Saving the Well

An old Arab proverb says, “Health is a crown that rests atop the heads of the healthy; it is only the sick who have the eyes to see it.” My mother told me this near the Eastern shorelines, where I clutched her calloused hands and latched onto every word, fearing—with my heart in my palms—that each would be her last.

She was coughing and sweat broke across her skin like glass shattering across dirt. She placed her hand, a deep purple sand color, against my face, against the tan that clings to my body like bark. At that moment, we were a reversible quilt.

“I see something glowing right above that widow peak you try to hide,” she wheezed, then winced. She raised her eyes lethargically, then gazed at me in wonder. “It almost looks like a halo.”

Sobs wracked my body as she drew a final breath and shut her eyes.

Time folded like scraps of date leaves as malaria took my mother.

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It wasn’t a good year.

In the span of two weeks, this disease spread across four villages, leaving 45 dead, 17 of which were children. Our people didn’t understand the dialect of the pale Americans that swarmed our homes. Their voices carried a tone that didn’t make much sense to the elders, but to us, the young, we knew what they meant.

Even the foreigners, who’d only been here for a span of 174 hours, said we had no hope. They saw the water we pulled up from the ground in dirty canteens, turned their noses at our showers, and refused to use our *hoofras*, holes dug in the ground; they would only touch mud. They claimed it was all in the name of protection and used a word called “protocol.”

They doubted our prayers, our “stupid wisdom” they wrote off as old African legends. Who were they, these white people whose ribs and arms were all sharp angles, to sniff out our faults, to thrust our demons into their cameras and printed papers? Some of us were scared. All of us mourned the death of our Mamas and Babas, blessing their caskets with the rain that only deaths could conjure up. We put faith in God and hope in these foreigners called scientists, who we trusted just enough to save us.

There were times when we'd gather in front of the television and motion our hands in different directions for the young ones to move the antenna, so we could catch the rumors they spread about us.

A woman, hair like the waves that rolled over our beaches, opened her thin lips and narrated "the nightmare." Those like her looked at our situation as if it God had vented his wrath upon our people while we, the alleged victims, accepted it as a duty, something that could not be avoided. It was our responsibility to push through. Their eyes glazed over us and accepted our old as bitter and our young as broken. They did not know the ancestors we had strapped over our shoulders. Their souls rested upon our heads and held our thoughts firm to the idea that we would not perish or lose face in front of the *dunya,* the world. We finally had the world strung across our fingers like fruit hung from the thin bark of trees.

"Malaria," the woman said, drawing us from our individual thoughts, "has already affected the greater portion of the Sub-Saharan part of Africa. Mothers are fighting to preserve the lives of their remaining offspring."

The picture cut to a woman in the village nearby. The last time we had seen her was as a young girl at her wedding, not yet fattened by her latest pregnancy. She was crouched down in the dirt, clutching the corpse of a newborn. Her face was stony as she bent down and tucked his little soul in a blanket of dirt and it was like we could see him joining the sky's group portrait of all our dead children. We spent a few minutes imagining it, their slight figures greeting heaven's gates alone, or alongside their dead mamas, forced to give up their future because of the faults of nature.

Our thoughts were cut short by a close up of her face. Tears mapped it, cutting straight down in boundaries that reflected the Nile. That was when we realized. The disease was not only breaking us physically. It was cracking our character, fracturing us from the inside out.

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Death was a janitor, and he made the usual rounds. Because of the extra headlines we took up, new scientists arrived in the coming days. A woman came next. She was of our people but all the same, she was not. She was a scientist, one who was assigned to our village because of her physical resemblance to us and the way her tongue rolled over our language. She's still different. Rather than glazing her eyes at us, like the others, who saw us as less than human, she

would stare straight into our pupils and face the fact we, as a people, had become eroded, a limestone settlement that had lost its texture. All that was left was a broken mountain path.

But even as clouds of the disease thundered over our villages, rolling over us in waves, we became engulfed in the beginnings of something else: hope. We saw it in her coiled raven hair and amber eyes that did not melt in pity but instead simmered in gingery determination, singeing the whites of her saucepan eyes. We did not know what the future tasted like, but it looked kind, and a lot more familiar than we'd expected.

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Her name was Hindia, although she asked us to call her Hind. Each day, I would observe her practices. She had a knack for creating distractions, making us forget that we were withering like drying date leaves, and that dying was all we had left to look forward to.

For a week, she would sit under the trees out front, bold and fearless as she abandoned her protective body suit for a medical mask and gloves. Her hair was pulled back, and she wore jeans and a light t-shirt, different to the vibrant *tobes* our women wrapped around their bodies.

She was smiling then, her dark hazel eyes taking in the state of the woman sitting near her. Naima looked brighter, fuller, and her hollow cheeks softened as Hind extended a small hand to Naima's youngest daughter.

"*Isima shinu*?" she asked, wanting to know what the young, dark girl's name was.

"Sajda," Naima replied, smiling down at her daughter. "I named her after the part in prayer where I kneel and touch my forehead to the ground. I prayed that God would let her live. Her siblings haven't been as blessed by His mercy as she has and I can only hope that she'll continue to be."

Hind's eyes softened as she looked at the little girl, hair cornrowed tight against her head, wearing a more elaborate dress than her mother's *tobe*.

"We spent what we could, my husband and I, to buy that for her, you know," Naima murmured as she took her daughter into her hands again. "My husband would've never agreed to spend our money on something like a child's dress."

She played with the hem of her daughter's dress and smiled hollowly.

"It wasn't until the *disease*," she spat weakly, "took hold of her siblings. Now we're just thankful we can give Sajda what she deserves before it's too late."

Hind's eyes watered and she placed her palm on Naima's shoulder before reaching out and pulling her into her arms.

"We'll save her," she whispered, her voice strained, into Naima's hair. "We'll make sure what happened to Sajda's siblings never happens to her. I promise."

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It was a week after watching Hind and Naima's embrace that I got to speak with her. I was kneeling beneath a tree outside my home, performing one of the five daily ablutions before prayer. The sun hung low in the sky and the crickets themselves hadn't bothered to get out of bed. I rubbed water on the pads of my feet and moved to slip my sandals back on. I stood up and stretched before reaching down for my prayer rug. It was when I was bent down that I sensed her behind me.

"Salaam," she said with a smile pressed on her face. "Can I sit here?" I glanced over at her. Today she'd abandoned her denim and light shirts for something more traditional—a long black and blue *tobe* tied tightly around the waist and wound around her head. She was nervously tapping one foot over the other.

"Sure," I murmured, before sitting down again. We looked out at the horizon and watched the sun heave itself over the riverbank.

"What's it like there, Hind?" I asked, breaking the prolonged silence. "What does the sunrise in Amreeka look like?"

Her hands were crossed over one another and she was hanging onto her forearms. She was chewing on her bottom lip as the minutes passed before speaking again.

"To be honest with you, it's nothing like the sun rise over here."

I pursed my lips.

"What?" I scoffed. "Is our disease so contagious that even the sun has lost its health? Or are you Americans so high and mighty that the sun belongs to you?"

"No," her voice cracked before she cleared it and said again, this time stronger, "No. If anything, it's our sun that's weak with illness. People back where I live don't appreciate the simple everyday wonders. Our sun is sick not from a physical disease, but an emotional one. It's neglected," she said.

"Your sun," she continued, "it's different. It's stronger. It's richer than it could ever be back home. And I can appreciate that, more than I ever will in America."

She turned to me and smiled thinly, as if she were looking for an affirmation, a reassurance that she could possibly belong.

So I smiled back, and although it was small, it was the most natural thing I could think to do.

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"I have a confession to make."

I cut my eyes over to Hind who came to stand beside me near the water basin. I lifted myself off the small stool I was on and gestured for her come near me on the cot against the back wall.

"I'm sorry it is not as nice as what you are used to. It is all I have," I said softly. I grabbed a small cup near the leg of the bed and poured her water from the pitcher I kept near it.

"No," she said, "it's fine." She took a sip from the cup before turning her eyes to me.

"What I wanted to say," she murmured, "was about the people...they're stronger than they give them credit for."

I took my eyes off hers and peered at the sun setting along the Eastern borders. The colors of our people were hung at the end of the day like a tapestry. In the center, I saw our strength, the steel in our bodies caught between day and night. Hope and utter despair.

"'They' give them credit?" I whispered. "Where are you in this 'they?' Don't you mean 'we,' Hindia?"

I turned back around and faced her with my breath hitched behind me, stolen by the scenery.

"No," she whispered in return. "We? We are standing right here. Together."