

End.

By Akaylah Ellison

CRUEL

Silence. We sat in it. Although the children knew, we never told them. Some basked in the absence of sounds. The air rolling over our tongues, hitting our faces, and bashing our hearts. The harsh winds slapped our children, but we never told. Darkness. We trailed our fingertips along the mud, tracing our heritage in their rightful place. Some tasted their fingers and reveled in the saltiness of dirt. Most of the children parted their cracked lips to taste the bitter rain. Some danced and some played in the darkness, but I sat there alone.

I knew that the rain was poisonous, but I never shut my eyes. I took my daughter into a cave. We didn't face each other. She trailed her little fingers over smaller rocks.—Then, she was eight.

We slept in that cave. I ripped my shirt and separated it in pieces. I blindfolded my daughter, then covered her mouth. Next, I repeated the ceremony on myself. Cruel was to never tell. She cradled herself in my arms. Bruised and cut up. She fell asleep fast. My mind never quieted. I sat in the darkness blindfolded awake and alone.

When morning came, we ran. I started toward a mountain. She awoke in a spring. She asked if she could have food, and I told her no. She made no sound. She did not move. She looked to the sky, kneeling as she prayed. "Forgive us. We have mended our broken ways. Please do not let us cry. Please do not--"

I scurried to her and made her stand. Never letting her finish her prayer. I scolded her for asking God.

"We cannot be helped now, Mia. We must hurry to the mountains. We can be safe there. There will be food there."

"Ma, we can always be helped. Papa said--"

"Papa is gone now. He was wrong."

Her eyes swelled, and I turned away not to see her cry. Cruel was that November. We walked along water we couldn't drink. It started to hail and I found an abandoned home to stay for the night. Roaches scattered about the floors. Families of rats lived in the shadows. The walls were failing and dripping. Everything had mildewed. There were two dead children in one room, draped in dried lavender as it was custom to do. Two dead children. One boy and one girl. Eyes never shut. Crosses hung from their necks. Lavender turned rotten. I closed the room and locked it. Inside I held both children's hands. I cried. I almost prayed to God to protect them before remembering there was none.

I took two candles and lit them for their souls. One boy and one girl, but I never told. Mia waited behind the door. "What's in there?"

I shook my head. "Dead rats, Mia. Don't go in there."

She nodded and took my hand.

"We should pray, Ma. Ask for forgiveness like Papa would want."

"We should not ask for help."

"Forgiveness, Ma. Not help. "

I relented as she prayed. Cruel was her prayer.

"Forgive us. We have mended our broken ways. Do not let us cry. Do not treat us kind. We are being slaughtered in our homes. Forgive us, if we were wrong, we didn't know. We know now. Please do not help us. We ask for forgiveness. Please grant us forgiveness. We will die without hope. We are dying anyway. Forgive us like you have forgiven Papa and take us home."

HESITATE

I fed her mashed dandelions and beans. They were not good, but it was all there was. She swallowed it hesitantly. Families starved their children and drowned them. I remembered the night when the poisonous rain started. My husband had suggested we do it to Mia.

"We should save her before she cannot be saved. We must help her."

"We are, everyday, Marco. We are feeding her. So many children are starving."

"They are the ones being helped. Not Mia."

I looked at her. --Then, she was six. Her brown eyes trusted us. I made sweet corn, sweet potato, and lamb. It was her favorite dish. She ate. Her fragile smile with three teeth missing. Her front left tooth gone. Two the lower front teeth were gone. It was hard for her to eat so I cut her dinner into little pieces.

Marco started, "Mia. You should ask for forgiveness."

"What, Papa?"

Her little brown eyes turned sad, "did I be bad?"

"No, Mia. Here, eat your potato. Don't listen to Papa."

"Marco, stop."

"Mia, just because we are wrong doesn't mean we know it. You should ask for forgiveness. You could go home."

I had gotten angry.

"Papa, we're home." She giggled.

"This is not our home. This is--"

"Enough." I interrupted.

Marco had gotten up to run some water. He rushed to Mia and asked her to repeat a prayer. It

started with "Forgive us. We have mended our broken ways. Please do not let us cry. Please do not treat us kind." It was the prayer of death he taught her. He soon took the bowl of water and he told her, "Mia, breathe this. This will make you go home."

I got up and threw the water to the floor. The bowl clanked and shattered around our feet. I picked up Mia and put her to bed. It was the first night of no sleep. I covered her mouth with cloth and blindfolded her. Then I did the ceremony on me.

The next morning, Marco had drowned himself in the bath tub. Mia didn't cry, she practiced the prayer he had taught her. We let the water out and draped him in lavender.

She added, "Forgive us like you have forgiven Papa."

Chills crawled along my legs up to my spine and down my arms.

Mia took my hand, "Ma, will we go home soon?"

"No, not soon."

We ate mashed dandelion and beans as it was custom to do when someone died. They were not good, but they weren't supposed to be. The dandelions were sour and the beans were hard. On the side, we had a glass of goat milk. Mia never cried.

Mia ate the dish now, older and quieter. She didn't ask me questions like she had asked her father. She had thought him to be wiser than me, kinder than me, better. I made her eat her food. She spoke "Ma. We should ask for forgiveness." I ignored her. "Where are we going, Ma?"

"To the mountain. I told you."

"What's there?"

"Food, Mia."

"Will we be going home soon?"

"No. Not soon."

CALM

We traveled toward the mountain when the hail had stopped five days after. We had eaten well and Mia looked cheerful. She grabbed my hand and told me a story about a friend of hers that she missed. She started laughing, her nose crinkled with her eyes, and she squeezed my hand tighter. Since we left, she hadn't smiled.

"Ma, did Papa kill himself?"

My body tensed and I told her, "When I was a little girl, my Ma told me there are strange things in this world things you could never understand. Things children should never see. As a child, you may not know when to ask the question why but use it sparingly because the reason behind things is sometimes worse than the action. She warned me that one day I may be unclear of something, she said it would be better to stay unclear than to know exactly what happened.

Mia, do you want to know?"

Mia's lips puckered, and she looked away.

"Papa did kill himself."

I nodded and looked at her. "Papa was very religious. He believed that was the only way."

"Ma, is there another way?"

"I don't know, Mia. I hope so."

We traveled down a dirt path and we sat under a tree. I picked off an apple and ripped the skin. I

gave it to Mia, and I told her to only eat the inside.

A young boy came up to us. He was thin and he looked about fourteen.

"Excuse me."

"No boy. We don't have any money. Be on your way." I yelled.

"No. I don't want money. What is money anyway? I just haven't seen anyone in a while. I just want to talk. I have food and a place to stay."

I grabbed Mia and she yanked her hand from mine. She ran to the boy and touched his shoulder. There was a cut that ran from his shoulder to his fingers. Mia pointed to her arm and showed him hers.

"You are marked by God, then?" I asked.

"I am. Are you?"

I ignored him. "This is my daughter. I am her mother. Where is your mother, boy?"

"I am Pat. They have gone home."

"And left you alone?"

"They drowned a few months back. They tried to starve my sister and I, but I fed us."

"So your sister is here then. Where?"

"Not anymore. She has gone home too."

Mia added, "You didn't drown with your Ma and Papa?"

He looked at her, "We couldn't. We knew better."

"Better?"

"There is more than home, girl."

Mia asked, "What is there?"

"Life."

"God would not think so."

"God gave me and you and your Ma life. He sent us away from home to it, girl. He gave us more than to be comfortable."

I asked quietly to myself, "Is there hope?"

We followed the boy down the dirt path through a garden of lavender. To the house where he lived.

Inside he showed us the rooms that were well kept and clean. He showed us his sister's last.

"Her name was Lavender. We called her Lavey."

"How did she go home?" Mia asked.

I hushed her.

"No. It is fine. She went in the river. We didn't know the waters were poisoned. She burned in there."

It was quiet. Mia held his hand and traced his arm length wound. She sang a prayer, "Do not heal these. They remind us where we are. Here we are fragile. Home we will come someday. Home we will come."

END.

I remember looking at the beauty and only feeling pain. I remember the cuts on my daughter's lips and the sadness of her eyes. I remember that nothingness I felt. I remember when Mia finally stopped crying, and Pat held her trying to erase the memory of his sister replace her with the skeleton of my daughter. Her frail, pale fingers grasped onto life, but there was nothing to it. There was no hope anymore. I remember everything because I had to end it. The suffering had to end. The daylight had to end. Night was coming. Night was always coming. Only the

night was left. So, I held my breath for a few seconds longer than usual to take command of anything. Mia had burns all over her skin from the endless days of rain. Her fingernails had turned rotten and her eyes had yellowed. She was a bluish pale color and her teeth had all fallen out as did her hair. All the beauty of her gone and only pain stayed. There was no more running. We had gotten to the mountain but there was no savior, there was no life. What we had wasn't life. What we had was hell. I couldn't kill us. I couldn't let us die to go to another hell because we had tired of this one. So, we waited for death. We waited for the night, and the night fell. It always did.