

## The Cost of Being Poor

I fumbled around the small hut as my eyes struggled to adjust to the bright morning light now streaming through the unveiled window. Although intense, it wasn't the light that awoke me; it was an incessant pounding coming from the single door cleverly made from tree branches found scattered around the Ethiopian countryside. Alem sat up on his thin mat as I made my way across the room, his innocent honey brown eyes filled with worry.

I smiled at him. "Go back to sleep, son. It's probably Ayana wanting to borrow a pot." He seemed reassured as he laid his head on the old clothes that now served as his pillow, but his eyes followed me as I continued towards the sound.

I tucked a stray braid into the brightly colored scarf that provided little protection against the relentless mosquitoes before opening the door. The smile fell from my face when I saw who stood behind it. It wasn't the needy neighbor I'd been expecting; it was Hakim Satta, a warlord known for his brutality. My pulse quickened as my eyes took in his nappy hair and rich Western clothing stained with the dirt from this trip. I no longer recognized the cold, dead eyes that met mine before he bared his teeth—alarmingly white against his dark complexion—in a twisted smile.

"Good morning Aisha. May I come in?" It wasn't a question, just forced politeness brought about by the crowd now gathering outside.

I wanted to tell him to go to hell, but the words were stuck in my throat, so I stepped aside and let the evil cross my threshold. He was followed by his usual entourage of soldiers, all armed with heavy automatic weapons. It was business as usual as soon as the door closed behind them.

“Come here boy.” He motioned to Alem who was now sitting alarmingly straight, terror radiating from his body. My youngest son scrambled to his feet and quickly scurried towards Hakim.

My heart was now racing and it took all the strength within me not to sink to the floor. I was only twenty-seven, but suddenly felt much older. I watched helplessly as Hakim grabbed Alem by the arm and twisted him this way and that, getting a good look at his lanky figure. His eyes surfed the boy’s body as he grunted in disappointment. Alem was silent as Hakim turned towards me.

“Don’t you feed this boy? I’ve seen monkeys bigger than him.” His tone was harsh and laced with mockery.

“We get by okay. It’s just me and him now...” My voice trailed away as I let the thought linger. What I wanted to say was that he knew damn well why we were barely scraping by. He was the one who had murdered my husband three years before. My husband, who had courageously shielded his eldest when this monster had come for him. Hakim had only laughed at his bravery before pulling the trigger. I watched the blood flow from my best friend, making his body go limp as the smell of gun powder assaulted my nose. It had taken two days to get that same blood out of the old cloth that still covered the dirt floor, taunting us of with what used to be.

“Yes, well I suppose your husband was the one who took care of food.” The corners of his mouth twitched as he tried to suppress the smile that was playing on his lips. One of his men let out a chuckle and I lunged towards him.

The anger only multiplied as I felt the butt of a pistol collide with my left cheek-bone, filling the air with a brief crunching sound. The impact surprised me and I stumbled backwards,

clutching my face. I struggled to regain my footing in the spinning room, looking toward the direction of my son. Alem strained to free himself, emitting small grunts in his effort. It was no use, Hakim held his arm in a death grip.

“Careful,” Hakim said, though I could not tell whether he was talking to me or to my son. “Wouldn’t want to do anything you’d regret, would you?”

“I’m fine Alem,” I told him, careful to disguise the pain. He stopped struggling, knowing it was best for both of us if he kept quiet, but his eyes never left mine.

Hakim glanced out of the window into the crowd now congregated outside my home. The whole village was awaiting the news, as we did every few months when one of these surprise visits arose. Most mothers in the village could sympathize with me. Each had been in my shoes at some point. And if they hadn’t, they would be soon. We couldn’t afford to pay the warlords off like those from other villages. It was the cost of being poor.

“Let’s bring this party outside, shall we?” Hakim said, eager for an audience.

He led the way, followed by Alem and myself and the rest of his crew. The sun was even brighter outside as it rose above the hills surrounding the village. It was unusually hot for an April morning with little trees to provide shady relief. The rich green grass glistening with morning dew soothed my blistered bare feet. I forced my head up, showing the crowd, my friends, my strength.

They stood in front of the eight circular huts whose thatched roofs matched the colors of the dirt roads that broke up the endless hills of greenery. Children clutched onto their mothers. Mothers with puffy eyes that no longer had children to cling to. Fathers with bent heads, too ashamed to show their faces. These people were just like me. They worked hard to make sure every child in the village had something to eat, often going without so someone else’s child

wouldn't have to. They had helped me get back on my feet after Hakim's first visit, as I had done for them when it had been their turn. Now they stood there watching helplessly, unable to move due to the price it would cost them. I could not be angry; I had done the same when the roles were reversed.

Hakim addressed the people in a booming voice that silenced the three cattle roaming in their small enclosure. "Hello friends," he began. "Today marks a special day for your village. Two of your own will join our troops to serve our beloved country of Ethiopia!"

He walked around in front of the crowd scrutinizing each young boy before stopping in front of Alem's best friend. The boy was the eleven-year-old son of a woman I had grown up with and who had later become the wife of my uncle. "You," he said pointing at him, "what's your name?"

"Kaleb," the boy whispered as his mother, Ayana, grasped his shoulder. Although older than Alem, he was no bigger.

"Speak up!" Hakim demanded.

The boy cleared his throat before repeating, "Kaleb."

Hakim smiled as he spoke to Ayana, who held her three-year-old on her right hip. "You have raised a fine young man, but we shall take over from here."

Ayana's eyes filled with tears and I was reminded of the day when her brother had met the same fate. We were both seven at the time and I had been the one she had grieved with for the next few months.

Kaleb did not cry. He hugged his mother, whispering something in her ear, and kissed his baby sister before following his new leader in front of the crowd. His bravery did not surprise me. After his father had been killed at war, Kaleb had taken his place as head of the family at just

nine-years-old. Like Alem, he worked around the nearby villages earning little money for odd jobs performed. He was the one the other children looked to for guidance and he would not let them see him defeated. Hakim smiled in sick glory as his large hand patted the boy's shoulder. The crowd was forced to applaud in false pride as Kaleb stared into their faces.

Then Hakim motioned for my son to join them. Before Alem could move, I stepped in front of him.

"Please," I begged Hakim searching his face for some sign of the boy I used to know. The boy whose home had stood next to mine before he too was ripped away. If anyone would understand, it should be him. "You've already taken my Amare. Alem is only eight-years-old. He's just a child!" I felt a hand pulling me away. I yanked my arm back and spun towards the man. It was my cousin Dabir looking at me with pleading eyes. His son had been taken with my eldest.

"You should be proud to serve your country," Hakim said. "Your sons will be remembered as heroes."

"Please—"

Hakim called for Kaleb to join him in front of me. "We must teach her who's in charge," he said to him. Then he walked over to another soldier, took his gun, and handed it to Kaleb.

"Shoot her."

Kaleb looked up in terror, refusing to take the gun. Some of the crowd let out small gasps, while others shuffled their feet uncomfortably. Hakim cocked his gun and pointed it at the boy's head. "Shoot her or I shoot you."

I could hear Alem scuffle, threatening to break free from Dabir, who had grabbed him when Hakim had approached. I prayed silently that Dabir could keep him in his grasp.

Kaleb took the gun with shaking hands. He tried to steady himself as the gun's weight pulled his arms towards the ground. He looked at me with eyes that begged for forgiveness before he pulled the trigger.

I shut my eyes, feeling my body tense as I heard the faint click of the metal. I waited for the pain. Instead, I heard the laughter of soldiers mingle with the hushed whispers of my people. My eyes fluttered open as I struggled to understand.

Hakim's face looked down upon me, his features barely visible as he stood, blocking the sun. But even the shadows couldn't hide the smile that was spread from ear to ear. I turned to face Alem whose mixture of relief and confusion mimicked my own. His front teeth gnawed at his lower lip; a habit he'd picked up since his brother was taken.

"Congratulations!" Hakim's voice forced my head to turn back towards him. He stood behind Kaleb—whose face was turned down in shame— clutching his shoulders. "You passed the test!" he said, patting the boy on the back.

I stood shocked as Alem silently clutched the back of the long, baggy skirt that hung on my hips. I grabbed his small hand and held it in my own, running my fingers over the jagged scars left by long days of building.

"It's time to go," Hakim said sharply.

Alem's hand was ripped away as one of Hakim's soldiers led him towards Kaleb. I expected him to break down, at least say something, anything. But he was silent. He turned to catch a final glimpse of me and I could see his bottom lip quiver as he held back the tears that threatened to spill over. I felt my knees give way and my body fell to the ground as he climbed into the truck that drove him away.