

From Tiriso Burning

Ida always believed that evil had come out of the mine, and Beryl said that it was true. She said that the workers dug and dug till they knocked the devil's door with their shovels and afterwards the world was never the same.

But now, Tiriso was quiet. The sand had risen with the wind and had settled on the place like some stinking old rag. The Main House, with its thin timber walls, was burnt raw at the edges. The workers' huts were collapsed and were hardly there at all. But it was the stillness that Ida could not bear. It was the kind of silence made only deeper by what had been there before.

Ida turned over onto her back. The sheets tangled where sweat made them stick. The ceiling was high and Ida made her breathing shallow so that even she could not hear. It would begin any moment now.

Had it been here that Beryl dropped the lamp? The bed was hot like fire and Ida's skin was stinging where it was being touched. She saw Beryl then, standing at the foot of the bed – her face flashing in the seconds before the thing slid from her grip.

Had it been like that? The mark on the floor where the fire had briefly burned was proof. But when Ida turned her head the woman was gone. She closed her eyes. Her breathing was too loud. The seconds were passing and still, all was silence.

Once, Ida had wished for quiet. At night she'd hidden beneath the eiderdown and pressed it into her face so hard that blackness became all that was real and there was no more noise.

She stopped breathing. The sounds had begun. They came from above – four footsteps where before there was two.

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The mine had worked at some point, she knew. It had opened up its wealthy belly and the land was fertile and cool. Ida was then a child and knew what it was to be full – when home buzzed busy as a swamp and nights were safe and quiet. Ida remembered those times before everything changed like it was a whole and complete life that was separate from her own. Some things stayed and would not fade – the smell of Beryl’s coco-milk, the flicker of moths against the kerosene lamp, the pat of the tray as it was placed at the top of the attic stairs in the mornings and taken away again at night. These things beat the rhythm of Ida’s life and were the things that she knew. They turned over each other with the swell and drop of the sun and were knotted together by the endless grind of the living mine. From the French veranda she could see the roof of the shaft-hut, the place that hid the entrance into the throat of the earth. She knew what the Colour was before even her heart began to beat.

Her father may have been mad but her mother knew where to put the pit. With Ida in her belly, she’d dug the earth, deep until she found what was there and when they drew it up, it shined in the light like a piece of rock with eyes, specks of gold, gleaming here and there beneath the clay-like mud. They passed it round and round and laughed. In the end the shaft-hut was built around the hole to hide it and after that, the compound wall was made. Thick and long, it rode round Tiriso like a giant snake. For years afterwards the gold had come up, winched into the air as the men burrowed deeper. But the deeper they got, the darker the shadow that came out.

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It had been a sultry, moist evening when Ida first learned about *Shetani*. Frederick was cutting the grass and he had the word on his tongue. Ida watched from the ground veranda as his thin blade swung back and forth, catching moonlight on its skin like a fish. He stopped when he saw her watching, leaning down upon the long wooden handle. His body was folded against the black garden, but Ida saw him grin.

‘You know what in the hut?’ he asked. She nodded.

'A hole.'

'A hole!' He whistled sharply. 'A hole deep as one thousand miles. And you know who go down?'

She shook her head.

'No one. No one go down because there nothing left to go down for. Your mammy took what there and now there nothing but dirt.' He hummed. 'But I hear there something there, it sitting in that hole and waiting for someone to wake it. Shetani been sleeping in the earth but your mammy woke him up.'

Frederick stepped further back into the dark, nothing visible but the blade. He laughed before carrying on, swinging it side to side.

When she climbed into bed that night Ida had sat and stared. Her mother's gown was hanging on the back of the door, but in the darkness it was moulded into a shape that made her anxious. Somewhere in the dense, unyielding black, the hole in the shaft-hut came into her room, its colour so deep it was blinding.

When sleep came it came suddenly. Ida dreamt of the fire that had destroyed her father's first dreams of Tiriso before she was even born. Beryl's memories had been poured into her own head like grease – thick, sticky and sickening. Most of all Ida saw the old winch, towering into the black as a flame as bright as whiteness lit up her father's strange and anguished face. Covered with the oil that burned, Beryl had heard him scream that the devil had come up from the ground.

There was nothing left of the house that had then stood. Its walls had been low and unpainted, squatting in a land that was as wild and as ugly as the building itself. Ida tried to imagine the small darkened rooms, but the Main House was unforgiving in its sense of reality.

In the heat of that summer the doors had been always open. The new glass windows were taken down by Frederick and replaced by iron bars to allow in more air. He clicked his tongue while he worked, methodically ripping out the white English panes and grinning when Ida caught his eye. Everyone knew what had been there before the fire but her, and the iron bars reminded her of something cruder. When she watched from her window in the night, she leant her face between them and thought that a fire would burn everything in the house but those bars.

It was the start of the dry months, before the world changed. In a time when Ida still believed that everything she saw was alive. When the table in her room or the rug on the floor lived like her, breathing, thinking and feeling. The days were long and still hot, always hot – but the ground was still fertile and cool and the mine was full the day Moses went with all the other workers, into the hole in the ground.

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It was afternoon when they dragged up his body with a rope. It squeezed his waist till he flopped over in half like a rag doll. Beryl didn't try to cover her eyes when it happened, when Moses came into the sun like something being born – everyone clamouring round him, wailing or crying or moaning. They shot out their hands before the rope had even been cut, pulling his body into the crowd to see what death had done.

Beryl squeezed the back of Ida's neck. The day was a dry kind of hot and they watched from the veranda as a crowd grew around the shaft-hut. The men's feet kicked up dust from the burnt stinking earth. It formed a kind of mist and stayed in the air about them, moving as they moved, lifting Moses high up above their heads. He lay there like that, bobbing and rolling about as they walked with him away from the hole in the ground.

Ida stared down at the body when the procession came underneath. In the sun he looked like he was alive. The brash light shined up sweat that was still on his skin. She looked but couldn't believe that the man was dead and when she asked if he was, Beryl hummed and shook her head.

'His body dead, but Moses still here. He still be here for a long time.'

'Like a ghost?'

'No memsa'b,' she replied, hand still hot on Ida's neck. Beryl had plenty of stories about ghosts, but this one was different, her voice was soft and serious. 'He still be here as a shadow, walking round till his family take him back. Moses not gone yet.'

They stood there above the heat and noise and dust till the men turned a corner in the compound road. Ida searched for Beryl's other hand beside her and held it. In the orange haze she thought she could see a shadow, walking behind the line like a piece of black dust.

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In the evenings they went to her mother's room. She waited for them that day on the blue sofa, her hair wound thick in a knot, black against a white dress. She beckoned Ida forwards, taking her hands and making her sit on the floor. The Afghani rug was warm but rough against her knees. Her mother's hands – soft and pale and strange.

'We can't talk for very long Ida,' she said, taking them away and folding them into her lap. 'I have to go to Gwanda, do you understand why?'

Ida nodded, thinking only of the way her mother stared at the top of her head.

'Something very terrible is happening,'

'I know.'

'But we mustn't talk about it now.'

'I saw what it was,' Ida said, looking up, pleased at first by her mother's stunned expression. But as the silence went on, she began to feel that something bad had been uttered. Her mother crossed her legs.

'Beryl will eat with you tonight,' she said, stroking her ankle with her strange soft hand, 'but you'll come here tomorrow evening.'

She looked towards Beryl in the doorway as she said it.

'Goodnight Ida.'

Her mother leant forwards. Ida brushed her skin when she kissed her cheek. It was warm and smelled like powder. She went back to her room with Beryl's hand on her neck. Her mother had not talked of Moses. She hadn't talked about his rag-doll body or his dead walking shadow.

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When night came it was different to usual. Something was hanging in the air and the world had changed like everything in it was suddenly alive, thinking and staring at her – waiting. Her room was dark and the night was stifled by a wide, thick cloud. She watched as Beryl's hands slipped in and around her own, kneading coco-milk into her skin. On the table the yellow lamp burned. Beryl pressed the soft white cream, smoothing – gently till her chair squeaked against the floor. Her face was a shadow and her breath was

hot as it brushed against Ida's forehead. Still she went on pressing, and Ida stared hard at how she moved, wondering how anyone so alive could ever be dead. But the hole in the shaft-hut had taken Moses and swallowed him. And now the world had woken up.