

GREY HEART

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To Nneka...
a sister like no other.

I never before knew what guilt meant, but from that time she lay by me each night. -Sarah Ngulale

GREY HEART

The Cool little Girl

It is often true what they say, that you can't possibly live a man's life for him. But, then I am moved to ask, what if you are the reason they got that life in the first place? What if they would have turned out differently if you had not...?

As I have realized, most people spend the early days of their lives making mistakes and the rest of it either correcting them or regretting them. For me, it started with a passive experience, then an immediately followed

inaction, and then regrets and reactions and more reactions...eventually back again to regrets.

The reason I am writing this is because I have long given up trying to convince people I am not as crazy as they insist or as my actions in the past may have suggested.

Yes I've done crazy deeds...*but I'm not crazy.*

I guess this will be my last effort to scream it loud to everyone who cares to listen (read in this case) that all I have done all my life were not as a result of a mental imbalance –as that batshit judge with the throaty voice put it- but were born from the guilt of not doing the right thing when I was given an extraordinary chance to do it.

My name is Sarah Ngulale. I was born and raised in central Soweto a little before it was called that. Jan Smut was prime minister and mine workers owned the entire shanty town. I was fondly known in my neighborhood as a bright little playful girl. Till I was eleven, I still built sand castles with younger kids outside our house. I wasn't so brilliant at school and my mother used to say it was because I played too much. I was the least bothered about that by the way. What does it matter that I am not the kid who throws a finger up even before the teacher finishes the question (I sourly hated those kids) when I am the kid every other kid want to share their lollypop with during break time?

All wasn't rosy at school though, I had gotten into fights. Four times precisely. On each occasion, I was beaten like an unfortunate domestic thief. On all occasions too, the fight was as a result of me trying to stand up for a bullied kid. Yeah, I paid for all the

lollipops I got in one way or the other. I guess I could safely say I was born with a terminal condition of not being able to mind my business.

I had a friend, Patrick Matsepe. He was nine when I was eleven and just a class below me in elementary school. Patrick was a shy little boy and was often jeered at school for his often show of awkwardness. It was hence true to my terminal condition to be drawn to him. What I could not explain was the quickness with which I became fond of him. Usually, the awkward kids in school were allowed to be my friends but not permitted to be my best.

Patrick broke that rule.

It soon became a routine for me to stop by his house every school day to take him along. As shy as he was, Patrick was incredibly brilliant with school work. No one ever came top of him in his class. That made our friendship most strange. Though we were not in the same class, I knew he definitely was in the class of those who shoot their fingers to air the moment the teacher begin to move their lips to form a question.

Why did I not hate this one?

It couldn't be because I kept trying not to imagine him doing that.

One day I decided I had troubled myself long enough and determined to put the matter to bed once and for all. I asked him if he raises his hand to answer the teacher's question before she finishes the question. He had the sense of a folklore tortoise. He wouldn't answer a question until he knows why you ask.

I couldn't tell him why I wanted to know and I did not get an answer.

Silly kid.

Patrick's father was a carpenter that had George Foreman's eyebrows and Stephen Biko's thick wide nose. He smoked a lot and drank plenty local gin too. Sometimes I would show up in the morning only to find him beating his wife, Patrick's step mother. That must have contributed to the reasons why I did not like him.

But not Patrick, he admired his father. He wouldn't say much when we were together, but the little he would say of his father was fondly. In some afternoons, he would take me to his father's under-the-tree workshop. The place had plenty space and only few grownups came around, so playing there was a blessing.

Then I Saw an Evil

On a certain Monday morning in May, 1956, I arrived at the Matsepe's apartment, a predominantly wood-constructed matchbox house they shared with an Angolan family that made Portuguese sound like the tongue of eccentricity. From the time I walked through the leaky awning into the narrow muggy-air passageway that led to their apartment door, I did not see anyone or heard anyone.

It was unusual to get that far and not hear Patrick's small voice insisting on one silly demand after another. Or his step mother's voice yelling at him to hurry up preparing for school or his father's voice asking him to

finish his breakfast calmly...or the voices of the adults fighting.

That morning, the only voice in the air was coming from a small transistor radio in the Angolans' apartment. I think the reporter was announcing a riot somewhere in Pretoria. The voice kept being broken by those tiny squeaks of poor radio transmission. I began to wonder if Patrick was in town. I had not seen him since after school on Friday. During weekends, he often visited his late mother's family in Johannesburg, but he always returned home by Sunday night.

At first, I tapped on the door gently...the first time, the second and the third taps, gently. That would be polite. No response came. I made the fourth and fifth knocks louder, and then louder again so that even the Angolans could hear, since they were not busy bastardizing Henry the Navigator's mother tongue.

I stood by the door for over three minutes without a response coming from inside.

Out of impatience I decided to turn the knob of the door. The door rolled over with a low whiny sound and I put a step forward. I was feeling bitterly offended that someone was indoors and have deliberately refused to respond to me.

But I looked up. The first sight my eyes caught was chilling.

Dangling bare feet.

Mr. Matsepe was suspended in the air in his sitting room and he wasn't attempting to reproduce the ascension of Jesus.

Run, Sarah...run.

First wisdom was to shut the door and dash into the street yelling. But no, I did not. My senseless legs took me in.

As I walked in and he noticed me, he began to kick the air rapidly. He had been trying to untie the noose of the thick, green rayon rope that hung him from the roof. The rope was tied tightly to the iron hook of the ceiling fan. The more he struggled, the more it was tightened by his weight. He opened his mouth to scream, but nothing more than a faint croak came out.

His eyes were bulging now and were set on me. Urine soon began to drip from his legs on the carpet of the floor. The sound of it on the hard carpet was about the only distinct sound identifiable in there...*tser,tser,tser*...running on and on like that. His sweat drenched and darkened his polo shirt.

He stopped struggling with the noose eventually and began to stretch his hands at me.

All the while I stood there confused, as still as a totem. Everything before me was surreal. It was like my soul was no longer in my body. I was mindless at that time; no thought came to my mind. I was frozen on that spot. His hands were still out-stretched at my feet.

I looked down, a stool toppled over lay on the space between us.

I began to tremble on my fingers and I was sweating like a laborer in a steam engine. My head was spinning, my vision began to blur. The sounds I was hearing were clear still. The silent croaky attempts of a cry for help...even more silent *tsush,tsush* from denim pants of

his legs brushing against each other...and the louder continuous dripping of urine on the carpet.

I began to step back, shaking my head as if his status was more of a danger to me than it was to him.

The moment I was outside the room, I slammed the door shut and fled into the street.

From there, I headed straight to school.

That day in class, I was a different person, everyone could notice. I talked to no one throughout class, just sat glued to my seat even when it was break time. My guts felt nutty like there was a conspiracy by some unseen force to strangle me from within. I threw up twenty-one times that day. From school straight to our house, I still did not say a word to anyone. After trying many times to get me to play mode, –something that needed no trying on a normal day- my friends found other play mates.

In some stupid and unfair way, their worlds went on like nothing happened. How could they not feel what I was feeling? How can it not be sensed that a man just took his own life somewhere in this same Soweto? My mother used to believe in omens. There has to be some omen or any kind of sign...like, like...whatever. I just felt sad that even my friends could not mourn with me; they couldn't even get alarmed that I wasn't my usual self.

It was mid-day before someone else entered that suicide throne of a sitting room and saw a stiffened body. I could imagine what drew such person's attention to the room. A curious thought perhaps that Mr. Matsepe had not been seen all morning. Or a nose-biting oozy-smelly rottenness of urine sailing out through the cracks on the wooden door of the apartment. Perhaps.

It yet felt like a dream. I felt like I was the one who hung there and the girl that walked around was another girl I knew no damn thing about.

All through his father's burial and the mourning period, I did not go to see Patrick. I could not stand what I might go through. I could break down and then confess I was there and saw it all. I never before knew what guilt meant, but from that time she lay by me each night.

Why did I not pick the silly long stool back to his feet?

Why did I not scream for help?

The Angolans could have heard me. Someone would have come to help.

Why did I not do a thing to save him?

That was how I was introduced to what would become the set of questions plastered all over my mind forever like meaningless tattoos on the face of a homeless retard.

Nights after nights, I saw that day in varying version of dreams. He hanging up there, staring at me with protuberant, black desperate eyes, trying to reach for me. Sometimes I would see his hands begin to grow longer than usual till they could reach for the stool, but instead of pulling the stool they would grip my neck and begin to strangle me. In one particular dream, I heard and felt my neck bones crack and crush like the sound of a dog chewing on the head of a roasted chicken. I would wake up from those dreams feeling sick. Always. In a few other dreams, all I would see are dangling feet dripping urine on the hard carpet floor.

Sometimes when I am alone in the house in the day time, I would be hearing that maddening sound of liquid

dripping on carpet. *Tser,tser,tser...*sounding from inside my head. As long torturous days and scary nights crept into weeks and eventually, months, I learnt how to live with my new weird self. It took some setbacks in school –it was actually a colossal plunging, given I was typically *back-setting* at school. Miracle was, I found some way to regain focus and went on with life.

Fifteen years later, in 1971, I graduated from the University and found a job in Johannesburg. How I could cope was to leave Soweto far behind. I would never go near there, not even to visit my parents. The memory of Soweto was a torture unto insanity.

Aside from that, my life had returned to normal –at least on the outside. I was making friends again in large numbers, being cheerful again. The bloodcurdling nightmares only came once in a week or so. I had once gone three weeks without them, just as long as I could keep my mind away from the thoughts of that cruel day.

I was meanly unfortunate; it did not take long for that hideous experience to sneak back into the fibers of my everyday life. It only took meeting a certain gentleman, Benjamin. Ben was from Soweto too and I think I liked him at first sight –I did not get to find out his origin at first sight. We allowed ourselves be played into romance in a way I found frightening and next thing I knew, he was asking me to marry him.

Slow down dude, you're from that place that drives me bonkers.

I was supposed to say that to him, right? I did not. Though I had seen his Soweto connection as a screaming red light, I convinced myself getting married

to him might help me heal completely if I have to occasionally visit that place in his manly company. Perhaps I would someday draw the courage to tell him my story and he would be a charming prince and pull me close to himself to tell me all is fine plus all the sweet words there was to say in the world. He would make the nightmares go away and would say stuff that would make the *pitti-patta* dripping-water sound fade away under his scratchy baritone.

A hard dream.

Things did not go that way for us. As soon as I accepted his proposal, he hit me with the blast.

He planned to give a facelift to his father's old house in Soweto and we would move there –not to take a look-to live there forever and ever till death do us part. He had found a job in a firm near town and he was already helping me find one. I thought I wanted healing, but this one was a dose too heavy. Something gradual would be fine, but *o/boy* was a fast mover. I could not give it the hackneyed second thought, not when things were the way they were.

This old house of his father he was talking of was not just in Soweto, it was on the same damn street as the house Patrick lived. You heard me right, the same *fracking* urine-dripping-on-carpet limp-feet-dangling suicide house. No way.

Not even a *fracking* chance of that happening.

I tried hard, but Ben would not change his mind, it could be because I could not give him a sensible reason why he should. I cancelled our engagement.

And the Demons Reappeared...

Only three days after I said the hardest goodbye to Soweto-for-life Benjamin, I was determined to restart my recovery from the pain and by any luck keep my mind for a long enough time away from Soweto and all that concerned it. It was a humid and warm and mildly hazy afternoon of October, I was taking a bus ride back home from work and guess who was standing by the curb of the bus station where I stopped.

Patrick.

A world record-*breakingly* scruffy-grubby looking Patrick. He was lean, very lean...and pale like the arch-angel of miserable deaths. He had over-grown dirty and paling dreadlocks that smelled like a diabetic cat peed on them and took a watery crap on them fourteen hours later. I was most surprised that I was able to recognize him, though it took sixteen minutes. He saw me and easily knew it was me and began the everlasting introduction. His beards were just as overgrown and grimy as his hair. He looked no different from the many wacko homeless Lucky Dube wannabes begging by roadsides and speaking incoherent patois like it's vital to their rite of passage.

I took him to a nearby restaurant and asked the waiter to bring him food. The way he madly attacked the bowl of *mealies*, I could swear he'd had nothing to eat since Walter Sisulu faced the Rivonia Trial. He emptied the first plate in a record time of three minutes and throatily asked if he could get another. Why not? He did the

second bowl in five minutes and then began to drink unbelievable volumes of water.

‘What has been happening to you, Patrick?’ it was the question I had on my mind all the while.

He looked up from his empty bowl –he wanted more *mealies*- to stare emptily at me like he too could hardly explain. His eyes in their sockets were like little walnuts in the middle of wide bowls. ‘It is my sixth day out of jail.’ He said slowly.

His response combined with his tone made me find it hard to work out. It sounded like he was better off in jail. He did not say, I have been in jail. Or, I just got out from jail. His response was like saying, his sixth day out of home, or sixth day in hell.

‘What got you in jail?’

‘What does it matter?’

Right there it mattered nothing what got him into jail, perhaps I should have asked him why they kicked him out.

‘I am very hurt you turned out this way.’

‘Me too,’ he was not looking at me, rather at his empty bowl. ‘I was more hurt by what my father did to me. If he had a thousand reasons to kill himself wasn’t I enough reason for him not to?’

It was my fault. I wanted to say. My mouth won’t open. My tongue won’t move. I sat there looking at him blame his father in the same way I stood looking at his father quench.

‘And you,’ he said.

My heart skipped and disappeared into my bosom. I had always feared he knew in some way what I was hiding. *He knew I had a chance to save his father?*

‘Me? What did I...’

‘You disappeared from my life. You did not ask after me anymore. Why were you avoiding me?’ it was in his voice and the look on his face, he blamed me for real.

Did he go to jail for strangling someone who looks like me?

‘I swear I wasn’t avoiding you. I was equally devastated...I don’t expect you to understand. After his death, I can’t explain what happened to me.’

It appeared he believed me...or so I assumed. It was hard to read expressions correctly on that scrawny ghost face.

He had no place to go as home and all he had as net worth were the raggedly tatty shreds of fabrics over his bony frame.

I was deeply troubled about his state...more troubled that his father’s death had so adversely affect him. And it was my fault. Nonetheless I was in a way relieved. Relieved that I can eventually find a path to a permanent recovery by correcting the effect of my wrongdoing. If I could help put Patrick back together to find something close to a decent life, then I might stop seeing his father’s pathetic face in my dreams. The stupid liquid dripping sound might even go away completely.

For starters, I took him to my apartment and made him wash. I bought him cloths and continually fed him. Living with the 1971 Patrick must be worse than raising the 1956 Patrick. It was like babysitting a papa chimp;

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