

This Crown is a Thorn of Silence

Abu was lying on the sack spread on the floor in our tarpaulin shack. His legs and hands were shaking like someone convulsing. Jibril and two other boys stood beside him, muttering prayers. 'Wallahi, don't die! Abu, stop this!' I held his hands. Soon they called him to stop shaking, to stop dying.

Because this place smelt of death, almost everyone was dying or living to die. Abu was about to die. The thought knocked on my mind again and again. But I couldn't say it. My mother once told me to not say things anyhow. 'My son, words have consequences,' she said. And since Abu and I came here, fifteen people had died. But nobody died unless it was the will of Allah. Maybe Allah had decided.

Maybe it was Abu's turn. Maybe Allah had decided.

Abu was still shaking, already foaming. His eyes rolled round like a spinning ceiling fan. I'd never seen someone dying. I'd never held the hands of a dying person. The only time I came close to see someone dying was in Maiduguri. It was the night before Abu and I ran away. We were in our house together with our parents. And we heard a fearful sound at the gate. I tried hiding under the sofa. But my father stood up, tied his amulet around his waist and reached out for his gun.

'They are coming for us, Banda,' my mother said in low tones. She held us close to herself; our faces pressed against her wrapper as though to stop us from seeing the faces of grief that threatened us, the voice of fear that tightened our throats.

Before that night, when the sun smiled brightly over the earth, we were at school. Mother had come to carry us home too early. Maybe she thought I would not bring Abu home or we would not come home early. But this wasn't it. Panic and fear settled in her eyes. She didn't wear her hijab. Her long, dark hair rested on her shoulders. Without talking to my teacher, she called me out. She'd tied Abu on her back and held my hand. As we raced, as we approached the main road, violence had turned the area into a pool of red water. People ran here and there, screaming. People lay on the ground, unmoved. We jumped over dead bodies. We ran past people bleeding from their heads or hands, their bellies or legs. Bullets wheezed in the air. The policemen were far away from their burning vehicles. People were screaming. Some of them said bad people had entered our community. Some said they were Jihadists. No, some said they were political fighters. People called them several names, but they'd scream, 'Run, they are Boko Haram' each time a bullet hissed in the air or houses burnt by fire.

Mother panicked that night. Sadness covered her face. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Abu stayed at her feet. He looked at her with shining eyes. He did not understand what was happening. He did not understand why she cried in low tones. As we curled ourselves up in the face of anxiety, we heard the stomping boots of people approaching. My mother carried Abu and me and ran to the backyard, close to the small bush behind our house. She was about to hide us there, to cover us with leaves when we heard gunshots inside. Mother froze. It was as if they shot her too, because she was still.

After a while, we heard the heavy sound of the boots of the men approaching our backyard. Mother looked at me, opened her mouth but no words rose off her tongue.

She didn't want to drop any trace for the men to find us. But she fixed her gaze on me. Her purple silk hijab was tied loosely around her head. Her eye brows quivered up and down. She spoke to me with her quivering eyebrows. To run. She wagged her forefingers, urging us to run. I held Abu's hands tightly and we ran. But we stopped. I turned back and saw her standing there. Maybe she was waiting for the men to scatter her with bullets. Maybe she was praying to Allah to accept her soul. We didn't wait to watch her. Rather, I held Abu's hands. And as we ran, our heels touched our bum-bum. We fell and got up, and continued to run. We didn't know where we were going. Our eyes could not see through the thickness of the night. The grass and shrub gathered around our legs. The wet soil clung to our feet. We spent seven days in the bush, fed on oranges and guava. And some days we fed on nothing. But it was Allah's will that we did not die. It was Allah's will that we found here.

Now, Abu was still shaking; foaming at the corner of his mouth.

'You, stop crying,' someone said behind me. I didn't know the voice. It was one of the boys who gathered around us, who had come to watch Abu die.

'But can't you see he's dying?' I sniffed between tears. Snots dropped from my nose to the sides of my mouth.

'Allah forbids! He won't die. Ibrahim is coming,' Jibril said. 'Oh Allah, hasten the steps of Ibrahim,' he intoned. But tears gathered in his eyes.

I knelt forward, held Abu's hands. I reached out for my *babban riga*, tore the hem, cleaned his mouth. His face was swollen; his hands were lean like dried stock fish.

A few minutes later, a motorcycle honked outside. The other boys ran out. They

screamed Ibrahim's name. I ran out of the shack toward Ibrahim. The boys had gathered around him, some tried to pull the little sack-bag in his hand; others held onto his hand or kaftan. I squeezed myself through the tiny spaces of the people around him. I got to him, fell to the parched ground, crying.

'What's that?' He held my hand, and pulled me up.

'My brother. My brother... is...' I pointed toward our shack. I breathed fast and the noisy rush of air through my mouth broke the words before I could say them.

'Wallahi. What? What happened to him?'

'He's dying!' I said. My voice became throaty. Like I'd eaten lots of toads. The other boys were silent. They held their hands across their chest. They watched with their mouths opened. Their eyes were teary. They had started to cry for Abu. With the sadness on their faces and silence on their lips, they looked sorry for Abu already.

Ibrahim walked toward our shack, moving fast. I followed him. Some of the boys followed, too. His shoes had pointed scrappy soles that ate deep into the ground. His kaftan danced to the movement of the breeze. Abu was still lying down when we entered. Abu was shaking. His white eyes had turned to yellowish colour. He sucked in air through his clenched teeth. Ibrahim knelt on his left knee, touched his body and shouted. I shivered. Something burnt under my belly. I didn't know what I felt. I didn't know if Abu was going to die. Wallahi, floods of tears covered my face.

'His body is too hot,' Ibrahim said.

He muttered that there weren't enough drugs. He fought with every word that jumped off his tongue. He sighed. And said, under his breath, that it'd be fever or cholera? He tightened his face; the marks across his cheeks showed.

'Anything? What is it?' I asked, sobbing.

He answered me with silence while he prised Abu's eyes. I asked him again.

'It's fever,' he said.

'Will he die?'

Ibrahim hurried out of the shack. I ran after him, crying; begging him to do something. But how could he do something? He asked me. And he reminded me the last time the government sent drugs or brought medical experts to the camp was over eleven months. He rubbed my head, asked me to clean my eyes because Abu would not die. He said Allah would not allow him to die.

We came back. Ibrahim pulled out some medicines from a small container. Yellow, white, green and red were the colours of the medicines. They were rounding, spherical and rectangular. The medicines were three or maybe four. I didn't count.

'Abu, can you hear me? Abu?' I held his hand, tightly. 'Abu, you will not die. You will not...die.' I broke into tears. The other boys held me. And Jibril held up Abu's head; Ibrahim poured the medicines into his mouth. And he forced some water down Abu's throat.

The next day, we sat on our sacks spread on the ground under the moringa tree. The sun had gradually hidden behind the cloud and only small orange lights lighted the sky. The evening prayer was over. Abu's head was on my shoulder. He was getting no better. He still shivered, his teeth clinking. We all folded our legs into each other. We looked into the road leading to Ibrahim's unpainted house. We were waiting for him. Danladi sat in front of me. He was nineteen years and talked too much about how he was the oldest;

how he should be respected. Indeed the age shone on his face: little beards covered his jaw, big balls of pimple stood on his forehead and on each side of his cheeks. He came from Adamawa. Or so did I hear. Ahmad was sitting close to Danladi. Jibril had told me Ahmad was thirteen, just like me. He wore a long, straightened face. His *babban riga* was torn at the ankle and knee. He squeezed his clothes when he talked. He would sit anywhere, on anything, even on cow shit. He dirtied himself. And he'd walk around the camp, talking to himself. Sometimes loudly. I'd thought he was mad. No. Jibril said the death of his mother, father and little sister had gotten into his head. Ahmad was from Baga, here in Maiduguri.

Jibril perched close to Abu. He was the first friend I made, the first person who asked me my name and gave me a small wrapped kosai the first night I came here. He was tall and slim with a square jaw that looked fine for a fifteen-year-old like him. He came from Maiduguri too. I liked the way he spoke English and Arabic. It was not perfect but the sound came off like a rich man chewing *kilishi*. I'd heard other children who knew him before, talking about how wealthy Jibril's parents were, how almost all he needed was served to him. But now, in this camp, he became like us who had never smelt of good money; whose parents had never gone to Mecca. He now struggled with us in the line to get kosai. Sometimes I pitied him. But Allah knew why we were here.

Abu was still shivering. His body was still hot. I looked at him and then at Jibril. The whites of his eyes were coloured red. Like blood. I pulled out the container of medicine Ibrahim had given me from my pocket. I shook it and opened it and emptied it in my palm. Two tiny white drugs settled in my palm. I forced them into Abu's mouth. He widened his eyes, then closed them. I breathed in and out. Abu was growing thinner and

thiner.

'He will be fine,' Jibril said, touching Abu's forehead.

'Are you sure?'

He nodded. 'He reminds me of my small sister.'

'Your small sister?'

He nodded. 'Yesterday was her birthday. She would have been eleven.'

'Where is she?'

'You mean Hauwa?' he asked me, staring at me as though I'd known her name. 'I don't know if she's still alive,' he said. A teary sound echoed behind his throat. Maybe something else stood behind his throat, something too difficult to push away.

'What happened?'

'Because they took her.' He managed to fight back tears. 'Hauwa had gone back to school the previous day. She'd exam the next day and you see? Allah wanted to save her. Allah made her to come back. For her friend's birthday party. I still remember her smile when she waved me goodbye in front of our house. That was the last time I ever saw her. We didn't know she'd be kidnapped the next day. We didn't know.'

'Wallahi, Jibril. I'm so sorry.'

I held his shoulder. Some boys around us looked at us; their eyes held pitiable words.

'I heard the news on my father's radio that morning,' I said. That morning came back to me now. The sadness in the voice of the reporter that hummed against the cries of people who'd gone to the school to see that their children and sisters had been taken away. I remembered my mother screaming and cursing the Boko Haram people. I felt sad, too. 276 school girls? Kidnapped? Throughout that week, and the week after, Abu

and I didn't go to school. Mother feared we'd be kidnapped or even killed.

'Hauwa is now resting beside Allah,' I said. But Jibril didn't turn his head. My own words broke me, too. The same words people had told me, 'Your parents are with Allah.' The same words that would have been poured into my ears if Abu had died.

'I don't want her to rest,' Jibril said. 'I want her back. Here.'

'I'm sorry, Jibril, Hauwa will come back,' I whispered. He nodded, as though I'd said the right words, as though he preferred these words.

I wondered if Allah knew why all this was happening. I wondered if my mother would come back, if she knew Abu was sick. If she knew life had moulded and hammered me into a man with baggy shirts of grief to wear. I asked her several times she came to me in the dream. I asked her when Abu and I would leave here, when we'd meet her. But each time she didn't talk to me. Each time she watched me with her hands clasped around her breasts. Each time tears covered her face. And blood dripped down from her mouth. Each time no word rose off her tongue. I whispered her name in the breeze the chilled my face. 'We're broken, mother. Our soul is like dust waiting to be carried away by wind.'

'Mother?' Abu grunted, looked at me, unable to steady his eyes. 'Did you...see her?' he asked.

I stroked his hair.

'Is ssshe co...ming?'

'Abu, get well soon, you hear? So that we'll see mother.' He smiled a faint smile and closed his eyes. I touched my forehead. Because inside of my head burned with ache, I shook it again and again, hoping that the crown of pain would fall off.

