

LIFE GOES ON

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“You stir it like this ...” she stopped and watched as the boy struggled to imitate her motion.

She smiled, “No ... Kokio. You’re doing it wrong.”

Holding the boy’s hand, they stirred the mixture together, slowly.

Kokio stopped then looked at her. “I get it now mama,” he said.

Kokio had baobab powder all over his body – on his forehead, nose and chin.

“You look like a baby meerkat ...” she said laughing then she grabbed a little tissue, “Baby meerkat, let me wipe your face.”

“If you succeed this time, I promise to make for you baobab juice for the next three years ... every morning,” Mama said.

Koikoi looked at his mother. “Deal!” he said.

From a small gourd, she poured baobab juice on a grave. “As promised my little meerkat,” she whispered.

She emptied the little gourd before putting it down. Liwe stood, looking at Kokio’s grave. Dawn was breaking over the horizon piercing the thin mist covering the graveyard. The mist obscured but didn’t hide the scattered tombstones, the sprinkled trees and leafy bushes. She could still see the red rope enclosing the cemetery or *makabouri* as they called it. In her culture, that rope meant that

the village marabou had exorcised and purified the site allowing the buried to rest in peace.

This new *makabouri* was smaller than the *makabouri* of her ancestral village. She remembered that fateful day when armed rebels invaded their village killing anyone they could find and raping women and girls. Those who survived had to start anew.

“We have an unpeaceful life now, but we will have a peaceful after life and... life goes on,” Liwe muttered, looking at the tombstones around her.

The new *makabouri* was like her second home. She knew who was resting where. Kokio was laid to rest here with his favourite hat, next to Nandi, buried with her comb. Villagers buried their loved ones with things they liked to use during their lifetime. Buried six feet away from Nandi, she noticed Siya’s tombstone leaning back. Liwe froze.

“Bongi?” she gasped reading the name carved on the tombstone.

“Siyi was ... is supposed to be buried there next to Siya his twin brother and not Bongi.”

She examined the suspicious grave, and then decided to inspect the area. Few minutes later she found Siyi’s headstone, stained with blood, on Bongi’s grave.

“Who could have done this?” her heart was beating faster, her jaw tightening.

“Calm down Liwe... this could be an animal... don’t jump to conclusions,” she mumbled.

Inspecting the grave, she noticed footprints on the burial mound. Hands clenched, she followed the prints with her eyes. Then she noticed it, a silhouette crouched at the entrance of the *makabouri*. Was it an animal or a human being? She inched closer... Then she heard a sound behind her.

She stopped and turned but all seemed normal.

“I guess it must have been all in my head,” she muttered.

She took a deep breath and was determined to find out what the silhouette was... but it was gone. She heard the voice again, this time louder. It was coming from the bushes behind her. She tiptoed to the bushes not to make a single noise.

She was petrified by the sight before her. She noticed his shirtless, hairy and bruised muscular back, arched like a bear then his bulky arms, sunburnt and full of scars. His big hands pinned the hands of a thin woman down. She recognised the green red dotted pair of trousers he was wearing, from the rebel army uniform. Beads of sweat ran down her face. Connecting pieces together, she knew what was about to happen. A feeling of nausea rose from her stomach. She covered her mouth.

The soldier mounted the thin woman. He pinned her down using his weight and immobilised both of her arms over her head using his left hand, restraining her movements.

The thin woman was trapped. She tried to scream but a tissue tied around her mouth muffled her voice and the soldier, taking his time, licked her neck.

“Mawa, if you stop resisting you might enjoy this,” the soldier was saying.

Liwe turned and walked away, shutting her eyes, covering her ears with her hands, mumbling, “I... I’m... I can’t... I’m sorry.” It was as if she was trying to erase from her memory what she saw. Images were flashing in her mind... soldiers... Kokio... screams... her hands are tied... she is on her knees, with ripped clothes... three soldiers are surrounding her... she is starring at the door of Kokio’s room, screaming, “KOKIIIOOOOO ... DON’T COME OUT!”

“Time to get serious ... Mawa ... you will enjoy it. Trust me they all do,” the soldier whispered in her ear. Mawa felt her heart pounding louder and louder.

The soldier slowly unbuckled his belt with his right hand, sweat trickling down his face, lips curving upward.

Mawa begged, Mawa cried, Mawa cursed, Mawa prayed, Mawa fought desperately trying to free herself, hoping for a miracle then she heard a shattering noise while the soldier was unzipping his pant. A noise coming from somewhere, behind the soldier. The soldier froze then collapsed on his left, revealing a crouched, concealed, Liwe behind. Liwe dropped the shattered gourd then gestured for Mawa to keep quiet. Liwe surveyed the surroundings before approaching Mawa. She untied the tissue around Mawa’s mouth.

“I’m Liwe. Are you hurt? Can you walk?” Liwe questioned.

Mawa nodded and grabbed Liwe’s hand. They heard footsteps.

“Come ... let’s go,” Liwe gestured to the opposite direction, deeper in the bushes.

The second soldier, seeing his companion lying on the grass, grabbed his AK-47 and scanned the surroundings. He knelt beside his companion and checked his pulse. “Wake up pal.” He followed his demand with a slap in the face.

Moko woke up with a jolt. Rubbing the back of his head and in pain, he looked at his companion and asked, “The... girl... where is the girl?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“Something hit me on the back of my head... aaaarghh... and I...” he groaned, wiping the blood off the back of his head.

“Wait... you mean... there was someone else? What the...?” he interrupted then face palming himself he continued, “You and your weird fetishes... I warned you to get rid of that cassava bread seller girl at the market. What is wrong with you Moko? The plan was simple... find the bag of coltan buried somewhere among these

graves before sunrise but noooooo... you and our fetishes ... now they saw us. Couldn't you restrain your urges for once?"

Moko stood and grabbed his machete hidden in the bushes. He examined what was left of the shattered pieces of the gourd then looking at his companion, he reassured him, "Calm down. They shouldn't be far. We've been in worse than this."

"I was digging around the entrance ... and I didn't see anyone coming here," his companion said looking behind.

"Which means they are still in this cemetery and the only place they could have gone hoping to hide is in that section over there," he added.

"You're right. Look trampled grasses!" Moko exclaimed.

Following Liwe behind and creeping among the graves, trees and bushes, Mawa slipped and fell, legs still shaking, blood dripping from a low back injury.

Liwe knelt next to her and with a gentle tapping on the back tried to calm her, "It is okay now ... we need to get going."

They heard crackling noises. They both looked around then at each other, shivering. Liwe saw dense tangled bushes and gestured to hide there. From behind the bushes she kept scouting the surroundings when her head stopped, her eyes lit up. She turned, facing Mawa, "I think I know how we can get out of here."

The cracklings of footsteps kept getting louder and soon the women overheard voices too.

"KLIK!" they recognised the sound of a loading gun. Mawa bowed her head and closed her eyes, Liwe tried to calm down by taking deep breaths.

“We cannot risk to use a gun here. It will alert the villagers and they might have guns too,” one voice said.

“Fine let split up. We will cover more grounds and get over with this quickly before sunrise,” the other voice responded.

As soon as his companion disappeared among the trees, Moko, holding his machete, got down on his hands and knees and started sniffing the grass, crawling like an animal. Soon he found a fresh trail of blood. He smiled, “I am coming Mawa.”

Liwe grabbed a thick piece of wood lying next to her. “Here is the plan. On the count of three, I will throw this to create a diversion and we will run to the opposite direction toward that headstone. The bushes behind that headstone hide a red rope and on the other side of the rope there is plantations and people, good people. All we have to do is run as fast as ...” While she was talking, Mawa raised her head to nod but froze. Her skin turning pale, her mouth dropping open, her eyes wide staring at Moko. Moko was standing behind Liwe, holding his machete high, ready to swing down on Liwe’s head.

Mawa screamed pushing Liwe aside, causing the blade to miss its target narrowly and smash the ground.

Liwe fell on the side and turned. Realising that her aggressor was trying to regain his balance after missing her, she jumped up and grabbed his arm with both hands, preventing him from using his machete then looking at Mawa, she screamed, “TO THE PLANTATION... RUUUUNNNN!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Mawa saw an open ploughed field and the sun rising on the horizon. She saw people, holding rakes and grape hoes, gesturing her to calm down.

She looked behind and pointed a finger at the graveyard saying, “There ... woman ... danger ... two rebels ... she ... help.” Coughing, trying to catch her breath she collapsed.

The following day Mawa, with her neck and left leg bandaged, and a scrapped forehead, sat with two elders, a man and a woman, under the shade of a mango tree, protecting them from the hot midday sun. Facing them she told them her story.

After she finished, the old man stood and tried to summarise the story, “You’re from the Mangaribi village and you sell cassava bread for a living. One evening you saw a soldier dumping a body in the lac. Unfortunately, there was another soldier hidden, who caught you. Since you saw them, the soldiers discussed what to do with you. One wanted to kill you but the other one, Moko, suggested to keep you as a trophy after completing the mission. Moko knocked you out. Later you woke up in our *makabouri* and Moko was trying to take advantage of you and that is when a woman from our village saved you. Right?”

Mawa nodded. The old man took out a pipe, lit it and started smoking it before continuing, “Yesterday after the men brought you from the plantation, some went to the *makabouri* and they found the two soldier you described but they didn’t find the woman, even after searching for hours.”

Mawa slightly raising her voice responded, “I swear she is still there somewhere. Check again please.”

She paused, thought about the story again. Lifting her eyebrows and jolting she added, “Liwe ... that’s it ... her name ... tall with a green headwrap ...”

Before she could finish, she noticed the elders’ eyes getting wider and wider, the more she described Liwe. The man dropped his pipe. The woman slowly covered her mouth.

“What’s going on?” Mawa asked with a distressed tone, head tilting to the side.

The old woman stood up, took a deep breath before saying with a melancholic tone, “Liwe died two years ago. She stopped eating, sleeping. She was depressed and grieving. She never recovered from the loss of her son.”

Mawa went pale.

END

Author's note

I was inspired to write this story by the long decade war in eastern Congo between the rebels and the Congolese army with the villagers caught in the middle, trying every day to survive.

