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Tamari Mulitalo

It was the old man's walking stick gently prodding my side that got me wide-awake. For a moment, I lay quietly not letting him know that I was awake. In the distance I could hear the conch shell distinctively, it always sounded woeful in the early hours of the morning.

"You didn't tell me something was going on in the village."

I turned, drawing the sheet up to my chin and faced him trying to make out his outline. I said, "Well the last time I reported something like this to you, you didn't exactly welcome the news."

"It doesn't mean that I don't want to keep up to date with what's going on in the village. 'Something like this', is this another rape case?" the old man asked.

"No, but some people in the council want to prove otherwise."

"Sole, you are my eyes and ears. I can't speak until you brief me on current issues. Make sure you give me the right information. I don't want to look foolish in front of the meeting."

"Okay. I heard at the village pool yesterday that Sama's father had accused Tavita of raping Sama and they were taking him to the village fono."

"Sama? Is that the daughter of Asu who is married to that drunken

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fat bellied what's his name?"

"Lafu Agale!. Almost everybody knows her husband has left a legacy of having a child from every house-girl they've hired in the last five years. He may be the outsider but his fishing boat and plantation employ and feed most of this village."

"So why the meeting?"

"Sama's family doesn't want to lose their bread and butter and their standing in the eyes of the village. Tavita is only a junior high school teacher but Sama seems to be smitten by him."

"But she knows she is married. Unhappily by the sounds of it, but still married."

"Yes. Tavita was seen at the back of their guest house last night holding hands with her," I agreed.

"Ok, I get the gist of it. Now hand me my torch and shoes and let's go. Put on a shirt or you'll catch cold! Hurry before the meeting starts", I readjusted my lavalava and lit the kerosene lamp before passing the shoes and torch to the old man.

Sama's father was pointing his finger at Tavita's father, one of the newly established chiefs, that had kept his head bowed the whole time, as arrows and darts flew from all angles at the meeting house. From the dim light of the fale, I could tell that he was getting the very attention he was aiming for.

"With due respect, what that man's son has done to shame my

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daughter deserves the worst punishment. He has been warned before to leave her alone. I saw Kavika, after he dirtied my daughter. I am ashamed to bring this up in front of the gathering of honourable members but the dignity of my family is at stake here. To my death I will never forget this sin committed against my daughter, the very pupil of her brothers' eyes.” Sama's father gulped in fresh air almost panting in his attempts to present his case.

“Everybody knows how he has flaunted his son as the only well educated young man in this village, saying that he is the best teacher in the government school for miles.” With each line rasped out, Tavita's father's head seemed to go lower. Sama's father looked around the meeting until he rested triumphantly on the accused man's father.

“I ask the dignified seating therefore to give out the punishment fitting for such an unscrupulous young man who has not only shamed his family but also his village in the eyes of the district.”

“I totally agree with your remarks.” The voice was hoarse but clearly disgusted. “What utter humiliation not just for his family but the honour of this district. Now the sacred names of the paramount chief not to mention the dignified seating will be dragged in the mud by the neighbouring villages. What arrogance! This is all part of this family's arrogant way of telling us they are above the law and the taboos protecting the honour of this beloved village.” The old man shook his head and looked sideways at the middle-aged man who was speaking. I wondered

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what was going on in the sharp brain, not reflected by his frail frame. “It is important to take out the dead fly that will spoil the peace and the tranquility of life in this village. If the father is arrogant, his children will walk in his footsteps. Everybody knows poor Agale works hard to provide for this village. and that his fishing boat employs most of the men of this village, he has the highest offering for the pastor every Sunday and is never stingy with kava like other men. But what has this family contributed to the well being of the village? They have spat on the face of our lifesaver. I totally agree that he should get the highest punishment, either exile or slash down every crop of his land. That will teach them to be arrogant!”

The old man brushed his eyes with the edge of his lavalava then swatted at a mosquito. I recalled the old man telling me that the speaker was the right hand of Sama’s husband. One by one the chiefs had their say either by accusing both son and father or by accusing ‘Kavika’ of trespassing in other people’s bed. One man questioned his credibility and integrity at school.

“He might be teaching our young daughters something else.” The majority recognised and acknowledged the contributions of Sama’s husband to the village and the threat of losing him if ‘Kavika’ was allowed to have his way. Nobody brought up the jokes mentioned at the village pool about Agale’s philandering ways. No one remembered that

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Tavita was the first man to honour the village by making it to the teachers' college in town and became the envy of the district. No one remembered that since he taught, a steady flow of children had made it to town schools each year. His family continued to be riled and slandered.

The old man cleared his throat before he moved forward. I sent a silent prayer that he would be blessed with speech. Then he spoke! What a calm after the storm. In his quiet voice, he began with the usual traditional salutation before venturing on.

“Before any solution is agreed upon, I wish to praise the good Lord for his protection and his guidance for all of us. Indeed this is the day that the Lord has made. A new day never lived before full of new possibilities. A new morning in his love, a new beginning. The wrong decisions or mistakes made in the passing parade of life we are on, can actually be the springboards for better times, taking us into a higher level. Problems can open new pages in our lives and serve as a reminder that we need to keep our focus on the living compass that is our guide through the storm. If I speak, I speak on my own behalf with a desire to see the people of my village seek peaceful solutions to issues that affect our lives now and in the future. From what I have heard this morning, the blame seems to be all on Tavita's head. I know this is no ordinary meeting but the two concerned are old enough to fend for themselves without adding further shame to their parents. Even though God was the perfect parent his children sinned. What can you expect from the willful, nature of men? I

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can see the consensus is leading to exile, some of you have even dared to speak murder. As for me, I'm close to my deathbed. I will go to the grave without a stain of blood on my conscience. You condemn Tavita for loving a woman who for so long has remained unloved, yet you casually sweep under the mat the fact that Agale continues to flirt and sleep with other women in her face? What does his wife's barrenness have to do with it? Some of you are just trying to get to Tavita's father through the situation."

The murmuring and hisses darted around my head as angry members reacted to the old man. Outside the meeting place, young untitled men lend to the ridicule denouncing the old man's speech. Now and then they would look at me and say "Your old man has gone funny in the head." I turned back to listen to the old man with pride in my heart.

"If you people remember yesterday's bible reading was based on Matthew 5, the dos' and the don'ts chapter on the mountain. In verse 22 Jesus clearly says 'But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her **in the heart.**' Which one of us can look the other in the eye and say they have never been guilty of such thoughts? Who is going to be daring enough to throw the first stone?" With that final comment the old man moved back to his post.

"Thank you to the dignified seating today. Thank you for your presence and for your comments to determine the solution to a very

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sensitive matter.” He paused then said looking at the old man “Thank you for your wise words. As the oldest person around our circle you never fail to touch hearts and lives with your advice and wisdom. However the bible is also very clear that striking the back of a fool will teach him a lesson. Although I too have my reservations about this family I have never raised them fearing that I was the one at fault but now it seems you are all well almost all in agreement over the same thing. Perhaps the beautiful words of our elder here would have worked in favour of Kavika except that I have just been handed evidence from his own hand that will destroy any questions of his innocence.”

He raised his hand importantly so everybody could see the so-called evidence fluttering in the early morning breeze.

“The title for the first is ‘**APOLOGY**’” signed here by Kavika Fulikua dated 11th to the 13th of this month.

11th December 19xx

Lord
my soul cannot sleep
for my sins keep rewinding over
The nights only highlight my transgression
against you Almighty One!
Lord
if my hands could wrench out
from this chest this that despairs me so
for I have plotted with eyes open
now I am ashamed to come to you
Lord
I am reminded to lay all burdens
at your feet
yet this stubborn mind
deeply contrite is ashamed

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and wary of what this flesh can do.”

The orator placed the first page down and looked sideways at the bowed heads across the meeting table. For some reason, he hesitated in reading the second one as if shattered by the outpouring of the poet.

12th December 19xx

Seeking Help

Lord
Here I am again
corrupt piece of clay that I am
confused in the tug of war
of flesh and spirit
I give up on my self
I have suffered and am deeply miserable
Hold me Lord
and give salve to my sinful heart
Don't turn your face away from me
unworthy and most hard headed
wretched creature that I am
Don't leave me
I beg of you Lord!
Lord
who else can I go to
others will be temporary relief
O let me lean on your strength
My God though I don't deserve it
extend your scepter
so I may crawl to your feet
let me be a stool for them Lord
just take this guilt from me
and cleanse me with
the ever living blood of the lamb.

13th December 19xx

Father,

overwhelm me with your love
and forgiveness
so I can release myself

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How I hate this flesh Lord
contrary and a stumbling block to your will
see how it corrupts and tempts Sama
to fall for its hellish snares
O raise the curtains of heaven for me
So I may see your glory
and purge my eyes with your purity
change my make O lord
so I may sing again of praiseworthy things
and share the marvelous wonders done in my life
to draw others to you.”

By the time he got to the end even Sama’s father had a different look on his face. There was a momentary silence after the last stanza of the poem. Daylight was approaching and the chilly breeze in the early morning seemed to do wonders for raised temperatures.

20th January 19xx

Mo la’u pele Sama,

I know I will always have love for you. Forgive me as the Lord has done for placing a burden and an obstacle in your path as well as continuing to indulge in what can never be. It is not something I can boast of. It reminds me that we are walking testimonies of abundant grace and so undeserved mercy. It also humbles me to know how unworthy I am on my own. I just wanted you to know that I really appreciate and love you. I am grateful that we never had to prove that in the extreme. This has been such a time of learning and growing for me. I will remember your love and I pray things will take on a higher level for you. Thank you for sharing a part of yourself with me. If the relationship hurt you at times, please forgive me. That is the sadder side of me that lets people down. God has not done with me yet. I’m sorry things cannot work out because we have a lot to give.

Did I tell you the things I love about you most? You have such a beautiful personality and it won’t be easy to forget what I cannot have. As well as that, a contagious zeal that make me leave whatever I am doing and want to spend the day with you. Help me to let go easily. I cannot continue to live with myself knowing that my spirit wants to serve the Lord and my body wants to go the opposite direction.

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May you be blessed, made complete and renewed by the Author and Perfector of our faith. Take care of yourself and remain my friend. I will always be yours. Pray for complete healing for both of us. I go with unshed tears some threatening to erupt. I will pour them out in front of Father in my own time. I too love Him and want to make the break because we both know that He has been wonderful to both of us. It is just after 5.00 in the morning and I have not finished my marking as I planned. At least I got to write this and get a load of my shoulder.

Be blessed! Be strong! Be joyful!

Ia manuia lou aso!

Alofaaga e le mavae mo oe,

Tavita.

PS. I will continue to pray for your relationship with your husband. Continue to submit to him. God will see you through.”

Slowly the orator raised his head and all eyes were on him.

“You have heard the confession of this son before God and before all of us this morning. I must admit being touched by the raw cry of the heart. No wonder the apostle Paul says there are ‘things I wish to do I do not, and those I should not I do...’ Ironically too, this young man has been named after the biblical hero David who also fell for a married woman. Yet David was called ‘a man after God’s own heart.’ Tavita has by his own hand convicted himself and sealed his punishment by every word he has written. Adultery or fornication has never been seen lightly or any other sexual offense for that matter. However I appeal to the dignified seating, Let your speech be mindful of the fact that no one is perfect. Like our elderly father here said, this is a new morning of God’s love.” He turned slightly to the old man and said, “I salute you father for

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the pearls of wisdom and your heart of love. I do not doubt they were divinely inspired. How blessed are the children that lean on your shoulder for advice. As for the dignified seating this morning I ask you all to come to a consensus. Again I ask you to douse your minds with love and mercy.” The orator leant back on his post as if spent and the old man did the same. His face was more relaxed and it was slightly upturned to watch the first rays of the sun play on the thatch of the nearby houses. Almost every matai seated that morning thanked the Lord for answering their earlier prayers seeking for his guidance. Finally the orator announced.

“As agreed by mutual consensus, Tavita will be exiled from the village for the next two months. His confession and the fact that he has been contributing to the education and well being of the community speak favourably for him. The usual fine of pigs and kegs of salt beef will be revoked. We ask instead that he provide the village meeting with breakfast the first week of March upon the end of his ban. As for the second issue brought up this morning, the dignified meeting has agreed it is time something is done about that faiava. For too long we have allowed his wealth and our own poverty to blind our eyes and muffle the truth burning in our hearts. I now open the matter for discussion.”

Total 2988 Words

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