

The Longest Rope

She could see his sulky silhouette shuffling in the distance.

The lonesome streetlight almost never worked, and tonight was no different. But the moonlight was enough. The loose gravel under his feet clicked and rolled and a dog howled afar off; a telltale sign of someone's demise. For a brief moment she wondered who. The clicking grew louder and louder, and then he was halfway down the dirt road, his slow but erratic hobble proclaimed the story of his life. She could see him clearly now. His shirt was open, the collar up, buttoned haphazardly, with one side higher than the other. The white insides of his trouser pockets turned inside out, hanging precariously on both sides. They floated in the slight wind like a fallen army, at last conceding to defeat. She smiled in spite of herself, knowing that *she* was really the defeated one. He had an iniquitous support, and it numbed his pain. She had sanity and truth, and they magnified hers.

But the marriage did not start off this way. No. Once there was something worth fighting for, and maybe even love. As unbelievable as it may seem now, once there was laughter emanating from the weathered galvanized rooftop of this dreary home. A home now beset by wandering, wary ghosts, who just wanted to move on. A house where neglected crotons and forgotten frangipanis sat hopeless in the shade, longing for a change. Stretching their necks toward the light, greedy for its love.

A swift reality check roused her from a useless dream. Why was she mulling over this anyway? It was no longer relevant. A long time ago, when their son was still here, their one and only child, things were different. It was not perfect, but it was good. Then tragedy struck. Will he ever stop casting blame and just grieve the way normal people do? Stop plugging the painful places with pints of bush rum? Stop squandering his little earnings on other women who were just in it for the almighty dollar? She shook her head violently as if it could stop the thoughts from being formed and found herself being startled when he entered the rickety porch where she stood. Dreaming could be dangerous for her.

'Ah ha!' Bush rum filled the air acrimoniously. 'I go catch you tonight! And if I find him, he dead!'

She didn't really see his fist, only its menacing shadow, and it was fast. But experience made her faster.

He swung, she ducked, he missed. She was lightning quick, and he was no match. Already unsteady from drink, his feet got tangled in an absurd knot and he came crashing down. But she had already made a mad dash through the front door, her hands instinctively slamming down the lock. By the time she heard the thud, she was safely inside, crying for them both. Things would never change.

And Joshua was never coming back.

For the next few hours, until sleep mercifully came, he lay on the floor of the porch performing an all too familiar Friday night ritual; expounding on her 'jezebel' behavior. She was this, that and the other. She hid a man in the house when he went to work. She was to blame for Joshua being gone. If she had been a proper mother, not a jezebel, she would have taken the child to the hospital before the fever got worse. She lay on the living room couch and listened bitterly. Did he conveniently forget that she brought the sick child to him while he was outside drinking with his friend Baldie? He said a fever was nothing and to sap the child's head with some rum, the only remedy in his repertoire. She didn't dare disobey.

And then it was too late.

A few neighbors gathered in the road out front. Others didn't bother, they knew the script. Some flagrantly pulled their curtains and watched while others walked by, rolled their eyes and sucked their teeth. He would rise unsteadily from the floor, every now and then, to hurl insults at them.

'Mind allyou damn business! Get out me yard! This is man and wife thing! Don't watch me. I look like a movie?'

'Dig out we eye!' The local obeah woman retorted.

'Beatrice, why you don't learn to wash you man clothes? You always up in people business, but you don't see you own?'

'And why you don't learn to treat you wife right? Peter, Peter the pumpkin eater!'

He was holding on to the railings for support and pretended to descend the stairs. She didn't wait to see if he would make it. She turned around and walked swiftly toward her house, just around the corner, vowing that he would get what was coming to him someday - someday soon.

As usual, the next day brought with it, some level of remorse.

But this was of no comfort because another Friday was coming, sure as night follows day. He cried, coaxed, pleaded and did whatever he could for her to believe that he was truly sorry. Then he brought Baldie in as backup. But Baldie was a constant in the 'next day' ritual, she eyed them both warily.

'Eva,' Baldie said carefully, 'I know this man longer than you know him. I know he sorry, is try the man trying. Why you not talking to him girl? Give him another chance nuh. Eva, please girl?'

She didn't try to pack her things this time. If she went to her parents' house, a one-hour drive away, to cool her head, he would just come over - crying, cussing and begging. Besides, her parents were getting too old for this kind of drama, this was *her* cross to bear.

And talking was no use.

So, she went on with her weekend cooking, washing and even gardening. It had been some time since she'd tended to the garden, but by Sunday afternoon her quietness mellowed things a bit and somehow she found the strength. She pulled back the cobwebbed wire gates and

entered its thorny shade. But the bittersweet memories were so much more bitter than they were sweet. When Joshua was here, she reminisced, he would prance around in the little red boots they had bought for him. He wanted to do everything, and the simplest things were a wonder. He watered plants, pulled up thorns, dug up worms and filled routine gardening with so much laughter that just remembering hurt - it hurt so bad. It hurt deep down; in places no one could reach. And her wounds were the worst kind, for she kept them safe and warm. Inside that secret hiding place. So, she wouldn't have to share. Because sharing might mean healing. And she didn't want to heal. God forbid she let it go. Then what would she have left?

Pain was her only friend.

And no amount of passing years made it easier, or more bearable. Who said time heals all wounds? That person must never have been wounded.

When people see your joy, it's a proud moment, exhilarating even. When people see your pain, it doesn't mean a thing. It doesn't add, it doesn't take away. And their puny harangue doesn't quite cut as they hoped, no matter how hard they try. Yes, it cuts a little, but it pales in comparison to the self-inflicted wounds that you and only you, have brought upon yourself. And then you only have two choices: pretend or lay down and die. And she was slowly dying, while living out this thing called life! But sometimes! Oh sometimes! Sometimes she found that place. That place where, for a fleeting moment, hell eased just a little and a piece of heaven barely peeped out from above. Just enough to catch that glorious light. Joshua was that light.

For years he came in dreams. Sometimes at a young age, the age when he had left them, but sometimes much older. He was still happy and playful, and asked her for 'tea tea'; an idiosyncrasy he possessed where he would say certain words twice. Especially when she looked tense and he wanted to make her smile. Those were fun-filled days in the house. Money was never in abundance, but Joshua could make you forget that if the lights weren't paid for soon, darkness loomed nearby. And it was good for Peter too. Yes, it's true he always drank, but it was never out of hand, crazy and unruly, the way it was now. She wanted to go out to work back then, to help out, but he didn't want Joshua with 'strangers'. And her parents were too old and feeble, though willing, they really couldn't help. Then, when Joshua was no longer with them, he still didn't want her to leave the house - but for different reasons. Maybe these were fears he had all along, and when Joshua faded away, so did his mind.

Peter's mood didn't lighten by the end of that week. And Baldie came over every afternoon, as peacekeeper, referee and life-long friend, while Eva busied herself with a multitude of housework. He fussed and he grumbled. He wallowed in more drink. He cussed. He didn't understand women. He didn't know why Eva refused to speak to him. She was high and mighty. She thought she was better than everyone, especially him. Her silence only prolonged his misery and fueled his tirade. By that Friday morning his emotions lay in shambles; he was crying and vowing to 'walk away and do something bad' to himself.

'Right there Eva,' he was saying sulkily before leaving for work, pointing to some bushes nearby. 'You see that mango tree over there? Eva, I got the rope and everything. You will be sorry. You will miss me girl.'

Much later, when the old clock on the wall, a rusted wedding gift, struck its midnight toll, it was time for her to panic. By this time he should have been shuffling down the road,

disheveled, cussing the wind, if it blew too much, or the puddles, for existing. The old folks say that joy and sorrow live in the same house, and something welled up in the pit of her stomach, though she couldn't tell what. Her heart leaped when she saw a figure approaching in the dark. Her natural instincts beckoned her to take cover. But who was this? It wasn't him.

'Evaaaaa, ohhh Evaaaaa.' It was a solemn, moaning sound. One she'd never heard before. It was Baldie. She squinted in the dark and the streetlight came on miraculously, just as he passed under. They both looked up in surprise.

'Baldie, stop. Come. Talk now!' She cried, the feeling of dread rising quickly.

'Evaaaaa girrrrrl, he gone, he finish! What we going to do?!'

But she was no longer listening. She was running. She didn't feel the prickly stones of the gravel road beneath her bare feet. She shot past Baldie and when he made a lame attempt to stop her, a small piece of her old, white night dress tore and floated gently to the ground. This time the army really fell. She kept on running.

The next morning, they both sat in somber silence.

The faint scent of cold, stale coffee, two cups untouched, lay on the railing as remnants of the night. Reminders of shared despair.

'Girl,' Baldie whispered tenderly. 'You want me to make funeral arrangements?'

She looked at him in shock. Had someone died?

Her flailing mind catapulted, then everything descended. Secret plans were now so meaningless, its urgency replaced with guilt.

'No,' she answered softly. 'I could manage. Got a little savings hiding. I was saving up for-for something...' Her voice trailed off, that would never matter again.

It was almost endurable during the daytime.

Most neighbors were around a lot, filing in and out the house. Bringing coffee, tea, biscuits, cheese - whatever they had in their cupboards - so that she could feed the people who kept *wake* at night. She only smiled and nodded her thanks as she didn't have the words. Baldie brought bush rum for the nightly singers and drummers, and they rewarded the crowd with high pitched hymns till dawn.

'Over Zion, there is music in the air', 'Sign my name up there', 'I must walk this lonesome journey' - the well-worn words of many wakes gone by drifted up and out, far beyond the darkness, over the grassy fields, past the slender sleeping teak, over the mountains even. Far, far away, where no living mind could reach. And the magic was the pain. Somewhere out there, Peter and Joshua joined in the chorus of morose and mirth, finding perfect solace in each other's embrace.

She was awakened from one of her many comforting dreams by the sound of someone talking sharply.

‘Girl, I hear it was heart! Who knows you could look so healthy and you heart could fail? What *you* think it was?’

It was Beatrice and another neighbor at the side of the house, talking in hushed tones, not realizing that the sounds came around, past the porch and well within earshot.

‘And I told him to watch out eh.’ Beatrice continued spitefully. ‘He shoulda damn well listen!’

She saw many people trudging by, but they were mostly faceless. She even thought she saw, or heard, her parents. Maybe other relatives too. Friends and goodly neighbors, they all passed by, saying words she couldn’t really hear. One time though, she thought she heard some chatter as she drifted in and out. She caught a few ‘condolences’, ‘he was still young eh’, ‘he was too damn bad mmn’, ‘she ain’t the prettiest, but could find a good man now’. How could she be angry with them? There were no more feelings left. And even so, they were right. She wasn’t beautiful, flashy or best-dressed. Her hair was graying at the temples, and mostly arranged in a modest, homey bun. Her dark brown eyes complemented her cocoa brown skin, which was almost flawless even at her age - but that was it. Nothing really stood out like some of the other village women. A little later, when everyone had gathered in the windless graveyard, she eyed some of them ruefully. Just look at them, bobbing around in black skintight dresses, catching foolish glances from unavailable men. She sighed and didn’t hear Baldie come up from behind.

‘Time to go girl. Boy gone home!’ And his voice cracked at ‘home.’

She nodded in agreement and they made their way out silently, stopping briefly for one last glance at the fresh mound of be flowered dirt.

He wasn’t much. But he was all they had.

As time went on, the old house she once called home lay empty and forlorn. When she passed by one day, to close the book on this chapter of her life, the new owners had not yet made any changes. Maybe in time she thought, when the money comes. She would not know, until a little later, of their lofty plans. And when this was complete, you would hardly know another stood there before. A graying, unsteady structure, hiding both joy and pain between the old, rotted woodwork. Concealing the agony of no good-byes in its webbed-up rafters. Its garden suffocated by the laughter of a beautiful boy who stole its heart then ran away!

But the end was so much better. It softened so many of life’s blows. If the old house was still here, its last squeak would be joyful. It would tell of a brand-new start - a chance at happiness after all.

Baldie touched her shoulders gently, then turned the wheels to steer them home. ‘Well,’ he asked quietly, ‘You seen enough?’

He didn’t need an answer.