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The Mango Tree

Sampa Musaba

Prologue

Everisto did not like the person he had become. He didn't like how he could no longer smile. His soul had been dumped by the unexpected turns that life had taken on him. He had heard people say that *life is funny* but had never thought that the joke would be on him. Regret and the guilt of regretting hung heavy on his shoulders.

He had once thought of ending it all; his life.

There were times when his large rough hands held a knife close to his beer-belly, but the feel of the cold blade against his skin shook him back to his senses.

He always blamed himself for his wife, Musonda's pain, which had become his pain. He further blamed himself that her eyes always had a glossy sheen to them and that her smile was no longer as broad. Whenever he spoke to her, she looked at him with a mix of disgust, pity, old love and a new loathing.

But above all, he hated the permanent look of anguish on her face each time he tried to talk to her. It was as if his efforts to resolve their problems only made it worse.

Everisto was a coward, and he knew it.

As he stared at his daughter, Tina, who sat on the floor of their hut between her mother's legs, he couldn't help but believe that he was indeed right.

He looked fondly at Tina, sometimes wishing that he was her age. He loved the innocence that her eyes held, an obliviousness that radiated light. She was sitting quietly, her little knees to her chest and her head bent into them to give her mother a good angle as she braided her hair.

She was smiling again. She smiled a lot, often for no reason. Her eyes were darting about as if looking for a reason to smile. She did it so often, leading one to believe that breathing itself brought her joy.

Everisto's eyes then shifted to the incredible woman bending over Tina. Her beauty always startled him. Narrow sharp features formed the face he so loved. Undeniably, Musonda was a beautiful woman. Large almond shaped eyes, shadowed by her long thick lashes. Her perfectly arched plump lips were now a straight line.

Musonda's slender hands began a fresh line in her daughters head, braiding her untamable curls. She tugged a little to get a better grip, Tina's lips pulled into a frown, sitting stiffly in silence without protesting. Musonda's hand had not loosened their grip, and her face showed no recognition of her child's stiffness between her legs. Her striking face, as always, expressionless.

"Musonda, you're hurting the child," Everisto spoke up, at last.

Musonda raised her eyes in his direction but said nothing, her grip loosened, ever so lightly.

Musonda rarely spoke. There was nothing much left to say. However, when she did, her words were blunt to the ears and sharp to the soul.

It was a full moon that night. Everisto remembered nights of old when he would tell Musonda of how beautiful she was, of how, if she wanted, she could replace the moon.

Those were the good days.

Everisto moved to sit next to his wife on the bench, as he took a long swig from his bottle of beer. He felt relaxed to the soothing liquid that spread warmth to his body.

"Will you ever stop drinking?" Musonda asked. Her sharp tone shattering the silence between them.

"Today is the last day," Everisto lied. He wanted to stop drinking, he did, but the alcohol provided the warmth he needed, the warmth and affection which Musonda had since withdrawn. It wasn't the same kind of warmth, nor was it enough, but it was warmth.

"So is every other day," Musonda retorted, without looking into his eyes.

"I promise I'll stop," he slurred, knowing too well he wouldn't.

An eerie silence fell upon them once again. Everisto blamed the blanket of silence that always sat between them on the fact that Musonda never forgave him. Musonda blamed it on his inability to face his actions.

"Tina doesn't deserve this," Musonda said. "Neither do I, neither do you."

He took a guilty swig from his bottle of beer.

Everisto knew what to say in the silence that followed. He always did, but each time, Musonda would walk away.

"I'm sorry," he said. Apologizing not for one thing, but for everything.

This time Musonda didn't leave. To his amazement, she leaned her head on his shoulder. "I know," she said, "I wish that there was nothing to apologize for."

The first time Everisto set his eyes on Musonda, he knew he would marry her. She was sitting under a mango tree with a forlorn face. He had just come from hunting, and the sweat made his dark skin to glisten under the sun. With game meat in one hand and his trap in the other, he approached her with confidence.

Her eyes remained on the ground even as Everisto's feet came into her view showing no recognition of his presence. He cleared his throat awkwardly to grab her attention. Reluctantly, Musonda raised her face.

Everisto could tell that this wasn't a good time, but still, he stood across from her. Her eyes stared at him with irritation. He felt queasy on his feet, and the weight of the load in his hands suddenly felt too heavy.

Everisto was about to leave when Musonda roughly tugged him down.

"What do you want?" she asked sharply through her clenched lips.

He loved her; he told her, boldly. She chuckled impatiently as if used to such uninvited declarations. Everisto took this slight change in her mood as a good sign.

They talked till the sun went down. And did so every day, for months to come.

Neither knew what it was that drew them to each other that day.

Eventually, Everisto told his father about Musonda and asked if he would accompany him to make his intentions clear.

Eight years passed. Years of love, but one thing eluded them and burnt into their happiness, a child. They wanted and longed for one.

One morning as Everisto was sharpening his hunting tools, a woman came into their compound. She introduced herself as Ella. She had golden red hair that went past her shoulders. Her white porcelain skin was covered in freckles. She had small green eyes and a narrow nose that complimented her thin pink lips. She said she worked for one of the churches that were being built in their community. She was doing research, she said, on local perceptions of the new religion that was being introduced to villagers.

Reluctantly, Everisto offered her a stool and called out Musonda to serve their guest a drink. As she did so, a knot formed in her gut. She didn't know why. She watched Ella and her husband talk when something unexpected hit her – a pang of jealousy.

In the weeks that followed, Ella made frequent visits, each day staying a little bit longer than before. Then one day as Musonda was at the back of the house cooking under the shed Everisto had built for her, she heard Everisto laugh at something Ella had said. Yes, they had many lighthearted moments, but this laugh was different. It was the kind only she could pull out of him.

The next day, early in the morning as Musonda swept the compound, Everisto stepped out. It was very early for Everisto to be up. He told her that he needed to go somewhere and would not be eating breakfast. Everisto saw what he thought was hurt in Musonda's eyes, but that emotion left as fast as it came.

Musonda watched Everisto take massive and hurried strides out of their compound. She knew where he was going; to Ella's house.

Musonda assured herself that the visit was an ordinary one, but her belly was gripped with the same gut-knotting feeling she had felt the first day Ella turned up at their doorstep.

Everisto stood in front of Ella's small house. It was painted white beneath all the dirt that built up from the red-brown soil. He knocked on the crooked brown door. Ella opened it almost immediately. She ushered him into her tiny sitting room. It had a small round table, two chairs and had a little bookshelf with more books than it could handle. They sat on opposite sides. Neither of them said a word.

Everisto never came home that night.

Musonda wasn't an unintelligent woman. She didn't say a word to Everisto who returned to their home with the same ease, and at the same time as he had left the previous morning.

They spent the rest of the day in silence as Everisto avoided her gaze, while she stole glances at him. She was hoping he would look into her eyes and reassure her that nothing had happened and that her suspicions were wrong and unfounded.

The other part of her wanted an apology. It hurt her that that seemed more realistic. Another part of her wanted him to deny it. Deny that he went to see her. Deny what she was thinking.

As she lay on the floor of their bedroom, staring blankly at the thatched roof, a tear slipped out of her eye, and she wiped it roughly. Another fell, followed by another. The more she wiped, the more they freely fell.

Everisto lay beside her. He tried to reach for her hand. Musonda pulled her hand closer to her body.

"Musonda I -," he started.

"Don't." She cut him off. He made no further attempt, to her disappointment.

Everisto left the room. He then left the hut. And lastly, he left the compound.

Her glossy eyes followed his retreating figure in the dark as he left the compound. Her lips formed a tight straight line. She cried at her how easily he left. How easily he gave up on explaining himself. It pained her how easily he left the house again, how easily he left her.

As easily as he left the previous night, he came back. For the next ten

consecutive days, he went and came back as he pleased.

On day thirty-two, Everisto didn't leave, taking Musonda by surprise.

Later that day, Musonda's mother-in-law visited them. She rarely visited, but when she did, it was usually about how she wanted a grandchild. Other days she'd stop by just to gossip.

Everisto sat outside on a mat laid out in front of the hut. He stared blankly with sullen eyes. His jaw clenched at the sight of his mother who was now standing before him. He hadn't seen her enter the compound. That's when it clicked to Musonda why he hadn't left. A small smile formed on her lips.

She greeted her mother-in-law and brought her a chair. She left them alone; mother and son. She watched from a distance, making sure neither of them could see her.

Everisto kept his eyes glued to the ground. His mother spoke for a long time. Her features were screwing up to add emphasis to whatever she was saying. She paused, and her son looked up. His eyes were, and tears nearly fell passed the brim of his eyes.

His mother raised her voice, but not audible enough. She raised her hand so close to his face, Musonda was sure that she would slap him anytime soon. Everisto dipped his head lower, which seemed to aggravate his mother as she stood to her feet. She was a short woman. When standing, she was a little over her son who was sitting.

Musonda will never know what shocked her the most, whether it was the sound of the loud clap of her mother-in-law's hand landing on her husband's cheek or his voice shouting "I love Ella!"

He spoke while his mother shook her head the whole time. She stood to her short height and called for Musonda who readily came out to walk her out of the compound. Once out of earshot of Everisto, the woman stopped in her tracks and held Musonda by the chin with a tight grip. "You're not stupid my dear; and how I wish you were, it would have been so much easier."

Musonda remained still as her mother-in-law sucked her teeth and

shook her head.

Her mother-in-law continued, "Be strong. Do you hear me? You can't get out of this. This is one thing not even I can help you with. You've seen," she said, raising her hand other in the direction of their hut, "I came to help but clearly my son has his own plans." She paused again and stared into Musonda's eyes. "You are his wife. Don't let anyone or anything change that. This is your marriage, your home. Don't let a foreigner ruin it. And even if she does manage to ruin it, don't show it. This is your world," she said letting go of Musonda's chin and gesturing around her, "Don't let another woman live in it. Don't let another woman live your life."

Musonda watched her retreating figure, as the words rang in her head - *it's your world, don't let another woman live your life.*

In the days that followed, Musonda tried, firstly, not to let another woman live her life, and secondly, she kept Everisto from leaving her, their hut and their compound.

On day eight of her efforts, he left.

One week became two weeks, then three months. And lastly, became two years. Everisto never came back, not once. Some days, Musonda would sit inside the hut and not come out. Market days were the most difficult, as women spoke in hushed tones, others pitting her, others blaming her. It was at the market where she discovered that Everisto and Ella were expecting a child.

Musonda was sitting outside her hut when her mother-in-law paid her a sudden visit.

"I told you to be strong. He'll come back," her mother-in-law began, "He loves you. He might love her too, but he's still married to you."

"Then why did he leave?"

"I told you to be strong," she said dismissing her question. "He will be back. Just accept him."

"After two years?" she chuckled.

"You just will," she instructed, directly.

"I did something to save my son because he made a bad decision. It is not something that I am proud of, and it's something that I know God will judge me greatly for. But it had to be done; there was no other way. I would not let my son ruin his life all because of a white woman. So you will accept him for you, not because he needs it, but because you do. You need him."

Her mother-in-law left as abrupt as she had come. Musonda was left to wonder what it was that her mother-in-law could have done.

She also wondered if it was wrong for her to want Ella's head on a spike.

She wondered if Ella had any remorse for taking what didn't belong to her and if she even loved Everisto. She then wondered what kind of strange magic she must have performed to steal him from her so swiftly and so effortlessly.

Lastly, she wondered if Everisto wanted to be stolen.

Epilogue

"I wish there was nothing to apologize for," Musonda repeated, quietly.

"Tell me what I can do to make this better,"

"What did I lack that you had to go and look for it in someone else?"

"You know I can't answer that," he said, without looking at her.

"Then there's nothing you can do." She said, barely audible.

He stood up and walked into the house, each step a drag, with guilt in toll. Guilt for the way his life had turned out, for the constant emptiness in Musonda eyes, for Tina, for Ella's sudden death in childbirth.

"You look beautiful," Musonda said to Tina, dusting off bits of hair from her shoulders. Tina stood up and gave a hug to a woman she has come to call her mother.

"You are beautiful," she told her, looking into her green eyes.

She had Ella's eyes and caramel skin.

They sat silently and watched the moon.

Mother and child, not mother and daughter.