

The Darkest Hour is Just Before Dawn

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“Mother!” I shouted, panting, as I jolted awake from a deep sleep. My tanned hands, leathery from being overworked, were moist with a coat of unpleasant sweat. Had you been able to see it, my forehead would have been gleaming with the same worried perspiration; however, it was nearly impossible to see anything through the foggy shadows of the night. The same omnipresent darkness that enveloped the room that I was confined to was alive in my dreams as well. Ironically, this dimness was the only thing to answer to my cries - and its answer was even more eerie and terrifying than the nightmares themselves. Dead silence, interrupted only by the creaking of a dilapidated wooden cot, replied to my disdain. The blatant quiet of the night paralyzed me, and I remained motionless, like a marble statue encase in petrified ice. The only movement I dared make was a slight shiver, provoked by the icy draft circulating through the crowded room, from which my only protection was a tattered gray blanket.

Because fear terminated my desire for sleep, I simply stared into the distance. The blackness penetrated my otherwise empty thoughts and forced me to reflect on the nightmare that so frequently disrupted a peaceful slumber. Almost every night, my subconscious recounted the same horrific events that separated my mother from me and my younger brother. However, the immobilizing power of these dreams was not limited solely to the night. Even during the hours of the day when the sun’s lively rays danced around the earth, giving life to the otherwise dreary world, my nighttime visions haunted me. I often found myself disconnected with reality, lost in the traumatizing memories of events that occurred just months ago.

Although an innumerable amount of tragedies had befallen me before I lost my mother, my nightly illusions usually began on that precise day. The picture of that fateful moment was painted clearly in

my mind - the scene as brilliantly memorable as a Van Gogh (though the content of the image was far less appealing). My mother, brother, and I, along with several hundred other individuals, were being pushed - no, herded - into a gloomy, musty-smelling alleyway by several men in dark green uniforms. All four of the officials had light blonde hair that appeared bleached by the sun; it was a strange contradiction to the abundance of brunettes, like me, that lined the thin corridor from shoulder to shoulder. Though I was relatively tall for my age, the masses of grief-stricken adults towered over my lightweight body. The brooding sea-blue color of the officials' mocked my murky brown eyes each time I returned their glare. My tan skin was afflicted by goosebumps due to the wintery conditions outside. Although the temperature was frigid, and pure white snow fell heavily, blanketing and contrasting the dark asphalt of the roads, I was kept warm by the body heat shared between the countless number of people forced into the narrow passageway. I was positioned against one wall, and as we walked, my left hand dragged across the bumpy, off-white surface. My right hand interlocked that of my younger brother, Sebastian, who innocently asked my mother, "Why are we here?"

"We are Jewish," my mother blatantly stated, a tone of disgust infecting her usually affectionate disposition.

It was those three words that echoed throughout my mind continuously, sparking infinite questions. Jewish. Why was my religion all that defined me? Jewish. Why was I condemned for something I was born into? Jewish. What was wrong with Judaism to begin with?

To these questions, I had no answers. I would likely never have answers - all I knew was that in the eyes of most of the country, Judaism was the definitive evil that had to be exterminated. To do so, hope had to be annihilated, and apparently, the annihilation of hope could be achieved by separating families.

When we neared the end of the bleak pathway, the air reeked with the scent of depression, defeat, and loneliness. The sound of tears splashing against the gravel beneath our unwashed feet echoed throughout the alley as it bounced from wall to wall, ringing in each and everyone's ears. Bloodcurdling shrieks pierced through the clamor of the area as the wails of children polluted the winds. Despite the general unruliness of the entire scene - I could still make out the words of one man; one man with sun-bleached hair and a dark, mossy-green uniform. And in that moment, time seemed to stop. Those words were all that mattered.

"Children to the left, women to the right," the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, elitist sternly commanded, showing no sign of remorse for the atrocity he was committing, nor any sympathy for the lives he was forever altering. Behind him stood a brigade of armed soldiers, and behind them were two colossal iron-wrought gates, rusted at their black hinges, presumably from the damp winter. Through the left side, teary-eyed children marched, shrieking "Mother! Father!" with an indescribable sadness. The drops of water cascaded so rapidly down their mud-stained faces that they formed channels as deep as the Grand Canyon directly under their baggy eyes. And suddenly, I was not just watching those children - I was one of those children. As my mother, brother, and I approached the villainous guards, our hands tightened around one another. With each squeeze that the innocent little boy next to me gave, I felt a miniature river run down my cheek. One by one, the beads of clear water began to pour, until the raging rapids before a waterfall were traversing their way out of my lonely, brown eyes.

And before I knew it, my voice was just another in the series of high-pitched cries that penetrated through the silence of uncertainty. "MOTHER!" I shouted, channeling every last bit of energy I had into one desperate yell. An equally desperate cry of "Steffen! Sebastian! I love you - never lose hope!" was the only reply I received.

Then, everything went black. The cinematic picture playing in my mind stopped and gave way to the same agonizing darkness that antagonized my fears; the same darkness that provoked my heavy breathing. With each pant, I felt like my chest was caving in.

"In, out. In, out. In -" I told myself - however, I was interrupted by the familiar creaking of an ancient cot and the even more familiar sound of light steps bounding towards me.

"Sebastian, go back to sleep," I commanded, my voice wavering as I fought back tears.

"Why? Are you okay?" He innocently interrogated as he ran his minuscule hands through the soft tufts of his short, brown hair.

"Listen. I said to back to bed. You don't want one of them to come in here and see you, do you?" I replied, my voice strengthening because I could not let him see me cry.

"I-I can't", Sebastian timidly stammered. "Steffen, I keep... I-I keep s-seeing mom when I sl-sl-sleep. We're n-never getting out of h-h-here, are we?"

"Never say that," I ferociously demanded. "You have to always keep hope. I'm going to tell you a story - listen to every word, okay?" He gently nodded his head, and I began to immerse myself in a different story, one that my mother had told me nearly every night. It was the only book I ever remember reading - whenever the words danced off of my mother's tongue, the colorful images joined with the flowing words and painted vivid images in my head. I had memorized the words almost verbatim, and though I wasn't sure of what each word meant, or even how to pronounce them, I stumbled my way through the tale.

"One day, not very long ago, there was a teenage boy named Nsowona. Mother always said he was about the same age as our ages added together - that would put him at around 15 - but he was extremely immature for his older years. His eccentric behavior often got him into trouble with his stern

father, the chief of the tribe, and honestly, no one took him seriously. Nsowona belonged to an African tribe called the Mbuti, who were a nomadic people, though they typically restricted their hunting to the Congo River Basin. There, in the depths of the dense growth of trees and vibrantly-colored flowers, they could find an abundance of succulent fruits. The rain-forests were also dwelling places for a variety of different animals, all of which provided the tribes' peoples with sustenance. While the tears of the clouds caused the lush, green plants to thrive, the droplets of rain also sheltered the tribe from the unbearable heat of the suns' rays, which frequently scorched their dark skin.

Although the jungle served as refuge from the acrid conditions outside of the leafy dwelling, it also represented something less pleasant to the young males of the tribe around Nsowona's age. The canopy of broad leaves represented abandonment, solitude, and betrayal to these unlucky individuals, who, during the summer of their 15th year, were left stranded and alone in the thick brush of the rainforest. This activity was not intended to be a cruelty; rather, it was a custom that the Mbuti tribe had practiced for several centuries. This ritual was designed to determine if the teenagers were capable of governing the tribe - if they were true men. If the boys were not intelligent, brave, and physically strong enough to return home, they were not suited for the difficulties that life in the Congo basin entailed.

This year, it was Nsowona's turn to face the challenge of manhood that each and every one of his ancestors had passed.

"Wake up. It is time," Kgosi, his father, commanded monotonously.

Without speaking, Nsowona lightly placed his feet on the red sun-baked clay, which coated his dark brown feet in a coral powder each time he stepped. He eyes traced each step he took; he could not look into the penetrating eyes of his father, and he needed to focus all of his nervous energy on picking

up his anchors of legs. Step by step, Nsowona inched his way towards the outskirts of the ominous expanse of greens, yellows, blues, and reds.

“Boys. I say boys, not men, for you are not yet men. It is time to commence your inductive ritual. You all know what will happen - we,” Kgosì paused as he pointed to several colossal, formidable men with shaved heads, “will escort you blindfolded into the rainforest. Once we reach a suitable location, we will leave you there to fend for yourself against the savage forces of nature. You will leave your blindfolds on until you hear this sharp whistle.” A shrill sound pierced through the silence like a bloodcurdling scream through the night. “Then you will know your escorts are far enough away for you to begin your journey home. Your challenge is to make it back to this location alive - unscathed or not. Are there any questions?”

Each of the five boys too distressed to reply, only a slight breeze and the sound of young men swallowing their fears answered to the chief.

“I believe we are ready,” Kgosì concluded. He briefly signaled to the four intimidating creatures, and they strode towards a single boy, their footsteps in unison. In a similar unified motion, each man extracted a dark brown handkerchief, the color of Nsowona’s eyes, from a suede satchel and wrapped it around the eyes of their assigned youth. Nsowona’s father did the same to him, and in that moment, he was blind.

The only thing he recalled as they walked through the forest was the crisp, damp grass that crunched underneath his bare feet each time he stepped. Nsowona occasionally snapped a brittle, fallen twig, but his father generally steered him clear of contact with any plant or animal life. This was not, however, for his own safety, but rather a way to prevent him from remembering any distinguishing marks that could aid him on his voyage back through the wilderness. Though Nsowona could not see,

he could determine from the lack of humidity that the forest had not been blessed with its usual downpour. This only meant one thing - a torrential rain was about to quench the thirsty land.

After several hours of walking, Nsowona felt a firm hand grasp his broad shoulder.

“It is time. Good luck, son. I have faith in you,” Kgosì bellowed. With those words, Nsowona’s heart sank as he made the realization that the time was now - he would either make it home as a man or die trying. As he waited in agony, listening for the shrill shriek of the whistle, his heart raced and his stomach sank.

Then, the sound. That dreadful sound that signified complete isolation. The sound that was so unbearable that a flock of tropical birds fled from the scene, leaving their chromatic plumes in their wake. The sound that began the journey back to the world that was so familiar to him - away from the foreign land of the rainforest.

As soon as the whistle sounded, Nsowona ran his fingers along the silk handkerchief that shielded his eyes from his surroundings until he found the knot. With one nimble maneuver, he swiftly untied the piece of black cloth and retied it around his thin neck. His hands then fell to his side as he examined the vast expanse of greenery in awe. Everywhere he looked - up, down, left, right - Nsowona saw a drapery of wild plants covering the soft, black soil. What appeared at first glance to be traces of this dirt on the plants were in fact tiny insects fluttering their paper-thin wings. Below them, at the roots of the plants, sat thousands of beetles, ants, and termites, returning to their decaying homes. As Nsowona traced the sturdy trunks of the trees upwards to the sky, he noticed several frogs almost camouflaged within the thicket created by the entanglement of branches and leaves.

As soon as his eyes met the canopy of leaves above him, a threatening blast of thunder penetrated the general quiet of the forest. Though the deafening boom was disorienting enough, herds of animals

began to rip through the trees, scurrying away from the warning of potential danger. Wild winds brewed in the sky above, and as the creatures bounded above him, all Nsowona could see was a mass of rippling fur and a swarm of flickering wings. The land mass that was once a jungle had immediately transformed into a sea of confusion, as the rains from the sky flooded the overgrowth. Each and every leaf was weighed down with the weight of a thousand pounding raindrops - the same rain that weighed down his spirits.

The water pouring from the darkening skies turned the dry soil into mud that stuck to the soles of his feet as he walked. Soon, his legs were iron weights that were increasingly difficult to lift with every step he took. After a few moments, the tropical paradise had changed into a muggy swamp; insects thriving in the adhesive-like mud nibbled at his toes while crystal beads of moisture blurred his vision. Brilliant flashes of lightning were the only things that illuminated the apocalyptic sky.

"I can't see!" Nsowona helplessly yelled through the beads that pounded onto and penetrated through the canopy of leaves above him. Though he fought his hardest against the rain, Nsowona made no progression through the breadth of the woods.

Minutes struggling against the abominable forces of nature turned to hours, and as day turned to murky shadows of the night, the storm persisted, as did the claps of thunder and shocks of lightning. The rise of the moon over the landscape introduced another element in his battle against nature; cold. As the stars emerged from their daytime hibernation, so did the freezing temperatures that came with an overnight downpour. Though Nsowona had planned to reach his home by the time the sun composed an extravagant portrait of oranges, yellows, and pinks across the morning sky, he determined it was impossible for him to persist through the unfriendly conditions. On the verge of hypothermia, his fingers and toes purple with algor, Nsowona fell to his knees and crawled to an enclosure formed by the branches of two teaks. He covered his shivering body with the remains of two

wide leaves that fell from the canopy due to the immense power of the storm. His body and mind were both equally weak and starved - he had gone all day without food and he had lost the power to form coherent thoughts. Nsowana had no slight idea where he was, how close he was to home, or if he was even headed in the right direction.

"I should just give up," Nsowona thought to himself. "I will never find my way home. Everyone was right - my father was right - I am not a man. I'm not cut out to rule the tribe." As each negative thought darted through his cluttered mind, he sunk into a profound slumber. Then suddenly, it was the morning.

After hearing a rustling in the brush behind him, Nsowona sprang awake, his throbbing head colliding with a thick branch as he sat up. Though it was still difficult for him to think clearly, Nsowona easily noticed how arid the air felt; there was no rain - it had been replaced by effulgent gleams of sunlight streaming through the rainforest's verdant canopy.

"Nsowona?" A nearly-inaudible voice whispered from somewhere in the shrubbery behind him. Two beady, black eyes peered out from a gap in the leaves; they were clearly recognizable.

"Adisa? Is that you?" Nsowona's voice sounded nearly incredulous.

"Yes, yes! It is me!" Adisa, Nsowona's close friend, exclaimed. "But a more important question is what are you doing laying here? You have been so close to home all night, yet you slept on the forest floor! Do you prefer it to your bed?"

"I... I gave up. I didn't think I could return home - I was hopelessly lost."

"Nsowona, it is important to never give up hope. You must always persist through your struggles," Adisa countered, sounding enlightened with a newfound knowledge.

“But now, I realize, we are near home! Why have we not left?!” Nsowona questioned rhetorically, in disbelief. He then stood up, stretching his brittle and aching muscles. “Lead the way!”

Adisa and Nsowona dashed away, leaving behind the tortuous realms of the jungle in their paths. A clear opening revealed itself as they ran, and in just minutes, the two friends had escaped the menacing expanse of greenery. Immediately after he felt the lustrous sun gently kiss his skin, Nsowona fell to his knees (for a second time), rejoicing in his triumph. There, Kgosì stood, his smile beaming as brilliantly as the incandescent ball of light in the sky.

“You did it, son. I am proud; and I do believe this journey has taught you something about being a man - it is not your physical prowess that determines such things; it is your ability to persevere through the toughest of times.”

“You see, Sebastian?” I gently inquired. “Just hold on to hope and we’ll be fine.”

I grabbed the innocent child and pulled him in for a warm embrace, but my action was stopped by the shock of the door nearest our cots bursting open. Iridescent light flooded the dim barracks, and an uproar of confused groans followed. A stern-faced man, dressed in the familiar, yet revolting, dark green, knelt down and glared harshly into the watering eyes of my little brother.

“D-don’t... h-h-hurt... us,” Sebastian stammered, his teeth chattering with fear.

“Hurt you?” The stern face was suddenly illuminated with a luminous, pearly smile that occupied the entirety of his rosy face. “We are from America - we are here to liberate you. You don’t need to be scared; you’ll be okay now.”

As the kind-faced American soldier carefully carried Sebastian away from the incommensurable barracks, I realized that the moral of my mother’s story reigned true; never give up hope, for the most difficult challenges will come just before your reprieve.