

Superior Sisters

When I arrive at home from school, I go straight to my sick father's bedroom. Inside, Mathabana, my grandmother's childhood friend who says she was there when my father was a little boy, is keeping him company. Mathabana has rumors in the village about her, not the kind you would want. She is known to be sorceress. One time she was speaking at the Catholic Church about being a good neighbor and her dress caught on fire, burned by the candles at the altar—many say because she is a witch.

After I change my school clothes, I go to the trees to get some peaches. It's hot in the sun, which is creeping towards the mountain hills, slowly making its way to sunset. I sit in the shade beneath the tree and wait for peaches half eaten by the birds to drop, for they are the juiciest ones. I usually read my *National Geographic Magazine* and the *Dictionary* at this time, slowly familiarizing myself with English words—names of objects in my house—spear, pot, and blanket. Inside the house, my father falls asleep; therefore, Mathabana comes outside. She decides to sit under the tree with me. I'm astonished that she wants to talk to me. She is an elder whom I don't have much in common with. Unlike *witch doctors* who are actually good and teach me about medicinal roots, Mathabana is a *witch*. We talk about the temperature, and I tell her that when I go to collect the cows back from the mountains I plan to jump in the river for a swim. She says that since the sun was so hot, I should come back quickly because she predicts the weather might bring thunderstorms. As she mentions thunder and lightning, her face freezes, and she stares without blinking. I can tell she has just reminded herself of a bad memory. I ask what is bothering her. She looks at me, repositions herself to face me, puts her left leg over the right one, her right hand over her left breast, and her left hand on the side of her chin. Like a snake's

tongue moving viciously, I watch her very tongue rotate through her missing teeth while she tells me her story.

“I was a married girl from Qacha’s Neck Village. My mother had been a witch all her life and she had told me to make sure I learn the family pots (spells), so that I could become a night sister as well. She died before she could teach me all the tricks. When I got to this village, boy, I was determined to find the girls my age that were like my mother. I had lived in this village for a long time and had two children—a daughter and a son. They both got married, and my daughter was pregnant with a child, expecting to deliver soon. I was bored just living with my husband after the kids were married and moved out, so I decided it was time to start witch practices. Plus, I was beginning to look old enough for it. My daughter came to visit her mama and live with me until I could deliver the child. I befriended two witches. The witch sisters had an eye on my pregnant daughter—Cedella. They told me that in order for me to become one of them, I must hurt the person I love the most in my life. I loved my Cedella. I was happier that she was about to give me a beautiful little face that I would kiss on the cheeks and hear it call me grandma. One night, the sisters told me that my daughter was the one that I must hurt, to make my heart evil and emotionless like a rock. I knew I had to do it. I had no other choice, for otherwise I would be deemed weak and unfit for being a witch.

They came to visit. We ate corn meal with salted pig fat sliding through our fingers, and we sat in a circle talking. They told me this was the night, for the moon was full and it would give us light in the caves. Every time I thought of what we were going to do to my child, my stomach turned to acidic and I kept spitting—”

As Mathabana spoke, a peach fell from the tree. Because I could see that this was the confession of a sorceress witch, I was sweating fearfully, and holding my breath. When I heard

the peach fall, it scared me and I jumped, letting out a little fart. She did not acknowledge any of that; instead, she continued with her story.

“That night I had to get a lot of fire wood. It was the only thing I kept myself busy with, so I didn’t have to look my daughter in the eye. I made sure to clean her pee bucket and was careful to get another pee bucket for myself, since our pee couldn’t mix. I knew I couldn’t make that mistake! The pee had to be just hers, just a pregnant woman’s pee; it was going to be perfect—”

Mathabana stuck her hand down between her sagging breasts dangling like squash pumpkins, and she pulled out a black container with a yellow lid wrapped with an orange cloth. She beat the container against her hand a couple of times and opened it to take out a small amount of tobacco snuff with her fingertips. She then shoved the snuff into her nose and began blinking.

“Before the night fire died, I put potions in there to knock Cedella out completely. She was a quiet sleeper, but that night she snored like a moving truck. I went to check her pee bucket. She had given me a generous amount; I didn’t think we needed that much, but I was glad that I was going to present a good amount to the sisters. I heard Reginah arrive first when she crashed atop my hut’s roof. We never set a time, so I didn’t know when they were going to arrive. Reginah was the clumsy one among us. She would always ruin things trying too hard. We told her that pretty women make lousy witches. I got undressed, took the pee bucket, and went outside to meet Reginah.”

“Did you climb the roof naked?” I asked, curious because the hut is roofed with scratchy dried grass, which would be uncomfortable. Mathabana leaned her head forward and stared at me with an angry look, biting her bottom lip with one upper tooth.

“I don’t appreciate being interrupted, child. Reginah would do that, too. We did not like that,” she responded.

I moved back and nodded.

She continued.

“I asked Reginah where Malebohang was. She was our Supreme. Nothing ever happened without her presence. We were careful to never make her angry. Just then, she arrived. We said our hellos, the usual routine—squeeze the breast of your nearest sister and genuflect. I told them I had delivered my promise and had the pee. They got excited. I felt pleased to have their approval. They asked about the firewood. I told them I had collected plenty during the day. Malebohang told Reginah to take the firewood, and she took the pee bucket, since Reginah would spill it. Malebohang said that she was going to warn me when the fire was ready in the caves, so I could bring Cedella with me. With the mention of my daughter’s name, I felt a lump down my throat, but chose to remain strong. I asked Malebohang how she was going to warn me all the way from the caves. She looked at me with her eyebrows tight, like a gorilla. I looked down. Asking questions was not allowed in the sisterhood. They left for the caves.

I went back inside my hut and found my daughter sleeping. I leaned into her pillow, put my hand on her forehead, and began sobbing. I was new to witchery. Though I was supposed to be heartless, this was my Cedella—the baby I had carried on my back, fed, raised, and loved. I wanted to wake her up so she could run away. I would make up a lie that she had escaped when I got back inside. I would say that she must have heard us upon the roof. I put my hand on her pregnant belly. I felt the baby move. I began slapping her. I put my guilt on her, blaming her for not waking up to my warning. I screamed her name—*Cedella! Cedella!* It was senseless thinking and all too late. Malebohang was a clever Supreme; her magic and spells never failed.

The potion she gave me to put in the fire knocked Cedella out completely—there was no way of waking her up. I waited, staring at my daughter's sleeping body.

I jumped. My hands felt like they were on fire. I needed no explanation: it was time. The fire in the cave was ready. My head began ringing. I could hear the sound of Cedella's cry as a baby in my ears. I was confused. How was I going to take a pregnant woman to the caves? Do I carry her? As I began walking back and forth in the hut, Cedella rose from her mattress. I froze. I could not look her in the eye. Strangely, neither could she. She was awake, but asleep—sleeping under Malebohang's spell. Her eyes were open, but she could not blink. I tried calling her name, and pinching her—no response. She was under Malebohang's spell. I knew I had to be naked, but the sisters had not mentioned if I should undress Cedella, too. Since they hadn't stated, I left her dressed and opened the door. She walked out as if she had been waiting. She knew the way to the caves. With a steady pace she led the way. I followed behind, filled with shame. The howling of Cedella as a baby would not stop ringing in my ears. I heard it all the way to the caves. I began slapping my ears and biting my fingers. The closer we got, I thought of turning back. My hands still felt like they were on fire; the closer we got, the hotter they got. I wanted it to stop. This was Malebohang's way of ensuring that I wouldn't change my mind and back out. There was a mellow tune from the caves. I was surprised because I could make out a lot more voices singing, yet only Malebohang and Reginah were supposed to be in the caves. I began to panic. I feared that they had tricked me, and that more people were involved in this. I never regretted anything more in my life. I wanted to turn back but I could not.”

“There was a cannibal-like fire raging in the large cave. I could smell hair burning. There were definitely more bodies in the cave. Malebohang and Reginah were dancing over the fire. When I scanned the cave, trying to figure out what was happening, I realized that the burning

sensation in my hands had stopped. I recognized who the other people singing in the cave were. I recognized Barbara, John, Potli, Postman Thabe, Mpho, Manyefolo, and Malebohang's daughter Cecil, whom she had killed seven years back to darken her soul. All these people were known to be dead, at least to my knowledge and the rest of the villagers. As drying ashes from the fire began to go into my mouth, I realized that I was in shock. All those people whom we had buried—apparently, Malebohang and Reginah killed them all and used them as their slaves at night.

“Welcome, sister. At last you have arrived.” Reginah welcomed me at the fire and rushed to grab Cedella by the hand and bring her to The Supreme.

“Shave her immediately, Mathabana,” Supreme Malebohang exclaimed.

“In the caves and during our witch business, we only called her Supreme and not by her name. If we forgot and used her name, she slapped us hard enough that her fingerprints remained visible against our skin. They handed me a heated tuna can lid, sharp enough to cut through skin.”

“Get with it, Mathabana,” the Supreme shouted, “shave her head. The moon will soon be gone—the night is aging.”

“I headed towards my sleepwalking daughter and began undressing her. There was neither water nor soap to loosen the hair for shaving. I began cutting the hair and scalp—with every move I made, skin came off with the hair. My hands began to slide as blood covered her head, dripping onto her forehead. I wanted to stop, but eyes were on me. If I stopped, the Supreme would kill both my daughter and me, and turn us into slaves for eternity. I had already gone too far.”

“Throw the hair into the fire!” shouted The Supreme.

“With every piece of skin and hair I threw into the fire, The Supreme tossed olive-colored powder from her hand, which increased the flames. The singing grew louder. With a horse leather whip, Reginah whipped the slaves who stopped clapping.”

“Take this and smear it all over her body; make sure to go over the belly,” The Supreme announced, while handing me a greasy potion mixed inside of a cow’s horn.

“As I rubbed Cedella’s belly, I jumped. The Supreme nudged my head with her elbow and shoved me back. The baby had violently kicked as I began rubbing its nest. Cedella began rotating on the ground like a lizard giving birth. I could tell that though she was not awake, she was in agony. I could not make out the beat of my heart anymore. I placed my hand over my chest—nothing.”

“Hand her the sickle, Reginah,” The Supreme commanded.

“I felt pee run down my legs. I needed no further explanation to figure out what was happening. The Supreme wanted the baby.”

When Mathabana continued telling her tale and mentioned pee, I felt my own pee almost shoot out. I held my hands tight on the grass on the floor, bit my lips together, and leaned back listening to the old witch. I could hear my heartbeat drumming—daunted by how calm Mathabana was while telling this tale.

“I had to do it. I had to cut the baby out of her body, alive. That was my big test. By finishing that task, I’d be one of the sisters that night. Sinking the sickle into my Cedella’s belly felt like I was cutting through three-day old baked bread left in the sun—I could feel each pull and push. I was shaking and grinding my teeth together. Cedella woke up. I knew that The Supreme did that to see if I would follow through.”

“Mama, what are you doing? That’s my baby. Mama—Mama, what are you doing?”

Cedella cried looking me in the eye.

“I closed my eyes. Cedella grabbed my hand, but she had no energy to stop me. Proving myself worthy to the Supreme when I sank the sickle into my Cedella’s belly. She walked over and touched my shoulder. Her hand was cold, even though she had been dumping hair and potions over flames of fire. When she touched me, I felt fearless, heartless, and awakened. I no longer felt connected to Cedella.”

“Put the fetus in the pee bucket while it’s still warm—do it quickly,” the Supreme announced, squeezing my shoulders.

“My hands were still shaky. Reginah rushed forward to help me. She took the bloody fetus, dangling with the umbilical cord and guts from my hands. Cedella remained kicking.”

“Lick your hands and smear your face with the blood,” said The Supreme.

“The Supreme mixed her potion—which she called millipedes pubic, with the contents in the pee bucket. She proceeded by dumping it all in the fire. We stood naked, holding hands around the fire. The Supreme gave a look at the enslaved villagers. They began singing louder and clapping hands. *Youth! Youth! Youth!* —Regina and The Supreme shouted. I joined in. There it was, my first spell—*youth*. As the flames burned higher, the breeze of the night made our naked bodies feel stronger. We felt like teenagers again. We danced. Oh—we danced, danced, and danced!”

“Welcome, sister,” The Supreme announced, and squeezed my breast, genuflecting. I blushed.”

“The feast was a success, now we must all rest. We shall rejoice again at our next ceremony,” The Supreme announced and gave the slaves a look; they stopped.

Sethunya Mokoko

“The final undertaking was for me to clean up. Dealing with my dead daughter was my obligation. I was neither afraid nor worried. No one would ask me questions. I was looking forward to my next ceremony—the elimination of the only person who might be a problem to my new life—my husband.”

Mathabana took her orange handkerchief and blew the tobacco snuff out of her nose.

“The sun is down, for the moon shall soon appear. That’s enough for today. I want to start visiting often to bathe your father while you’re in school.”