

Little Goat

(4991 words, not including title)

You did this horrible thing, and then you told yourself a very nice story why.

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You go down to the tidepools when no one is looking. You do not slip as you used to, there will be no grazed knees, no bloodied shins – you have become goat-like, hunting down the cliffs. Slippery, green mossed rock mastered into firm handholds by wily practise.

All the leopard conch has been plucked for some tourist's dressing table, sooner find a diamond in the weeds than you would the spotted shells. Nonetheless, for half an hour you pretend, you harvest cucumber, and drag out of their houses the crabs by seizing them by the claw.

When you are done, you begin your pilgrimage. Basket swaying on your hip, little goat. You put your delicious hooves into the lukewarm pools, making enough noise to tempt even the lure.

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Your mother cries when she tells the story. If it caused her such pain, you'd think she'd tell it less often. Yet, she revisits it like a grave, tears glaze over her dark eyes, turning her cloudy and ceramic, precariously teetering on the edge of a shelf she'd sooner throw you over than step away from.

She tells it often, especially when family deigns to visit. You used to hate it, but now you just bear it. Perhaps grief is her own way of loving you. Maybe even the only way.

"One day you came home from school, you must have been six and you told me...you told me you were racing, that you remember racing with your father. You remember him throwing you up and down in his arms, and I," her face breaks like an egg, gruesome in its thin shell. "I told you it couldn't be true. It was impossible. And you got so angry with me, you argued, you said you *did* remember. You wouldn't listen to me. You made me cry so much, Noora. That day your uncle Omar visited without warning. He saw that I was forlorn and sad. *What is the matter?* So I told him" (She had to, always she had to) "And he said, Amina – Amina, I will race that child of yours, I will love her, I will throw her up and down in my arms. I will be father enough to her, don't you worry even a little, not even once."

The part that still shocks you in the story is that you are always angry with her in it. And then you remember it, unfolding in your mind like a paper fortune teller toy. As though you *were* there, arguing with her all over again, pecking at her because you cruelly dreamed your father died only after you were born and not before. You remember it like a scene plucked from memory or planted into it. She has kept it fresh.

You are a good and proper girl, what choice do you have?

When Soufian pecks at you, you do not fight him. When he gives you such cold eyes, you turn away from it as you would from a muddy path.

What your mother is saying, is not that your Uncle Omar is a good man. He is.

Remember that as a child, even in your heartless innocence.

You were a liar even then.

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Sasa, little goat? You can't just tell a story kwa ki ovyo, otherwise it falls apart. That's how liars are made. The first thing you must do is to listen. Very carefully, little goat. Yes, what are they saying? What makes their eyes gleam? What is most secret in their hearts? They betray themselves every day, every look away, every instance of forced nonchalance, pretend-shame. What are they hiding? Are you looking, are you listening?

Alright, now. Unfold your palm, show them what you need them to see. What they need to see, as you have gleaned it.

In a learned enough hand, there's no difference between a lie and a miracle.

No difference at all.

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Brittle black starfish long-arm their scattering escape away from your feet, clearing the underwater path, sand billowing as they roll. They move like apes, swinging from danger.

It has become a very clean beach, hasn't it? These days it's avoided by garbage and wastrels alike. Perhaps the leopard conch will come back.

That you are here is a gift. Some knowledge is like that, not textbook. It rises through from the marrow like a precious sickness. The soul brews it.

You arrive at the end of the bend where the shore has grown hard, concealed, it cuts off like the tip of a knife. On the left of it is rolling sea, not sand. There beneath the dripping overhang, the last long pool stretches out black as a mirror in a darkened room.

Out of the smaller shallows, foot finding purchase on soaking rock, you are over the pool, just like that. You shake out the long hem of your blouse.

The water shifts, and a flat face rises, spilling skeletal out of it.

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Soufian's grandmother keeps in her handbag;

Gloriously red lipstick, loose change, a book of ad'ias, a hard lime with a needle pierced through it, an old mobile, plastic sachets of mavi ya panya, and last week's wedding garlands rotting beneath it all in the dark crush.

The tiger-eyed tasbih does not count. It is more often in her hands than in her handbag, her fingers plucking and rolling each glassy pearl.

It is not your business to know the insides of someone's handbag, but Soufian's grandmother frequently commands you to rifle through it. You are a proper girl, a secretive girl. If there is shame to be found in a thing it reaches its hands out to you and you lower your head, offering your face so it can dig in its nails.

Your favourite thing is the lipstick. Your least is the mobile since it confounds you both. *Noor*, she says, *help me send this message to Yasser*.

When she feels she has been treated poorly by those she loves, and she is near tears, she settles in the corner of a majlas or a kitchen or a garden and puts on the lipstick to please herself. She is still a woman, no matter how old she is. Beauty is something that is only taken away if you allow it to be taken, so she puts it on and crosses her arms, and sits there haughty and pretty in reminder.

Dressed in her pride, she refuses then to weep.

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“What have you brought me today?”

You search the basket, inexpressive as Mama, a kind of indifference in your generosity. The box of Marlboros is damp, the lid tearing from the water-logged air. “It will rot your lungs.”

They only belong to the idea of a dead man. You would have smoked them in remembrance but that hurts too much.

The creature drags themselves to the rock, wet silky arms draping over as they offer their face. The long teeth are translucent as steamed fish bones, you fix the cigarette between the jagged jigsaw of them, balancing it for a while, drawing back once it’s secure.

Then you bring the flinty little lighter to the end of the stick. “Inhale,” you command.

The cigarette flares, and the creature gives a sigh of surprise, pleased with the poison.

You set out the sea cucumber in neat slices, feeding the creature by hand.

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Shrivelled crescents of mango dry out on the zulia, the reed mesh so tight that ants will find no admittance. The glare of the mid-afternoon sun so imperious, it slaughters those who dare.

Soufian’s grandmother dozes in a chair nearby, her hardman’s hands relaxed into the prayerful claws of a beggar. In her palms glisten gritty granules of rice along with the dirt that has not yet been plucked out of it, still sleeping in the cup of her hands. The silver sinia balances precariously on her knee. You worry it will fall, gravity toying with it.

It’s there like an alarm clock, set so perilously. Should it begin to slip Soufian’s grandmother will wake, catching it before it dares plummet.

And then she will continue dividing the dirt and the unworthy, from the worthy.

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But oh, you are not hers to love, Soufian’s grandmother. She is Soufian’s grandmother after all, and the less you have to do with Soufian the better. His name shines him like a stone set apart from the rubble other children are made of. His skin blotches in the sun like a mzungu’s, everyone is always talking about how fine and light his skin is, for is that not what handsomeness is? To pinken like a pig? He runs, round little pig, chest puffed knowing early that his flesh is sweet. An angel to (nearly) all, he speaks proper rounded English and precise Swahili. People talk of how fine and white his children will be, how anyone would be lucky to bear them.

What kind of lousy bargains women make! But ah, let us call them blessings.

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When you are older, you have then known each other for years. In the last days before it becomes all too late, the serpent says. "Courtship is strange above ground. For humans."

Your hands are already branded, flowering with the black ink of tear-dropped karase. You should not even be at the sea, you have been warned not to be in the sun, undoing all the mwanaumke waku sugua's work.

You lean to listen, the hem of your skirt has dragged over the lip of the precipice, its threads suckling at the cool water. On this beastly hot day, the pool's chill is like the musk of paradise against the face of the desperate repentor.

"The peacock fans his tails. The bluest birds set out an extravagant flooring of feathers, hoping that the geometry pleases his mate's eye. The coldest bird collects rare and precious stones to seduce his mate."

The creature's breath is cool on your brow, your mascara clouds, dripping down your face like a fresh wound.

"You, the female, is playing the wrong part. Why are you being like these birds, in all your colours?"

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His father is your uncle, you are only half-his to love. Amo Omar never forgets you in his graces, if a gift is got for Soufian, then he never fails in bringing something for you too.

As children the two of you sit next to each other on the scratchy pink carpet of their majlas in their fine big house, unwrapping your gifts. Soufian receives a shiny model car, lacquered in colour, glittering beneath their yellow chandelier. You receive a tea-set made from material so fine you cannot guess if it is glass or ivory. Elegant, girlish things – they are for your dolls. Soufian oohs and ahs over it.

Then his father leaves and Soufian picks the fine-bone cup. His face has gone cool and dry, and pitiless. It is only one piece in a set of five, he is too clever to seize them all.

Pulverised, the cup sits in the carpet.

Neither glass nor ivory.

No more than chalk in his wicked little fist.

*

When did you meet the creature? You were old enough to know better, and young enough to dare it, nonetheless. Soufian leading the pack down the cliffs, your legs are so short, you shouldn't have come, Noora. Who wants you, anyway? Be embarrassed. They were going to walk all the way, the cousins, to the hotels. A pack of children, prowling the slippery lip of a cup. You couldn't have stayed at home, of course. The adults had gone for a funeral, your grand aunt is dead. She died a million miles away and when you ask the adults who she is, they don't know. They never met her. But they go to her half-brother's house, they shared the same father. Maybe they hated each other, without ever meeting each other too. They gather like crows, your people. Lining the walls of each other's homes. When they do their wailing, its best to do so in a guarded group. Grief is like that, even for people you don't know or haven't met. That is blood.

Soufian leaves you, they're going to make memories. If the adults come back, how pitiful you will be to have been left out. Even if it's out of mischief. You do not want to be a good girl then, even though it's the only protection Mama says you have. A girl without a father, a woman without a husband, is at the mercy of worse than usual danger. You go down, Alliyah and Suheila scowl at you, Soufian doesn't like you, so why should they? Mkia wewe, aren't you ashamed, to follow where you aren't wanted? It is one thing to be a dog, but to decide you are the tail? Ah, grow some dignity.

The tide rolls in, as it must. The children run back, and you, your short legs! You're so stupid, Noora. The steps are too high for your knees, the cliff too slippery. It is easy to go down, not so easy to go up, is it? Suheila had helped you when you had insisted on joining them, out of cruel practicality. Didn't want the fun to be cut short in case you broke your head open on the hard reef. But on the return, chasing home, Suheila doesn't look back. None of them do.

Adults often say that children are cruel. Children are monstrous, in fact.

How is it then, that some children are monsters, and some are not?

Is it an excuse, little goat? There must be a reason.

Will they come and claim you, only as a corpse? As the family claims the great aunt no one knows? The crows mourn their own or study the crime scene at least or make an example out of the dead. Grieve, warn, punish. Life is precious, death is the waste of it. Blood is blood. Maybe some people in Yemen, who don't know you, will cry for you – not knowing who you are, knowing only that you belong to them. That's enough. Blood is blood is blood.

And yours has left you in the sea.

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Like the pan balanced upon a knee, on the edge of catastrophe, you will catch yourself before you fall – it's a way of waking yourself from the dream of life, of choosing when to exit and when to rise. There are always failsafes and kill chords, just as there are escape strategies and exit signs. You wind the threat of consequence around your wrist like thread, until it slices into the meat of your palm, until the floor spots with it.

The dream is happening, but you are bleeding within it bright life's blood, the iron rooting you to where you must return. You are only in the trap that you can navigate, and if you cannot, you will hurl yourself out of a window, break your nails on a wall, scrambling up and out of it. If danger is near, its bright smell stinging at your nostrils like spilt viscera, it is only so you can know how to avoid it – sometimes you have to go on a journey to come back to yourself, sometimes you have to wound yourself to teach the body how to heal its wounds.

But you are between catastrophe and catastrophe, like a thumb in the hinge of a door, whether that door opens or closes, you are fastened in the blooming injury of it.

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Courtship is indeed strange. Soufian spits on you, hates you savagely. Soufian's grandmother says that he is in love with you, that one day he will marry you, you'll see. You would rather tear out your eyes.

As childhood evaporates, this cruelty becomes more careful, pointed. A hammer he whittles into a fine needle, thinner than any of Mama's sewing instruments, than a hair, thinner still. It will leave no bruise, any entry wound is so tiny it is not even a pore, it cannot even bead with blood.

Soufian gives you *kind* words because he is a good and handsome boy. No more smashing teacups. He says with kindness that it is a pity that your father is dead, that they used to call your father 'Moshi' Moudi, for he was a chimney of a man, black lungs rotting in his chest – a sad way to go, he says. To poison yourself like that. His problems were too great for him, God forgive him his sins and grant him heaven. He says he knows that you are neighbours but that that his house has much more room, that his mother would love to have you over for biscuits, your mother doesn't cook much, does she? She sits all day on the balcony, chewing miraa. She used to do that with your father, a lot, didn't you know? They were made for each other.

When there are people around you, Soufian chats with friendly venom, pecking at you, fitting his curses with pity and kindness. When the audience has left, he turns away from you, and ignores you.

He is only two years older, a *baby* when Baba died. He's no real witness, meaning he has overheard others speaking, relished in it. He is only saying what everyone is already saying.

It becomes too much once. Soufian is so good with this beloved needle. You cannot hide the tears from your mother, you wicked girl. Amo Omar is inappropriately sensitive to your mother's tears, he would have married his brother's widow himself, don't you know? Only by the time Baba died, Amo Omar was already married, had already started his family. Two years too late, the wedding garlands would have already disintegrated.

But you see the carefully hateful politeness Khale Hannah treats Mama with, party invitations not extended, a veneer of perfect manners shielding her jealous heart. If Soufian's grandmother dotes on you it's because she doesn't want people to say that her daughter is wicked.

Two years too late. The wedding garlands would have already disintegrated, Khale Hannah with that hellion Soufian on her breast, toothed new-born like Genghis Khan. Poor woman, even in her forty-day bed she must have known her husband's true heart.

And yet you dream it in your dream's eye; Amo Omar as a groom, the stain of bachelor party henna not yet lifted from his fingertips. You see him sitting before your weeping mother, head bowed. Big black coat perfumed in the sugar-fumes of bukhoo and duhoon, the wedding smoke coming off of him as his brother's body cools on a table.

Two years too late, and yet your liar's dreams make him a groom. Your mother veiled in lesos, death's bride, hiding herself– and Amo Omar, longing to take her hand, never daring.

Why wouldn't Khale Hannah see that you see? It must be a nightmare for her. Knowing that her husband loved his brother enough to marry his widow, had he been free to, and loved his brother's widow too much as to likely have entertained the idea frequently. This uncommitted sin stands between all of you like a wall of barbed fencing, every which way you move, your skins are being torn.

Soufian thinks that you will fall like Liongo Fuma, killed by a quick needle – but the awful dream, wild in imagination, horrifies and enthrals you. Here a reason to be hated, here a weapon.

So, you cry, your mother cries. Amo Omar becomes a cold titan, and Soufian takes his needle with him to a boarding school in Eldoret, a beast banished

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Suheila married two years ago and is heavy with child, Alliyah will debut at your own wedding. How bitterly they hate you, one will come as a guest, and the other will open for you before you enter the stage as a new bride, swinging your hair like a wild deity.

You want a sword in your hands. Your people bring you gold bangles. A long chain ki'tete for your waist, gifted by Soufian's grandmother. Your mother sold all her wedding jewellery a long time ago.

You could be Soufian's grandmother's to love, isn't that what you want?

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The waves rose and the creature wound their terrifying, snake-body about you and did not crush you. They put you in a pocket like a precious coin – there was just enough air for your lungs.

Their torso confined to the little pool, they never leave. Their long tail is twisted around a cursed anchor, they confide in you later. The anchor sits a thousand feet deep, beneath layers of hard rock. In two hundred years the creature will be free.

When the tide rolls out again, the creature sets you aright on your feet, long webbed fingers straightening the frills of your dress, the padding on your shoulders, as you sob childish noisy sobs. They shush you with a stern croon, knotting your hair up on your head.

"You saved my life once," you will tell the creature during the last days, just before it is too late, perhaps when it is already too late. "Will you do so once again?"

The adults have not returned from their vigil, you manage to climb the steps yourself. The creature sings encouragement from their prison down the shore. You manage, return. No one wonders where you've been.

No one even notices you were gone.

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"I hated you," Soufian says, like he still hates you now. "Half-orphan, you sleep and dream, you can always imagine that ghost-father of yours loves or loved you. No matter what happens, you'll have faith there. I don't have to guess like you, if my father loves me or not – I will *always* know."

A month later, his family proposes.

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Men say cruel things and expect swooning, if they weren't so bent on harm you would pity them. Little kings. What does nature care for kings? What won't it do slow in its cruel care?

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You want your mother, you want your mother. When you eat you think of her fingers delicately shredding white flesh from fishbone, unthorning it for your plate. You count her on the belly of each of your fingers, your love for her sown through your navel. They are dressing you in wedding things, your mother puts you in them tenderly, carefully tying you into the noose. Velvet, henna, piko, tents on green grounds, money – Amo Omar will take care of all the money, it is his son, and you are his niece.

You demand an audience two weeks before the wedding. It is unseemly. He comes secretly, to give you an opportunity to dishonour yourself. Only a whore would want to see her soon-to-be husband without a chaperone.

"Do you remember when we were children, running along the shore, trying to make it to the hotels before the tide rolled in?"

His expression doesn't shift. "So?"

"One time, you left me there."

"Children imagine things wilder than they were."

You left me there to die.

Soufian shrugs. "I was a child."

And what were you, little goat?

Either he doesn't remember, or he is indifferent. It doesn't matter which. Soufian has learned the trickery of manners and even temperament – but this time, marriage is the lethal needle. He has poured all his hatred into its workmanship for years and dressed it up in want. Should the cat be flattered that the dog desires to rip it to shreds?

"Why marriage?"

"It's late to be asking that," he says, bored and losing whatever little interest he'd bothered to come with.

"You hate me, and I hate you."

"It's been the plan from the start, hasn't it? Your beloved uncle, securing your future. Do you want to marry outside of the family where they will feast on you, knowing they can take advantage because you don't have brothers or fathers to protect you? There's only so much my father would be able to do for you then. You should be grateful."

Why would you be grateful to be owned?

"Follow me," you say.

He scowls. "Think of your honour."

Your honour has been on your head your whole life, a plate of maharagwe the birds sweep down to peck at, they sit on your shoulders as you walk. They peck at your skin, *proper girl*. Tear at your clothes, *you are becoming naked, proper girl*. Dig their beaks into your ears and spit their sticky nest-spit, *you are so lucky, unfortunate one. Where is your gratefulness?* Sit like this, talk like that. Don't smile so much in the presence of strange men, don't go anywhere unaccompanied. People come with their spit-pity, promising you are pretty enough to manage, somewhat. You could not put your honour down, you had to keep all the grain and seeds intact somehow. The impossible task, the unending burden.

Your houses share one compound. The women tease you, suspicious jealousy simmering in their eyes. *Childhood sweethearts, sio?*

Soufian need only glance from his window to see the mwanaumke waku sugua's comings and goings, the chefs arriving for consultation, his grandmother and even his mother coming to and fro, teaching you how to stomp your feet, wrapping the big jangly silver shackle's insides with cloths so you won't bloody your Achilles tendon. Too much.

Soufian knowing you are within, being kneaded by the mwanaumke waku sugua. Your naked flesh lathered in sandalwood and manjano— a chicken being basted.

His car parked where it always will be, his mobile in his pocket. Your mother downtown, haggling with madafu vendors. His mother at her sister's estate, heads together to calculate what degree of pomp is required and what corners they can cut, it would not do to show your mother too much favour. Soufian's grandmother is there too, to limit their cruelty.

It is only you two now, Soufian's eyes gleaming in the afternoon cool. Uncle Omar is not so cruel as to force his son to marry. How could *you* have refused? It would have been to spit on all his kindness, his protection. *Oh, so you think you can do better for yourself?* The birds rip out clumps of your hair. *Who are you?* That's right, Soufian has his mother and the power to refuse this marriage, this vengeful play. You are only half Amo Omar's to love, Soufian has jealously despised you for it. The only way to defeat you and make you pay, is to own you.

The needle Soufian has been fashioning is mortal indeed.

You offer out your hand, nearly milky now from the hard work of attending womenfolk. No more and no less than what he deserves. Your childish hands newly cloaked in the ink of the piko-painters. The next you see the people of your tribe, they will cry over it.

A tub; jik and Coca-Cola, the concoction frothy, turning you lightheaded. Steel wire scrubbing, making red scours in your skin, and other such expert errors. *How could you think to lift it?* Khale Hannah rolls down the gloves from your arms, your stupidity and the humility of it, and finally you are her daughter in a way even marriage could not make you. She and Mama hold each other, at ceasefire, and cry rivers.

"Think of your honour," Soufian scowls, knowing nothing.

Squeezing your hand in a threatening vice, he follows nonetheless.

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His body all blue. He was held and held, just like you were, when the tide rolled in. Preserved in one mouthful, or rather choked in it. Not a mark on the flesh. He was missing for an evening. Most of the time the sea drags clothes from its prize, bashes it against the cliff, but not Soufian, who is exemplary even as a corpse.

Soufian's grandmother cannot lave on lipstick to ward of her tears, such armour is inappropriate for this occasion. The crows they come, sinias of pilau floating on the shoulders of both married and unmarried women folk, feasting the mourners.

Had he lived you would be a wife, they would all be rejoicing with biriani, kigelegele and wedding singers. Amo Omar appears for a moment in the doorway of the women's wing, he turns into his wife's arms briefly, shoulders shuffling and quaking as though beneath his pristine kanzu he were no more than a pillar of sand. Then he turns to you, eyes dry, cheeks wet as though it has rained inside their house. You hug him fiercely as he assembles himself more completely.

You hate pity. It is like stranger's caressing you with hands covered in spit. You can endure it today.

Thankfully, you cannot kiss the corpse, you weren't married.

You take Soufian's grandmother's hand. You make your voice small, tremble it. "A Muslim who dies by drowning is a shahid."

How skilled you are, little goat. She does not slap you.

She touches your face, your raw, stinging arms. She winds her arms around you and weeps into your neck where no one can see.

You have become a master.

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Down to the tidepools, there is no one left to look. You slip only a little, old age is hell on the joints – grizzled and careful and goat-like, hunting down the cliffs. Slippery, green mossed rock, you could make the journey in the blackest night if need be.

You play with the quarrelsome crabs, gather sea-cucumber into your dress.

The creature greets you with a sigh, never sorry to see you.

“Here,” you unwrap the shiny plastic from a fresh packet. “It’ll rot your lungs.”

“You give me poison.” The creature says, smiling at the treat.

“No,” you correct. Neat slices of sea-cucumber, you feed it by hand. “I give you vice.”