

Radiance of Tomorrow, A Novel

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| Sierra Leone |

excerpt of Radiance of Tomorrow, A Novel
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*It is the end, or maybe the beginning, of another story.
Every story begins and ends with a woman, a mother,
a grandmother, a girl, a child.
Every story is a birth...*

She was the first to arrive where it seemed the wind no longer exhaled. Several miles

from town, the trees had entangled one another. Their branches grew toward the ground, burying the leaves in the soil to blind their eyes so the sun would not promise them tomorrow with its rays. It was only the path that was reluctant to cloak its surface completely with grasses, as though it anticipated it would soon end its starvation for the warmth of bare feet that gave it life.

The long and winding paths were spoken of as “snakes” that one walked upon to encounter life or to arrive at the places where life lived. Like snakes, the paths were now ready to shed their old skins for new ones, and such occurrences take time with the necessary interruptions. Today, her feet began one of those interruptions. It may be that those whose

years have many seasons are always the first to rekindle their broken friendship with the land, or it may just have happened this way.

The breeze nudged her bony body, covered with a tattered cloth thin and faded from many washings, toward what had been her town. She had removed her flip flops, set them on her head, and carefully placed her bare feet on the path, waking the caked dirt with her gentle steps. With closed eyes she conjured the sweet smell of the flowers that would turn to coffee beans, which the sporadic breath of the wind fanned into the air. It was a freshness that used to overcome the forest and find its way into the noses of visitors many miles away. Such a scent was a promise to a traveler of life ahead, of a place to rest and quench one's thirst and perhaps ask for directions if one was lost. But today the scent made her weep, starting slowly at first, with sobs that then became a cry of the past. A cry, almost a song, to mourn what has been lost while its memory refuses to depart, and a cry to celebrate what has been left, however little, to infuse it with residues of old knowledge. She swayed to her own melody and the echo of her voice first filled her, making her body tremble, and then filled the forest. She lamented for miles, pulling shrubs that her strength allowed and tossing them aside on the path.

Finally, she arrived at the quiet town without being greeted by crows of cocks, the voices of children playing games, the sound of a blacksmith hitting a red-hot iron to make a tool, or the rise of smoke from fireplaces. Even without these signals of a time that seemed far gone, she was happy to be home that she found herself running to her house, her legs suddenly gaining more strength for her age.

The light from the fire painted the dark shadows of everyone on the walls of the houses behind them. The young people weren't as plentiful, and some sat reluctantly by the

fire. The eager ones were the generation of Oumu and Thomas, who had heard of moments such as this from their parents, and some exceptional ones like Hawa and Maada, who despite what they had endured, had a joy within them that such a tradition sparked even more. The other few, who had arrived in town without parents and roamed about, helping here and there to get some food, sat by themselves. They listened to the story with one ear focused on the gathering and the other on guard.

No matter who was present, and why, the entire town had come to hear a story from Mama Kadie and from whoever else would be moved to tell. This was the tradition---the elders, mostly women, would tell a story and the other elders will join in afterward. Some nights it would go on until even the children were called upon to retell stories they had heard. Tonight, Mama Kadie stood up inside the circle and walked around the fire as she told the story, adjusting the wood every so often to make the fire brighter or duller depending on the mood of the tale. Some of the boys who had sat away gradually came closer.

“Story, story, what should I do with you?” She had shouted, the call for the teller to start, and the audience responded, “Please tell it to us, so we can pass it to others.” She went on for a number of times until everyone was asking to be told the story.

“There was a man who always complained about his condition and was unhappy with every aspect of his life, especially about his only pair of trousers, which had holes in them everywhere. Parts of his flesh could be seen through the trousers, so it looked from afar as though he had on checkered pants. When he got closer, you could not help but laugh at the natural beautification of his trousers. Soon all the young people whose pants had holes in them were referring to it as a new style, 'skin to cloth.'”

“The tailor in town was of course unhappy about this and blamed the man with the holes in his trousers for ruining his business. No one came to get things mended anymore; natural beautification had taken over. The Tailor followed the man everywhere, waiting for the perfect time to steal and destroy his trousers. Late one afternoon, after the man had returned from his farm, he decided to bathe in the river. He took off his trousers and carefully washed them. Then he laid them on the grasses to dry and went into the river. He submerged himself in the water to get a nice soak. The tailor, who had been hiding in the

bushes, decided this was his chance, but as he was preparing to move toward the trousers, another man came out of the bushes, took the trousers, and disappeared. When the man came out of the river, he couldn't believe his pants were missing. He called out, 'If this is some kind of a joke from gods or any human, I am not laughing.' He waited a while, but no response. Then he saw the footprints of the thief and began laughing so hard he fell into the water and struggled to pull himself out, still laughing. He said, 'There must be somebody worse off than I am, and if so, please enjoy whatever is left of my trousers. Thank you God and gods for not making me the poorest of men.' He danced in the grasses while the tailor watched, still not happy because he knew the thief would use the trousers. He wanted them destroyed."

"When the man walked down the path toward town, the tailor rose from hiding. He thought he should clean and cool himself off. He took off his clothes and dove into the river. The naked man heard the sound of the water and ran back, thinking he could see who had stolen from him. He saw no one, only some fresh new clothes: long pants and a shirt. He looked around, but the tailor was deep under the water, enjoying its coolness — even the top of the river had calmed. The man danced as he wore the new clothes, thinking that this was a wonderful day."

"When the tailor came up for air, he noticed that he had nothing to wear. It was a strange thing to see a naked tailor running through town."

The gathering was in a fit of laughter. The children of Oumu's generation laughed purely and repeated the funniest lines to one another. The adults laughed even more because they knew the story was true. The tailor was among them and the checkered-trousers man was there, too. But who was the trousers thief? No one admitted it, as usually things are mended at such gatherings. After the laughter died down, the adults and elders formed their own circle, leaving the children to themselves to talk about the stories. The adults started a serious conversation. There was silence among them, but the children were playing games, laughing and clapping.

If God could be anywhere, this was where he or she was tonight.

No one could have anticipated that this was the last of such gatherings. The elders would

have told more stories if they could have seen the changes that were in the wind of time. But at such beginnings, it was too early to hope for more; they had hoped only for incremental changes and reintroductions of old ways. They couldn't think too far into the future.

Sometimes a story doesn't make immediate sense — one has to listen and keep it in one's heart, in one's blood, until the day it will become useful.
