THE GIRL WHO SAW LIONS

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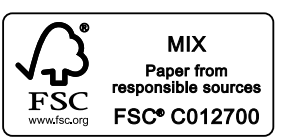

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ABELA

The priest arrived on a red motorbike. Dust rose like smoke around him as he roared into the village. Already the villagers were strolling towards the church, which was built like a barn on wooden supports. The sides were open, and swallows and children swooped and tumbled in and out. Abela had been one of the first to arrive, carrying her baby sister on her hip, the child's skinny arms looped round her neck. She was too big to be carried really, and Abela was too small to be carrying her. When she found her seat she lowered her sister on to the sandy ground and shook her shoulders to ease them. Nyota could walk now, but wouldn't. She sat gazing listlessly up at Abela, sometimes whimpering to herself, sometimes completely silent. The music and singing might distract her for a while, or might send her off to sleep. She was poorly, Abela knew that. There were many poorly babies in the village. Her grandmother, Bibi, told her there was no hope for any of them.

One of Abela's neighbours squeezed along the row to sit next to her. 'Where's your mama?' she asked. She had to shout over the noise of chattering and bird cries in the church.

'Mama's tired,' Abela said.

‘She poorly too?’ The neighbour clicked her tongue and shifted herself round in her creaking seat.

Abela turned her head away and watched the priest. She had nothing to say. Mama was sick. The baby was dying. Baba was dead. What was there to say?

The priest was unlocking the pannier of his motorbike. He brought out a green carrier bag and took out his altar vestments, his long white robe, his gorgeous red embroidered chasuble and stole. He slipped them over his jeans and T-shirt and tucked his white collar into place. Then he walked into church carrying a tin of dried milk powder, which he placed on the altar table. He turned to face the congregation, and lifted his arms wide so his robes unfolded like wings around him. The chattering stopped. He began to sing, and immediately everyone joined in, fitting harmonies round his deep rich voice. The hymn was like a river flowing with currents of different colours. Abela always thought the sound she made when she was singing was yellow, golden-yellow like corn. Mama’s was a pretty shivering blue. And Baba’s – her father’s – Baba’s used to be brown. But Baba’s voice would never be heard again.

‘Please, please don’t let Mama die too. Don’t let Nyota die. Don’t. Don’t.’

If God listened to songs, he would surely hear hers, he would see the golden stream of her voice and listen to the words that floated inside it. And now the singing had stopped, and the priest was telling them that they must pray together for the dead and the dying and the sick.

Abela knew that the prayer was for just about everybody who wasn't in the church at that moment, and even for some people who were. Sickness stalked the village like a hyena, ears pricked, fangs dripping, sparing no family.

On the day Baba died, Mama had shaved her head to show she was in mourning for her husband. She sat outside their mud hut and all their belongings were brought out – their bedrolls, the cooking pots, the blankets and baskets. Her husband's younger brother moved into the hut, because he was nearly a man now, too old to be sharing a hut with his parents and his sisters.

On that terrible day of sadness Mama and Abela and the baby Nyota had sat in the baking sun waiting for someone to give them a home. With the help of her sisters, Mama had built the hut just before her marriage, slapping the wet red mud with her hands to shape it, piling the straw thatch onto the roof. When it leaked, she had smoothed mud over the cracks, smearing it to fill up the holes. Mama had dug the garden, their little shamba, and planted it with vegetables. She had spread out the beans to dry in the sun, she had pounded the maize to make flour, she had carried it to market in a banana leaf basket on her head. Even when Baba was ill she had done this, even when he was dying in the hospital. And when he died, they had been forced to give up their home and their shamba.

At last Mama's mother, the grandmother Bibi, had come to fetch them to her own house in the next village.

'One day soon,' Bibi had said, 'the hyena will come

for me, and this will be your home. And the field that goes with it,' she added, gazing out at the little strip of land that was their family's only wealth. 'Your brother won't want it, now he's in England-Europe.'

The priest used the key of his motorbike to prise open the lid of the dried milk tin, and brought out of it the discs of unleavened wafer bread. By the mystery of his prayers the bread would become the body of Christ. Abela knew that was so, even though it still looked like bread, and was so fine and light that it melted on her tongue and clung to the roof of her mouth.

'Lamb of God,' the priest said, 'Who takest away the sins of the world . . .'

The rainbow river of song poured through the church again, and the rich loud sound of it filled Abela with hope. God would hear it and make Mama well. Her golden voice shimmered all the way to heaven. Of course Mama wouldn't die.

The priest bowed and walked out of the church, with his powdered milk tin tucked under his arm. Outside the church he rolled up his gorgeous vestments in the carrier bag and returned them to the pannier. He swung his leg over the motorbike and turned the key. The bike roared into life, sputtering a cloud of smoke. Laughing children scattered away from him like dusty sparrows as he swerved round them and away to visit his next parish. Long ago, when he was a child, he had been one of the red-robed nomad children of the Maasai Plain, but that

was before the Jesuits had given him an education and priesthood and called him John, after a saint, instead of by his tribal name. He had never been back to his tribe since his ordination.

We have a game, Mama and I, when we pound maize. When the corncobs have been drying in the sun for long enough, we shake off all the little yellow buds into a heap, and we pour them into a basket. They go *tchick*, *tchick*, as they trickle down. Then we grind the buds into flour. We pound it with the end of a long stick from a tree, which is just as tall as Mama. It takes so long that our legs ache and ache with standing and our arms are heavy with holding the branch and stamping it down again and again. We must do it for hours, every day when the corn is ripe, to make enough for our food, to make enough to sell. The sky is greasy and sweaty. Flies buzz round my face and walk on my skin, and because my hands are busy I can't brush them away. They crawl in my hair and I can't do anything about them. My head throbs and I'm thirsty and tired.

This is when the game starts. Just when I think I can't do any more, Mama shouts, 'One, Abela!' She raises her branch and then she lets go of it and she claps her hands before she catches it again. I do the same. It's hard to keep the pounding rhythm going. *Pound lift drop clap catch pound lift drop clap catch*. Mama sings while we're doing it. When we've got a nice smooth rhythm going she shouts, 'Two, Abela!' She lets go of her

branch and claps twice before she catches it again. *Pound lift drop clap-clap catch pound lift drop clap-clap* . . . My face is twisted with concentration and my hands are so sweaty that the branch slides through them. Mama is singing and my chest is tight with wanting to laugh. The rhythm flows, smooth as a dance, and then Mama shouts, 'Three, Abela!' But it's impossible. We bend over with laughter, it hiccups out of me like the little yellow buds of corn, and Mama's laughter peals out like pretty bells, blue and shivery and sweet. And when we look down, the flour is made.

But we don't play that game now. Mama doesn't stand with me while I'm pounding corn. She lies in the cool darkness of Bibi's hut, and she doesn't laugh any more.

I am not afraid of anything. I am not afraid of the mad mzee who comes down to the market sometimes. She is not like my grandmother mzee, Bibi. She is like a wounded animal. We don't have a proper stall in the market, under the shade of the thatch, because we are too poor. We spread a cotton kanga on the ground and sit on it, and Mama and I make little heaps of the things we have brought to sell; red beans sometimes, or yellow cobs of corn, or oranges that a neighbour has swapped with us. If we have been given green bananas we lay them out in a bunch, like the fingers of a hand. If we sell enough to buy some other food from someone else, we are happy.

But then the mad mzee comes hobbling round the

stalls with her panga tucked under her arm. This panga is a very sharp curved blade that is used for cutting down the corn. My father once told me that he had seen a man slice another man's head clean off his neck with a panga, because he had tried to steal his cow. And the mad mzee comes with her panga, muttering and grumbling and staring at people, and if she thinks you are a stranger or you are laughing at her, or she doesn't like your face that day, she waves her panga in the air and lurches towards you. I'm not afraid when she chooses me, because I can run, and she can only stamp her feet on the ground and stumble forward a few paces. I can run to the chilli-seller's stall and hide under it, and when the mad mzee finds me she bends down shrieking and wallering, and I see the blade like a silver tongue sipping the air for me. I can back away and shimmy under the next stall.

In the end she forgets me and chases another child or the white lady teacher Mrs Long, until somebody holds out a cigarette to her. This is what she wants. She tucks the cigarette behind her ear and shuffles away home, and the gossiping in the market starts again, and somebody puts on the tape of Mister Bing Crosby singing 'I'm dreaming of a white Christmas,' which we all love so much. No, I'm not afraid of the mad mzee.

And I'm not afraid of the lion. Simba. The lions live up in the purple mountains and they never come down to the village in the daytime. At night we sometimes hear the maize crinkling as they step through it, and we lie in the darkness with our breath as soft as moths, and

my mama's hand creeps out to me and closes over mine. But Simba won't come into our hut, and we won't go out in the darkness of the night, so I'm not afraid of him.

I know how to kill a lion. My baba told me that when he was a boy he saw Maasai men killing a lion who attacked their cattle. It takes four men to kill a lion, Baba said. One dances in front, to lead him away to a safe place. One dances behind to grab his tail when he springs. And when it is safe, the other two men stab him with their spears, one each side. Then the Maasai men leap in the air and holler *lu-a-lu-a-lu-a-lu,* because their cattle are safe again. But nobody wants to kill Simba, Baba told me. He is beautiful, with his golden coat and his black mane. He is huge and proud and silent and strong, and he belongs to the lion world, not the man world. So I'm not afraid of the lion.

I am not afraid of the little monkeys who drop down on me from the trees and squeal and jabber down my ear and pull my hair with their tight little fists. They snatch food from my hands and gobble it up. I hate them sometimes, but I'm not afraid of them.

I have never been afraid of anything till now. Now I'm afraid that my mama is going to die.