

COLOURED LOCKS

August, the windy month, is seven days old. As many nights have passed since I have been back in my mother's home.

I open my eyes to sounds of early morning in the village and get out of bed to stand at the bedroom window. A woman sweeps the ground with one hand; she rests her other arm across her back and bends at the waist as she moves in a straight line from one end of the yard to the other. I shake my head at the futility of her efforts.

Even as she sweeps, the breeze plucks yellow leaves off the mosalaosi tree and scatters them on the ground. They turn cartwheels across the just-swept yard. A white plastic bag leapfrogs after them and is trapped in the corner of the house where the veranda begins.

It is as if God holds a giant sieve over the village, swirls it round and round, sprinkling dust everywhere. Dust filters through the fly-screens and carpets the floors. It coats our shoes and clings to our hair like chalk on a teacher's hands.

I walk to the veranda and settle into my mother's favourite chair.

When I was a young girl it was my duty to sweep the floor everyday. Once a week I mopped it, then got down on my knees to make it shine with polish red as ox blood and a brush. My mother inspected my handiwork as I scrubbed. With her hands on her hips and a long sigh she'd point out patches of unevenness.

'Look at that spot, Sethunya, there, behind your foot. What kind of a woman will you become if you can't even keep a floor clean?' she used to ask.

She always wore one of her homemade ankle-length leteisi dresses. My favourite had a collar edged with white lace and large pockets on either hip. In one of them she stored the pantry keys, which jangled like a cowbell when she walked. In the other she kept a cloth for polishing any piece of furniture she thought needed shining.

The last time I visited I found her sitting on the porch, sipping bush tea from the 'Best Granny' mug my daughter had given her. It struck me then that she had grown old. I watched her pull herself up from the chair. She paused midway, as if to steel herself, and the crease between her eyebrows deepened. Then she shuffled until she was upright and waved away the cane I held out to her.

She had rejected the hearing aid the doctor said she needed.

'That thing makes my ears go ting-ting-ting like raindrops on a rain water tank.'

I wondered about that sometimes. I think she simply chose what she wanted to hear.

My mother raised me on a cocktail of ancestors, tradition and God. Not for her these ideas of the new generation of Batswana who raised children by planting them in foreign soil. A month before my daughter was born, and despite all my protestations, my mother arrived on my doorstep in Gaborone to ensure I followed the rules for caring for a new-born. The doctor had said the baby was in breech position. My mother fetched a woman who massaged my stomach every day and guided the baby's head the right way round.

She kept me out of the kitchen for three months after April was born and cooked all my meals.

'You must eat. That is the only way you will produce enough milk for the baby.'

She stood sentry at my bedroom door, banning all visitors.

'You just never know what ailments people harbour. They will see her after she is officially introduced to the world. Let us do things the right way, my child,' she said.

Years later, when April was a teenager and got so ill I was afraid she would die, my mother nursed her back to health and cursed the alien foods I fed her, in particular rice.

My mother towered over most women, and stood as tall as many men in the small village. She always covered her head but last night, when I went to the mortuary to prepare her body for burial, she was without a doek on her head. I traced the lines of her face and stroked her hair.

Her hair was black, with threads of grey, and parted into four blocks. Each block was braided and the plait tucked in and hidden away. I ran my fingers over her hair and it felt soft. Somehow I had thought it would be hard and brittle like her hands that refused to bend when I held them in mine. I took out the scarf that I had fished from the trunk in which she stored all her treasures. I had found it tucked between the sheets of tissue paper that it had come wrapped in. It was the rainbow-coloured silk one 24-year old April had bought for her grandmother with her first pay-cheque.

I folded the scarf into a triangle, wrapped it over her head and tied it into a knot at the base of her neck. My mother had said she would only wear it on special occasions.

I close my eyes and can see her ululating and waving the scarf above her head, this way and that as she danced and sang praises to her granddaughter. When I open my eyes the woman is sweeping the front of the yard. I see my footprints on the dusty stoep. I get up from the chair. My mother's house is waiting to be cleaned.

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It is the morning after my mother's funeral. Sitting on the bed, I study my daughter's sleeping face. She curves her body the way I do when I sleep and draws her knees up close to her chest. She stretches her legs and her eyes flutter open as if to look at me, but then she closes them again.

I hope she dreams in colour. Pink, like the hydrangeas that grow as large as my fist in pots on the veranda. Or maybe her dreams are orange like the golden shower vine that twists one way and then the other as it creeps up the wooden fence.

She turns towards me and I stretch my hand out to push back a strand of hair from her brow. Her hair used to be black, with tight coils, but her tresses are the colour of mulberry now, from a bottle, with ends that lie flat and lifeless, without a hint of curl remaining. Last month it was the colour of sand.

She shifts again. I think she says 'grandmother.' I look at her face but her eyelids are pressed tightly together.

My daughter dreams in English, a language I list as my third. She learnt it at the private schools I sent her to, and I forced her to speak it all the time, just like they did at those schools.

'Children are only to speak that language during the Setswana period,' the teacher warned.

I wanted my daughter to have a life different - no, better than mine. I sent her there so she would one day travel to faraway places that I had only seen in books. It pleases me that she lives like rich people do in my country. When she speaks, she flicks her head back and tucks her hair behind her ear with her finger.

But it saddens me that she has forgotten who she is, rejected our ways. I thought she would learn Western ways but keep her own, and set them together side by side like the knife and fork with which she always ate.

During her grandmother's funeral, she tripped over Setswana words as she tried to read the messages of condolence. Her nasal 'robala ka kagiso,' rest in peace, must have turned my mother in her grave for sure.

My cheeks stung and the blood rushed to my face as the crowd growled their disapproval. I could almost hear them asking what nonsense is this? A Motswana child who cannot speak Setswana? What is this? I felt the heat of shame on my fingertips as I pulled the veil over my eyes. My daughter has boxed and buried her mother tongue so deep, when she finds Setswana words they have English hues. I never wished it to be this way.

When I was a little girl, I had short black hair with small tight curls. Just as soon as you stretched them out with a comb, they snapped back into place like tiny springs. I wished for wavy tresses, blonde, that swayed to the rhythm of my movements. I yearned for hair like that of the girls who lived in the big houses that my mother cleaned.

My hair never had a chance to grow long. Every last Saturday of the month, my mother took me to a man who ran an open-air barbershop-cum-shoe-makerfix operation at the Gaborone train station.

We walked to the bus stop to board the bus to Gaborone. My mother walked fast and I had to run to keep up. When we arrived at the barber, Mama handed him a bottle of purple methylated spirits and left him with a stern warning too.

'Make sure you soak the clippers before you touch my daughter's hair. I don't want her getting ringworm from dirty blades.'

As Mama watched, I climbed onto the black chair whose threadbare seat cover flapped over its sides like banana peels. I took care not to wriggle lest the edge of the material cut my thighs. Then trying not to blink, I watched Mama's doek bobbing up the road as she walked to the supermarket behind the big busses that refuelled at the garage.

The man mowed my hair flat, with clippers that creaked as he worked them like a pair of scissors. He wedged my head against his football-sized stomach and tilted it to the left, to the right, down and up with gnarled hands that looked like the mophane worms he chewed and spat out as he cut.

I watched tufts of my hair tumble onto the circle of newspapers that covered the ground around the chair I sat in. When he finished, he offered me an orange that was so big I had to hold it in both hands. I rolled it under my foot and sat under the morula tree sucking out the juice till Mama came back. As we left, the barber rummaged around in his apron and pulled out a lollipop - always red, with pink chewing gum inside. He pressed it into my hand and warned me to eat it only after I had my evening meal.

Sometimes I begged my mother: 'Please, please Mama, can't I stretch my hair instead?'

But her response was always the same: 'Give thanks for what God blessed you with, my girl. If God wanted your hair straight, he would have made it straight. You cannot change who you are. How will you balance a bucket of water on your head?'

When we got home, Mama lathered my head with red soap that smelt like the barber's hands and glazed my scalp with Vaseline, leaving it shining like a mirror. In winter she put on two layers, as though to cold-proof my head. Warm tears streamed down my face when I looked into the mirror and traced the bumps that criss-crossed

my scalp. I wished I wouldn't cry, but already I could hear the song the boys would sing at school. They would be waiting for me, chanting:

Chiskop, tamati, Lerago la mmisis Chiskop, tamati, Lerago la mmisis

'Baldhead like a tomato, smooth as a madam's bum.'

Leaving home to attend boarding school, I flung open the gates to life unbounded by Mama and visits to the barber. Every Friday my friends and I sat on the braiding rock, where we took turns to style each other's hair. When I was in form one, the fashion was 'strop'. We created a rope with hair and black wool and made it go in circles around our heads. In form two, our American teacher - who wore colourful caftans and beaded earrings - taught us to plait our hair into tiny lines that made our heads look like rows of corn on a cob. In form three, we saved up to lengthen our hair with extensions, bought from the Ghanaian factory that supplied the hair salons that were springing up like mushrooms all over the country. The next year, in form four, I kept my hair natural, but washed it with green soap and didn't rinse out the lather. 'Cold stretching' we called it. On Saturdays I combed out the hair into a giant Afro.

In my last year at secondary school, we jerry-curled our locks and left our pillows as greasy as the overall of our mechanics teacher.

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I am still trying to remember all the other hairstyles when someone knocks on the door and calls out, 'Mma Lorato.' It is only when the door opens and my aunt sticks her head through that I realize she is calling me, mother of Lorato, Lorato being the name given to my daughter by my mother.

'Mma Lorato, we need sugar - from the storeroom,' she whispers.

'Coming,' I respond, and I pat my hip. I get up to leave the bedroom and April opens her eyes.

'Those keys, Mama, jangling like that...for a minute I thought you were grandmother.'

'Wake up April. It is time for you to get up now. Remember this is not Gaborone city. And cover that head when you leave the room.'

As I stand up, I wonder if she has been awake all along. She has a lazy streak, an air of entitlement that irks me, but she is my creation.

She used to come home crying when she was a little girl. She said she wanted to be like Rapunzel, then Barbie, and I offered her nothing in their place.

From the time we arrived in my mother's home I had hovered around my daughter like a hen waiting for its eggs to hatch. I reminded her to hold out both hands and say clearly 'Dumelang bo mma le bo rra,' instead of the slurred 'melang' she offered as greeting; I had examined her cooking efforts, crushed the lumps in her just-cooked porridge and got down on my knees to clean again the floor she said she had mopped. All the time I wondered what kind of a woman my daughter was becoming. My worry deepened as evening approached.

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It is time for our hair to be cut as tradition demands. My aunt starts with mine, with a pair of clippers that shave my hair off in strips and groan as they plough through my plaits. Behind my eyes, the stinging starts, but I press my eyes closed with my fingers. I feel like I am a little girl again. I am angry with my mother as I perch on a chair whose insides show. I am blinking and blinking so the tears do not leave my eyes, but they still slip through my eyelids. So I try instead to string together happy memories of my childhood.

I have been gone so long from my mother's home. I have forgotten that it is a place where life was measured by the slant of shadows created by the sun; where morning began when a cock called out for morning to take the place of night. Home was a place where Mama woke me up every morning with 'Wake up, wake up. The sun does not find a girl in bed,' until one day I woke up before her and she hugged me and said, 'That's my girl.'

I have forgotten that after fetching water and cleaning the stoep, I would find Mama's slices of freshly baked bread and home-made Morula jam waiting for me on the table. I would gobble it up and wash it down with a cup of bush tea made on the primus stove. In winter, Mama would warm a stone and give it to me to hold in my hands as I walked to school.

I loved it when schools closed. All the children in our neighborhood gathered in our yard to play barefoot in the sun. We skipped rope fashioned out of a creeper that weaved in and out of the fence. Other times we played diketo, with pebbles, or dibeke, using a ball made out of Mama's old stockings. When night and day traded places, we huddled around a bonfire and listened to Mama tell us our own fables, the kind that began, 'Gatwe erile,' our 'Once, long ago...'

I rejected that life as I grew older. I grew up wishing for another life, and always another mother. I wonder now if a person could cling on to sadness so tightly that it bleached even the brightest colours.

When I open my eyes, I am surprised to see April sitting beside me. 'No,' I say. 'She's not cutting her hair.'

April looks at me and shakes her head. Then another woman gets up with a pair of scissors. She chops off April's fake hair first. Then she takes out a razor blade and starts at the top of her forehead. With tiny flicks of her wrist she shaves off the brown hair. I watch as it falls in little clumps onto the towel they put across her shoulders. Some of it lands on the floor.

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Two weeks have passed since we laid my mother to rest. Every morning I stand in front of the mirror and re-discover my face. We stand together, my daughter and me, matching heads clean-shaven and smooth. Soon it will be time to return to the city where neighbours share a tarred road home and not much else.

'Maybe you can buy a wig when you get home,' I say. She looks into my eyes, her eyes so like mine, so like my mother's. She smiles.

'No Mama, I think I could get used to this.' I see new hair sprouting, like tiny green shoots of grass after summer rains. I run my palm over my head and smile too.

I like the feel of the August breeze on my head.