sickly air, drawing confectionery junkies drooling over baklava, halva and mushabak. We drove slowly through this intriguing place, leaving the chatter and sweetness for the aromatic leaves that scented the air of Khat on the edge of town. We pulled up outside the home of cousin Kofi.

It was late and the road was still, the heat barely the only sound, humming as it pawed at you. The quiet was hacked by excited voices as our relatives gathered round to hug and welcome us into their home. Uncle Kofi and Aunt Tina pulled us close and kissed our cheeks. The children in their bedclothes without footwear giggled at us, and hid behind their mother's shimmery violet kemis.

Their home was basic, a concrete floor with a couple of thin rugs thrown down. We settled into our room with a large bed that we had to share, it had thin white sheets over two flat pillows. There was a small table with a lamp that glowed reluctantly through a red shade, painting a pinkish hue around the room, along with a small set of drawers that we had to fight over to fit our clothes in. Our young cousins kept laughing at us, calling us koshasha.

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I had trouble sleeping that night, but Bibi slept heavily. A thin wet shining veil glowed over her cheeks, the change of air had floored her. I looked out of the window into the deserted street. It was nothing like our road with houses almost on top of each other. There we could hear the neighbours arguments, parties, dogs barking, and smell the stinking fryers at the end of the row that never stopped burning.

Here, the trill of nightlife was hypnotic. The warm air caressed me with a light tickle, and the scent of heat and dust was comforting. A skinny wild dog, pups in tow with teats dragging, slinked down a side alley, as the moon watched over its brood.

After breakfast of fruit and fatira, we prepared for our welcome party.

The house, although small was full of people. They danced a strange jerking dance called Eskista, it looked like they were having seizures. We tried to dance along and ended up laughing so hard it hurt. A beat kept drumming for hours and we had a pile of presents that we happily made our way through.

In the morning Bibi and I bathed and dressed, the aura of festivity seemed to have disappeared. Eyes wouldn't contact mine, and I felt invisible.

We were going to meet a very old aunt that lived near the edge of town, she was going to teach us how to bake injera. Kofi asked for our mobiles, he said we wouldn't get a signal in the forest.

We approached the beginning of a wooded area where there were small huts. I remembered thinking this is going to be a long day, learning traditional cooking in a hut with no air conditioning.

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Sweat was dripping down my legs.

Bibi who had fallen asleep, opened her eyes and looked at me, her eyebrows knitting, she didn't speak, quiet tension in the rusty car told us otherwise.

Aunt was a very unhappy looking woman. Her hair covered by a black scarf was braided back so tight it pulled at her eyes. She wore a midnight kemis with fading gold crosses round the edges, a dark netela round her shoulders, a brown bumbag round her waist, and had bare feet. Her body looked strong but small, eyes were black and unfriendly, as she beckoned me. I remember seeing a bed on the dusty floor, a small table with towels, a bowl of water, plus scissors. They were sharp and shiny, glistening, knifing my eyes as the sun speared through a tear in the roof.

At once my throat was dry, I tried to speak and only a squeak surfaced. I looked from Aanak and Tina as they gestured for me to lie down on the bed. I knew this was wrong, and I backed away calling for Papa. Tina whispered with still eyes.

“Do be quiet, you will frighten Habibi, and it will bring shame on your family, you want your Mamma to be proud of you”.

“What's happening?”

My voice was quiet although I wanted it to roar, I became frigid with terror.

Her sweet nature had been a shroud over cultural ignorance, and her soft hands became a vice of tradition, as Aunt Tina held my shoulders down. A

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small frame became gargantuan, and weight immobilised me as I tried to fight back.

Aunt stared at me with eyes of emptiness, as Anak helped to hold my legs. I saw a glint of a sharp edge, the light piercing, and unbearable pain. I screamed, hearing the faint drums beat drowning my call. I saw Mammas foreboding eyes and I remember no more.

The Cutter who changed my life was capable and callous in her career, and part of me died that day.

My naivety of youth was stolen, murdered, thrown and discarded.

Body parts unwanted, were unnecessary, silenced, gutted and scraped away.

We lay on the floor with two other young girls that stared ahead, mute in acceptance. Day bled into night, as Aunt 'looked after' us in the hut. She allowed us all to share a bowl of soup, not too much, to avoid us needing the toilet too often. She ripped leaves off our cuts and replaced them with ash, sap and more leaves every three days. Aunt told us how we would now be honourable to marry, and remain pure for our husbands.

"This will stop you being promiscuous, it makes you a better wife, calmer. No good man will marry an uncut girl, she is dirty, koshasha".

I wanted to scratch her eyes, feed them to the hungry wild dogs.

I tried to comfort Bibi. Her eyes were closed, her brown button face, as pale as a dirty puddle. Blood seeped from us while death lingered around, right under our breath waiting to steal what was left of us, but we held on.

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A few days earlier, the air held an expectation of summer. Holiday, fun, stomach's tight, butterflies flapping as though trapped in a jar, trying to escape. School was a boiling pot about to erupt, with endorphins and hormones intoxicating, as we ran through the gates.

"Why d'you wanna go to Ethiopia? Sounds crap to me"

She gripped me tight, as her denim eyes searched mine, her grey pinafore far too short, thinning and frayed on the bottom, as she sashayed down her path.

"I'll see you soon, I'll have lots to tell" I called.

"Yer. Whatever".

I always felt loved, part of a family. We were not rich but wealthy in our belonging, to our heritage, our origins. I now wished so hard that I could go back and change our minds. But I couldn't wait to leave London, my little home, my little friend, my little bedroom, for the big wide world and the wonder of tradition.

The smell was suffocating, the metallic smell of stale blood that I could never remove was in my nostrils, still lingering years later. It was an invisible memory that slaps you in the face on the few moments you dare, or hope to forget.

Mamma's face was the shape of betrayal.

"Girls it was for the best, it will bring you the best life".

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She said it was to be the holiday of a lifetime.

It was the time I learnt that honour is thicker than blood.

Word count 1967