BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE

CHILDREN AND CHILDHOODS
IN HEALTH AND AFFLICTION

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SHORT STORY

BEAN CAKES

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The lorry bounces again and shakes more wildly. Whatever things are underneath it rattle like my teeth have been doing for the past two nights. I am cold and scared, especially now that the driver has stopped in the middle of nowhere for their night's rest. There are four drivers, I think. I have seen one with a deep tribal mark that runs from the corner of his right eye to his lips. The others, I distinguish by their voice; one voice is hoarse, one feeble and the other stoic. I was biting my lips to hold back the tears but now they are flowing freely. My tears have known more freedom than I have. They would not be held back so they flow. They flow as freely as the Black Volta.

My buttocks hurt badly. Why wouldn't they? There is not much flesh between my bones and the floor and the gravel road has deep ditches. I am sitting on the floor of the lorry with my rough knees drawn to my chin. I hug them tightly, they are my only comfort. Well, the many jute bags pressing against my starved body are a comfort sometimes. They make me feel like Lamisi were hugging me, like she did whenever I had a nightmare. I would roll to her side of the straw mat that we shared and tug at her sleeping cloth. She would hold me and lull me back to sleep. But she left. She held me in the rain one night and whispered to me, 'Lariba, I want to be the bird that builds her nest and not one in a cage.' And she left.

She ran through the torrents, oblivious to the lightening that showed the underbelly of the night sky. She flew, never fearing that her wings may get wet. She flew away to build her nest and without intending to, left me to face my nightmares all by myself.

‘Shift the silver a bit to the left, yes, there, there’, Baba Moro mumbled, pointing to the mouth of the milling machine. His hoarse voice was muffled by the brown handkerchief he had tied over his nose. His forehead was almost perpetually creased, as if there was something gnawing at his peace of mind. The old mill was the only one in the village and everyone came here almost every week. A lot of the food we ate had to be made from some kind of dough or flour. We ground most of our beans, maize, millet and sorghum here at Baba Moro’s mill.

I am the younger of my mother’s daughters, so the chore of going to the mill was mine. I didn’t mind at all. But on days like this, when the weather was hot and dry and my nose burned, I wished my mother had another child after me, a girl preferably. My lot would not be any different if he were a boy. They say that going to the mill is a girl’s work. I sometimes wonder why.

Whenever I went to the mill, Baba Moro would tell me stories that my father did not have time to tell me- he would shush me away whenever I lingered in the millet field after sending him his lunch. But Baba Moro told me about Tohazie, the Red Hunter and how he had come to discover the land. He knew many things. He knew about all the spices that people came to mill and taught me their names. He once said that some like the ginger, black pepper and grains of paradise had magical powers and could cure mysterious diseases. He also once said that the sumbala was his favourite spice and that was the secret to his fourth wife’s delicious meals.

Baba Moro’s fourth wife, Auntie Meiga was my mother’s friend. My mother told me that they used to draw water from the well that was shaded by the large baobab tree. She said the paths that came from her home and Auntie Meiga’s intersected at the well. Auntie Meiga was the prettiest girl back then. All the young men wanted to impress her by fighting well at the village square whenever wrestling matches were held. My mother said that it was as if she was the prize to their victory. In the end, she was worth just a little piece of land. The entire village knows her story.

Her father had acquired some land from Baba Moro’s brother. The five bags of cola nuts were never exchanged in payment as was the agreement between the two men. Baba Moro’s brother died first, then Auntie Meiga’s father. Baba Moro inherited all his brother’s property including all the debts owed him. His brother

was a good man, and many owed him. Baba Moro became a rich man. He collected from those who could pay, their very last pesewa. From those who had no money or yams or cola, he claimed whatever they valued the most. Auntie Meiga was not lucky to be so loved by her family. My mother said Auntie Meiga's fire was doused when she married Baba Moro. She said it was as if the spirit of the fortnightly wrestles was captured in a bottle and carried away by the Savannah winds. I did not know what she meant by that- I had not seen any fights in my village. In fact, according to my mother, my school came and the village square left. It did not matter to me. But it did to her. She always recounted those fiercely entertaining moments with a trickle of tears from her left eye- the one that watered whenever she laughed. My mother said Auntie Meiga was the one that delivered me. She said that the night she went into labour, our village's midwife was somewhere she could not remember. She could not wait. I would not wait. So he sent Lamisi, who was about 4 years old to run and bring her friend. She had wanted to name me after her. I was as feisty as she had been. That was 14 years ago.

Baba Moro jerked me back to reality with his thunderous laughter. Today, he told no stories. While I was occupied with my thoughts, his son-in-law had walked in and they engaged in some conversation. I could not hear what it was they were talking about. The grinding machine was deafening. But I knew it must have been something that greatly pleased Baba Moro, his darting wide eyes had become slits and they glistened. I looked under the machine's nozzle and it wasn't my silvery basin that was there. He had finished milling my beans and had already started with some grains I was not familiar with. "Baba, what is this that you are milling now?" I asked and waited for him to respond with a rundown of its history and uses. "Who is your mother?! Didn't she ever teach you manners?!!" Baba Moro's son-in-law barked at me unexpectedly. I was shocked. I stood there with my mouth open and stared at him. "And who is your mother too, didn't she also teach you manners? It was Baba I was speaking to", I spat back at him before I knew it. He shot a glance at Baba Moro, expecting him to reprimand me in some way but he did not say a word. It felt like the harmattan sun had gotten hotter and the air in the mill was poisonous. I wanted to leave there badly. Baba Moro's eyes looked amused.

My mother had taught me that it was rude to cut in when my elders were speaking. I was ashamed. I lifted my basin of ground beans and perched it on my head. I did not ask either of them to help me. I turned to ask Baba Moro how much I had to

pay him and his eyes became slits again. He looked at me a bit more intently and pulled down the brown handkerchief. He was smiling and it wasn't a very pleasant sight. His teeth were ugly. They were darkened- evidence of his over indulgence in cola nuts. He turned me around, patted my back as if he were congratulating me for enduring his ugly smile and pushed me towards the doorless opening that was entrance, exit, lamp and window. I stepped out of the mill. My relief at getting out of the musky mill was quickly blown away by a hot gust of wind that seemed to carry all the sand in the Sahara. I did not shut my eyes in time and they watered in protest. It was harmattan, and the air was dry. My lips had already started cracking and licking them did not any good. I had to get home quickly. I needed some shea butter badly for my lips. The shadow of the large pan I was carrying fell some way before me, shading my eyes. The sun blazed and the ground was roasting all that looked like grass. Had it not been for the cow hide sandals I was wearing, my feet would have been seared.

I was almost home. From the outside, my father's household looked like a large circular mud wall. It was mainly brown, but here and there, there were remnants of the paintings the women had made the year before for the Damba festival. They made beautiful patterns, my mother and her friends. I entered by the gate by the place where we made our food. It was more like a shed with a part of it pitched against the wall. At the corner, there was a large black earthenware pot. Somehow, the water in it was always cool. I couldn't wait to get a long drink. I looked around for Lamisi. Usually, she would be out on the compound doing something and she would see me come in. She would follow me to the shed and help me offload the pan and promise again that she would teach me to make bean cakes like hers. But today, she wasn't anywhere on the compound. Nobody was. It was strange. Slowly, I went down on my left knee and managed to bring down the pan. I was beginning to get confused. The household was too empty. On a regular Saturday, no one dared stay inside their hut, and nobody really had anywhere to go. Except my father. He was never home with the sun. I made as if to call my sister and my throat scratched. I really needed some water. I walked to the pot and picked up the calabash that was religiously kept atop it. I fetched some and took a good drink. Some of the water touched my lips and it burned. My lips were so dry the cracks had gotten deeper. I started off towards our hut for some shea butter.

A little distance away, I heard voices coming from within. They were hushed, and I did not know who were being talked to or what was being talked about. My heart started to beat faster. As I got closer, I made out my father's voice. My father never entered our hut. Never. I got rooted on the spot. Then I heard what sounded like muffled sobs. I could sense that something was terribly wrong so I stood, unsure whether to enter or hang around outside. Curiosity finally ate my indecision and I moved forward. I slowly parted the raffia curtain that draped the entrance of the hut and I entered cautiously. There, sitting cross-legged was Lamisi. My mother was sitting beside her, tears streaking down her face. Sitting from across them was my father. He looked cross. They seemed not to have noticed my presence when I entered. 'Father, please' My sister was begging, 'can't you ask him for just one more year? We can raise the money and pay him then.'

"One more what?!" my father barked. "If you dare protest again, I shall strike your mouth and your teeth would fall out before the words did." My mother rose from the goat skin she was sitting on and left the room without a word to anyone or a glance at me. I wanted to run after her, to hold her and to cry with her. But I felt my sister needed me more. Her eyes searched mine for solace when she saw me. So I stayed. Then my father rose. "You do not have a choice, Lamisi. We do not have a choice. It is his land." His voice shook with rage. He looked long and hard at me as he passed and finally stepped out. I walked slowly to Lamisi and I sat down beside her on the mat. She opened her mouth as if to say something to me, but she burst into tears. I did not know what she was crying about, but I wept with her. My sister hardly cried. That day, she wept like she was mourning. Like she was mourning herself. We held on to each other tightly and soaked the hard pain in our hearts till it became soft and we drifted off to sleep.

I do not know how long we slept for, but thunder woke us up. We could not hear the rain as it fell on thatch roof, but we knew that the cold we felt was not the harmattan nights' but of merciless rain. Lamisi sat up suddenly. It was dark and I could not see her face, but I knew she was smiling. I could feel her excitement. She whispered my name and pulled me up to sit with her. She cupped my face with her soft palms and held me like that for a while. "Wait for me," she whispered and went about the hut hurriedly. Then she came back and asked me to come out with her. She had gathered her things, not many of them tied them in a cloth and slung it across her shoulder. 'Come with me,' she whispered, looking towards the entrance of the hut. "Hurry." I took her outstretched hand, got to my feet and

followed her. The rain shocked me fully awake right when we stepped into it, and with that came the realization that my sister was running away from home. I became terrified. I wanted to ask her what was going on but before I knew it, she had broken into a run, pulling me along with her. We ran through the rain and through the dark for a while without looking back.

Suddenly, there was a blinding lightning, then very loud thunder. We stopped. Lamisi started to laugh, or so I thought. I could not tell what was rain and if there were tears, what were tears on her pretty face.

Pulling her into an embrace, I clung to her like our wet clothes had stuck to our bodies and I begged her, 'Lami, please, please tell me, what is going on? Where are you going? Why are you going?'

She pulled away from me and held my two hands in hers. They were shaking, probably from the cold because she feared nothing. She turned away from me, looking to some place I could not see and when she looked at me again, she touched my chin gently, and rubbing it with her thumb she said she had to go. She did not say why or to where, but she kept on saying that she wanted to build her nest herself and she had to go and go quickly, before the rain stopped or day broke.

She urged me, 'Go home, and make Ma happy. I will be fine. I shall still teach you how to make bean cakes like mine- someday.'

And she left.

I made my way home, walking slowly through the rain. I wanted it to wash my sorrow away, but it seemed it would last longer than the paintings the women made on the huts. The wind whistled through the leafless branches of the cashew trees as if it were singing me a dirge. I could not cry, I was angry. I felt that someone had made my sister leave me. I got home while everyone was still asleep in their huts. I changed my drenched clothes and wore one of the dresses she had left behind and I curled myself to her side of the mat. I did not want to cry, but tears just tumbled down and crossed the bridge of my nose. I lay there and waited for daybreak.

It was soon morning. I heard the curtain get drawn aside, the beads that hung on the fringes knocking against each other. My mother barged into the hut. I did not turn to look at her as she started to speak. I pretended to be asleep and tried hard to keep my eyes shut without them twitching. My heart was pounding fast and I prayed. I prayed it was all just a nightmare but I knew it was not. She drew close to me and she spoke again.

"Lariba, I said where is your sister? I know you are awake so turn around and answer my question." I caught the sound of fear as she spoke. I could not bear to hear her plead any longer so sat up and turned around to face her. She had come onto the mat and she was sitting with her legs beneath her. Her shoulders were slumped and when I looked at her face, I saw that her eyes had sunk in.

'She is gone.' I responded, bowing my head in shame as if I had a part to play in her leaving. Her head jerked up and her mouth fell open. She let out a heart-wrenching scream and run out of the hut with her heavy hands on her scarfed head, shouting and wailing, 'My daughter has killed me! She has killed me!!'. My confusion from the day before returned and replaced the anger that I was feeling. I went after her but what I saw on the compound of the household threw my mind into more confusion and I stopped in my tracks. Many women had gathered around many large cooking pots. I presumed they were preparing a feast but now, they were clacking noisily like chicken, cooking up stories about my mother's wailing. I looked around and spotted my mother sitting in front of my father's hut on the wet red earth. Auntie Meiga was trying to pull her off the ground but comparing the size of my mother to Auntie Meiga's, it was fruitless.

They kept at their struggle until my father stomped out of his room and bellowed, 'What is going on here?!'

Auntie Meiga was the one who responded. She told him that my sister had run away. His hands flew to his waist. He looked down and told my mother to gather herself together. He turned and started walking away. As he passed through the bamboo gates out, he said to my mother 'You have two daughters. Lariba would replace her. I'm going to inform Baba Moro about the change. He will even be happy to have a younger bride.' The whole compound became very quiet. I felt the eyes of everyone on me then my mother began to wail even louder. I stood rooted on the spot. Auntie Meiga left my mother and came up to me. She pulled

me gently and took me back to my hut. I asked her what was going on but all she said was that I would be ok. She said that her husband was not a bad man and that he was gentle. She was saying many things I could not understand and she knew that I could not appreciate what she was saying. She held my hands and said she would love to be the one to draw my tattoos and she said she would teach me many things. She said I would make a good fifth wife to her husband. And then it hit me. I was going to marry Baba Moro. His cola-stained teeth flashed before my eyes and I shuddered.

I wanted it to be night again. I wanted it to rain again. But it was harmattan and rains like last night's only came when a crocodile turned into a frog. I lay on my back and stared at the logs that held the thatch. I wished they would come falling on me. I was going to marry Baba Moro. I finally understood what yesterday was all about. I now knew why Lamisi said she did not want to be caged. I did not know what would happen to father and his millet field if I did not marry Baba Moro. But I knew one thing, I was going to fly away like my sister. I sat up with a start, smiled and glanced at Auntie Meiga. 'I must tell my friends', I squeaked, pretending to be excited. I ran out of the hut and went to hug my mother. I sat with her on the ground. She turned and looked at me sadly, and she cupped my face in her palms and wept. She kept on saying that she was sorry.

I told her that I would be fine, I laughed and added that after all, she was the one who always said that Auntie Meiga was my mother too. This made her wipe her tears and we stood up together.

'I want to go and tell my friends, Ma.' I said to her, unsure of how well I was hiding my intention. She was my mother, and she could see through my soul. I do not know if she knew what I really meant to do but she grinned to and she said to me to wait. 'Take these' she said, 'eat them on the way to your friends' huts.' She handed me some freshly fried bean cakes made from the beans I had gone to mill the day before. She patted the top of my head and whispered to me that the lorry that went down south of the country would be leaving the market soon. She stood watching me as I went and when I got to the gate by my hut, she shouted that and I should get back on time, they had to start dressing me up early and the henna tattoos took some time to dry. Once I got outside the gates, I put the bean cakes into the pockets of my dress and broke into a run. I ran past my school and then the well. The huts with their intricate patterns went past quickly. The wind

filled my ears and drowned out the hum of the mill as I went by. I was leaving all behind. I was leaving behind what I knew, the places I loved, the people I loved. I was leaving my life behind, my life as I had known it, to save it.

The market was at the outskirts of the village. As I neared it, I saw fewer and fewer people, it was a good thing that it was not a market day. I did not know which of the trucks to climb onto when I got to the market. There were about 6 of them so I stood to catch my breath and watched from behind one of the closed market stalls. A little moment later, a man with a coarse voice came to pass by where I was hiding and he shouted to someone, "Let's hurry and go. We need to leave here in the next 5 minutes." Another person responded from a blue truck. It looked fully packed with bags and bags of beans, and some millet. They had thrown a worn canvass trampoline over some railings on the truck. The back lay bare. I saw my chance. I did not know where they were going to. I did not care. I sneaked carefully, afraid to even breathe and jumped onto the blue truck. Once I got in, I burrowed into the stack till I found a place a little comfortable. I took out my bean cakes and ate them. I was hungry. The engine coughed a dry cough and I felt the truck begin to move.

I do not remember when I drift off to sleep. I start when I hear the coarse voice and the stoic tone talk. They seem to be talking right in my face. I have been found out.

'Little one, what are you doing here?' Stoic Tone asks. My lips quiver and I start to shed tears.

'Whatever you're doing here doesn't matter anyway, we can't take you back to your home. We're in Accra now', he says and laughs. They go off and continue offloading the foodstuffs they had brought. There is a buzz of activity outside the truck. I can hear cars honking here and there. A couple of hawkers linger around the men. One of them buys some water. He drinks little and splashes the rest on his face. I become aware that I am thirsty. As they work in a chain, they chat heartily and talk about how many girls come down to the south hidden in the cargo trucks. They say many things which frighten me and I begin to wonder if running away was a good thing. Baba Moro's smile comes to memory again and I convince myself that yes, leaving home was the better option.

I continue to sit huddled in the corner. Now, they have finished unloading the truck. Many girls with pans like the one I had back home gather around them. They seem to know themselves. I hear some speak Dagbani. These are girls from my place, I think. I hear them ask about home and their villages from the drivers. I do not know what to do or where to go so I sit and watch them. They move away from the bucket of the truck toward the front and their voices hush. A few minutes later, the one with the tribal mark on his face comes back with one of the girls. Her skin is light in an unsettling way, almost orange. It is as if she has used a bad bleaching cream. Her brows are pitch black, and are drawn in nearly perfect semi-circles. The cornrows on her head look untidy. She's wearing too many colours and could easily pass for a masquerade on parade. She has chewing gum in her mouth and she is popping it as if she were in a competition.

"Little one, what is your name?" The driver with the tribal mark asks when they get to the bucket.

"Lariba" I answer.

"Okay, Lariba. We can't take you with us to where we are going. You can stay in the market. This is my friend, she's called Asibi. You can hang around her."

He motions for me to come out. When I do, Asibi grins widely and I notice she has nice teeth. I relax and feel strangely comfortable, as if she is a friend I have known for long. I move to her side and stand beside her. I am a head taller than she is. The driver turns and walks back to join the others at the front. The engine revs and they are gone. Asibi cocks her head a little and sizes me up. She clutches my left-hand and turns it to look into my palm. She feels it with her other hand and nods. "You'll survive" she says, pulling me along with her from the lorry station into the market. Later, I get to know it is the Madina market.

"When did you come here?" I ask, eager to establish a real friendship.

"I came here almost two years ago. Yorne brought me the man who handed you to me."

"Why did you come?" I probe further.

She turns sharply and eyes me. She sucks her teeth. "You ask too many questions." She sounds pained, so I let it pass.

We weave our way through the tight mesh of buyers and sellers. I look around and I begin to feel giddy. The market is hot, not the kind of hot that I'm used to, and everybody is jostling somebody. The women selling their vegetables call out loudly to people as they pass, and the men with their things in wheel-barrows - toothpastes, rubber slippers, fake perfume- claw at shabbily dressed girls and disturbed women as they go, calling them "My princess" " My love" "Sugar" and "Future Queen". We pass through an alley and on either side, there are many different stores, provision shops, cosmetic shops, underwear shops. The space in the shops seems not enough for their owners so they set out their wares on tables they have put outside. The tables share the alley with us. Asibi pulls me and I stand behind her just in time. A man approaches, carrying a plank of wood on which he has packed cartons and cartons of Kalypo. The veins on his neck stand out, tensed. He calls out "*Agoo, agoo, agoo*" as he goes as some kind of disclaimer for when he topples you off his path. He walk-runs past us. Just when we get back to the alley a lady standing by a smoked fish seller shouts "*Kayayo!*" Asibi runs towards her and I am surprised. I stand and I watch as she comes back to me. Some other girl carrying a similar silver pan had got to the lady first.

"I thought your name was Asibi? " I say ask when she gets back.

"Yes, but everybody else calls me *kayayo*. They will soon call you that too." She says with a chuckle. "Have you seen all the girls with the pans? They are all called *kayayo*. And your stomach will make you respond." She laughs again. A light, happy laughter.

I feel my stomach rumble and I clutch it. Asibi sees this and smiles. "You're hungry, heh ?" she asks.

"Very. The last thing I ate was two bean cakes when I was leaving." I manage to smile. I can taste my mother's bean cakes in my mouth. My lips quiver a little and I feel a knot in my chest. I miss her.

"You ate just two *koose*?! Your stomach must be eating itself now. Here, take my pan." She hands out her pan to me and I stare at her. I look at her questioningly.

"You won't take?" She asks, quite shocked.

"What would I use it for?" I ask. I begin to feel embarrassed that I do not know what she means for me to do with the pan.

She shakes her head and says "Oh no, no. Truly you're a "newly-come-down". Just don't let the boys know else they will corner you before you know it. Here, collect the pan."

"For...?" I question again.

"I'm lending it to you until evening. You can carry people's things for them and they will pay you. Clearly, you need the money. You said you are hungry, no? Ahaa, so take it. Besides, you will need 50 pesewas for the kiosk you'll sleep in." She looks at me like she is exasperated and sighs.

Tears well in my eyes but I am determined not to cry. Not in front of Asibi, she will think I'm weak. But one tear escapes and glides down my cheek. I wipe it with the back of my hand and sniff. She stretches her hand and puts it on my shoulder. She squeezes it gently and says I will be fine. I nod.

"When I run down here, I was very frightened, well not as much as I was the night they started cutting us. I did not know anybody and I slept outside for three days until I met some girls from my place. They showed me the kiosks they slept in at night. For 50 pesewas a night, it was a good deal. They told me that I was lucky that I had not been raped on any of those three nights." I cannot believe her, but she is telling the truth. I shudder when I think about her short self lying in the open in the market.

She hands me the rug-mould she uses as a pad for her head and the large pan.

"Now go and make some money to feed yourself. Come to the abattoir we passed by when you finish or are tired. I'll be waiting for you there with the other girls."

I stare into her face and smile broadly at her. She smiles and pops her chewing gum again, and turns to go. I make a mental note to ask her to let me borrow her pan for some time until I gather some money to buy my own.

"Kayayo" Some woman calls. I run to her quickly and set down my pan. She shows me her purchases and I start to pack them. Two tubers of yam, five fingers of ripe plantain, a black polythene bag full of tomatoes, some onions and other things. She is kind enough to help me lift the pan and carry on my head. She says to me to follow her. As we go, she stops and buys a packet of toilet roll. She hands that to me and she zips up her handbag and holds that. We walk to the car park and

we unload the things into the boot of her car. She reaches into her handbag and she takes out a worn one Ghana cedi note. Her nails are long and painted red at the tips. As she hands the money to me, she looks at me and says "You're young".

I smile and respond, "I am fourteen."