

REFLECTIONS ON CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGES: ANECDOTES FROM BOTSWANA



An anthology of 20 short stories written by secondary school girls in Maun schools

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ON CHILD, EARLY AND
FORCED MARRIAGES:
ANECDOTES FROM BOTSWANA**

An Anthology of Short Stories

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To all the girls around the world, especially the victims, or those who have been victims of Child, Early and Forced Marriages.

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Lastly the team appreciates Cresta Riley's Hotel for providing the 3 workshops venue and catering at a discounted rate, thank you for the environment that was conducive to the task.

Le ka moso betsho.

Ms. Tshepo John

*Students Against Rape Clubs Coordinator and Project Officer,
WoMen Against Rape*

Editor's Note

The narratives on child, early and forced marriages was a five months long project that aimed not only at giving the girl students an international platform for articulating these critical issues, but it also gave them an opportunity to learn the craft of creative writing – a potent means of effective communication.

Alongside Mr. Charles Kakomee, we worked with a group of twenty bright girls from five secondary schools in Maun, Botswana. We started first by discussing the theme of Child, Early and Forced Marriages (CEFM). It was apparent that the participants were very much aware of this plight. CEFM is a common problem in Africa, Botswana not excluded. It does, in fact, happen in our communities and many young girls have become victims of this sad situation.

The girls were then taken through intense workshops on the art of creative writing, in particular to the short story form of fiction. The workshops explored writing beyond the mundane classroom compositions they are used to in schools. The aim was to expose them to mainstream, international standards of creative writing with the hope of making out of them competent and confident young writers. Workshops covered topics like Plotting, Style, Characterisation, Viewpoints, Effective Descriptions, Punctuation and Mood.

Participants started with rough story ideas which were, over time, developed and polished with the help of their teachers and us, the coaches. In addition to the three workshops, we visited schools and did a one-on-one consultation with students. On these individual visits, the students opened up and showed a great desire to become good writers. It was in these sessions where life was truly breathed into their stories.

In the end, twenty stories were compiled into this anthology of short stories. I also stumbled upon another good story written by a student who was not part of the project. The story, which I found relevant and well-written, is included in this compilation as a bonus. All stories are relevant to theme, though each participant had her own story to tell. Although the stories are based on real-life situations, it should be understood that these are works of fiction, written to relay messages as well as to entertain through the power of words.

We hope that projects like this one, projects aimed at developing the arts at an early age, find way into schools and communities, because it is largely through the arts of expression that a better world can be built. It had been a great pleasure working with the girls, their teachers and the WoMen Against Rape staff.

Enjoy the stories.

Legodile Seganabeng

Coach/Editor

Foreword

It is with great honour that I present to you the narratives on child, early and forced marriages as reflected through the minds and pens of The Girl Child, from Ngamiland, Botswana. The narratives are thought provoking, personal and deep reflections on the impact of child, early and forced marriages on these voiceless girls who have rediscovered their voice through the pen.

The reflections are based on Botswana's commitment to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action(1995) especially the critical area of concern on The Girl Child, the Botswana Children's Act 2009, Domestic Violence Act 2008 and other related national, regional and international justice instruments that Botswana has acceded to in order to prevent violence against women and children.

The Botswana HIV Impact Survey IV (2012) identified intergenerational sex and gender based violence among the key drivers of the HIV epidemic in Botswana. This is reflected in the narratives that you will engage with in these pages.

WoMenAgainst Rape is making a contribution into the education system, both formal and informal, by nurturing the creative writing talent of the girl child and anticipating a ripple effect that will result in more girls sharing personal and inferred experiences of gender-based violence in the Botswana home towards the girl child. I am calling on all Batswana from their various levels of influence to make social, cultural and political changes to protect the girl child and give her the right to be a child and not a child bride, give her a right to grow up and access further education leading to prosperity and not a life of ignorance and poverty through the practice of child, early and forced marriages.

As you read and share these narratives with your families, neighbours, relatives, community and policy makers, take a pledge to end girl child marriages at all levels of our society. Be a change maker to end child, early and forced marriages in your community.

Thank you,

Peggie Ramaphane

*Executive Director,
WoMen Against Rape*

The following stories are works of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

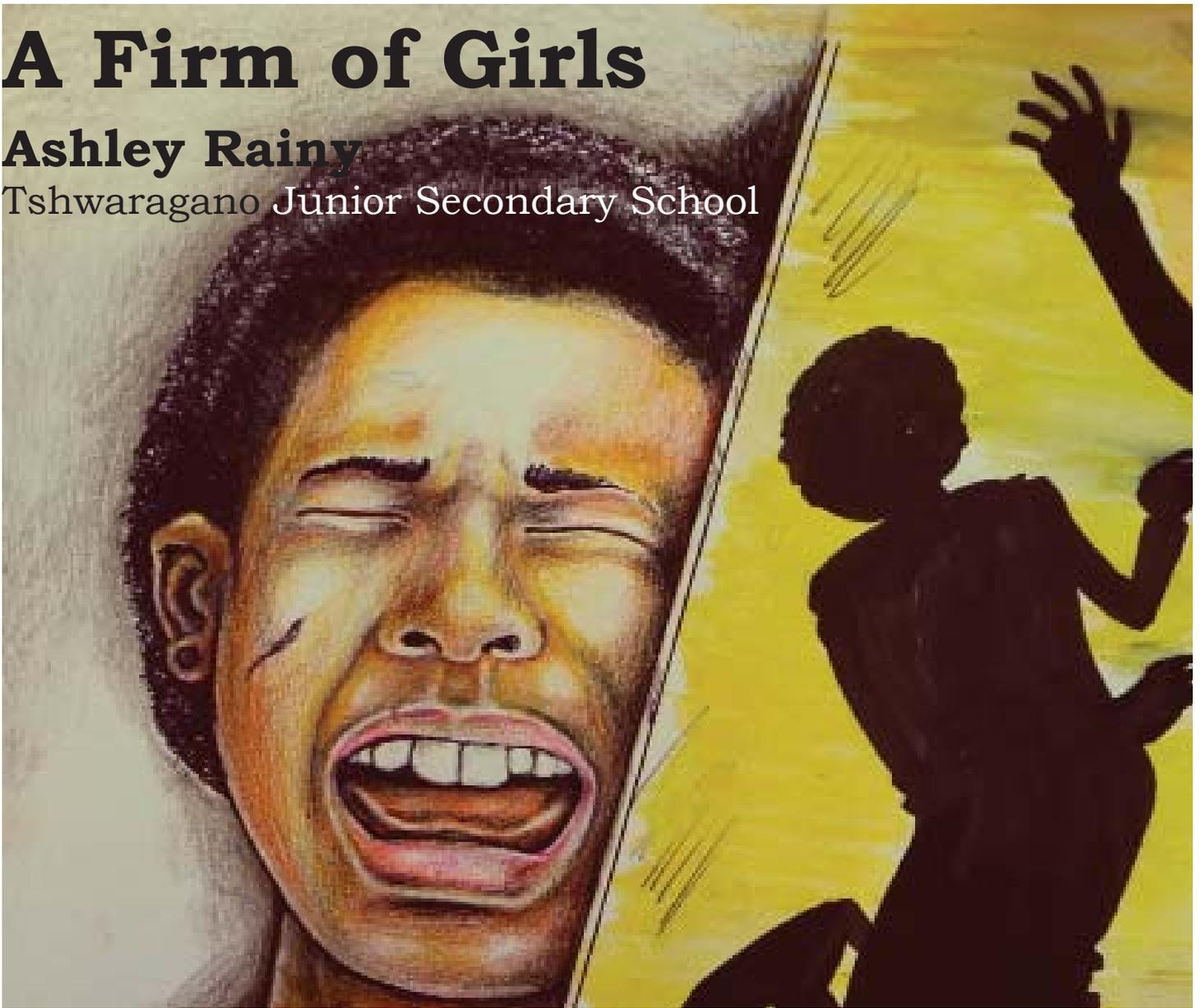
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A Firm of Girls

Ashley Rainy

Tshwaragano Junior Secondary School



Bailey stared at the mirror, her fingers tracing the scars on her body. She could still hear Jack's thunderous voice and the gun shot. Especially the gun shot. It was a miracle that Bailey was still alive. Years couldn't flash away the memories.

It started when the 'witch' called her. Bailey had always referred to her aunt, Martha, as a witch. Of course she couldn't say that to her face. Aunt Martha would split her head apart. Martha was a rough, foul-mouthed and violent *shebeen*¹ queen. Selling *chibuku*² to a bunch of rowdy men had turned her into a monster. Martha was a beast. None of the men in her drinking hole could dare raise a hand at her. She once knocked a man's teeth down his throat and broke another one's arm. That's how bad Aunt Martha was.

Aunt Martha was also greedy. Her god was money. To her, nothing mattered more than money. She made a deal with Jack, a man who traded drugs and secretly bought young girls. Jack bought young girls under the pretext of finding them good jobs, when, in fact, he wanted

1 A drinking hole, or a place, usually illegal, where home brewed beer is sold.

2 Commercial traditional brew usually packaged in paper cartons or plastic bottles.

to turn them into concubines. Fifty thousand Pula was the amount paid for Bailey.

“Bailey,” the witch called her. She came running and sat next to her. “I found you a job.”

That sounded like good news to Bailey. Just the previous year, she had failed her form three examination and had thus been staying home with her aunt, helping her sell the beer. Bailey’s parents had long died when she was still very young and her aunt adopted her.

“There’s a man called Jack. He will come for you tomorrow. He has a firm where you will work, in another town. The pay is good. So get yourself ready.” It was easy for Martha to convince her and so Bailey didn’t resist the offer. If only she knew!

Bailey took off to the small shack at the back of Martha’s house, where she lived, humming happily to herself. Inside, she started packing all her belongings. The thought of a job made her happy, because she had not yet given up in school. In her mind, she was already planning her savings. She would save money every month for a year, then quit the job and go for school.

The journey was long before they could arrive in a town that Bailey had never visited before. It was a big house surrounded by a dense expanse of green trees. There were lots of girls of her age inside the house.

“Is this the firm?” she asked Jack.

“What firm?” Jack responded.

“The firm I came to work in,” Bailey said, her curiosity rising. Some girls giggled, others looked at her with pity and sorrow. Most of them were half naked, a sign that something amiss was going on in the house.

“Follow me to your room,” Jack led her deeper into the huge house.

He shoved her into a room and ordered her to wait in there. Jack locked the door on his way out. Whilst inside, Bailey’s mind ran like a stream train. She could sense that something out of the ordinary. Why were there so many girls here? Why was she locked in a room? What kind of a firm was this? She listened intently. Could this be a brothel where illicit sexual activities took place? Most likely, Bailey thought.

The door opened and Jack stepped in. He had a digital camera in his hand. “Sit up straight,” he said.

“Would you please tell me what’s going on?” Bailey’s voice trembled with fear. She was on the verge of tears.

“Relax,” Jack said. “I’m taking a picture for your work profile. Tomorrow you’d be ready to start your job.”

“What kind of job is this? I deserve to know!”

Jack ignored her and proceeded in setting up his camera. He aimed the lens at her for a pic-

ture but Bailey covered her face in resistance.

“Don’t do that. Take your hands off your face,” Jack’s voice was laden with frightening authority, but Bailey hid her face still. “I won’t ask you again.” He threatened.

“I demand to know the nature of ...” a blinding slap fell across her face like a thunderbolt, sending jolts of pain to her brain. Her face burned and tears spilled. Jack stepped back with the camera, aimed the lens and took a picture of Bailey.

“I love how tears always enhance a woman’s beauty,” he said, clearly admiring what he was doing. Then he left the room again and locked it.

It didn’t take long before Bailey learnt that Jack ran a firm of girls. The place wasn’t a regular brothel. Jack hired out girls to rich men for sexual exploitations. Orders were made through the Internet and girls were delivered to posh suburbs of the town. A girl could be gone for an hour, a day or even a week, depending on the needs of the buyer.

Whenever a new girl came, Jack first turned her into his own concubine for a period of a month or so. He referred to this process as ‘preparing the item for the market’. The girl’s picture would be uploaded into his website and tagged ‘available soon’. Rich men would put up their prices, bidding for the newest girl in town.

It had been a week since Bailey had been Jack’s concubine, his sex tool. One morning, as Jack came for his daily satisfaction in Bailey’s room. Bailey asked, “For how long have you been doing this?”

“Doing what?” Jack asked, surprised. There was no way Bailey could have known yet.

“Running a firm of girls,” she said. Her eyes were hard.

“You have no right to ask me such questions. I bought you from your aunt. You’re my girl, my slave, my wife, my anything that I want you to be.” He approached the bed, pushed Bailey down and started ripping her clothes. He didn’t see the knife coming. The first stroke slashed his neck. He screamed, stood up and clutched his bleeding neck. “You fool! I’m going to kill you!” He charged at her.

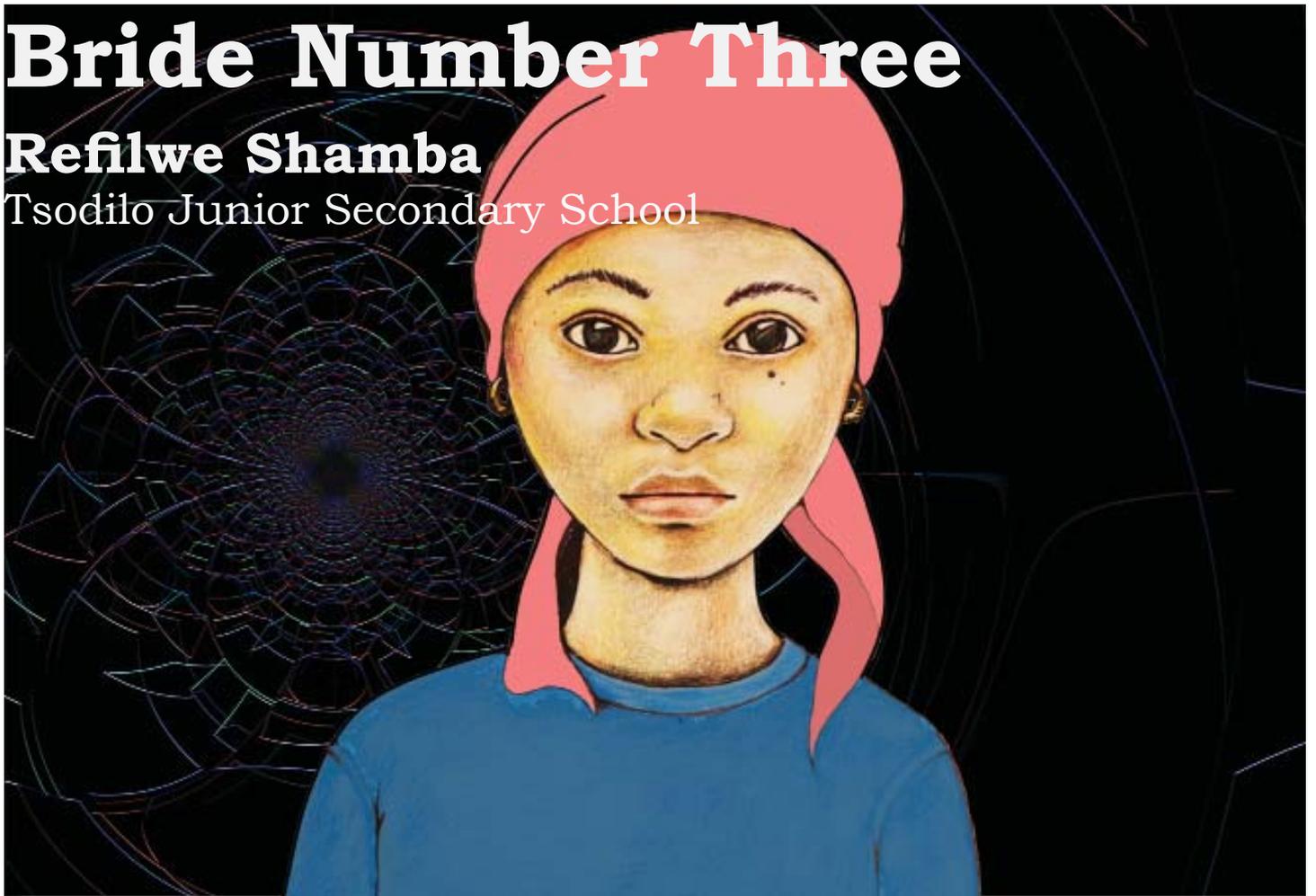
Bailey swung the knife at him, stabbed him in the chest, the stomach, the chest again. Even with failing strength, Jack was still tough. He kicked the knife away from her hands. It clattered on the floor. Jack snatched it. That was when Bailey’s scars were born. He scored her nude body with the knife like a man skinning a goat. Jack wanted to inflict pain before he could kill. Both of them screamed in pain. Blood sprayed the room like garden sprinklers.

A loud gunshot stopped the violent madness instantly. Jack crumbled on his chest, lifeless. A girl stood on the doorway with a smoking gun. She motioned at Bailey, *let’s go, time to run!*

Bride Number Three

Refilwe Shamba

Tsodilo Junior Secondary School



I woke up in a white room, not knowing where I was. It was like I had amnesia. I could remember bits and pieces, here and there. Somehow this white room seemed safer. It was too white to be part of the hell that I lived in. Or had I died and this was heaven? Either way, something in me told me that I was never going back there. My name is Tshegofatso Sombre. Yes, a weird last name I know, very perfectly describing the condition of my life.

It all started when, at the age of eight, I was betrothed to a man. His name was Kgolage. He was already in a polygamous marriage and wanted one more wife. Greed. Kgolage was seventeen years older than me. When I reached twelve, I became his third wife. It had been an elegant wedding. The tent was adorned with red and white fabrics. While they were dressing me and applying some make-up on me, I whispered into my mother's ear. "I still don't love him. I'm just being an obedient sheep here."

"Good girl," mother said. "Marriage is never about the consent or happiness of a woman. It's about what society deems good for you."

My first few months with Kgolage were peaceful, not very unlike home. Day and night, Kgolage put pressure on me to have a baby for him. My parents sang about it every day. I was in distress. The song tormented me and I finally decided to bear him baby. One night when he came back home, he found me nude on the bed. I had always given Kgolage a hard time when it came to 'making love'. I slept with my clothes on, every day. I told him that I didn't have any love to make with or for him. Luckily Kgolage wasn't a violent man. As a result he

was forced to lay with one of his other wives. He had reported the situation to my and his parents and whenever I was called for discipline, I would keep my mouth shut, not saying anything to them. I was scolded for being rebellious and failing to perform the most crucial duty of a wife.

Now, on this particular night, Kgolage got a shock of his life when he found me sprawled on the bed, dressed only in my golden brown skin. He gasped and asked what the matter with me was. I told him that I wanted to give him pleasure, that I was finally ready to taste the scent of his skin. My words were too poetic for him to resist.

Three weeks later the doctor announced that I was pregnant with twins. Kgolage was overjoyed. He lifted me and kissed me so hard I thought I would faint. The next day, Kgolage threw a party for me. He had never had twins, or even dreamed of it. Twins to him symbolised the biggest of all blessings. I became his favourite wife instantly. Jealously crept into the house. The other wives believed that I had bewitched our husband. How could he be so thrilled by me?

We fought frequently. I remember when Mmakgosi, the eldest wife, sprang on me and threw blows at me. Kgolage suddenly showed up and Mmakgosi suffered the consequences. She was lashed like a child. He was always ready to protect me. "Have you no fear that you'll ruin her pregnancy?" He had thundered at Mmakgosi.

Nine months later I gave birth to a set of beautiful twins – a boy and a girl. But the war in the house was not over yet. The other wives made my life miserable. They believed that since Kgolage seemed to be too fond of me, he would probably leave his entire heritage under my name. I, on the other side, couldn't enjoy Kgolage's affection with me. The other wives made sure they denied me that chance. They scolded me when he wasn't around. Every word they said to me stung like a bee.

When I was eighteen, five years after the wedding, Kgolage brought in another wife – bride number four. She was thirteen. His attention focused on her and I became like a piece of old furniture. My days turned gloomy. He ignored me and treasured his new catch. I wouldn't say he hated me. No, he just didn't have time for me, or the older wives. I noticed that it was his weakness. The older wives shifted their hate towards the new girl.

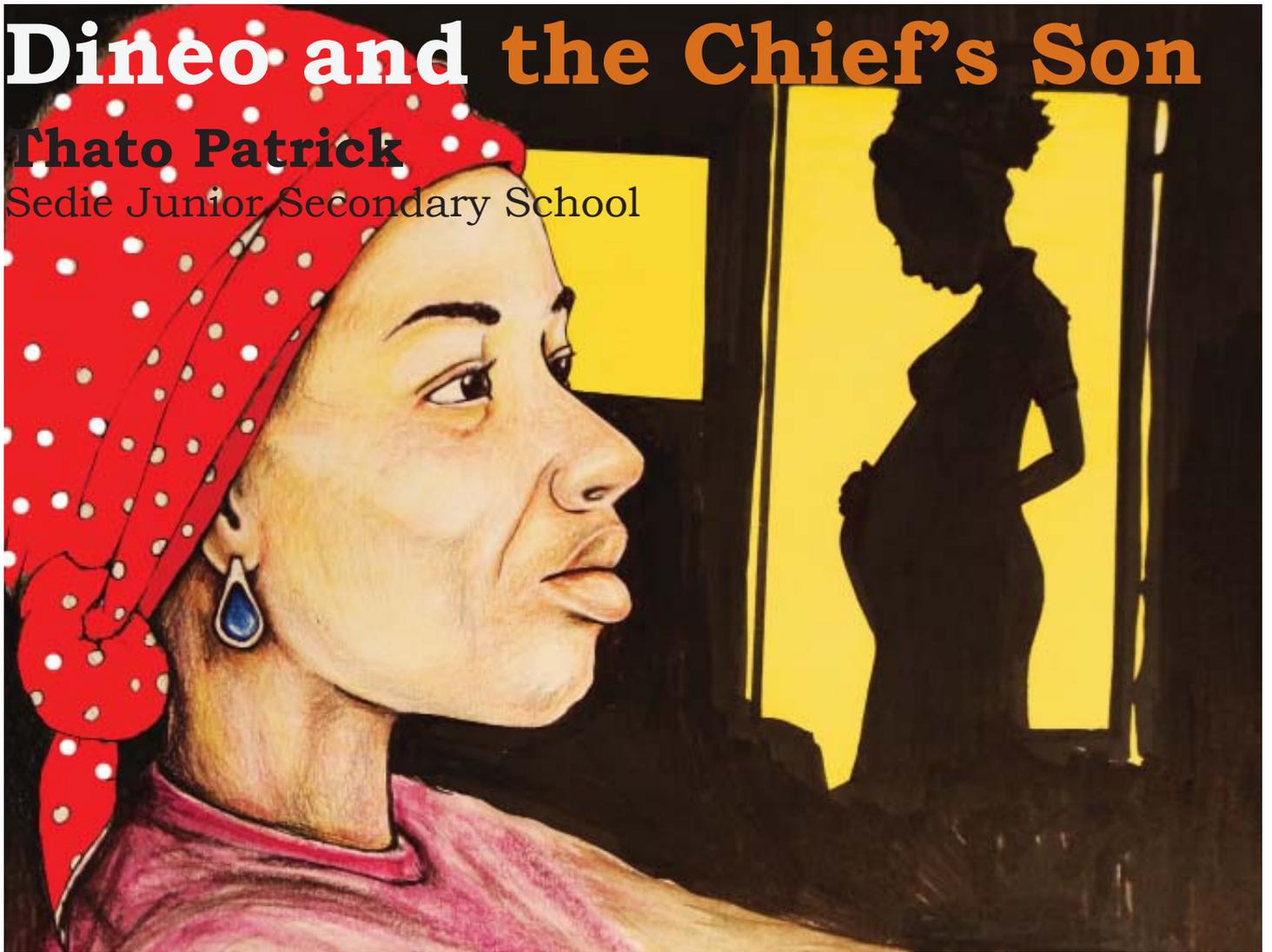
I wondered, how long was it going to continue like that? While Kgolage was in the new girl's room, striving for another baby, a set of twins maybe, I stood outside on the patio, with a box full of sleeping tablets. Tonight I was going to sleep forever. Kgolage would take care of his children.

When I woke up in the white hospital room, I was disappointed that the pills couldn't end my miserable life. But I swore, over and over, that I was done with Kgolage and his many wives. I was not going back there.

Dineo and the Chief's Son

Thato Patrick

Sedie Junior Secondary School



The day MmaTebogo took a step to chase poverty away from their home was the end of the road for Dineo's life. Dineo was young, beautiful and free. She was a hard worker, selfless and determined. She was raised by her aunt MmaTebogo because her parents died of AIDS when Dineo was young. Dineo had only one sibling, Thapelo, her brother. They lived in Sexaxa, a small village northwest of Maun.

Life became complex for Dineo after realising that her journey to get educated had ended. She had failed her junior secondary school examinations and couldn't be admitted to a senior school. On an early Friday morning, a week after the results were announced, her aunt knocked on her door.

"So tell me, you poor thing, how long are we going to suffer? You know you are an orphan and yet you chose to fail your examinations. Who is going to take care of you and your brother?" MmaTebogo asked.

"Aunty, I'm still looking for a job. Someone promised to hire me for weeding their garden," said Dineo.

MmaTebogo planted her hands on her hips and snorted. "Job? Weeding gardens? Are you

crazy? There is a ceremony tomorrow at the *Kgotla*¹. *Kgosi*² Thabare is looking for a good wife for his son. You're going there to parade among the damsels."

"But Aunty, I'm not ready for marriage," Dineo protested.

"At fifteen and you think you are not ready? I'm not going to repeat what I said. Go and wash your best dress." MmaTebogo walked away.

That night it rained. As the downpour thrashed on the thatched roof, Dineo was on her knees praying. She demanded answers from God. Why did it have to be her parading for the chief's choice? Moatlhodi, the chief's son, was twice her age.

The day of the ceremony arrived. Dineo was anxious as makeup artists prepared her for the parade. When they were done with her, all the men gathered in the *kgotla* gasped at her glowing persona of a true African queen. From the onset, everyone could tell who the princess was going to be. Needless to say, the chief's son chose Dineo. Ceremonial oaths were made and the *Kgosi* and his delegation of councillors blessed the royal couple.

Dineo tried to accustom with the marriage. She tried to learn how to live with someone she didn't love. The first year with her husband was hard to bear because Moatlhodi was always busy with his royal duties. Even when she fell pregnant, her husband was still not there for her. "You know I have a lot of work to do," he would say every time Dineo asked about it.

"I need you to give me a little bit of your time!" Dineo would demand but to no avail.

Throughout her pregnancy, Dineo wept bitterly. She was worried about her future. Even though the Prince provided all material things she needed, Dineo never received love from him. In fact, Dineo didn't have any love for him either. They were brought together by a group of traditionalists who cared little about her feelings. Dineo hated her aunt for giving her away. Her aunt only wanted the riches and the noble title of being the Princess's aunt. But Dineo didn't feel like a princess. She felt, instead, like a slave about whom the so-called prince didn't care.

Labour pains came and Dineo was rushed to the operating room. It was an unusual, complicated delivery. For hours, doctors battled with her, trying to save her life and/or that of the baby. They failed. Both Dineo and the baby died. The Prince was crushed and dejected. He cried like a child, blaming God for it all.

MmaTebogo cried sour tears too. She felt the weight of the blame on her shoulders. Had she not forced Dineo to parade for the chief's son, this couldn't have happened. She didn't know how she would look at Dineo's brother who had been against the marriage from day one.

A few months later, the Prince remarried. But the Prince never found peace. He was haunted by thoughts of Dineo. Although he had not declared it to her, Moatlhodi had grown to love Dineo very much. One day the Chief, his father, summoned him.

"My son, you don't seem happy. What is wrong?"

1 Customary court

2 Chief

“I miss my princess. I wish she was alive,” Moatlhodi said, tears filling up in his eyes.
“But you have a princess,” the chief said.

“Not this one. I mean the princess I truly loved. If only I had told her so. That she was my princess of divine.”

And so the Prince had to live with a lump in his heart, a sorrow so deep that no other princess, no matter how beautiful she was, could eradicate. Prince Moatlhodi never lived happily ever after.

Eugene was a Dog

Mercy Phatsimo Thutwa

Maun Senior Secondary School



I rolled on my bed, careful not to let the cold seep into my cuddly polar fleece blanket. I couldn't uncover my face, but I heard the steady tick-tick of the clock as it threw the minutes away. Minutes didn't mean anything to me, not even the hours, or the years for that matter. My mind was stalled, trying to ponder on the trauma that was my life. I tossed under the blanket. And turned. How could life be so cruel? I had been forsaken.

Finally darkness broke into dawn, and dawn into morning. I could now feel comfort from the warmth of the rising sun. I swayed on the bed and planted my feet on the cold floor, groping around for my sleepers. I tottered to the full-length mirror pasted on the wall. There was a stranger in the mirror, not me. Terror and shame dragged me to the window. My hands hung on the floral curtains as I thought of nothing and everything. I slid them apart and a wash of sunlight spilled in, reminding me that I was alive.

I saw Antonio sitting on a rock outside, his ball trapped between his feet. He was up so early, a sign that something was bothering him. It was cold outside. And he wasn't even playing with the ball. Surely there was something. But I knew my son; I had to let him handle it first. I would speak with him during breakfast. For now I had to give him a little space and time.

The wound on my knee started itching. Just the previous day I had fallen on a brick outside. Lately I had been tripping and falling frequently. I was overstressed and constantly absent-minded. I went for a bubble bath, trying to soothe my body and my knee. As I filled the tub, I heard the dissonant sound of breaking glass. I rushed there to find Antonio cowering outside, trembling with fear. He had kicked his ball onto the window.

"Please, mummy, don't beat me?" he whimpered.

My heart went out to him. Antonio was a scared, vulnerable child. At four, he had suffered too much physical and emotional abuse. I hugged him. “I’m never going to hurt you, okay? I’m not daddy.”

“But what if he comes back home?” he asked with a wavering voice.

“Forget that, Antonio,” I squeezed him. “He will never come back, sweetheart, he is gone for good.” It had been three days since Eugene, my husband and Antonio’s father, left.

Eleven years ago when I was in form two, I had known Eugene as a family friend. He would visit us at home. During his visits, he normally brought along groceries, money and even gifts for my sister and I. Eugene liked sitting next to me. He also liked holding my puny hands in his. Whenever he did so, I’d pull out my hands from his touch. It made me uncomfortable. Sometimes I faked smiles and pretended to be enjoying his company. But the thing is, he was nowhere near my liking. His arrival in our house faded away my happiness.

Sometimes he tried his luck at being funny. He would crack some silly jokes and pretended to be a comedian. He sucked, but I laughed, not because he was funny. Eugene’s jokes were purely geared towards making me fond of him, but the plan failed dismally.

At the crack of dawn one morning, mother woke me up from the comfort of my bed. “Get packing,” she said. “You’re leaving to your new home.”

Struck by confusion, I asked, “What new home?”

“Your husband and a delegation from his family are on their way. You’re getting married.”

“I know nothing about this marriage! Again, you can’t just marry me off like that without my consent,” I retorted. Mother ignored my reaction.

“When they get here,” she said. “Be good. Remember, *mosadi tshwene o jewa mabogo*¹. Treat your husband with love and care. Bear him children. Be the best.”

My arguments fell on deaf ears; I was fighting against a stone wall. Mother didn’t budge. Before I knew it, the wedding was celebrated. It turned out that it was Eugene to whom I was getting married. I can still remember the African cloth dress. It was a deep green tie-dyed fabric with bright yellows speckled with some batik cracks, like a maze of spider webs. I had a matching scarf around my head and a yellow shawl hanging over my shoulders.

From day one, Eugene treated me like dirt. It was as if he had married me for the sole purpose of humiliating me. He was fifteen years older than me – a rude selfish man with whom I never sought to be identified. After taking away my education by forcing me to stay in the house, he took away my dignity. I was a piece of junk to him, worthless and meaningless.

Eugene had other women. Girls, in fact. He cheated plainly and boldly, without remorse. Worse, he slept with these girls even during my presence, grinning like a hyena and boasting about it. He would even force me to be there, and sometimes he wanted me to take part in the illicit multiple intercourse. As if I was the dirty one, they called me names like ‘slut’, ‘whore’, ‘bitch’, names that eroded my self esteem. Eugene was a dog.

1 A Setswana proverb meaning that ‘a good wife works very hard.’

I was trapped, with no way out. In our culture, divorce is not an option. It is 'till death do us part' in the very literal meaning of the phrase. Three years into this prison of marriage, I gave birth to Antonio. My son never felt the love of a father. As Antonio grew up, he too was subjected to Eugene's wrath. He scolded him, barked at him, and slapped him now and again. Eugene had such a bad temper.

Now, on this cold morning three days after Eugene had left, I found it difficult to explain it to my son. He wouldn't understand. How do you explain to your three year old son that when his barbaric father left that Friday night, he didn't know he was never coming back, that you, the mother, knew everything? I reached into my pocket and opened the note that was delivered to me last night: *Mission accomplished. Target terminated. Please deposit rest of payment.* I crumpled the small note, threw it in my mouth and chewed it. Sometimes, a woman got to do what a woman got to do.

If Only God

Gift Karabo Mpho

Tshwaragano Junior Secondary School



“Papa...” it was a breathless, little gasp, as though someone punched the air out of her lungs. “How could you abandon me to her, Tata? When you know her deeds?” Her muttering tone drifted into the silent, empty night. Moonlight elongated her shadow, throwing it on the pebbled ground beside her father’s grave. A family of tombstones looked on, silent and cold. Ukelele’s long skirt was now greased with dirt, for she had been sitting down on the ground, conversing with her lost father. Her eyes focused on the writing: *in loving memory of a father, an uncle and a friend*. Tears itched in her eyes. She was getting too emotional, again. She stood up from the dirty ground and walked out, as silent as a ghost, through the gates of the graveyard.

It had been four months since Ukelele’s father passed away. With him alive, life had been a marvelous mystery. Tlhalodi, what Ukelele’s mother called him when she was up for a quarrel, was both a father and a friend to Ukelele. Before the heart attack snatched him away, Ukelele lived like a queen.

Breathing heavily from the long walk from the gravesite, she crossed Bomba Street, which was well known for notorious gangsters at night. She increased her pace, counting the houses leading to theirs. Suddenly she was home. As she walked past her mother’s hovel, she noticed that the lights were still on. Getting closer, she heard whispers. Her mother was with someone in the house. But why were they whispering? She tiptoed closer to the hut. The second voice revealed that it was Unomasa’s, the young man with whom her mother hid. Maneuvering away from the window towards the corner of the house, she could hear them clearly.

*“Nnyaa tlhe Uno, o a bo reng jaanong?”*¹ her mother spoke.

“It has worked for others. Why wouldn’t it work for us?” Unomasa said. “Look, just say yes, and leave the rest to me”.

Unomasa’s tone revealed a deep seriousness, followed by a moment of silence in the house. Outside, Ukelele was in turmoil, trying to put pieces together. Unomasa continued. “Uke gets married. No wedding. Just negotiations. We get the money. And that’s it! How difficult is that?”

“Okay,” her mother said. “You better make it fast. This week then”.

Ukelele was in shock. She couldn’t react or do anything except to stand riveted in one place like a telephone pole. In fluster, she paced towards the door behind which her mother and the gigolo conspired against her. Stumbling over a ring of flowers, but not deterred in any way, she reached for the door. It was locked. She pushed and pushed until someone opened it. It was Unomasa. Ukelele was too disgusted to look him in the eyes. She pushed him aside roughly, muttering, “Get out of my way!” Her mother was seated on the bed.

“You can’t do this!” Ukelele spat words at her. “Mama you can’t. I’m not getting married. How about my school, my future?”

“Forget it, Uke. It’s a done deal,” she said. “Now go back your room and sleep.”

Crying couldn’t make the couple change their minds about Ukelele’s marriage. They married her off to a man four times her age. Two years later, she was accustomed to societal expectation as a mother and a wife. Holding her son Tjose, Ukelele rocked slightly in an arm chair, pampering the baby to sleep. She sang a lullaby to him, a song with lyrics advising on the dangers of marrying defenseless young children. As she sang, she watched the opalescent moon suspended above. She wished to touch it, to cry tears on its shoulder, for perhaps only the moon could understand the misery she was going through.

A weak cry pulled her from her fantasies with the moon. “Uke...Uke...Aaah” It was the sound of her ailing husband, moaning in agony. He was supposed to be sleeping, but a sickness had suddenly swept over him. Even the doctors couldn’t diagnose his illness. Rushing into the house with the baby in her arms, she found her husband on the floor, barely breathing. She kneeled by his side, wondering what to do. He tried to speak to his baby, “Tj...Tj...” His breath faded and Ukelele realized that life had escaped him. She leaned back. For a moment there was a heavy silence, and then Tjose started crying, as if sensing the death of his father. Her husband’s death should have brought an end to her suffering, for she hoped that she would go back to her mother’s place. Alas, it was only the beginning of a series of misfortunes.

A few days after the burial, she swept the front yard just as the first rays of the sun peeped out. She looked up to see a small group of people approaching her house. At close inspection, she realized it was her in-laws, led by the uncle and the aunt.

*“Moloi ke wena!”*² the aunt shouted at her. “You think you have succeeded in killing our son?”

1 “Come on, Uno, what do you mean now?”

2 “You witch!”

Ukelele dropped the grass broom on the ground in shock.

“What are you talking about?” she asked them.

“We’ve come for you. *Ko masimo ngwanyana!*³ That’s where you belong now.” It was the uncle speaking, grabbing her wrists and pulling her towards the gate.

“*Tla le selonyana seo!*”⁴ the aunt blurted, commanding another family member to bring along Ukelele’s baby, Tjose.

That afternoon at the cornfield, with a baby on her back and a hoe in her hands, Ukelele worked under the burning sun, weeding the crops. Her back had started hurting. Sweat and tears drenched her face. She uttered a prayer. If only God could listen.

3 “You’re going to the cornfield, young girl!”

4 Bring along that little thing!”

In Memory of Vaakisa

Kagisano Machai
Tshwaragano Junior Secondary School



A heavy rain drilled the ground of the small village of Toteng. Swords of lightening scored the clouds. Thunder roared like a group of ravenous lions rummaging the thicket. People shivered in their houses. Small children clung tightly to their mothers for safety. It rained with such force that the rivers and tributaries that were once as dry as bone were now filled to capacity.

In the Uarenga homestead, Mr. Tjihera had visited, again. They sat in silence, listening to the rain as it assaulted the roof. When it stopped, the roads were flooding outside. At the instruction of her mother, Vaakisa made tea for the visitor. Mr. Tjihera was a friend to Vaakisa's late father. He and her mother had a chat while Vaakisa busied herself with cleaning the kitchen. The clouds broke apart outside and sunshine kissed the earth. Mr. Tjihera excused himself and left.

"Who is he, Mama?" Vaakisa asked her mother after he had left.

It was her mother's opportunity to tell her. "This might come as a shock to you but Mr. Tjihera is interested in marrying you."

"I don't understand, Mama. How can I be married at my age?"

"You don't need to understand," her mother said. "It's what culture and tradition dictate. I was married at your age as well."

"But what if I don't want to?"

Her mother touched Vaakisa's shoulder, and then held her hand in a loving manner. "This is

a good opportunity for you and your family. It is a blessing that children in the village yearn for. He is a responsible and wealthy man. Fear nothing Vaki, God is great and we are blessed. Your father must be smiling in his grave. Why do you think it just rained? It's your father's way of showing his appreciation and acceptance of this marriage proposal!"

It was the community's expectation that children be married at an early age. Her mother was determined not to let Vaakisa miss this marriage. The community rendered such children, and their parents, outcasts. They wouldn't get any community support and they'd be shunned by everyone in the village.

Although she cried herself to sleep, Vaakisa had no way of resisting the marriage. She didn't have a choice; besides, she was just a child who had to follow the rules.

On the morning of the next day, Mr. Tjihera and his uncle came for their bride. "Vaakisa!" her mother shook her from her sleep. "Get up and go for a bath. Your husband is here to pick you up."

Vaakisa yawned and stretched her arms, trying to shake away the remnants of sleep. Her mother repeated what she had just told her.

"I don't want to get married, mother?" she said.

"I know, my daughter. But you and I can't stop this marriage," her mother told her. "If you miss this marriage, no one else will be interested in marrying you. You'll become like the useless girls I see in the village."

The wedding, celebrated in cultural style, lasted two days. Vaakisa and her husband went to live in their home. Her mother received thousands of Pulas and a kraal full of cattle. Mr. Tjihera was indeed a rich man. Three months down the line, Vaakisa's stomach swelled. The elders advised her on motherhood and how to take care of a baby. But Vaakisa didn't feel like it. She was still confused and had not fully embraced the marriage, let alone the pregnancy.

The pregnancy brought with it constant illnesses. Every now and then, she was admitted at the hospital. The doctors said her body had not yet fully developed for motherhood, and so even the stretching of the stomach muscles resulted in pain to her. And though they fed her lots of healthy food, Vaakisa lost many kilograms of weight. She was frail and fragile.

Labour pains came on a rainy, stormy day. She was rushed to the hospital where she struggled to deliver. The nurses took over an hour trying to help her give birth. There were tubes and pipes connected to her body, machines beeping to monitor her progress and also to give her a little strength for delivery. She moaned and cried, drenched in sweat, tears and blood. When the baby finally popped out, the machines monitoring her stability screamed. The nurses tried to resuscitate her but it was too late for poor Vaakisa. She couldn't make it. She died at labour.

Her mother wept. She cried because she knew that her daughter was against the marriage. She didn't do anything to help her resist it. She was her only child. Now she was left all alone, with the cattle and the money. But all these, the cattle and the money, couldn't equal the value of her daughter. In memory of Vaakisa, her mother visited the grave twice a month, praying and asking God for forgiveness. But most of all, she prayed for the custom of early and forced marriages to end in her community.

Omahangaukiro's Tale

Mpolokang Bontsibokae

Maun Senior Secondary School



RraMauano stormed into the yard, his boots kicking dust into the air. Instead of barking, dogs cowered from his presence. Vihoroka stepped out of the hut just as he spat the words. “Do not play silly games with me! I’m not a child. I am going to marry your daughter and that’s final,” he swayed a finger the size of banana at her. “I already paid the bride prize.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Vihoroka looked at him with confusion.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know. I hear she spreads words in the village that she’s not marrying me, after all my efforts!”

“Relax, everything is under control. The girl will marry you.”

“She better do just that or there shall never be peace in this village,” RraMauano threatened before kicking the dust out of Vihoroka’s yard.

“Oma! Oma!” Vihoroka called her daughter after the enraged man had left. Omahangaukiro came running. “Now tell me, what kind of words do you spread that you’re not marrying RraMauano?”

“I don’t want to marry him,” Omahangaukiro said.

“And who told you that you have a choice?” her mother quipped.

Vihoroka was dogmatic in her culture and Omahangaukiro knew that no matter how much she resisted, she would never win the battle. She considered running away but thought better of it. They would hunt her down and administer a communal punishment of her.

A week later RraMauano started seeing Omahangaukiro. He brought her gifts and Vihoroka was pleased with him. He seemed to be caring a lot. But to Omahangaukiro, the gifts didn't mean anything.

During the wedding day, Omahangaukiro was dressed in a Herero gear. Her five aunts had helped her put it on. Songs of celebration were sung. Omahangaukiro was getting married to one of the rich men in the village. The next day RraMauano and Omahangaukiro left to their new home. Omahangaukiro was only fifteen, forty years younger than her husband.

A few days after they tied the knot, RraMauano declared Oma as a terrible cook. “Your shift starts tomorrow morning, you are the new bartender at the *shebeen*¹ but I won't be paying you,” RraMauano announced. Omahangaukiro did not respond. The following day Omahangaukiro made her way to the shebeen. She was friendly to the customers. When it wasn't busy, Omahangaukiro would sit at tables with customers and engage in small chats. The shebeen ultimately became her place of comfort, a place where no one ruled over her.

One day when RraMauano stopped by the shebeen, Omahangaukiro was smiling to a man in his early twenties. They were openly flirting. RraMauano didn't like the scene. He walked past them, giving Omahangaukiro a hard glance. She felt a chill inside of her. After a few hours, Omahangaukiro knocked off and hurried home. She found RraMauano in the living room. As she walked past him, he hauled her back. “Is he the reason why you have been neglecting your bedroom duties?” he said while making his way towards her. Oma was trembling from head to toe; she had never seen him that angry.

“I...there is nothing going on between us. We were just talking. Please, calm down.”

“Calm down! How can you expect me to calm down when you are sleeping with every man in Habu, except me?”

RraMauano's huge hands came down on Omahangaukiro, striking her face. She fell to the ground only to suffer an assault of kicks to her helpless body. She screamed in pain and then suddenly she was quiet. RraMauano came back to his senses, “Oh my God! Oma...Oma! Oma are you dead? Please open your eyes,” he knelt down beside her unconscious body and cried. *What have I done?*

He stood up and paced around the house. Suddenly, a thought crossed his mind. He walked to the kitchen, opened the gas cylinder and closed all the windows. A pungent smell filled the house. He grabbed a box of matches, lit a stick and the house blew up in flames. Everything burnt to ashes. What a sad, sad way to end a sad marriage.

1 A drinking hole, or a place, usually illegal, where home brewed beer is sold.

Root of Evil

Grace Nkolokosah

Moeti Junior Secondary School



Hell started when I lost both of my parents to a fatal car accident. They were all I had. I didn't have any siblings and so the untimely demise of my parents left me all alone. But my mother's sister took me in to live with her. To me, that was a relief because I couldn't bear the thought of being registered with the town council for monthly orphan hand-outs.

By then I didn't know that my parents had left me enough wealth to survive on. They had money in the bank – a huge amount that could have instantly turned me into a millionaire. With my parents, we had lived a normal life and there were no signs of richness in the family. Coming to think about it later, it made sense that my parents had been saving money to build their dream home and to make sure that I lived a better life. Sadly they died when I was only six.

My aunt adopted me and inherited my parents' house and their bank account – supposedly on my behalf. I was young and my aunt had sought the court's permission to be the rightful guardian to take care of me. That gave her access to everything that my parents had accrued over the years. She moved in with her husband. She convinced me out of an expensive private school to a government school. I didn't know that it was all because of the money. Apparently they had decided that with so much school fees, the coffers would run out soon. They both didn't work, but we lived well. In fact, as years passed by, many people thought I was their daughter.

But the truth is that they lived better than I did: a nice, flashy car, expensive clothes and upper-class restaurants. They were the modern, ultra-sophisticated couple, the kind I read about in novels.

Then the money finished. I think I was fifteen or thereabout. It was as if they didn't expect the money to finish. I did accounting at school and I knew that there were debits and credits in a bank account. The two had to balance in order to maintain the funds. My aunt and her husband never did a debit transaction to the account they stole from me. They ate the money as though it had its own way of duplicating itself. I found it absurd that when the account emptied out, they panicked. They started arguing and fighting frequently, blaming each other for the depletion of the money. Life started to get tough. Like real tough. People talked. People always had ways of knowing things. The selling of the BMW gave way to the selling of other household equipment like the television, computers, microwave oven, beds, the couch and the washing machine. Still, we plunged. They couldn't afford even a cheap *fong-kong*¹ vehicle. My sister's husband left. He was too weak to withstand the pressure and the social humiliation.

My aunt lost her spark. She couldn't attract men anymore and that very fact ate away her flesh. She lost weight and was often emotional. I suffered her verbal abuse. My performance at school plummeted.

A man from Malawi called Mr. Goodwill arrived one day. He had a letter in his hand. A contract, he called it. My aunt summoned me from the kitchen. She was reading the document. After introducing Mr. Goodwill to me, she told me the news. Mr. Goodwill was an old friend of my father, my aunt said. He and my father had signed a contract to the effect that if my father died while I was still young; Mr. Goodwill would take care of me. It was explained to me that my father and Mr. Goodwill had been partners in a business in Malawi.

I moved in with him. Surprisingly, Mr. Goodwill had been staying alone. He supplied me with everything I needed. He was close to me just as a father would be to his daughter. We lived very well, far much better than at my aunt's. We ate out in restaurants. He took me out with him on weekends. Even to some important meetings, I was taken along, though I would only remain in the car while he met his 'clients' or 'business associates'.

The bombshell was dropped one cold morning while I was still snuggled in bed. Mr. Goodwill stepped into my room and sat on the edge of the bed. "We need to talk," he said and I sat up, probing my back against the huge pillow.

"I'm listening," I said, sensing trouble.

"There's a huge business tender I'm applying for - one that would bring billions into the house. I qualify for it."

"Wow, sounds like you will win it," I said.

"But there's a glitch," he said, looking me in the eyes. "I have to be a Motswana or be married to a Motswana."

1 Local slang used for cheap, used and usually imported vehicles.

“Then go ahead and marry a Motswana,” I advised.

“I have to marry you,” he said and I thought I must have misheard him. But Mr. Goodwill explained to me that he never knew my father. There were never any businesses in Malawi that he shared with my father. The idea of a contract with my late father was my aunt’s. He was desperate to marry someone who would make it easy for him to win business tenders; she was desperate for money. So my aunt sold me off to him, under the disguise of a contract with my father.

His words sapped the strength out of me. I felt like my bones had been crushed to powder and my muscles dissolved in water. Shock gave way to anger. I couldn’t believe that this man, whom I had great respect for, had conspired with my evil aunt to fool me.

“Trust me, it’s just the signing of papers but nothing will change. You’ll be my wife only in the certificate. In the house, you’ll be like my daughter.”

“I don’t understand, why can’t you find a woman out there to marry?”

“Those people out there are greedy, Rati, they’ll find ways to control our money and ultimately make it theirs. You’re over sixteen. It’s legal that we can marry.”

I asked about school. Mr. Goodwill promised that nothing would distract my education; he wouldn’t touch me or do any bad things to me. It was purely for the acquisition of the tender, he explained tenderly. He said that after he got the tender, we could divorce and let things roll back to the good old days.

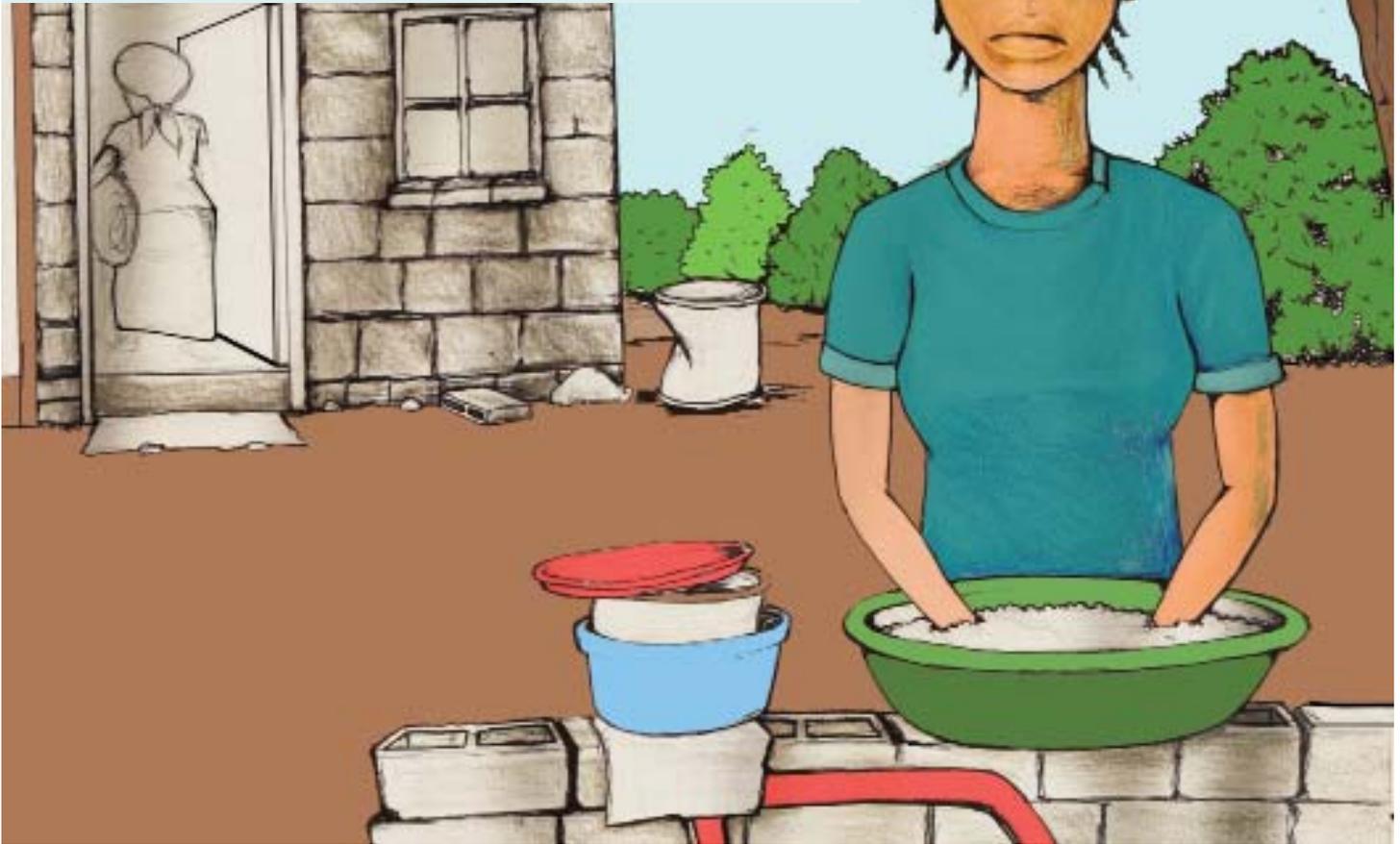
Mr. Goodwill and I got married and that was when hell truly began. He didn’t win the tender. We didn’t divorce. He was frustrated. He forced himself in me, sexually, saying I had to wake up and perform wifely duties. Five years later I was still trapped in the marriage with four children.

Finally he won a big government tender when I was twenty two. But he was also ill. My aunt visited one day and I could tell that she had long depleted the money paid to her for selling me. She must have been drawn by something to our house. She couldn’t just come. She sensed the inevitable death of my husband as it approached. My aunt was like a vulture, circling over a dying animal. I knew it. She wanted the money I would inherit when Mr. Goodwill died. To her, it was all about money. My aunt didn’t know what I had in store for her. This time we were going to lock horns.

So Help Me God

Phemelo Marumo

Moeti Junior Secondary School



I never met my husband before the wedding. But they said he was a good man, and, therefore, I had to be a good girl. I was told that he had a stable, well-paying job and that he was unlike most men in the village who frequented drinking holes with no future whatsoever. I'm very lucky, they told me. But luck or no luck, this knowledge didn't ease me up. I was used to freedom; played games with friends and got wild as I could. How could this man have developed interest in me? What was it in me that attracted him? Who was he anyway?

He was God-sent, I was told. I believed them. See, I was a child, naïve, innocent and oblivious of life facts. They convinced me that with a man like him, I didn't need school. Besides, I had never been an A student. In fact, they bluntly told me that I was a failing slow learner at school. That was true, but it was a bit too crude to put it plainly like that. I hadn't given up in my academics. I was in form one, dreaming of becoming a nurse one day.

That day when I accepted the 'marriage proposal' from the elders, I cried. I cried because I was somewhat confused. I didn't quite fully grasp the whole idea of marriage. I knew little of what was expected of a bride.

Grandma had been married very young, probably much younger than me. After they dispersed, she sat down with me and counselled me. I'd be responsible for the household,

Grandma told me. I had to take care of my husband and the children that I was going to bear for him. And so I left school to become a child bride. They didn't see it that way, of course. And neither did I. At least back then. To them, I was 'the wife'.

During the marriage ceremony, they did weird things on me. They immersed me in a bath sprinkled with foul-smelling herbs. I was dressed in traditional garments with beads all over me. They placed leaves on my mouth and told me to chew some roots. They smeared white soot all over my body, saying it was cleansing me, making me a strong but obedient wife. I believed them. Girls of my age danced to drum beats while a traditional poet recited verses. In the end, I was awarded a bracelet, officially pronouncing me a married woman. Well, a married girl, in truth.

I went off to live with my man. He was twenty-two years my senior. I wouldn't lie, he wasn't abusive. He provided for me: food, clothes, shelter and all the basic needs, except, of course, education. Now I know why they take young girls out of school. They know we'd grow wise and rebel against them; against the entire notion of early and forced marriages.

We lived with his extended family, something that never really bothered me. Truth be told, I never felt like a wife. I felt like a child. He had young sisters and brothers much older than me. As for love, I was robbed of the feeling. Even to date, I don't know what love is. And I'm now thirty years.

A month into my marriage, I moved into my husband's bedroom. Previously I had been given the guest room as part of the culture. Somehow I didn't care where I slept. Besides, I didn't know what sleeping with a man entailed. Remember, I was naïve and wet behind the ears. As he started fondling me that night, touching me at places no one had touched me before, I was shocked, trying to resist. He calmed me down, convincing me that everything was alright; that it was a part of my duties as a wife. I believed him.

Two months later I missed my period, felt dizzy and frequently lost my appetite. I couldn't stand even my favourite foodstuffs. They told me I'm pregnant, though I knew virtually nothing about pregnancy. Your stomach will bulge with a baby inside, they said. Usually women get happy at pregnancy. I wasn't. But because my husband was overjoyed when he learnt about it, I feigned happiness. I liked it when he was happy. It made my parent happy. I had always wanted an heir, my husband would say, beaming like a child.

But there was a lump in my heart, a deep-seated pain that nudged at my conscience, reminding me constantly that I was wrong placed, that this marriage was decadent. But I always ignored it. After all, a woman was meant to feel the pain, someone once told me.

I had a difficult pregnancy period. I was sick with headaches, nausea, cramps and everything. The pain was terrible. I guzzled concoctions of traditional medicines by the litres but there was no difference. Witch doctors couldn't help me. When I was almost nine months, the baby stopped moving in my belly. For two days I didn't feel the usual signs of life inside my stomach. At last, the family agreed that I should be taken to the hospital where a doctor attended me. We were told, my husband and I, that it was highly unlikely that either me or the baby would survive the labour. It was scary. The thought of death made me tremble.

I was forced into labour through the caesarean section procedure. My baby didn't die. I didn't die either. I had become accustomed to my life. I had duties of a wife and mother. I grew wiser

too, through experience. And one thing I knew for sure was that my daughter, who is now fourteen, was going to finish her school and no one was going marry her off at an early age. I am going to protect her with everything I can. They can crucify me for her. I can wear a crown of thorns for her. I can schlep the heaviest weight just to see her free. Heck, I'd rather die for my daughter than see her being married at a tender age.

My husband is an old man now, weak and awaiting death. I had grown fond of him, somehow like a father to me. After he dies, I'm going to marry again – this time a man of my dreams. So help me God

Tahla's Miserable, Short Life

Shathani Nthoiwa

Sedie Junior Secondary School



This is a story of Tahla. It is very short. Just like her life. She lived with her father in a shack at the village of Marobela. Her father was a farmer, the sole breadwinner of the family. But fate decided to take him away through a brutal car accident.

Tahla and her mother were left alone in the shack. Life was tough. Her mother introduced her to a way of life she called 'the hustle'. It involved reckless sex games in exchange for money. It wasn't very different from prostitution. For months, both Tahla and her mother irked a living out of this illicit practice. Then her mother contracted HIV and clients shunned her.

Knowing that she was now out of the game, Tahla's mother sold her daughter off to a fifty year old man called Thabang. She told Tahla that it was only a temporary arrangement and that she would be back soon. It was part of the game, she lied to her daughter. Even though she protested against it, Tahla couldn't win the arguments. Thabang had already paid Tahla's mother, and Tahla went to live with him.

As expected, life with Thabang was a nightmare. What started as a temporary arrangement had now turned into a full-blown marriage. Then one day Tahla's aunt stormed into their home. She told Tahla to pack her things. She had come to take her away. The aunt was mad over what her sister had done. She scolded her and told her that she was very insensitive for selling her daughter away. The aunt reported the matter to the police. Tahla was only thirteen and Thabang was reprimanded, whipped with a criminal charge and locked behind bars.

Sadly, Tahla had caught HIV and died at the age of fifteen, a few months after the passing away of her mother. Recklessness had taken away a life that could have been great in many ways than one.

The Betrayer

Karinadjo Nauta

Moeti Junior Secondary School

Shorobe



My two young brothers and I were raised in the small village of Shorobe. The breadwinner was my father, of course, while my mother also worked hard to keep us orderly and well taken care of.

My mother raised me with love and affection. And though my parents struggled to make ends meet, they had so much hope in me, their eldest child. In response, I worked very hard at school. As time passed by, illness caught up with my father and he grew weak. We watched in pain as cancer ate the life away from him. Ultimately, he died. Devastated and in desperation to not allow starvation creep into the house, my mother found a job of minimum wage. It was better than nothing.

Then my primary school leaving examinations came. Needless to say, I passed with flying colours. I wanted a better future for my brothers and I. I wanted to lift my mother from the humiliation of being labelled 'poor'. And most of all, I had sworn to my late father that I would not let him down. I had told my father that I was going to become a medical doctor. No one would die from cancer ever again.

I started a three-year journey of junior secondary school, still aiming for academic excel-

lence. Competition was stiff but I tried. When not in school, I was locked up in my room doing homework. I loved to read. Education was always in my mind – until Kagiso started visiting. Mother told me he was a family friend. He dropped groceries and toiletries every month. I saw him give mother some money to buy us clothes.

A heavy malaria struck my brother. The illness took longer than usual and my mother had to leave her work so as to care for my brother. Unfortunately, he couldn't make it through and we lost another family member. Now it was just me, my mother and my brother Dave. The family was smaller, but poverty threatened to swallow us. Kagiso was always there in the brink of time, to save us from hunger. It was Kagiso who actually helped us bury Tiro, our late brother. We couldn't have afforded the casket.

One Friday evening we had sports competitions at school and I arrived home late. It was twilight when I walked through the gates. Something was odd because candles were not lit and the huts were dark inside. My mother never allowed darkness to fall before lighting up the houses. But the fire was still glowing in the hearth outside. Maybe they've gone to the shops, I thought. I had to light up the candles.

It was dark in my hut but I knew where the box of matches was. Just as I stepped in, something pushed me further inside. I tripped and fell on the floor, hitting the edge of the bed with my head. I cried in agony.

“Shhh...” A voice in the dark.

My heart raced and I tried to stand up. A boot kicked me in the ribs and I fell back down. “Onto the bed,” the voice commanded.

“Kagiso? Is that you? What are you doing?”

Having realised that I noticed his voice, Kagiso grabbed me, pulled me up and pinned me down on the bed. I could vaguely see his face. There was a glint of moonlight that laced in through the window. He was breathing hard. I clawed at him. But Kagiso's strength was that of a rampaging buffalo. He raped me. Kagiso, our beloved 'family friend', raped me. Oh, the pain! He had all the time in the world. He wasn't worried that someone might come in.

When my mother and brother arrived sometime in the night, Kagiso had long gone. I was crying when I narrated the story to her. I expected my mother to cry with me, to show the compassion that she had always shown. But instead, she looked at me and said; “Don't mention this to anyone else, okay?”

“Why?” I asked, sobbing and sniffing.

“That wasn't rape. He was only taking a taste of you before he could commit to marriage. He told me he's happy. You're getting married.”

“What?” I exclaimed in disbelief. That couldn't be my mother talking.

“So this was a set-up? You deliberately walked away with my brother to create space for him to rape me and you call it tasting! How pathetic, mother!” I snorted.

“My days are numbered. I’m old now. I can’t afford raising the two of you. Kagiso is willing to take care of you and your brother. But you have to be his wife,” my mother said, her abrasive voice hurting my feelings.

“I knew there were strings attached ever since the bastard started visiting. I knew...”

She slapped me hard on the face. “You can’t say that of your husband. You better wake up. In this harsh life, a woman doesn’t have a voice. She doesn’t have feelings. She obliges and follows the commands given to her. Do you hear me?”

“I’m just a girl. I’m not a woman,” I protested.

“Kagiso sees a woman in you. That’s all that matters.”

“You’re a monster, a betrayer. You’re not my mother,” I spat at her.

“Call me by any name you will. Preparations are starting tomorrow,” mother said without blinking an eye.

And with that, my gloomy future began. I was betrayed by my own mother. I plunged into a life I never envisioned – just so that I could live ‘a better life’. But the life of a young girl forced into marriage is never better. It’s only better for the beneficiaries: in my case, my mother and her friend, the so-called my husband. How I despised them both.

The Black Widow

Zandile Chelane

Tsodilo Junior Secondary School



She fiddled with her hands and bit her lower lip. That was what she always did when she was in distress. It often stopped tears from coming out. This time, however, it didn't work. Tears flowed down her cheeks like waterfalls.

Vuyile was sitting in a cubicle at her mother's house in the outskirts of Eastern Cape. She was two weeks away from becoming a wife. It had taken her a week to digest the news, analyse it and come to terms with reality. The prospect of marriage shook her, more so that her so-called 'husband-to-be' was thirty-five – a rich and powerful businessperson eighteen years older than she was.

Vuyi dreamt of being an accountant. She yearned to have her own kids with the husband of her dreams. She would take care of her aging mother. All these, however, were exactly what they were – dreams. The weight of her plight brought tears to her eyes. She felt defeated and hopeless. Thrown into a pit were her wonderful dreams. 'How could they do this? How could they just bury my dreams? Do I deserve this?' she whispered to herself. How greedy was her mother for the love of money! Vuyile had opened up to her, cried on her shoulder, laid on her chest, spoke to her heart, consulted her brain, breathed chest-to-chest with her. The trust she once had in her was quickly fading away. 'But why, mom?' she asked desolately.

"My child, I had no choice," her mother told her. "Don't worry; he will make a superb husband. You are not getting any younger, Vuyi." She looked at her mother with eyes gleaming

with snuffle, and Vuyi knew instantly how foolish and reckless her mother was.

At a fiery crack of dawn on a Saturday, the two families met at Vuyile's homestead. Up above, grey clouds hung heavily, and down below, several vehicles of magnificent elegance parked outside their modest house. From her bedroom, she heard people murmuring outside. She sprung out of her bed and tiptoed towards the window, stealing a voyeuristic view of the front yard. Looking through the glass pane, she could see women in shawls and men in black suits. She caught a fleeting glimpse of the fiancé. Vuyile gritted her teeth and clenched her fists.

"Vuyi!" her mother shouted.

Startled, she leapt away from the window. Ntokozo was a small woman with a bold and grave face. One could tell by her small eyes, full of life and warmth that she had once been a drop-dead gorgeous, a stunning beauty that was now evident in her daughter's face.

"Would you like to meet your in-laws?" Ntokozo asked as she flung into her room.

"Oh mother, please!" she cried.

Ntonkoko fixed her with a withering glare and she knew better than to protest.

"I will never ever forgive you for this, Mama," she spat the words through clenched teeth as they headed outside.

She met with her fiancé for the first time. Khetha was his name. It meant 'to choose' in Zulu. He towered towards the sky - mountain of a chest, broad shoulders and a skin as dark as darkness itself. His lips were thick sausages stuck between a pointed chin and a cave of a nose. Surely, this was not Vuyi's dream image of a husband. The women ululated as he took Vuyi by her tiny hand, a lopsided grin caricaturing his face. Khetha wore a sapphire glossy suit with a grey bow tie. Vuyile sneezed as she caught a whiff of his cologne. Oh gosh, everything was clashing.

The day of the wedding came, attended by the who-is-who of the village, and by invitation only. They occupied decorated chairs and tables that spread in the spacious hall, garlanded with flowers. Hand in hand, Vuyile and her husband Kheta walked in. Applause rattled across the hall, like a gentle roar from inside a seashell. Gifts were in abundance: expensive clothes and shoes, toiletries, electronic gadgets, household equipment and several others. They fed on a buffet of delicacies served by a four-star hotel.

After the celebration, the newlyweds headed to their new home. They rode in silence.

"You should say something," Khetha said. "It was a beautiful wedding after all."

But Vuyi's gaze was fixed at the blurring trees outside. She remembered clearly all the times when she told her mother how successful she wanted to be when she grew up. Her mother had seemed to understand. But that was before the greed for money blocked her senses. Now here she was, and just like the adage, gone were the days and left were the memories.

"You're very beautiful, Vuyi."

She shifted her gaze from the road and pinned it on him. She felt like spitting on him but a chill ran in her bones.

They arrived. It was a huge mansion. A wide, manicured turf carpeted the front yard. As if to

show off, two garage doors were open, revealing a showroom of lustrous Beamers and Benzes. It was the trendiest place Vuyile had ever seen. It made her tremble with fear, instead of glowing with delight. Inside, the ceramic tile sparkled and Vuyile thought she was walking on mirrors. Khetha led her to *their* room. The view should have dropped her jaw, but she stared at it blankly. *I don't belong here*, she thought dismally. *I don't belong here*.

A few minutes later, while Kheta was watching TV in the living room, she took a long bath in luxurious scents and bubbles. But the bath didn't soothe her. She cried. Hard. When she was done with bathing, she walked to the bedroom where she made a life-shattering decision. Comfortable in his cosy couch, Kheta saw her sway into the living room, wrapped in a towel.

"Wow, you look sexy!" he beamed. Vuyile pointed a revolver at him. He gasped. "What the...?"

"Shut up!" she screamed.

"Don't play with that thing, Vuyi. It's dangerous. Why did you search my cupboards? Put it back!"

"You think I'm playing?" she stepped closer to him. "You're a pig, Khetha. I don't wed pigs. I can't even bear the thought of sleeping with you even once."

"Listen, you can't talk to me like that," Khetha said, fury clutching him.

"Sit back down!" she barked and he slumped on the couch. "I'm teaching this savage custom a lesson. You and I will be an example to this barbaric community of yours. These kinds of marriages will end. We are a sacrifice for the people. Our story will be headline news on the radio. Papers will run front page stories about us - the couple that perished in love. Have you read the story of Romeo and Juliet?"

Khetha shook his head, anger pulsing in his eyes.

"Of course you haven't, you pig!" She pulled the trigger, burying the bullet in his brain.

Quickly she swallowed the barrel of the gun and pulled the trigger. *Cluck*. She pulled the trigger again. *Cluck*.

"Oh no!" The empty bullet chamber spun around as she madly pulled the trigger, hoping for a boom that would take her life.

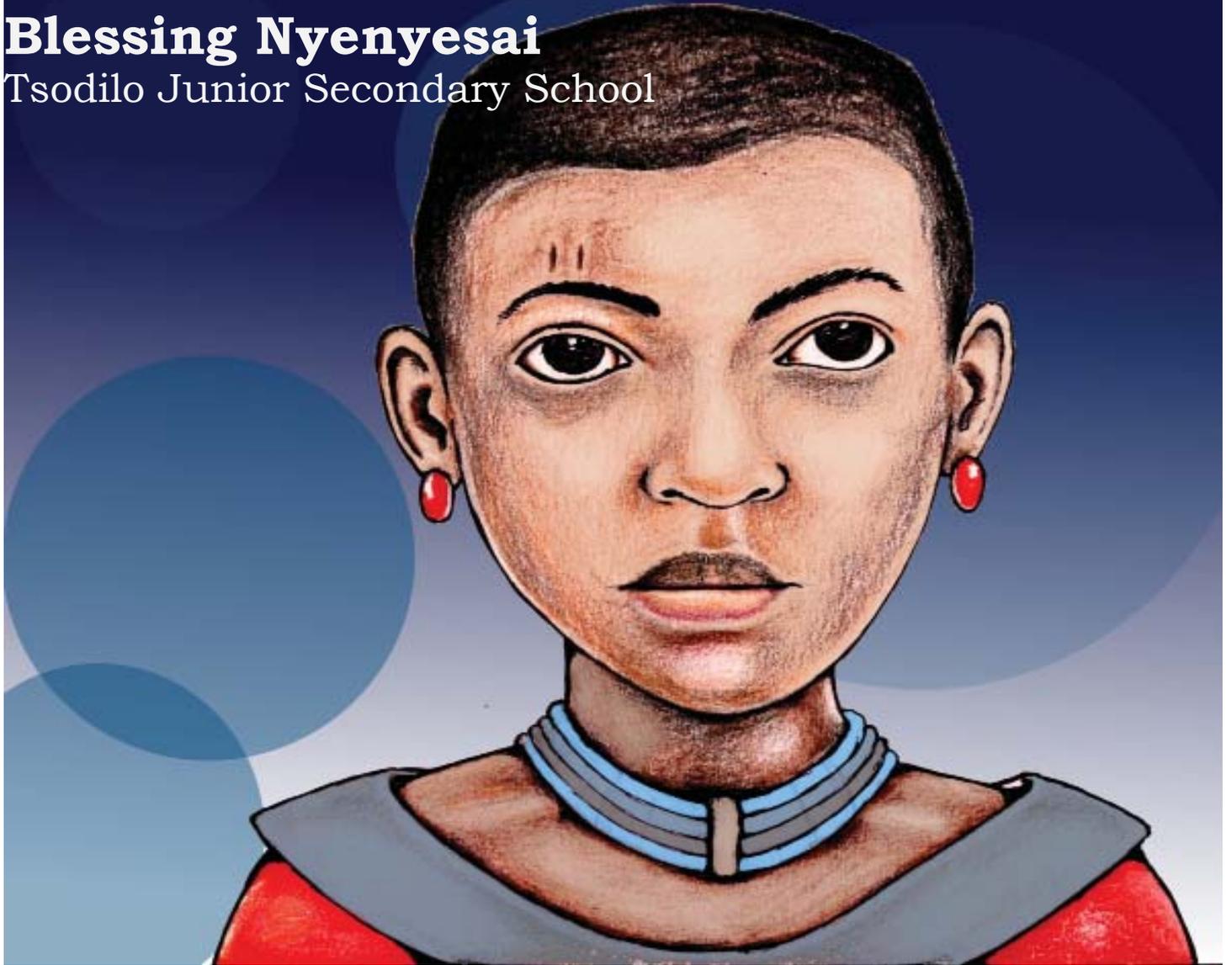
They must have heard the gun shot because the door burst open and men rushed in. She was crying. The towel had dropped to the floor, leaving her stark naked. "He wanted to rape me!" she cried, the gun shaking in her hands.

Two years later, people in her community still called her 'the black widow.' It was a title she had embraced. After all, she deserved it.

The Curse of Beauty

Blessing Nyenyesai

Tsodilo Junior Secondary School



They gave me away when I was fourteen. Exactly the way you would trade a goat for a bag of sorghum. That's how I was sent away. I now knew how those slaves back in history felt when they stood on an auction block, their teeth and ears and eyes examined before the highest bidder could snatch them away. Marriage here is just like the slave trade – men bestowed with wealth snatch away young, pretty girls out of their innocence.

The day I became a bride, or rather, a child bride, I knew that it was my looks that betrayed me. I grew up into a pretty flower, with short, neat hair, eyes big, brown and shiny like marbles. I had cheeks as smooth as tomatoes, titanium white teeth with a smile that could melt even the hardest of rocks. I knew this because boys at school told me so. They'd write waxing lyrical about me, speak poetry of me. But I always played hard to get – the stunning girl who everyone knew as Ms. Perfect. But then, before I knew it, I became a victim of my own beauty.

In my imaginations, I've always had a man of my dreams: good looking, robust, funny, charming, and, of course, a gifted lover. Money wasn't an issue. Give me a poor, dedicated lover

with all these qualities and you have yourself my heart. But unbeknownst to me, marriage came knocking on my door at a very early age – with none of the qualities I had envisioned in a man.

It was on a Saturday noon when my father called. “Abby! Abigail my daughter!” he shouted and I responded promptly, running to the dining room where he was having his lunch. “Abigail,” he started and I knew there was something. He hardly called me by my full name, unless there was something. “Do you know MmaGorata’s daughter Lesego?” I nodded. “And Boitumelo, the daughter of MmaMoikani?”

“I know them, dad? What about them?” But I knew. Those girls were now housewives. One was seventeen while the other nineteen. Both were married at fourteen. “Don’t say it dad, don’t say it,” my voice was already wavering.

“You’re fourteen, Abigail. You know what culture dictates that we do. We don’t want to be a cursed family. You’re getting married, Abby.”

“But dad...”

“Listen to me,” he cut through. “With this extreme beauty of yours, very soon men will be killing each other for you. Just the other day there was a battle at the *kgotla*¹, two men were fighting each other over you.”

I was scared at the thought of men scrambling for me without my knowledge. His tone revealed to me that my father wasn’t joking. I asked about school and he waved it away, saying that where I was going, it was better than school. How old was he? I wanted to know. Sixty years, my father told me and I felt the world spin around. This was betrayal. I hurled words at him but once my father had made a decision, there was no convincing him otherwise. At that point, I missed my mother who died while I was seven. “Your mother would have loved this, Abby.” He said. “I know seventy-year olds who married girls of nine-years! Now wipe those tears *o ise o ntene!*²

My last day at school was hell. Somehow word had sneaked out and everyone knew I was getting married. It was even clear from the way I was reacting from their snappy comments. When they saw the ‘engagement’ wire wound around my finger, I turned into a spit bowl of the school. Suddenly the gorgeous girl was the shunned leprosy patient. The entire day I walked with downcast eyes, like a dog with a tail tucked between its legs.

Wedding arrangements were made and I was given away. And so I went. My husband’s previous wife had died two years earlier, I was informed. We lived with his two daughters and a son. All of them were older than me. It was clear from the day I walked in that the girls didn’t like me. I was obviously too beautiful. I didn’t like the way his son looked at me. He had an eye of envy on me. Two months down the line, his father caught him winking at me during dinner. Verbal war erupted between father and son.

That day when I walked in, peace had walked out of the house. Several times my husband clashed with his son. The daughters, my step daughters, thought I was the cause and they despised me. They made my life miserable in any way they could.

1 Customary court

2 “...before I go mad!”

“You should be ashamed of yourself, you gold digger,” one of the girls, Amantle, said to me. “Dad has cancelled us from his will and placed you as the sole benefactor. You persuaded him to do so!”

I was clueless of what she was talking about. I didn't even know what a will was. But the girls were not done with me. The torture continued, especially when my husband was away on a business trips.

I was diagnosed pregnant on my second month with my new family, much to the shock of my husband. “How on earth did this happen? I hadn't even started sleeping with you!” he screamed at me. I told him that every time when he was out of the house, his son forced himself on me, and threatened to kill me and commit suicide should I spill the beans.

The old man was devastated. He summoned his son. Without listening to his story, he whipped him severely and banished him to the cattle post where he lived a miserable life. Her daughters ran away from home and no one knew where they stayed. Rumour had it that they lived in Gaborone. When my husband died seven years later, no one but myself knew that our son was, in fact, my son alone and not his. It wasn't even the child of his son. Clandestinely, I had sneaked out and slept with another man in the village, just to punish and scorn this savage custom. You don't mess with a beauty with brains.

The Man, My Husband

Bofelo Mokomoto

Moeti Junior Secondary School



To me, he had never been a husband. He had always been *the man*. But of course I was instructed to call him my husband. It was my mother and my uncle who had forced me into this man's life. I never address him by his name because I forgot it as soon as it was mentioned to me. So, I didn't know my husband's name. This arrangement, me living with this man, was called marriage. I had heard this word before, but never had I anticipated entering matrimony at the age of fourteen. I did have my own dreams of a better tomorrow. But it seemed the future was too far away for the patience of my mother and her brother. They found the man because he was well-off and could provide not only for me but also for them.

I blamed it on hunger. We would go for days without food. But every time as we went through these hardships, I'd tell my mother my dreams, and she found comfort in them. But dreams are not reality. My mother took a daring decision.

Oddly, I was excited to live with the man, my husband, because he supported us and encouraged me to dream. He paid my school fees, bought me all the basic needs and took care of my mother. In return, I tried to perform the wifely duties, though I wasn't sure if I was doing my best. I never felt any emotional connections to this man. I didn't feel a thing for him. There was even a boy at school that I think I loved. But other children knew that I was married. They mocked me and made my life unbearable at school. *Hello madam wifey, don't you miss your husband? Or Look at her, she's getting fat. Big man really takes care of her!* The remarks

were course and hurting but I tried to ignore them.

The man, my husband, started abusing me physically, verbally, emotionally and sexually. He would taste the food I cooked and spit it back into the plate, calling me a useless slut who couldn't cook. He broke too many glasses in fits of fury. He barked at me, slapped me, punched me, kicked me and raped me whenever he wished. One day I threatened to report him to the police.

"For what?" he said, leering down at me while closing up his zip after one of those joyous moments of his. "Rape? They'll laugh at you and send you back home like a lost dog. Husbands don't rape wives, idiot kid!"

At school, I was written 'abuse' all over me: loss of weight, blue eyes, scratches and scars, swollen lips and several other embarrassing signs. I began to fail almost all subjects as I found it hard to concentrate in classes. My friends shunned me.

The man, my husband, decided to withdraw me from school to save me the humiliation. I willingly obliged. Being home twenty-four seven was the worst thing ever. School had given me a chance to take a breathing space from him. Now I was entirely at his mercy. I would cringe even as he lifted his hand to scratch his nose.

One night I ran away. I hadn't even packed anything. I just wanted to run. It didn't matter where I was going. I wanted freedom. But freedom didn't last because the man, my husband, found me and brought me home.

He was mad at me. "Why do you disobey me?" he demanded to know. I was sitting on the couch, drawn in a defensive ball, knees to my chin.

"I want freedom," I said and he laughed – a jarring sound completely devoid of mirth. "I can't take it anymore."

"You want freedom?" he laughed again and turned to face me. "Would you rather be a well-fed slave or a hungry free bird?"

I sobbed into my knees. I expected a shattering blow to my temple, or a kick, or spittle of saliva on my face. The man, my husband, stood up and headed for the bedroom. "Make me something to eat and come to bed."

I was awoken by a loud knock on the door. "Who is it?" the man, my husband, shouted.

"Police! Open up!"

He picnicked and jumped to his feet. "Get in the wardrobe!" he hissed at me.

"Why?" I asked.

"Get the hell in the wardrobe, now!"

"No!" I shouted so that whoever was outside could hear me.

"Open up or we break down this door!" the police screamed from outside.

He glared at me, his face contorted in an angry scowl. I had seen many versions of that face before. I wasn't going to get scared now.

"You get in the wardrobe first," I told him. Under normal circumstances, I knew he would have mashed me to pulp. But my hope was just by the door outside. The living door outside imploded, followed by a squad of policemen rushing in. The man, my husband, rapidly stepped out of the bedroom into the living room. I followed him. There were six policemen and a woman that I instantly recognized as my class teacher Ms. Dipuo. She pointed at me.

"That's her," she said. "And that's him," pointing at the man, my husband.

"Who are you? What is wrong, officers?" the man, my husband, asked. I could pick a tremor in his voice. I derived pleasure in seeing him scared. I wished they could scare him more, or better yet, kick his butt.

"You are under arrest," one of the policemen said.

"For what? She's my wife, for Christ's sake!"

"You know what you did." The policeman concluded. And they took him away. Because I wasn't a suspect, my former teacher took me with her in her car. We followed the police to the station. I was a key witness, she told me.

It turned out that the marriage was counterfeit. There had never been a ceremony, but only the fake certificate. I was not, in fact, married to this man. He was charged with forgery, molestation, abuse, statutory rape and rape. As prison doors opened for him, school doors did the same for me. A future, at last.

The Man with Metal Eyes

Phetso Asele

Sedie Junior Secondary School



Growing up in the mining town of Jwaneng, I was labelled a queen; my skin likened to milk. Although I acknowledged myself as beautiful, beauty started stinging me. The attention I was getting was too much for my comfort. I felt that people exaggerated my beauty. I hated mirrors. Mirrors reminded me of my beauty – the very beauty that had turned not into a blessing but rather a curse.

At times I'd listen to my parents, especially my mother, boasting to her mates about how much of a 'snow-white' I was. My dad brought home his friends to see his Cinderella. I felt like a toy on display. I was only fifteen for goodness sake. What is beauty to a fifteen year old girl? I loathed the good looks I was associated with. I couldn't even enjoy my playtime with other children because instead of playing, they would be so fascinated with my beauty; touching my 'soft' hair, running their fingers on my velvety skin, commenting about my magnetic eyes, intrigued with the shape of my pert nose, murmuring over the subtleness of my luscious lips. Inside, I'd cry a little, wishing to have a 'normal' childhood. Each time I arrived home, I'd cuddle in my bed and cry, cursing the day I was born and the beauty I possessed.

My 16th birthday was fast approaching. I prayed daily that no plans for a party would suffice. I've had enough attention already. I could imagine the gazes, the whispers and the whistles, the touches that the party would evoke. Oh snap, my mother called me, to inform me about the party; not to ask or seek my opinion on the matter, and knowing her, I remembered to just nod and vacate the room. Swiftly, party plans were ongoing; the circus cartoonist, the

character cake, theme colours and the menu were all ready to go.

The day of the party finally arrived. I was not allowed to go outside until all guests - the young and the elderly - had arrived. I sat on my bed with tears burning in my eyes. Other girls out there would kill for a day like this. But here I was, trembling with frustration and anger. I could hear my mama's footsteps down the hallway. Quickly I wiped away my tears and forced a smile. She extended her arms towards me. I pinned my head on her chest and wished that she could say 'you don't have to attend if you don't want to', but no, she ushered me towards the door that led outside. I could sense a pulse of excitement out there. I tried to walk as steadily as possible, faking joy, but I couldn't. Drained and emotionless, I stepped out through the door. The guests burst into a melodious birthday song.

I sensed a pair of eyes on me, their weight as heavy as metal. I turned and saw *him*. I saw his metal eyes gazing at me. When we locked eyes, he didn't look away. He wore a weary smile but the depth for his gaze unnerved me. I ignored him for a while, chit-chatting with other girls. Now and then I was called to be paraded among the elderly. This was a norm but I dreaded every moment.

To my relief, the party ended. When it did, the man with metal eyes came towards where I was sitting with my parents. He handed a briefcase to my dad. Gracefully, my dad opened it and I could see stacks of cash. I was shocked. Daddy looked towards me and said "baby, this is your birthday gift". For a moment I thought he meant the cash, but no, he was pointing at the man. I looked at them, utterly confused. My mother's eyes spoke it all. She gave me an encouraging look and asked me to go with the man. As confused as I was, I obeyed. I was raised never to question elders.

We drove in silence for a while in his evidently expensive car, but halfway towards his house, he told me how our marriage had been arranged since I was five. He told me the briefcase had a million Pula in cash. I couldn't bring myself to speak, and let alone look into his eyes. Something was stuck up in my throat, making it impossible for me to breathe. The pain was unbearable. When he finished talking, it was clear that he didn't expect me to say anything. We drove again in silence. My head was spinning, a thousand voices echoing in it.

It was a huge house. The most beautiful I had ever seen. He showed me around and encouraged me to feel at home. After gulping a glass of whisky, he directed me to 'our' bedroom. It was a struggle going up a long, winding staircase. He told me he had to go out to run a few errands. His eyes still had a weird weight on me. As he closed the door behind him, I sat on the bed. Through a film of tears, I took a slow view around the spacious bedroom antiquesly furnished in grandeur. I stood up and walked the carpet with feeble feet, afraid of even touching surfaces. Then bingo! A box of tablets! I snatched the box and opened it. My mind raced. I had to decide fast. As quick as lightning, I stashed a hand full of pills into my mouth, rushed to the bathroom and downed them my throat with tap water. Everything went black.

I woke up to the sound of a beeping machine. My head was heavy and my bones weak. I flipped open my eyelids and a gash of white light stung my pupils. I closed them again. I could hear voices besides me. I couldn't make out what they were saying. I opened my eyes again and realised that I was in a hospital. My husband was standing by the bedside, my father and a doctor flanking him. He came closer to me. This time I sensed some kind of sincerity and sympathy from him, but I looked away. I feared his eyes. He held my hand, squeezing it gently. Then he leaned and whispered into my ear, "A million bucks is not a joke, young

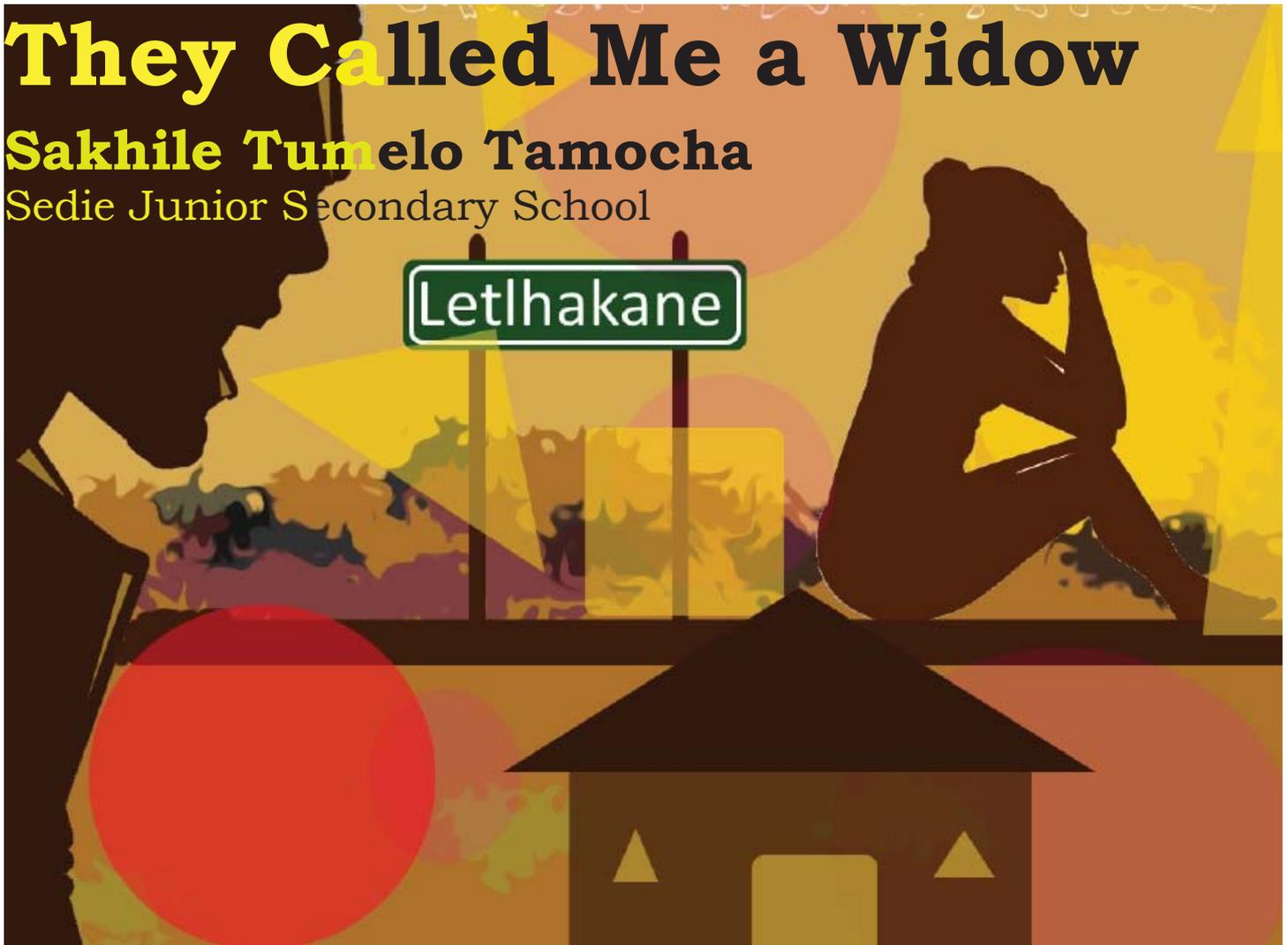
girl. What are you doing here? This isn't the kind of bed you should sleep on. Get well and come back home."

As he spoke, I could see my world getting darker and darker. Gently, he turned my head so I could look at him. His metal eyes bore at me. This time the weight wasn't just physical, I felt it in my soul. I knew I had to devise a better way to die.

They Called Me a Widow

Sakhile Tumelo Tamocha

Sedie Junior Secondary School



With the daily, evil stares that drilled holes in me, I had difficulty moving around the village. The harsh whispers made my life miserable. Everybody expected me to be a mourning widow. I was regarded an outcast and condemned for refusing to mourn someone I never loved, a person whose blood was in my hands, who robbed me of my innocence. I was never going to mourn. Over my dead body I swore.

I grew up with my mother and father. They were happily married and madly in love - a living example of a perfect marriage, envied by many in the village, including myself. But there was a little problem; my dad was careless with money. He spent hugely on unnecessarily things - the ephemeral glitters of the world. He had not even bothered to insure our family.

Though we came from a small village called Dagwi, we lived in Letlhakane, where my father worked in a mine. On a fateful 21st of January my father died during a mine explosion. I was ten years old then. It was an awful, awful day with pain searing my heart, piercing like a hot needle. I cried bitter tears for daddy. A few days after the funeral, my mother told me that I couldn't go to school anymore, saying that daddy had not insured us and all the money was spent on funeral expenses. We were, she explained, basically broke. My mother's behaviour changed drastically. She drowned herself in liquor. Every day she'd crawl into the house stinking of cheap alcohol.

A year passed by and I still hadn't stepped through the gates of school. Mother's drinking

habits worsened by the day. She had started another habit of sleeping out on some days, and I'd miss her terribly. Then men started taking advantage of her, buying her traditional brew in exchange for sex. But in no time, she lost value to the vultures that fed on her carcass. They didn't find her attractive anymore. That was the beginning of hell for me. I became a bartering object. Men touched my breasts for pleasure and bought her beer. They stuck their foul-smelling tongues in my mouth and squeezed my buttocks. I never imagined it could get any worse until she brought a man home and ordered me to prepare a meal for him while they drank. My mother quickly excused herself, telling me to please the man however he wished. The man complimented me of my beauty, of how wonderful a cook I was. He asked me to sit on his lap while he fondled my breasts. I was scared to death, wanting to scream. The man, whose name I later learnt to be Mike, bought groceries for us on regular basis. He also gave me money for new clothes and toiletry. At first I thought he was going to be my next daddy. Wishful thinking.

One day I eavesdropped on their conversation. Mike had changed his mind about giving us money and food. He told my mother that he wanted to marry me first. I hoped for my mother to disagree, but she didn't, of course, being the drunkard that she was. My head spun in circles as I frantically paced the kitchen floor. He must have been well over forty years and I wasn't even a teenager yet. Oh Lord, have mercy!

My mother arranged a traditional wedding for Mike and I. Disgraced and sad, I was very disappointed in my mother for the decision she had made. She insisted that she was doing it for me, for us, but I knew she was doing it to nourish her bad habits. I got married on my eleventh birthday and moved out of my father's house to go and live with a man I abhorred. To imagine I had to call him my husband was torture. I lost weight and fell sick spiritually and physically.

The house was big and beautiful. It was everything a woman would dream of. But mine were not the dreams of a woman. They were dreams of a child, wishing to back to school, not wanting to be a housewife.

One night I woke up from my sleep, hearing some movements outside. Lately there had been some reports that burglars were on the loose in the neighbourhood. Threatened by unknown forces outside, I tiptoed to the kitchen and snatched a bread knife. I put it under my pillow and listened intently again. The movements had gone. I slept.

I woke up again to the sound of the door opening. It was Mike entering my bedroom. He tucked himself in my blankets. I had not yet started sleeping with Mike. This was going to be that first moment I had always dreaded. The moment that had given me nightmares had now arrived. I pleaded with him to go back to his room; that I wasn't ready for him. He shushed me with a wave and told me to relax. He touched my behinds and I cried. Mike reminded me that I was his wife. He squeezed the small balls of my breast while he took off my pyjamas, breathing hard. Mike forced himself in me, tearing me with a pain I had never known existed. I screamed, clawing at him but Mike only gained speed and pleasure. I asked him to stop. Mike didn't. I remembered the knife under the pillow. Swiftly, I pulled it out and sliced Mike's throat. Wide-eyed, he gurgled, blood spraying my face. Mike died in a combination of pain, shock and pleasure. He slumped on me, his body writhing.

Just then, as I pushed Mike to the floor, a window broke outside. I froze. Then I heard the door being kicked in. It sprang open and footsteps hurried in. It was dark in the house. No

one switched on the lights. I opened the bedroom door and they came running towards me. Not realising what had just happened in my room, the thieves unleashed their violence on me before I could see them clearly. They punched and kicked me until I lay cold on the floor. I heard one of them declaring that there was no one in the house. They took time stealing jewellery, cutlery and electrical appliances.

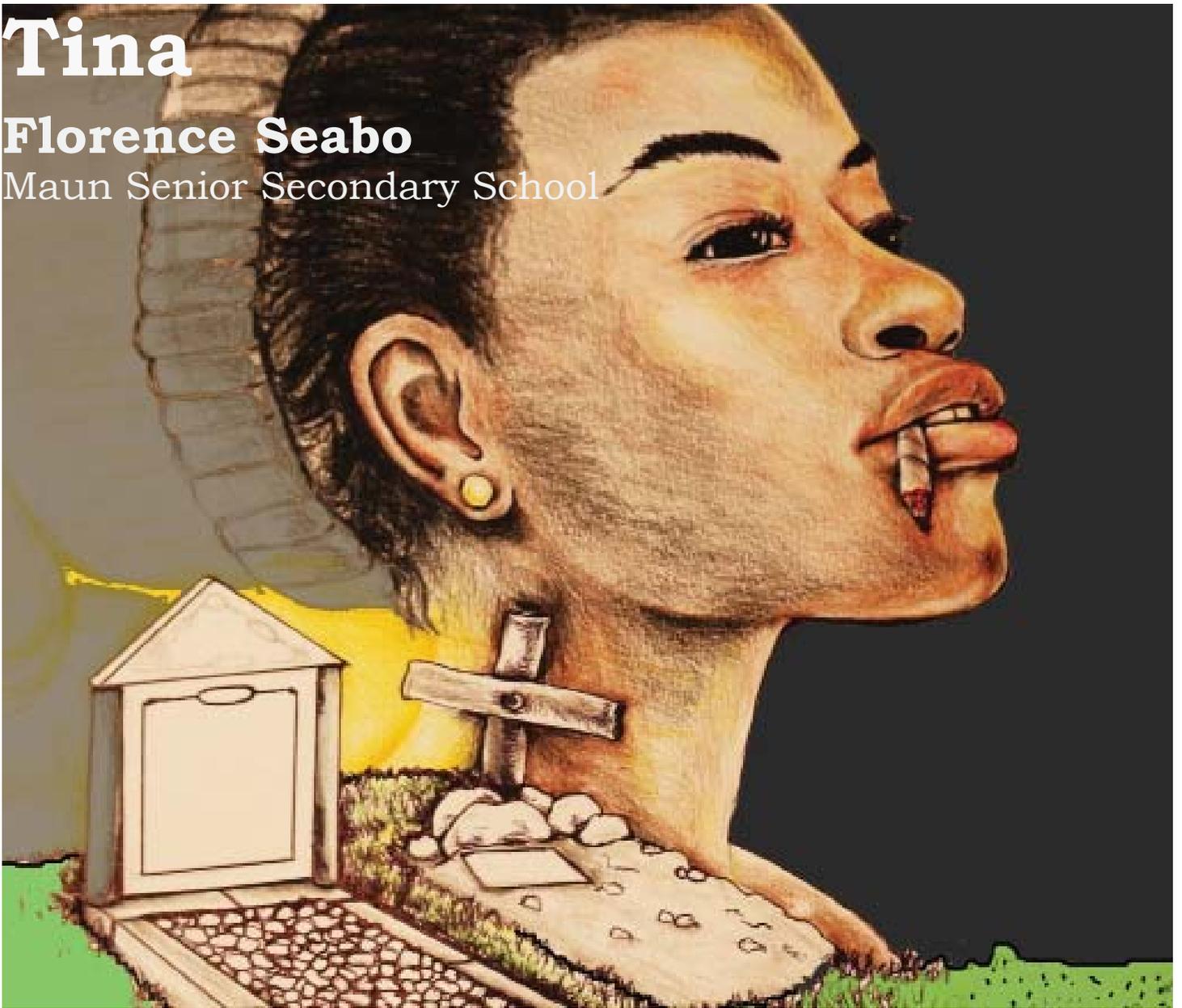
I was 'rescued' the following morning. Newspapers carried the headlines: *Thieves Break into a House, Kill Husband, Maim Wife and Run Away with Valuables.*

After the funeral I moved away from his house. I couldn't go back to my mother either. My loving aunt took me in. But all eyes fell on me. Just when I thought I was liberated from that marriage in hell, the community expected me to mourn the death of man I loathed. They called me a widow. But hell no, I was a child, looking ahead with so much hope.

Tina

Florence Seabo

Maun Senior Secondary School



Downtown in Puo's Luxury Apartments was Tumelo Ruri's residence. Morning light found Tina Mokane sleeping in her bed. The light brushed her long-lashed eyes just as she was opening them. Then the light touched the cornea of her eyes – two deep brown marbles with thick brows. She had the skin of an infant, soft and supple - caramel on a petite body. Many a time she was complimented on her beauty. Tina pushed away the duvet and stepped on the thick carpet. She pushed her feet into the pink, fluffy, rabbit slippers and made her way to the bathroom.

"Why not make it a shower?" she almost jumped but laughed instead. It was her husband Tumelo shouting from the kitchen. "This Maun water is a problem, you know that. Shower is more economic on the water!" It was true, for they had spent the last couple of weeks without water supply. She ignored him. Tina loved her bath. She slid out of her pink, silky night dress, dipped into the bathtub and heaved a sigh of delight.

A knock on the bathroom door and Tumelo breezed in, handing her the Blackberry Z10. "It's your mum," he said. He sniffed the flowery aroma of bathroom salts emanating from Tina's bubble bath.

‘Mum?’ She spoke into the phone, pouting her lips to him playfully.

In the phone, her mother said, “I need you to come fetch your daughter. Your father and I are leaving mid-morning. There is a crisis that needs our attention in Gaborone. Our flight is in three hours. Please hurry.”

She relaxed in the bath. She was not going to waste such a luxurious moment. In the bedroom, Tumelo had placed a tray of colourful and mouth-watering breakfast. The tingling aroma of the toast; the spice on scrambled eggs and juicy sausages beckoned at her. Tina spread her lips into a wide smile, exposing paper-white teeth. Tumelo was a great cook. He sat lotus position on the bed like a monk, the tray balanced on his thighs. “Ahh, babes, you really didn’t have to. I should learn how to cook,” she said, sealing her words with a peck on his lips. She picked a toasted slice and bit on it, then sipped on the freshly squeezed orange juice.

“Anything and everything for my lady,” Tumelo said as he shoved a fork full of eggs in her mouth.

“My mother wants us to go pick Nana,” Tina said as she chewed. She gulped a mouthful of juice. “They’re leaving this morning.”

“What about your school today?”

“I would have to drop Nana at a day care centre. With the exams coming soon, I can’t afford to miss a lesson”. Tina was a first year at the local university campus. She was determined to make good first impressions.

Tina always dressed in style. She shimmied into a pair of tattered boyfriend jeans that Tumelo loved so much. Over that, she threw an oversized gold-trimmed shirt with folded long sleeves. She punctuated it with a gold chain before pushing her feet into a pair of ankle low white Converse sneakers. To complete the outfit, she slung a trendy, slim purse over her shoulder, and a touch of Versace fragrance. She winked at her husband.

Tumelo and Tina lived in a double story apartment. Young as she was, they were a married couple. The marriage came after Tumelo impregnated her at the age of fifteen. To save their daughter from social scorn, a customary marriage was arranged. Tumelo came from a well-off family and Tina’s parents saw the incident as a great opportunity.

Tina drove a posh VW Golf VI along the streets of Maun. After picking her daughter from her parent’s, she drove to the day care centre to drop her off. She had to make it snappy; her time for school was also up. The road to the day care centre wound along the edge of a local mini game reserve in the middle of Maun. Her cell phone quivered and fell on the car carpet. Tina leaned down to pick it up.

“Mom, look out!” Nana screamed. When Tina raised her eyes back to the road, the car hit a warthog that was crossing the road. The animal spun up while the car veered off the road and hit a streetlight post. The seat catapulted Nana forward, smashing her on the windscreen while Tina’s head smacked on the steering wheel, breaking open the airbag.

Five hours later, Tina woke up in a hospital bed, disorientated and sedated with drugs. Tu-

melo sat by her side. “My baby,” she asked. “Where is my baby?” Tumelo shook his head, tears glistening in his eyes. “Tell me that Nana is okay, Tumelo, please!” There was no response. Tina broke down and cried like a baby.

A week later after Nana’s funeral the two families gathered. Tumelo’s parents had bad news for Tina’s parents.

“There is no reason why your daughter should still be tied to our son. The bond that tied them is no more,” said Tumelo’s father.

‘What are you trying to say, mister?’ Tina’s mother said.

“A divorce is a very long process. We are going for an annulment,” he explained.

‘You must be high on marijuana, aren’t you?’ Tina’s mother was getting agitated.

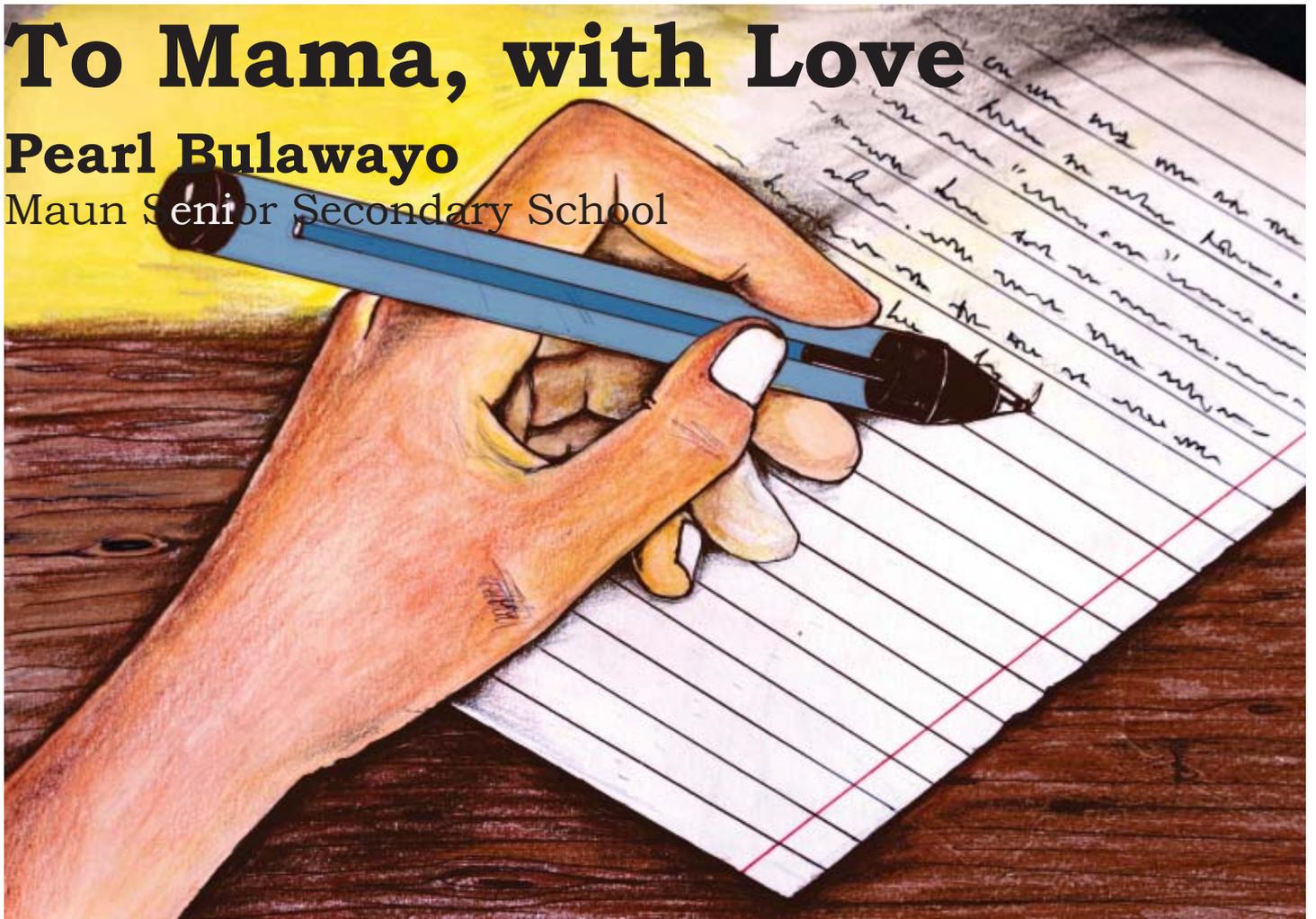
They argued for nearly two hours. In the end, a resolution was reached. Tumelo’s family didn’t want Tina anymore. They had convinced their son that it was bad luck for a first daughter to die at that age; that it was harbinger of bad things to come. She had to leave Tina, lest they all lose their riches. It was a sign of God’s disapproval of the marriage, they told him. There were too many beautiful young girls in Maun.

Tina’s family lost the battle. The marriage was called off. Sunk in her wheelchair with her face buried in her hands, Tina cried until her tears ran out. She was not allowed anywhere near Tumelo, who changed abodes to Francistown. She didn’t have the lavish life anymore. She couldn’t even afford school fees and dropped from university. She resorted to drugs – a young girl who was married off immaturely and suddenly abandoned. Tina would have made a great wife – and with such splendour of beauty, Tina could have been next Miss World. Her not yet fully developed thinking capacity led her to a suicidal decision.

To Mama, with Love

Pearl Bulawayo

Maun Senior Secondary School



“My girl listen to me, you are getting married. I know you hate the thought of it, but nothing can be done. *Ke ngwao ngwanaka*¹. I was married to your father at the age of 14. Now be a good girl. When you get there, behave. Be a woman. *Monna o a tlhokomelwa*². Show him love and he will do the same. Wipe those tears, my girl, smile, and be happy. Marriage is a blessing.”

She sat by the veranda with her son, recalling her mother’s words four years earlier. With her head bowed down, she used her shawl to dry her eyes, afraid that Boi might see her weeping. Holding on to the end of the stoop, she limped into the house, afraid of hurting herself more. Her husband Tirelo, usually called RraBoi, had been exercising his muscles on her, again. Her body looked disfigured and bruised all over. Boi stood up with a troubled face and said, “Mama, you are not okay.”

As the new dawn broke, rays of sunlight made way through the transparent curtains of the couple’s room. Dineo’s shadow fell across the room as she knelt to give grace to the one above. She was by then nineteen years old while her husband was forty. Each Friday, RraBoi left home early in the morning. This time around, Dineo tried to stop him since it was their son’s fifth birthday. She had prepared a cake for him and wished for them to celebrate together. RraBoi’s face turned red with rage. The next thing their child Boitshoko, was by the door, listening to the sound of her mother screaming in anguish to the lashes she was receiving.

1 It’s part of our culture, my daughter.

2 Take care of your husband.

RraBoi stormed out of the room, looked at his son, then swiftly back to Dineo and ordered, "I need my dinner ready when I come back."

Dineo wept.

A few minutes later, she took a pen and paper and wrote;

To Mama, with Love. Dear mama, I still remember your words, "Marriage is a blessing." I wonder if you would still utter the same words after having seen the kind of life I live here. I had long wanted to pay you a visit, but as you know, this devil designated to be my husband, completely rules me. He's the kind that can make even Lucifer cringe in fear of him.

I am hurt mama. I no longer know who or what I am. I don't know my purpose either. An identity of long dresses and oversized garbs has become my culture. Like a lined paper, I am scared all over. I am beaten, severely, every day. I bleed, mama, from the lashes I receive, from his punches. I swallowed a tooth and I weigh like a feather. He forces himself in me every time he comes home late from drinking. Anything he wishes do with my body, he does it. It's like my body is his marionette, you know, that puppet you can control without any resistance from it. Remember you once told me that this body of mine is a temple, that it is holy? Well, it feels like a toy now. You said I should be a good girl. God knows I am at my best. His family treats me like trash, I work like a slave. They don't care about me, even when I am not well. They spit on me, Mama. My son says 'sorry, mom' to me whenever I cry. At his age, five years, imagine that.

I was a bright student at school, I'm sure you remember that. The School Head knew my name. I was one in a million. Sometimes I look at my merit certificates, remembering the good old days of school. My future was promising. I had big dreams. My teachers, my friends, they all had great expectations of me. Heck, I was even a role model to my classmates! Had it not been of this nightmare you term marriage, I would be somewhere. But here I am, in life's most unpleasant stay; in a grave you call my home. I'm like a walking dead, covered with clouds of grief. I struggle to subsist from dying of this calamity.

Sometimes I question your love and care for me. I expected you to stand up for me, to protect me from this so-called marriage. But you didn't Mama. You helped this system of an archaic culture force me to marry a forty-seven year old man. I'm still sixteen Mama, in case you forgot. Your interests lay not in my feelings but rather on the material riches they gave you. I trusted you. I thought you were different from the rest of them who sell their young daughters to uneducated old rapists of this village. You were my only hope Mama...

I'm sending my son to deliver this letter to you. I don't need to tell him anything. My son knows my trauma. He understands. I told him that after giving you the letter, he's not coming back here, because I won't be here either. Do me one big favour; take care of my son. Prove your worth, Mama. Don't send him back to this hellhole. Prove to me that you're not entirely heartless. And please, don't worry about me. I'm out to change this life your culture and society has chosen for me. Though battered and bruised, I'm not broken. I still have my dream. Someday I'll be back. Hopefully. Oh, tell this monster you call my husband that he should look for his ring in the rubbish bin outside, and tell him that I'm gone. Tell him that he can't stop me from my God-given destiny. No one can. And tell him that he won't find me, no matter where searches.

Please don't waste your energy trying to look for me or worry over me. I'm everywhere: above you, around you, below you. Look for me in the eyes of my son.

With love, your daughter, Dineo.

Quickly she packed some clothes for Boitshoko, gave him the directions and sent him running. As for RraBoi's meal, she filled the plate with sand and stones then covered it neatly for him to find. It would serve him right, the bastard. Dineo fled.

She had a long way to go, but Dineo spent the first night in a local hotel. Upon arrival at the hotel, she found an open-mic poetry performance going on. It was her time to spill out the green bile that had accumulated in her over the years. She approached the microphone. Poetry was talent to her. Dineo performed a poem titled 'It Is Well'. With soulful metaphors she painted the story of her life and found herself in tears at her last line. She smile and silently repeated the line; *Yes I Am Gone.*

We Could Smell Freedom

Laone Aaron

Tshwaragano Junior Secondary School



“Open the damn door, you idiot!” he screamed from outside. His boots hammered the door. I could hear the hinges creaking. The latch would soon snap. “I know you’re in there.” His voice was slurred from the effects of alcohol. His breaths came in short gasps, signaling that he was incensed. I knew my husband Kasimir. Kasimir Thomas was his full name. We had been married for four years, and I was still a teenager.

On that Saturday night when he banged the door outside like a mad man, I had decided to lock him out. It was a bold, daring move from me. Before he had left for the bars, Kasimir had trained his kung-fu on me. For years I had been his punching bag as he practiced some Bruce Lee moves. This I never I told my parent. I knew they’d scold me and call me a liar. My parents were very fond of Kasimir. He was their bread and butter. Ever since I was tricked into the marriage, I never saw happiness. I had wondered, many times, if what I was experiencing was a true definition of marriage. If it was, then marriage was a curse.

“Ruth, open this door or you’ll suffer the consequences!” His voice was slurred, but it still rang with those fear-inducing notes. Our daughter Violet jerked awake at the loud violence on the door. She cried. Violet was almost three years old. She had witnessed most of the fighting scenes between my husband and I. Now she knew that the monster had arrived. I had crept into my daughter’s bedroom, hiding away from him. I cuddled Violet as the door shook under his assault. I heard the latch pop and the door swing open. Kasimir’s Nikes squeaked on the polished floor, striding to our bedroom. I heard him puff and heave – a drunken man

on the precipice of madness. He cursed profusely, spewing profanities like a poet flowing with rhymes. I clutched Violet's mouth, sealing any chances of her crying out and revealing my presence.

Kasimir opened the door to his bedroom, our bedroom. He fell silent, probably surprised that I wasn't in the room. Then he laughed and I heard his approaching footsteps. He was coming towards Violet's room, my hiding place. I wanted to squeeze in the cupboard, but it was too small. My body started quivering and my legs went numb. I could hear the beat of my heart, together with that of my daughter. We were both scared. Suddenly his hard, dry hands grabbed my wrists. He yanked me off the bed. Violet wailed. "Shut up, you little moron!" he barked at my daughter. Violet cried harder. I could feel Kasimir's rage. The first strike split my lips and I tasted blood.

"Papa, please!" Violet clung to his thigh, trying to pull him away from me. He kicked her away. Violet rolled across the floor and hit her head on the wardrobe. That was too much for me to bear. I sunk my nails in him, scratching his arms in attempt to reach his eyes. I wanted to rip them off their sockets. Kasimir was a big man. I was a tiny, little girl. My attempt at fighting him brought joy to him. I saw him smile as he clamped his huge hand around my neck, squeezing tight. I felt the air escape my lungs. His free hand tore my floral dress with an outlining of royal blue that my mother made for me. It was my only reminder of the good old days. I wore it whenever I was depressed. It helped heal my mind. Kasimir ripped it off my body, the buttons popping and scattering across the room. He reached for my underwear and I knew what would follow next. He was going to rape me in front of my daughter. What if he raped Violet too? The thought was an agony.

He started with the bra, snapping it off. I was weak from lack of air. I couldn't breathe properly. He pushed me down to the floor, slamming me on my back like one of those wrestlers I had seen on TV. He still clutched my neck. I gurgled for air, my eyes rolling and bulging. He reached for my panties and tore it away. Kasimir was grinning like a lunatic. It wasn't just the alcohol, I thought, he had gone completely berserk. His hand undid the button of his trousers and I heard the sound of the zipper opening. I closed my eyes in anticipation of the pain that would follow.

A hissing sound made him scream and release his grab on me. I opened my eyes to see him rubbing his eyes and screaming in pain. As I gained my strength, I saw Violet with a can of 'Doom' mosquito spray. She had just saved me from a violent rape. She threw the can on the floor and came running for me. "Mama, mama, mama." But I wanted to finish what my daughter had started. He was still dazed and temporarily blind, kicking haphazardly at anything. Using as much strength as I could muster, I smacked him on the head with the handle of a broom. He collapsed on the floor.

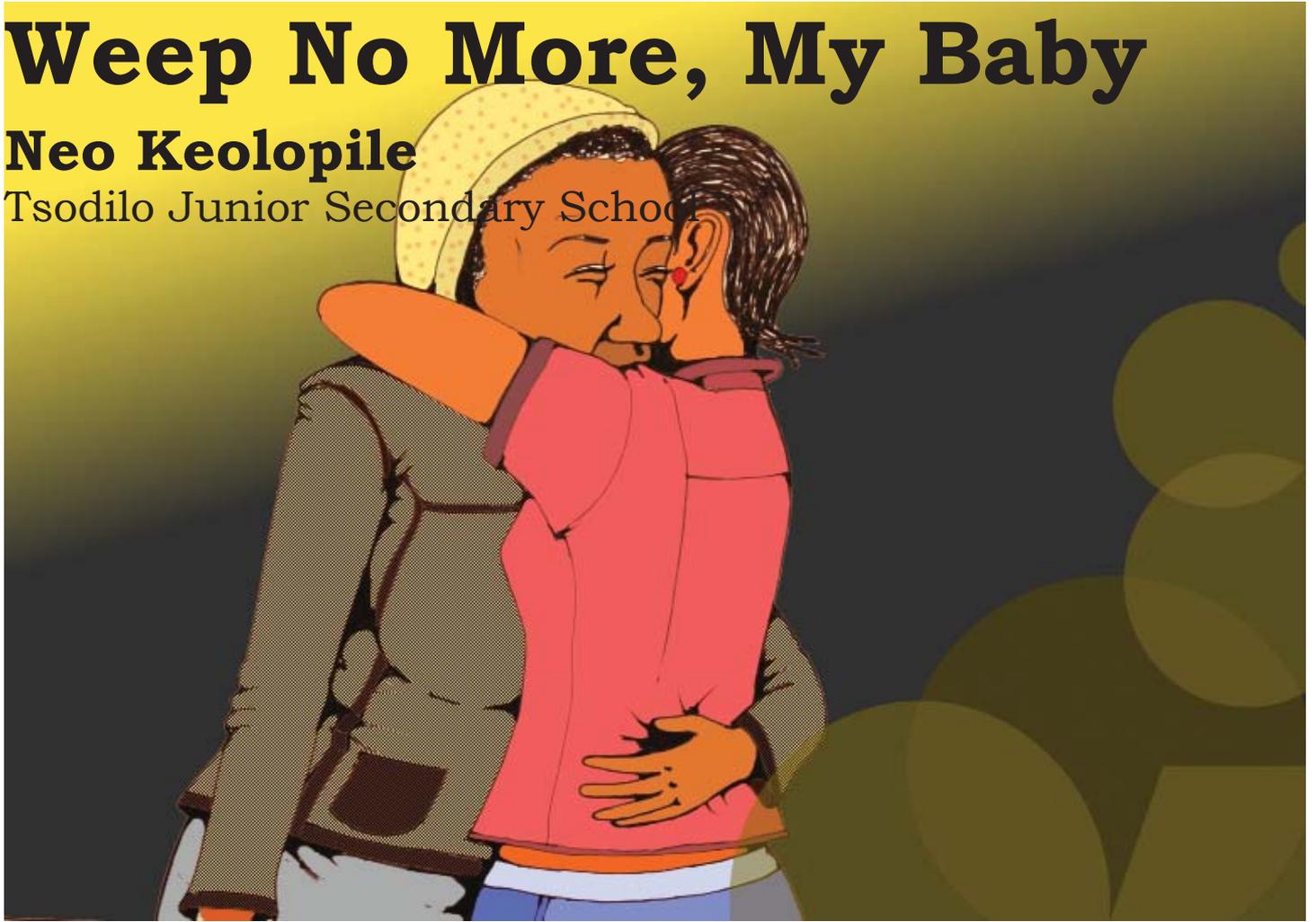
"Hurry, let's go!" I told Violet as I rushed to our room to dress up. She came running after me. His car keys were in his pockets. I snatched them and we headed for the door, running for our freedom.

Violet was cuddled on the passenger seat, awake and alert. We were never coming back. He was never going to find us again. Even if it meant skipping the boarder, we would do it, Violet and I. We could smell freedom. We could taste freedom. Freedom was beckoning at us. Towards freedom, we drove. We drove and drove and drove. We didn't care about the destination.

Weep No More, My Baby

Neo Keolopile

Tsodilo Junior Secondary School



In Samedupi, a small settlement sprawled along the Francistown-Maun road, culture is the order of the day. Betrothal of young girls and early marriages are a common practice. Although most of these marriages are forced, it's all normal and business as usual, and to the villagers, it's a part of upholding the culture. But there is a girl in this village who had given her family a hard time. Her name is Serati Maduo. Her story is that of courage and vigour unknown before in the village. She resisted the custom marriage arranged for her, calling herself a victim of an archaic tradition, much to the shock of village elders. But from where did this young girl of fifteen get the audacity to stand up for her 'rights'?

Even from when she was baby, Serati was bubbly and full of energy – a sure sign that here was an embodiment of tenacity and willpower. Her mother, Dikatso, would look into those bright eyes and sorrow would fill her up.

“Why did you have to be a girl?” she had whispered several times to the ever giggling baby Serati. “They’re going to snatch you away before time. Oh, my sweet child...” and her eyes would moisten with a glaze of tears.

Somehow MmaSerati abhorred certain aspects of her culture. She too had been married at a very early age, and the circumstances of her marriage weren't anything to be proud of. Life wasn't the milk and honey that she was promised. She had been tricked, she always thought. And she was trapped in it for life. The thought of her daughter going through the same calamity tore her heart apart. Her family just couldn't make ends meet. They had few cattle one could actually count them with their fingers. They also had a land to plough on, though it

was now useless with the scarcity of rain these days.

Serati had now grown into an eleven year old hope of a better future for her mother. She did well at school, and her teacher had always told her that she had the eyes of a doctor. Oh, how Serati would smile at that, imagining herself in a white coat with stethoscopes hanging on her neck. But, lo and behold, a hammer came down on her dreams, shattering them like glass.

It was a Saturday morning of early February when she woke to the sound of drums beating out loud. It was still dawn. Sitting up straight on the bed, Serati knew what those sounds meant. She had heard them before in the village. It meant they were here to take her away. "Over my dead body!" Serati swore to herself, lying back down and pulling the blankets over her head. Suddenly the door to her room swung open and her aunt stepped in.

"You silly, lazy girl!" she shouted at her. "Wake up and get ready! Your dress and shoes are in the bathroom"

"Why? It's Saturday. There's no school today," Serati said, her voice muffled from under the blankets.

Her aunt pulled away the blanket and threw them to the floor. "Don't you dare answer back! Can't you hear the drums outside? You're saying goodbye to your pathetic school! It's time to bring food to your family now. Your husband is waiting outside."

Serati jumped to her feet. "I don't have a husband," she sneered at her aunt. "You're not selling me away."

A hard slap fell across her face. "Mind your language, little girl. Get to the bathroom and scrub yourself clean, do you hear me?"

At that moment, her mother Dikatso walked into the room.
"Mom, what's going on? Who is he? I don't want to be married."

Dikatso turned to her sister and requested her to leave them alone for a while. She hugged Serati tightly. "Listen to me, my daughter. You and I have no power to say no to tradition. We're mere mortals against the chief and the village elders who have found a man for you. I'm sure he will take care of you. Please, weep no more, my baby."

"But mom, there is a boy I love at school," tears coursed down her cheeks. "I promised him we will marry when we're both grown up."

"My dear, you and I are both against this, but please, let's not cause a scene," her mother pleaded and it hurt Serati to see her beg that way.

"Why do you allow this, Mama?"

"I have no choice. We have no choice. Resistance means social scorn and communal punishment. We don't want that, do we? You know that your father was a respectable man. Please go ahead and take a bath."

“What about school?”

Her mother shook her head, sorrow creasing her face, revealing age and weariness. Serati went into the bathroom.

Outside, the sun had just risen, casting tentative streaks of gold through tree branches. Dancers stomped the ground, drums and singers entertained the groom, a wealthy man known only as Mr. Seole. He sat with Serati’s mother and aunt, a broad smile splitting his huge face into two. They all were watching the bathroom door, where Serati would soon come out dressed in her new bride clothes, glowing like the princess that she was.

The sun kept rising up the sky. Dust swirled from dancing feet until the stomping receded into a weak, tired tap-tap-tap. Singers’ voices began to fade with fatigue. The door to the bathroom had still not opened. And the sun kept rising.

“This is it! She’s probably just sitting in there, crying out,” blurted her aunt, who then hurried across the yard to the bathroom door. She yanked it open and stared inside with disbelief. “What?!”

Everyone came running to peep into the room. There was no Serati in there. The window hung open. Men searched the bush behind Dikatso’s home and didn’t find her. It was a futile search that was going to last a week or more. Mr. Seole was disappointed and angry. Serati was going to be her seventh wife. He paced and kicked at stones, cursing.

In her room, Dikatso, Serati’s mother, wore a smile on her face. “Good, girl,” she spoke alone. “I’ll meet you on the other side.” Just before her bath, she had secretly given Serati a note. And her daughter, smart as she was, acted on it.

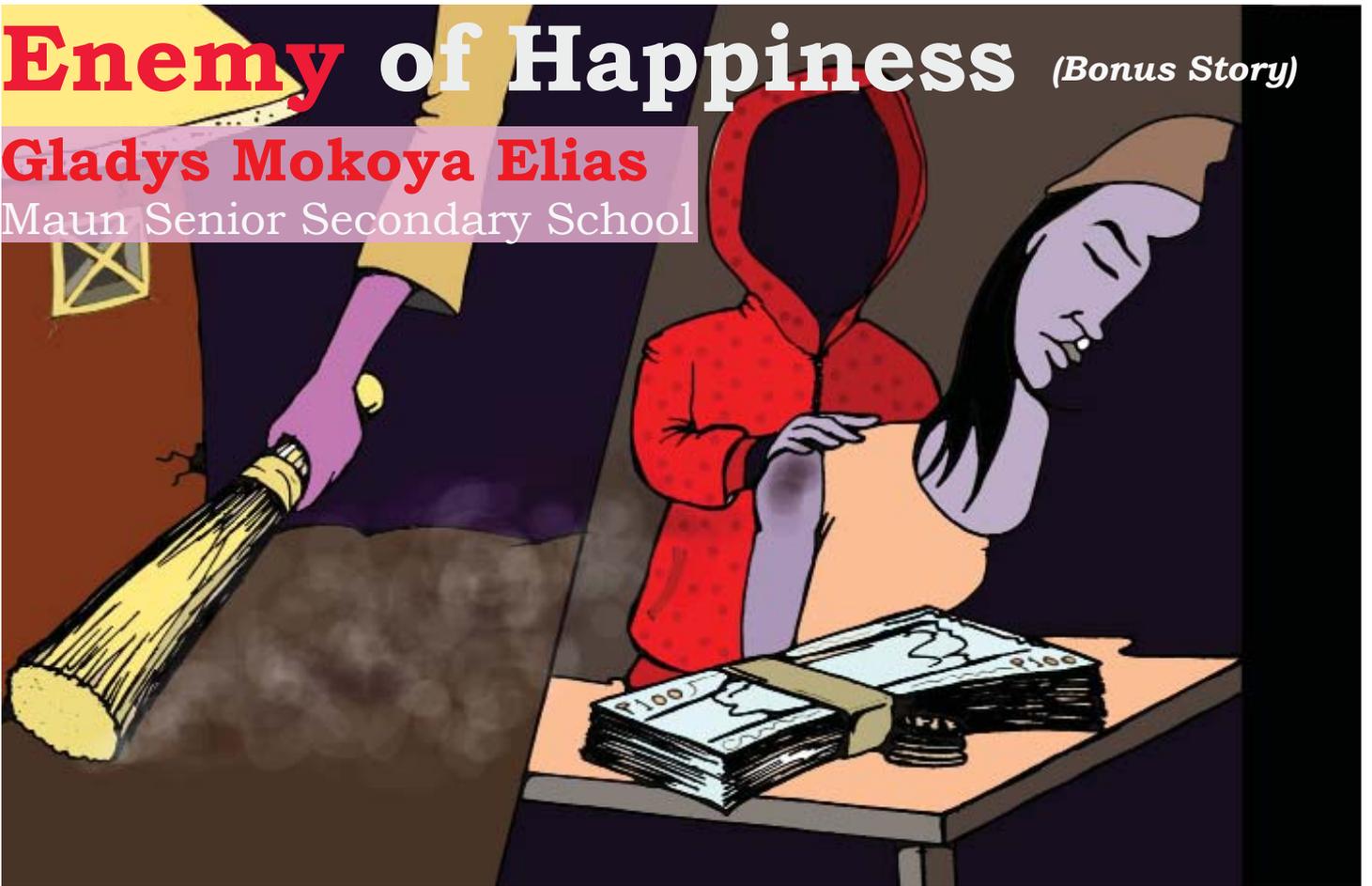
“What are you smiling about,” her sister had stepped into the room.”

“Nothing of your concern, you little witch. I’ll be leaving soon.”

Enemy of Happiness *(Bonus Story)*

Gladys Mokoya Elias

Maun Senior Secondary School



Neo lay on the enormous bed in the en-suite master bedroom, staring at the big, framed picture on the wall. She fell deeper into malice at the sight of the grim figure staring back at her. His face was an awful pointillism of freckles, bloodshot eyes bulging out, thick lips slightly parted as if cautioning her of an oncoming insult. How on earth could he display such ugliness? But Neo knew. It was just a move to terrorise her further, even in his absence. She contemplated sending the picture crashing on the floor. Immediately her mother's words rang in her mind and she dismissed the thought. The sun was riding high up the sky, a ball of light that never stopped for anyone. Neo pulled the broom from behind the door, but even as she swept the floor, memories of the past played in her mind like a cinema.

One evening, a few months earlier, Neo had arrived home from school to find two men clad in black suits engaged in a serious talk with her mother. In her most composed tone, Neo's mother had summoned her. The familiar ring in MmaNeo's voice made Neo shudder as it reminded her of day her father died. That same tone had rang in her mother's voice as she gave Neo the sad news. With a racing heart, Neo walked slowly towards them. The news was as shocking as the announcement of her father's death.

After the men in black had left, Neo sat in the little hut that she shared with her mother. Her eyes glared at the tiny golden watch wrapped around her small wrist. It was her most treasured possession, a wonderful gift from Thebe. Thebe was Neo's schoolmate and the only boy she had considered as an ideal, prospective husband. Sadly, the bright future she had fantasized about had started proving to be fantasy in itself. Her mother's utterance, "This is your husband," had been bullets to her heart, paralysing her entire system. It so seemed to Neo that the demons that controlled all the women in Masa Village had finally reached her mother. What else could have convinced her into giving away her daughter under the dis-

guise of an early marriage? Neo was barely fifteen.

The man chosen for Neo was called Masego. He was the village tycoon and every girl did everything they could to attract his attention. Masego wasn't good-looking per se. Girls wanted his riches. Even on his way to Neo's house, Masego had walked through a display of girls, each flaunting an assortment of beauty and lure, but Masego didn't look at them. He was determined to make Neo his wife.

The wedding had been a good one, leaving the village of Masa talking about it weeks after it had ended. But to her, the wedding was just the beginning of sadness.

"Sweeping won't put any food on the table!" she jumped at the hoarse voice that pulled her off her memories. A glance above her shoulder and she could see Masego standing a few meters away in the ugly spotted sweater she hated. Deducing meaning from his statement, she knew it was time for her to take a bath and wear one of those body-hugging dresses she didn't like, whichever one he chose.

MmaNeo had totally been mistaken about marriage being a cause for daily celebration because as far as Neo knew, marriage had taken away her dignity. Her husband was an enemy of her happiness. He was the worst human being ever to walk the face of earth – a greedy creature that cared about nothing but money. Making her own money had always been Neo's dream. She hated being dependant on anyone, especially someone to whom she didn't feel inclined.

An hour later, eyes rimmed with fatigue, Neo sat on the bed with tears stinging her eyes as the first customer of the day paid Masego and left. "Clean up!" her husband commanded. "Next client will be here in a short while." She tried to protest but the look in Masego's eyes froze words in her mouth.

When the sun sank behind trees, giving way for a gloomy night, Neo's duty was over. While Masego sat on a cosy sofa counting the day's earnings with a foolish smile across his pimpled face, Neo lay weak on the floor in exhaustion, her eyes heavy with sleep. The smell of burnt food from the kitchen reminded her that she was cooking. As she fumbled to her feet, a crackling slap hammered her face, making the world fade out of sight. Although her mother had taught her to humble herself in all trials, she decided to throw all the humbleness away. It was time to stop playing the noble wife.

Masego's hideous, big nose huffed and puffed. His iron grey hair glistened with perspiration and from the swelling of his belly, Neo could tell that the poison was starting to work. It was probably rushing through his veins, weakening him more and more by the minute. Neo watched excitedly; there was something about seeing a fearless and abusive man lying helplessly on the floor. Finally, he gave up his last breath and with an index finger, Neo at last sent the picture on the wall crashing on the floor.

In a vibrating roar, Masego instructed Neo to start cooking all over again, snapping her out of her dour thoughts. As she made her way to the magnificent kitchen, Neo decided to follow her heart and execute the plan that had been tormenting her mind. Liberation was no longer a fantasy as she could already smell it in the food she was about to cook. With a smile, she bowed before her husband, and in a sweet and obedient voice, she said, "I will make the best soup, my love."

END



Reflections on Child, Early and Forced Marriages: Anecdotes from Botswana is a compilation of 20 short stories written by 20 girls from five secondary schools in Maun. The schools are Tsodilo Junior Secondary School, Moeti Junior Secondary School, Sedie Junior Secondary School, Tshwaragano Junior Secondary School and Maun Senior Secondary School.

The girls tackled the stories from various angles of the theme, depicting the different ways by which early and forced marriages affect the African child. Set in the normal everyday life we all experience, the stories span across social classes, painting an assortment of moods within which the potent messages are submerged.

The stories limn a common concern from the writers: a call-out for the abolition of CEFM's. Through their child voices, we enter into the vehicles of powerful storytelling and experience a fast-paced journey of sorrow, pain, hate, fear, anger, regret and, of course, love.

She slapped me hard on the face. "You can't say that of your husband. You better wake up. In this harsh life, a woman doesn't have a voice. She doesn't have feelings. She obliges and follows the commands given to her. Do you hear me?" [from *The Betrayer*]

Now I know why they take young girls out of school. They know we'd grow wise and rebel against them; against this entire notion of early and forced marriages. [from *So Help Me God*]

This book also displays the amount of literary potential the country of Botswana has, giving hope that if investments are made into local literature, the youth will find the value of writing and reading.

Reflections on Child, Early and Forced Marriages: Anecdotes from Botswana is a book that is not only relevant for the African child, but a must-read for the global population.



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