

Lamentation of a Little Girl
1997—June, Mbuji Mayi

The thirteen-year-old girl's lips quiver, cheeks are slick with salty tears of sadness. She lies shoulder to shoulder with Mother, whose eyes brim with a sorrow that can never be expressed. "The most heartbreaking day of a young girl's life is the morning of her wedding," her mother whispers against her daughter's soft skin, "But after that, with God's grace, things will only improve."

The girl holds her breath as she listens into the night. She prays for order, for peace, and soon, her prayers are answered as her mother's sobs give way to a succinct harmony of steady breaths. The girl is soon soothed by the gentle hum of her mother's snoring. It helps drown out the overwhelming troubles of the night: the stifling heat, the rustling of the wind, and the muffled meows of the family cat in the adjacent room. Her mind is temporarily soothed in the warm embrace of her mother's snoring.

At the same moment, a grey Hornbill looked down from its perch in the branches of a towering tree, surveying the humble clearing below. Its piercing cry echoed across the lagoon and meandered beyond, to the creek meandering through the polished pebbles and the paddy field. Silence descended suddenly, as though a hissing cobra had startled it into stillness. The grey bird had brought with it the seeds of distant trees, seeding the bare expanse below with new life and promise. Its piercing cry had also deprived the girl of the clearing of sleep. She thought to herself in her mother's tongue: "Nzete yango ebotamaka na ndeke yango." Meaning the tree has been given birth to by the birds.

As the sky lightens with the intensifying dawn, she is stirred from sleep by the chirping of birds and the distant lowing of cattle. She rises to find the surrounding aglow. The paddy fields and river seem to effervesce and shimmer like liquid silver freshly beaten out of ore. Her father's bamboo chair, situated on the front porch, awaits, its long wooden arms encircling it like a hug. She sits, feeling the ghostly impression of her father's presence preserved in its woven cane.

On the sunlit shore of the serene lagoon, four graceful palm trees lazily bowed their branches toward the calm glistening waters, as though admiring their ethereal reflections. Then, with a whisper of wind, they elegantly rose, extending their heights to the star-studded sky, bidding a fond farewell to the peaceful lagoon and meandering creek.

"Mwanani?" her only uncle had uttered the previous day, his voice dripping with surprise and something else - a slyness she had only heard the day before. How strange, she thought, that he had suddenly fallen into the old habit of addressing her with the endearment "Mwanani" - daughter. "We found a good match for you!" he proclaimed, his tone unctuous as though she were still the child he remembered her to be, despite the fact she was now a blossoming young girl of thirteen. "Your groom highly values that you've come from a respectable family and you are a Christian girl." The young girl was well aware of her uncle's desire to marry her off, yet the haste of his arrangements still made her uneasy. With political turmoil continuing to ravage the country with complex economic struggles, many families had been resorting to marrying their daughters off at a young age to reap the benefits of a dowry. Despite her

apprehensiveness, she knew her fate wasn't hers to decide. Her mother's expression of defeat and helplessness filled her daughter with pity, although a hint of respect lingered in the air between them. As soon as they were alone, her mother spoke softly, pleading, "Mwanani, this is no longer our house. Your uncle . . ." She left the next words unuttered, yet the girl could understand. Her mother was letting her know that it was beyond their control. A different life awaits her in her new family.

The sun rises on the distant horizon, and life in the far-off land is like a beautifully painted portrait in hues of vibrant sapphire and indigo. During the holidays, the air is filled with sumptuous aromas wafting from the feast in the kitchen, and during Lent, faithful souls come together in solemn prayer and reflection. On Sundays, the people flock to the local church, gathering to receive communion, just as their ancestors have done for centuries. Amidst this warm and comforting familiarity lies change — a betrothed in a faraway place, the ever-plentiful rows of coconut, palm trees, and coffee bushes, will welcome her to a newfound home. "Life on the distant horizon isn't different from here," her thoughts try to comfort her.

The young girl couldn't help but wonder why, at age 37, a man of refined means had chosen her—a poor girl from a small, rural village to be his bride. She could almost hear her uncle's words as he scolded her mother.

"It doesn't matter if his mother is a witch! Who even knows a family with magical powers? It's all just other people's envy of a great match. They'll take something small and make it seem much bigger."

Still, the answer to her question eluded her, haunting her like the shadows of the night.

She gently ran her fingers over the silky armrests of the bamboo chair. Fond recollections of her father's muscular and sturdy limbs flooded her thoughts. A typical MuLuba man in every sense, he was covered in a luxurious dark pelt of hair from head to toe. This hair served as a protective blanket that made him so huggable. However, when embraced, it acted as a barrier between his skin and the little girl. Sitting in this very seat as a young girl, he taught her to read and write in her well-loved native tongue, Tshiluba. When she consistently earned awards for her academic excellence in the church school, her father looked into her eyes and said softly, "You are so clever, Mwanani. However, don't forget that having an inquisitive mind is even more important. You must continue further and pursue your studies in high school and beyond. I won't let you marry too young like your mother did."

The girl remembers an event that happened two years ago right around this time. When the atmosphere was filled with toxic mist crept through the air, rising towards the region owned by the state diamond mining company, "Societe Miniere de Bakwanga (MIBA)," which was known as the Belgians' concession. By midday, the fuzzy mist had licked its way up to the inhabitants' thorax, and by evening it had swollen like cream, rising to their chins. The unrelenting dampness caused the people to suffer from wheezing, aching rheumatism, and fever-induced tremors. Less than a year after his posting as a diamond miner at MIBA, her

father returned with teeth-chattering chills, his skin burning to the touch, and his urine tragically running black. Before he could get help, his chest fell silent as his breath slowly seeped away. His spirit had already danced its way up to the clouds.

The girl closes her eyes, and tears immediately flow down her cheeks.

She stands up from the old, tarnished bamboo chair. The weight of sorrow is causing her to feel overwhelmed. The heavy air of the area clings to her like a warning of the finite. The memory of her father is rapidly fading, but his chair and bed within loom like ancient monuments, still vibrant with his spirit. Yet, they too will be relegated to the past, and her only comfort comes from the hope of carrying them with her towards her future. The large residence slowly trembles with activity as the family prepares for the painful and irreversible transition.

She swipes away the tears, mustering up all the courage she can find in her aching heart. She forces her shoulders back, lifting her chin to meet the challenge of what the day has to offer; the sorrow of leaving that which had been her home is now nothing more than a distant memory. It is difficult to comprehend the great tragedies and suffering that often exist in our world, but her unwavering faith leads her to believe that there is a greater purpose behind it all, a meaningful order amidst the chaos. Just as her father taught her in times of pain, that faith means “to know the path is there, even though it is invisible.”

She whispers her reassurance, picturing the sadness that must be clouding his face and wishing he was here at this moment to give his blessing. She feels a sudden invisible sob crest through her. She can't help, but picture how he would react to her union. His traditional worry for a cherished daughter was quickly softened by the knowledge that a faithful husband would bring her comfort. Above it all, there is still an assurance rooted in the depths of her soul, an understanding that whatever path is ahead of her, God is present. God is there in the Gospel promises of his unwavering presence, even until the very end of Time.

On the way to the groom's church, the tricycle man steered them through a twisting labyrinth of canals lined with hibiscus, their petals as bright as the evening sky. Along the way, they caught glimpses of the local life. An old woman squatting in her doorway, winnowing a pile of maize with her flat basket, and a young boy tiptoeing precariously through a mango tree, stretching up for the sun-ripened fruit amongst a canopy of green. House after house passed them by, each small bubble of life closed off to the tricycle passengers. Then, from a doorway ahead, a bare-chested busybody with teeth stained black from eating charcoal asked, "What is this?" His index finger—blackened toothbrush in hand—pointed accusingly through the air. The tricycle man shot him an icy glare, and the journey continued. It is a journey that would take nearly half a day to reach the groom's church.

Stepping out of the roadway, she finds herself upon a lush carpet of colorful lobelias and mesmerizing lilies; petals of every shade of pink, their vivid hues woven together so densely that she could almost walk across them. On her left side, she notices the flowers with their petals

spread open as if inviting her to be a part of the picturesque landscape, creating a feeling of warmth and comfort. Overcome with awe, she impulsively reached for a nearby blossom, its long stem nestled deep within the earth. With a splash, she pulled it free—a shimmery pink jewel that belied its muddy origins. Her uncle's suspicious gaze shifts to her mother, who remains still, worry creasing her forehead as she wonders if her daughter's white blouse and traditional pagne with its faint gold trim, would be sullied. The air is sweetened with the scent of exotic fruits as she cradles the flower in her hands. Peeling away its petals one by one, she counts thirty. Pushing forth, the group slowly makes its way through the lobelia-covered ground—its wide expanse stretches deep into the horizon, its surface like still glass, granting her the tantalizing vision of a much larger land.

After riding the tricycle, her upcoming nuptials suddenly came back to her like a forgotten memory, anxiety sipped into her heart. She then hopped on a humongous pickup truck driven by a wiry, sinewy man. In the rear stood a hodgepodge of people, umbrellas mounted as a barrier against the scorching sun. She knew then that this was her journey to a foreign land, an immense distance away, away from the familiarity of home.

The winding road unfurled like a ribbon beneath the tires as the pick-up truck picked up speed. Suddenly, perched atop a sun-kissed hill on the distant horizon, a behemoth of a stone crucifix emerged, casting an immense shadow like a protective shelter over the golden waving fields of Manioc. This was one of the many churches founded by the Belgian

Christians who had come ashore to introduce their cultures, and for the first time, the sight of it left her awestruck. Like the map of the colonies she studied, she might have seen it pictured in textbooks, but nothing could have prepared her for the magnificence of seeing it in person.

The marriage broker from Kisangani marched restlessly across the quaint courtyard, perspiration slipping through the seams of his alb. His threadbare scalp, thin strands of hair strewn over it like a parrot's disheveled plume, quivered as he may have anticipated the delay of the groom. The knot in his gorge seemed to rise and sink intermittently, likely a consequence of the soil in his village - renowned for producing the finest grains of paddy, along with bulging goiters.

The groom's party is a single vibrant presence: Monique, his grinning sister, tenderly catches the bride-to-be's hands in her own and assures her excitedly, "He's coming!" The priest calmly dons his richly embroidered and bejeweled liturgical garments, holding out a hand to the hushed crowd for its blessing. Not a word passes in the air, yet the anticipation crackles like flames.

A soft chill ran down the bride's spine as beads of sweat trailed along her usually sun-kissed skin, creating constellations over her shoulder blades. She felt the unfamiliar weight of an extravagant blouse with a traditional "Pagne" draped familiarly around her slender figure, representing the life-changing unity of two families that would occur today. Her lifestyle of shorts, and skinny jeans is exchanged for bulky skirts and billowing blouses - every single curve is hidden in sight, a

fashion statement that seemed to be uniform for all married women of the society. The V-neck blouse similarly served to hide the voluptuous chest, though it would never be able to conceal the glimmer of distraught on the young bride's flushed face.

A sunbeam slanted through the lofty windows. Its light is slicing through the chamber like a shining blade, creating oblong silhouettes upon the floor. The captivating aroma of the sacred incense filled her nose and throat, stirring a sensation of spiritual comfort. The space bore little resemblance to her beloved church, apart from the vast emptiness of the chamber; there were no seats along the beaten red oxide flooring, only a lone coiled carpet adorning the altar in front. The muffled reverberations of her uncle's cough echoed in the vast nothingness.

A tumultuous heaviness clenched the atmosphere as the bride's mother took a hesitant step back. Towering menacingly beside her, the groom seemed poised to devour her any moment. The priest, quick on his feet, unleashed the ritual with nimbleness as if he were all too familiar with juggling mysteries of life and death. It was as if he possessed the same agility and dexterity needed to deliver a newborn calf in a barn. Standing rigidly in her place, the bride stared on, unblinking and trance-like, her soul already in a distant place.

The glint of the priest's smudged spectacles momentarily blinds her, but when her vision adjusts she catches a glimpse of her reflection. The figure standing in the doorway is majestic and imposing, casting a formidable shadow. Beside him stands a small, fragile girl. The man is thirty-seven years old. In the presence of this man, she feels younger.

Yet, she also realizes that he is older than her mother. Would a life of widowhood be her only alternative? Should she ever have faced such a plight, she ponders – a reality scarcely better than living as an outcast?

The priest's incantations come to an abrupt halt as her betrothed, his back shockingly turned away from the holy figure, pivots to meet her gaze. He locks a penetrating stare upon her, his breath coming in desperate gasps like a man who had suddenly broken into a sprint and raced for miles against time. She stands still beneath his regard, courageously struggling to keep her eyes from betraying her uncertainty. With her lashes casting shadows over her cheeks, she almost misses the hushed exclamation that falls from his lips - “Such a Luba young beauty!”

She strained her gaze downwards, and she noticed his feet. His feet were strong and defiant, callused and unflinching in the face of thorns, capable of crushing the splinters of a rotten stump and expertly finding footholds in the bark of a palm tree. His feet shifted, almost self-consciously, aware of their observer. Eventually, she was forced to look up to meet his eyes, their darkness in stark contrast to her own. His nose, aquiline, his lips, full and lush, and his chin, as strong and sturdy as the tree trunk he towered over. His hair, darkest black, with no sign of silver, rendered him formidable and imposing. His eyes were filled with such powerful intensity, flashing with a surprisingly agile focus, reminiscent of a mongoose on guard, always on the lookout for danger and prepared to attack.

The service whizzed by in a flash, leaving her startled mother to help the groom in freeing the bride's veil. His body merged into hers as he spun around and shyly embraced her. His fingertips were like smoldering embers that seared her skin as they softly swept down her shoulders.

The groom, with clumsy haste, hastily inscribes his name into the church registry and then hands the pen to her. She furrows her brow, scrawling her name and their union's date of wedlock -1997 - upon the Ancient page. In that same moment, the girl's gaze rises, only to witness her new husband departing the Holy Church, his figure diminishing into the distance, the priest watching, dumb-founded.

"What? Did he leave Pondu on charcoal?"

His grand exit is regarded with considerable befuddlement. She reaches the truck, its engine is rearing in anticipation, her husband's absence conspicuous.

Monique embraced her new sister-in-law, and her laughter floated effortlessly through the air. Monique joked about the girl's husband's love for traveling on foot.

This is the crossroad of the girl's life where she had to part ways with her mother. She clasped her beloved tightly, not knowing when she would see her again. Soon, she will have to leave for a new home, and a new life, and have a new name, with only a foggy image in her mind of the exact place she was heading. Hesitantly, she says her last goodbye to her mother, knowing that she will never be able to return to her home again.

Monique's gaze was glistening and sincere as she spoke to the agonized mother. "I will watch over her like my own; I intend to stay here in Kasai for the next three to four weeks. She will become so familiar with the home and its routines that she will know them better than her Bible verses! You don't need to thank me; my children have outgrown me, and this length of stay will surely have my husband realizing how much he misses me!"

The young bride's knees wobble and she clings desperately to Monique, who lifts her as if she were a mere babe. Her thin arms wrapped tightly around Monique's strong torso. She squeezes her eyes shut against the tears building, subconsciously pressing her cheek to her protector's sun-worn shoulder. When she finally opens them, her mother's glassy gaze stares back at her, coming in the form of a fragile silhouette whose own petite frame is dwarfed even further by the looming crucifix rising eerily in the background. The bride can make out the hint of a wistful wave, the last goodbye she will receive before being carried away forever in the rickety truck.

The young bride's new home gleamed in the sunlight. It was located in the sparkling oasis of Tshikapa. Tshikapa is a city situated at the junction of the Tshikapa and Kasai rivers. It is positioned only 60 km north of the border with Angola and 189 km west of Kananga. Travelers are drawn to this city for its potential for wealth and the allure of finding valuable diamonds. The city's foundation was laid in the early 20th century by Forminière- a celebrated American/Belgian mining

consortium who made an astounding discovery of diamonds near this location in the early 1900s.

The new land sizzles from the heat of a tropical savanna climate, which is typical of western Zaire. Sun-scorched months of June and July give way to a sweltering wet season spanning from September to May. The inhabitants of this vibrant city rely on agriculture and diamond digging for their economic main activities. Sadly, limited access to electricity, gas, and clean drinking water is a harsh reality of life here. In this land, mango and palm trees thrive with lush abundance, casting their frilled silhouettes against the night sky so that the twinkling shadows linger inside closed lids, refusing to melt away even in sleep. Dreams bring solace and rest only when there is vibrant growth; the absence of lush greenery and the sound of a trickling waterfall usher in the descent of a bleak and relentless nightmare. The bustling markets of the city are chaotic yet captivating spectacles; an array of vivid colors and delightful aromas fills the air. Everywhere you look, there are piles upon piles of products and wares spread across the ground or every which way in makeshift stalls. Despite the lack of basic business infrastructure, these markets are beacons of life and vigor in the city.

In May 1997 Kabila took over the country. Kinshasa was filled with chaotic noise. Our young bride stood with trepidation as Kabila, the newly claimed president of the country, proudly marched into the heart of the city. Her trepidation, however, was soon replaced with a hopeful glimmer of promise that the hardship of their history could be replaced with the sanguine future of new beginnings.

One can almost feel the moist Tshikapa's rich, russet-hued soil. A surgeon's blade can easily make an incision through it. This fertile land has magical power: it can sustain all living things with progressive bounty. Though many may scoff at tales of jettisoned, barely-born babes rising from the mud as wild wildmen, the truth is that the exotic cassava trees of African land thrive here with unfathomable extravagance.

The new bride drifts away to a dreamscape where she and her best friend are joyously immersing in a serene lagoon, their gleeful giggles and carefree splashes cascading off the verdant shoreline.

As the morning light grows stronger, she awakens abruptly, head foggy with the disorienting reality that has become her married home: Tshikapa. The unfamiliar syllables stick like a burr in her mouth as she turns to the slumbering mound next to her, the staunch figure of her sister-in-law, Monique. She senses the silence emanating from the abutting chamber of her husband's. She strains her ears, feeling a distinct void. Something essential is absent. There is an unsettling silence, and she recognizes its cause - the gurgling of water is nowhere to be heard. The temptation to close her eyes and find an imaginary substitute for the missing sound is unbearable. She succumbs to sleep and the tranquil whisper of a hidden stream is recreated in her dream.

The young girl, barely a youth, is a delicate flower in a storm of poverty and political chaos. Wrapped in a cloak of innocence, she grew pale and motionless, fragile against the cruel weight of abandonment, of being given away to an adult man whom she had never met before. She opens her eyes, and she can feel her tears and fear rising, causing anguish

in her chest. The realization of her fate hits her hard, as she painfully accepts the truth; that despite her innocence and purity, she is destined to become a bride against her will in a land ravaged by war. To her uncle, this marriage was seen as a way to ease their poverty. Her family would receive money and financial aid through the dowry. She is a victim of circumstances caused by poverty and political turmoil in Congo and was thus forced into an early marriage. A reflection of the sadness of the prevailing conditions in society, it left an unforgettable imprint on our young bride's life, diminishing any freedom of choice and happiness.