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Rana’s Nightmare.

I was twelve when the Civil War in our part of Africa started. I didn’t take much

notice at first; even when my two brothers went to fight. My parents were horrified

and silent, but I didn’t know why. It was my aunt who told me that they’d gone to

join the side we were fighting. Rebels, or murderers.

Whispers, group mutterings and red eyed parents, told me something

unpleasant was afoot.

One night in bed, I could hear my parents whispering as they prepared six

packed bags and water bottles. Obviously, we were leaving our home.

In my fitful dreams, I thought I heard my rebel brother, Said, crying with

my mother and father. A lorry tooted outside and we never saw dear Said again.

After a bit of goat meat, we piled loaded baskets onto our heads and left

the village. Father said we were going to hide for a couple of days in the bush, until

the rebels had gone to richer pastures.

I didn’t know then that I would never see my village again.

At first we were happy. No hard jobs to do on the land, so it was like going

down to our roadside stall weekly, with our village’s spare produce.

The sun seemed very intense that day, I remember. At last we stopped at a

river meeting point, shaded by fever trees. My father whistled, as he would to the

goats. He listened and back came the same whistle. We relaxed and started walking

towards a nice surprise.

Inside the fever trees, most of our village was crowded. Aunts, uncles, friends

and enemies, all glad to see us. Our baskets taken down, we rested and had a drink.

None of us knew what would happen later, so we ate a little fresh green and meat.

The subdued talk amongst the adults was about a Refugee Camp, which was

guarded by UN forces. I decided, at that moment, that I was an adult, so I stayed near

them. For the first time, my stomach knew the tangle of true fear.

It was early evening when we left the trees and continued walking. We were a

big group; the thinking being that we were probably safer in larger numbers. How

innocent.

The pace slowed now, what with a goat, babies and two pregnant women.

We must have looked a sorry sight. Uncle Maddie had brought his best goat and its

kid, which he carried. Everyone else had left their goats with Old Lily and her

husband, Amos. They were going to look after them and sell them as and when. I

think we all carried chickens with us; which we regularly watered.

The group was silent and slow as we had days of walking ahead of us. At last

we stopped to pray, kneeling to face Mecca with an urgency I had never experienced.

As we prayed, our lookouts indicated we must hide, by whistling three short blasts.

In seconds, we were bundled down towards the sluggish river water. The

smell was of rotting human flesh; but the bank overhung the tree roots well, so we

pressed ourselves beneath it. My sister started crying, so I told her to shut up, very

sharply, then pressed our lips to the mud; red, warm and stinking.

There was a swollen arm in the water, I recall. How far it had travelled, I

don’t know. I prayed silently, as the country was mad?

Two hornbills looked at us new river bank dwellers. How I wished they

would fly away.

Trucks drew up with a screech. Two, I thought. The rebels hit out at our

parents. I could hear their guns whacking the people I loved. I wet myself, as they

wanted us children.

The chickens, so carefully fed and carried along the road, were killed there

and then. My heart turned to stone in a second. Next the goat and her kid were

loaded onto a truck. Uncle Maddie protested bitterly, despite being hushed by the

others.

A crack of repeating shots and Uncle Maddie’s scream, caused the younger

children to lose their grip and scream too.

We were discovered!

Angry rebels pulled us from our hiding place. The adults ran at them, hitting

out with whatever weapon they had about them; knives or pangas and even a ladle.

We tried to help by kicking and pushing the men into the weapons.

My world went black instantly.

“No!” I remember screaming.

Hot blood shot all down my best dress and a rebel collapsed on top of me,

blood pouring from his panga’d chest. He, in fact, saved my life, although I didn’t

know it at the time. I was hysterical and being smothered by his agonised, dying

body. Oh the smell of him. I will never forget it. Like a toilet ditch, washed with

rancid beer.

Why did no one help me? He was sliding both of us into the river.

The answer? They were all dead!

I swear I never heard the guns, but they must have been firing for ten seconds.

Everyone had been murdered and lay in bloodied heaps. Only ‘my’ rebel was

killed, but many had been cut badly, I saw with pride.

My body was yanked from underneath the corpse and thrust in front of the

six remaining men. I dripped blood from the tip of my nose, but as too frightened to

wipe it off.

I wanted to grab a gun and kill them all, but could not move. My whole body

now, had turned to stone. They ignored me and dealt with wounds on each others’

bodies. Horrified, I saw they had a brand new first aid box, from the airport. They

must be in control of it. It was then I wet myself again.

No one was coming to save us. It was too late anyway, for my family and the

village.

The rebels were packing up, ready to go. This is where I die, I thought. No, I

was bundled into a truck with the goat, and tied like it. No one spoke, as if I were

some potatoes, to be taken home. I knelt near the goat and fed her greens they had

thrown in, with the rest of our village’s belongings and the dead chickens. The

rebel’s blood had dried on my face and I couldn’t smile. Not that I ever would in

the future.

The trucks went racing back, past our village and the town. We rattled off left,

on a rough, unfamiliar road to the north; the villages and roadside stalls recently burnt

or shot out.

Both the goat and I longed for a drink. The kid needed her mother, so I held

her to suck regularly. She pee’d on me, but what did I care. The nanny goat was very

loving towards me, so I groomed her as well as I was able.

Suddenly the trucks veered into a makeshift camp, on top of a hill. Probably

once a village, I remember thinking. It was eerie and smelled vile. Filthy rags of

washing hung to dry and stew was being prepared by sad little boys. We stopped by

them and the kid was handed over to be killed. The nanny tried to climb out too, but I

held her back, with difficulty. In the furore, one of the boys passed me an orange,

which I hid. My truck bounced down to the small boma, where I thought just

the goat was to be kept, in a hut.

Only when I was pulled out of the truck, did I realise that I was to be kept with

the goat. But, I was tethered tightly, she was nearly free! The goat hut was dirty

with old goat shit, and someone’s blood. I swept with my feet, until I reached bare

earth, then sank down. I had to drink some of the goat’s stale water to replenish my

tears.

It was nearly night, when a young boy crept in with food and drink for me and

the goat. Lendi was my age, but so small. Originally, from a village here in the north,

now destroyed. I told him about my awful day and he just looked at me sadly and

urged me to eat his stew. It was very good, but I told him it needed salt, being fresh

meat. I retched then, as I realised it was the kid.

When he touched my arm and asked me not to blame him for anything that

happened to me now, I froze. The look on his face told me. My whole body turned to

water and the goat nuzzled my face.

When the hut door crashed open, Lendi fled.

Obscene shouting and laughter told me what was about to happen. I had been

cut as a child, so always had pain.

‘Allah (peace be upon him). Help me now’ I prayed.

As a filthy hand grabbed my shoulder, I closed my eyes.