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The seed

Agnes Sam

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The seed

Abstract

The seed should have been planted along with the rest in the arid, rustred soil. Instead it lay gleaming on the toughened skin of the old woman's palm like a hardened black tear-drop. She had held it back.

The Seed

I

The seed should have been planted along with the rest in the arid, rust-red soil. Instead it lay gleaming on the toughened skin of the old woman's palm like a hardened black tear-drop. She had held it back.

She was stooped in the manner of a large old woman, feet set wide apart, legs awkwardly bent, with an arm along the sloping length of a thigh supporting her weight. All morning she had moved up and down the rows in this half-bent posture forcing each seed into the soil with her thumb, while the sun rested shimmering on the earth. Now, with the sun poised regally in the blue overhead her hand clenched tightly around the one remaining seed while she stretched forward to draw the rust-covered implements she had been using, towards her. When she straightened up she brought with her a shovel and hoe, brushed her hand on the loose heavy cotton blue dress she wore, then stood quite still.

Was it the frustration of planting seeds where none would grow that had made her hold this one back? Slowly the clenched fingers relaxed. The fist unfurled. Cradled in her palm, the black seed glistened with perspiration from her hand. Of the seeds she had planted, some would not swell with water; some would grow stunted; some would look sickly with disease; and all would wither with the first sign of drought. Having held it back, would she want to force this seed's passage through life, uncovered by the soil? With a decisive movement she delved into a pocket of the serge-like blue dress she wore, groping for a handkerchief into a corner of which she knotted the seed with brisk, determined fingers. The shovel and hoe she carried to the end of the field where she had begun sowing, propping the shovel up on its blade in the soil near a metal bucket of water. She returned to the field taking the hoe with her. Then, moving backwards along the rows in a slow, pre-occupied way, drawing the hoe towards her as she moved, she covered the newly-sown black seeds with the dry red soil.

When she paused during the blistering heat of the midday sun it was to ask herself, was it perhaps the irony of planting seeds at her time of life

that had made her hold this one back? For wasn't she like this homeland, the life ebbing from her? She too could no longer retain life in her. She touched the handkerchief in her pocket. Then again, wasn't she also like the seed, tough and resistant?

She resumed her work, walking up and down the rows; stamping firmly down on the newly-covered seeds; sprinkling water in handfuls from the bucket onto the soil; stopping only when there was just sufficient left for her to cool her face and neck with, and to rinse the sand off her feet.

At the end of the day when the old woman left the soft-surfaced red field with the tools on her shoulder, and the empty bucket in one hand, she wore a man's old, inflexible white cricket boots. As she walked she sang to herself in a soft, mellow voice, while the sun receded indifferently into the background.

II

That night, with red and violet streaks in the sky where the sun had been, the old woman drew the child on her lap closer to her, as they sat around a communal fire. But he wouldn't have her sing him to sleep. Her own drowsiness she fought off, in response to his plea, 'Make a story, Armah. Make a story.' A plea which was soon picked up and tossed from one voice to another across and around the crackling fire until the old woman began to weave a story about a seed that failed to grow.

'The seed,' she said, 'was buried with many, many seeds just like it — in rich dark earth — where all seeds grew in the way that was expected of them. But, of all the seeds buried in the earth that season — only this one failed to grow.'

'Say what seed it was, Armah,' the child said, in an encouraging tone, as if she needed to be coaxed to elaborate on any detail.

'To make what difference, Jelani?' a voice spoke querulously from the darkness.

The child turned an uncertain, uncomprehending look towards the speaker while the light from the fire played across his face. The old woman, observing the child, remembered the little girl who had sat like this on her lap years ago asking the same question. Then the old woman had said the seed was just like every seed that grew in the way every seed grew in that part of the province. The girl's need for detail remained unsatisfied. Like the boy she believed they all knew the name of the seed, but, in the manner of adults, withheld it from her. Now the old woman said, 'If I name a woman, that woman could grow to be powerful, she

could grow beautiful, she could grow wicked, she could grow kind. If I name the seed, it can only grow to be one kind of plant.'

The child thought about this, then reached up and kissed her cheek.

'Now, where the seed should have grown — there was a wide gap in the row,' she continued. 'Each time the planter passed the gap, he became — a little bit anxious — a little bit cross — and a little bit disappointed.'

'Was he worried about the seed, or was it just the gap was untidy?' the child asked.

'He was a tidy man! He swept the field each day!' someone shouted with delight.

The others joined with him in laughing and teasing the boy. They were a group of middle-aged men and women sitting on unmatched chairs and makeshift stools, some smoking tobacco in pipes, some drinking coffee, others drinking home-brewed beer.

When the laughter subsided, someone added, 'Listen, Jelani. If the planter spaced the seeds when they were sprouting he would lose more. Not so, Armah?'

'But he did wonder about the seed,' said another.

'Did he need every seed to grow?' the child persisted.

'Isn't it important that everything grows, Jelani?'

'Not if the planter was rich!' the child retorted.

'He had enough to eat,' the old woman said quietly.

'Did he own the land, or was he just a worker on someone's land?' he asked.

'Jelani!' someone answered crossly. 'The man was just a planter. Where do you find this boy, Armah?'

'Why did the seed bother him, then?'

'Because the planter's life lacked interest,' the old woman said. 'And the seed was different.'

They all waited, expecting the child to want an explanation. Someone stood up to add more charcoal to the glowing fire. When it seemed that he accepted the answer, perhaps without understanding it, the old woman went on, 'So, the planter — he began giving the seed special care.'

'Can *he* have a name?' the child asked.

'*You* say a name for him.'

'Je-la-ni!' he pronounced, without hesitation.

'Yo! Yo!' someone laughed. 'Jelani is a boy! A naughty boy,' he added. 'The planter is an old man.'

'Wait! Wait!' he called. Then, with his eyes closed, he searched for a

name while they waited, indulging him.

‘Mo-le-ah, then!’ he pronounced.

The old woman looked around the faces of those listening, wanting their approval. ‘Moleah?’ she asked.

They murmured assent.

‘On his way home each day — Moleah — gave the seed a little more water. When the days became warmer he shaded the ground from the sun with leaf mould. Moleah waited. Nothing happened. He looked more closely at the earth — and it seemed to him — that spot where the seed would not grow was too sandy. So — Moleah added some manure to help the earth hold on to the water. He gave it more water. Still nothing happened. Some time later — Moleah began to fear the water was clogging up the earth — just where the seed failed to grow. So — he worked some sand into the soil to help the water flow through. And still — nothing happened.’

‘The seed was dead, Armah,’ the child prompted.

‘No, no. The seed was waiting,’ a woman corrected.

‘By now, the field was covered with new growth — the leaves just about to turn green. But still — walking carefully between the rows to water the seedlings, the planter — he could not close his eyes to the gap. He fretted and he fussed over this one seed that failed to grow. At night — the planter — he would lie in his hammock wondering will the seed come up through the earth the next day. In the morning he would run out to the field only to find the ground undisturbed.’

‘Someone stole the seed, Armah!’ the child whispered.

‘The planter — he even feared that,’ someone said, ‘but who steals something with no value, hey Jelani?’

‘Knowing the seed had no value — the planter — he nevertheless took his blanket — which was striped red and orange like the sun — and slept alongside the seed — waking with the sun to look upon the earth. Still — nothing happened.’

‘Only an old man spends so much time with one seed when there are so many,’ one woman laughed derisively.

‘Even a woman,’ the old woman corrected, ‘when she values what is unusual.’

‘In the end — Moleah — he just had to find out what happened to the seed. So — he went down on his knees — and with his hands — he began to dig into the earth — with all his friends standing around laughing and pointing at him. He scooped the earth up — he rubbed it between his palms — he sifted it through his fingers — he repeated this — until he found the seed. Now Moleah — he expected to find a rotting seed —

because he gave it so much water. But the seed — it was just the way he buried it in the earth — smoothskinned and shiny. His friends — they stepped back from him — a little bit frightened, when he held up the seed for all to see. While they looked in wonder at the seed — a strange idea began to shape in Moleah's mind.'

'The seed was special, Armah?' the child suggested with a sense of wonder.

'The planter — he began to believe the seed was resisting growth.'

A stillness and attentiveness came over the group gathered around the fire.

'Out of respect for the seed's resistance — the planter — he polished the seed until it shone like a semi-precious stone. Then — he walked into the town and asked a silversmith to twist an ancient design to hold the seed. The seed in the silver setting was placed in a glass box. The glass box was hung over the fireplace in the planter's cottage.'

They waited in silence in a circle around the glowing embers, until one by one they began to grow restless.

'Poke the fire, Nason. Pour coffee for Armah,' someone whispered, wanting her to continue.

When the old woman spoke it was as if from some distance, 'You sleep now,' she said.

'Armah!' they complained. 'Why does Armah always do this? Please Armah, that's not the end.'

'There are many endings,' she murmured, smiling.

The child's arm crept upwards around her neck. Its softness and warmth reminded her of the hardness of the black seed in her pocket. While he slept on her lap she rested her face on the roughness of his hair and felt an indescribable warmth for the child. Of all the children who had sat like this on her lap, this child — perhaps because of the way he questioned everything — perhaps because he seemed to come alive in the company of older people — it seemed to her this child would expect authority to justify itself. This seed she held back, was it her resistance? Should new life not be planted here? In soil where dormant life is imprisoned within its crust; where the roots are choked; the rising sap stifled; where it seemed appropriate for old women and men to be sent into exile to die.

III

In the field the next day, the old woman laboured without rhythm, halting frequently to stare across the bleak, even landscape. Close to the

ground a thick haze given off by the heat, appeared like a distorting liquid suspended in the air. The air itself felt dry and still. It seemed to her the grains of red sand also hovered over the ground waiting for the first arid breeze to sweep them away exposing the thwarted life buried in the earth. With this image of her surroundings, she went about her work shut in with her thoughts, staring every now and then momentarily towards the horizon, until at last, she sensed more than saw movement in the distance. With her hands resting on the handle of the shovel she focussed on the disturbance until the movement took shape and she recognized the boy running towards her waving a letter.

The letter was simple. 'Armah, how would the child be housed? How could the child be hidden?'

The boy waited near her, panting harshly, while looking up to watch her face. It was only when she had folded the letter and put it back into its envelope that her eyes, resting on him, lost the anxious, concentrated expression that had excluded him. She took his hand and led him away from the field. Near the metal bucket of water she settled down on the ground, before extending both hands to him.

'The seed,' she murmured, as if there had been no break in the story, 'hung by the fireplace in the planter's cottage for many seasons. Then one day, a thief came to the village. He went from one cottage — across the land — to the next — calling through the door to find — was there any work in the fields? He found no-one home. It was the day for a wedding feast in the village. All the planters had walked to the bridegroom's home. Since there was no custom to lock doors — the thief — he wandered unmolested — in and out of each cottage. He was free to pick and choose whatever he wished to steal. When he came to the planter's cottage —'

'Moleah.'

'Moleah's cottage — the thief — he couldn't close his eyes to the glass box hanging by the fireplace. You see, Moleah — he had nothing of value. The cottage was completely bare except for the hammock and the glass box. In the quick manner of a thief — he reached for the box — forced open the glass and slipped out of the cottage with the jewel.'

'No, no, Armah! He knew it was a seed,' the boy said laughing in disbelief.

'How so, Jelani?'

'It *looked* like a seed!'

'Do you put seeds in silver? The thief — he couldn't help it. He believed it was a jewel. You would believe it was a jewel.'

'What name did *he* have?'

‘The thief? — Seroko.’

‘Is something bad going to happen to him?’

She looked uncomprehendingly at him. ‘For stealing the jewel,’ he added.

‘Who has that power to make something evil happen? The thief saw the jewel. He wanted the jewel. He believed it would enrich his life. So — he took the jewel. And — everywhere he went — he carried the jewel with him in a soft cotton wallet. Each time Seroko stopped to rest — he unwrapped the cloth, polished the silver and the jewel, then left the jewel to lie in the sun. He travelled from place to place — picking fruit — chopping trees — digging wells — and thieving, travelling into and out of each province — always taking with him the jewel. When he had put together enough money from his work — and from thieving, he asked a jeweller to shape a ring for him — in symbol of an ancient God — with the jewel placed in the centre.

‘Why steal and also do work?’

‘If he did no work they would know he was a thief!’

‘Who?’

‘Those who are not thieves.’

‘Couldn’t he only do work?’

‘Work was not as interesting — as thieving.’

‘Now, people seeing the ring — they whispered amongst themselves — the thief must be the son of a rich chief travelling in disguise through our province. So — they treated him like a prince. He was the guest of honour at weddings and festivals everywhere he travelled. Sometimes they asked him to judge a case that needed an outsider if the people were not to become angry with the chief. They allowed him to buy goods just by showing his ring. Soon — through clever trading — he was a rich man.’

‘He’ll be punished when they find the jewel is only a seed.’

‘Who will punish him if everyone is a little bit evil and a little bit good?’

The child said nothing.

‘Some years later — the thief settled in a community where he was well-respected. One day he hurried to the next town on business — but in his hurry — forgot his ring near the bowl where he washed each day. A few days later, he returned home to find the jewel had begun to sprout. The appearance of the jewel filled him with horror. It seemed to be struggling to grow out of the ancient silver design. He wasn’t able to understand what it meant. His first thought was that the ring was bewitched. Although he had never before been without the ring, he now

feared if he wore it — something terrible would happen to him. When his family and friends asked him — where is the ring? — he said — it is stolen — because he suspected that something evil would happen to them if they looked at it. It seemed to him a sign that he was to lose all his wealth and the people he loved. With all these fears in his mind, he spent a great deal of time running back to his room to look at the jewel. As the days went by he began to worry that the sprouting jewel might need some water. So — very reluctantly — he sprinkled a few drops of water on the seed. Then he placed the ring on the window-ledge where the sun would fall on it. Very slowly — he began to consider that the jewel was a seed. Now he feared that if he tried to remove the growing seed from its silver design — that it would be damaged. So — he left the seed in the silver. All the while the seed grew — the thief remembered the planter — and the glass box. At last — when the leaves were just about to turn green — the thief went to the centre of the busy trading town — followed by his friends — who now knew about the seed. He dug a hole in the ground and planted the silver ring with the seed twisted all round it, in the earth. The seed grew slowly into a tree, with silver sprinkled on the underside of its leaves.'

'He could take the seed back to the planter,' the child said.

'The seed didn't belong to the planter.'

'He would be glad to know the seed did grow.'

'He might be hurt to know the seed wouldn't grow for him.'

'Was the thief a good thief because the seed grew for him?'

'He was like any thief who steals what someone else values.'

'Did he stop thieving?'

'He thieved in unseen ways.'

'Can you say a name for the tree now, Armah?'

'I don't know a name, Jelani, but I know where a tree grows with silver on its leaves.'

She kissed him. 'Run home quick.'

She remained sitting on the ground watching the child run, then turned to wave, until she lost sight of him. How would the child be housed? How could the child be hidden? What did she mean? Where was she that she could ask these questions? Was she told she could have work if she lived in a room at the back without her child? If she were, then she could ask 'How would the child be housed? How could the child be hidden?' So what did she mean? That she didn't want the child with her? She couldn't see the value of the child. She couldn't know he would enrich her life. How could the child go to her if she didn't value him? How would the boy understand? How could he understand when he was

too young to understand the myth. She could see how he struggled to find the meaning of the myth. But the meaning would never be his while he struggled. It would only be his when he had lived out his life. And he might not have the patience to wait for his life to unfold before the meaning came to him.

IV

‘Jelani! Jelani! Jelani!’

The boy had spread on the table before him a meticulously ironed, clean white cotton handkerchief, in the centre of which, conspicuous and isolated, lay Armah’s black seed. He looked up from the cloth without a single flicker of anticipation. First he located the voice. Then he identified a woman waving excitedly from the crowd. Only later did he recognize with an effort and then only vaguely, his mother. He had folded the handkerchief and slipped it away by the time she reached him. Still with excitement and anticipation in her manner, she greeted him with an exuberance that did not falter even when she felt him stiffen unresponsively. She smelt of flowers, not earth, was his first assessment of her.

He accompanied her solemnly through the city, checking himself from responding with wonder at the mechanical movement around him. He watched a door slide open when he stepped in front of it. He stood in a train where there seemed to be only standing room. It stopped every two or three minutes — and there was nothing wrong. The doors opened as if by magic. People poured out and scrambled in. The doors closed and the train hurtled on to stop again and again. He was carried to the next level on a moving stairway. On the street he was surrounded by noise, people, cars, and buses. Everyone was in a hurry. They even walked up the moving stairway.

She kept up a flow of information about the city and questions about his home. His responses to her were monosyllabic. She talked too much. She couldn’t hold his interest.

He dozed off on the train, trying not to lean too close to her. He woke to find her arm cradling his head. But he didn’t feel safe with her. There was something of the hardness missing when she held him. She was too young.

The house she took him to had a neat compact garden in the front. She showed him a room that was to be his own. Left alone, he placed the cotton handkerchief under his pillow and slept.

In the morning he woke and slipped out of the house. He found a bottle of milk on the doorstep, and no sun in the sky. He walked around

to the back of the house but couldn't find a trace of blue in the sky. A long plot at the back had been dug over.

He asked her, 'What are you growing at the back?'

'Just weeds,' she said.

'What about seeds?'

'Seeds take up too much space.'

'There's space at the back.'

'I mean inside.'

He was baffled by this reply. She didn't think of telling him that seeds were planted in pots and then put outside.

She took him to the park and played with him on the grass. She bought him toys. At night she read to him from illustrated books about fairies, witches and magicians. But when she turned off the light and left him alone, he lay in his bed in the dark with the seed in its cotton handkerchief under his pillow, remembering Armah and the still, bright landscape of his home.

One day he asked, 'Do you have any jewels?'

'Not valuable jewels,' she laughed.

'Do you have any jewels from home?'

'No.'

He could not bring himself to ask her if she knew Armah's story about the seed; or if Armah had also given her a seed. So he maintained some distance from her. Whenever he was alone he would remove the handkerchief from the top drawer in his room and spread it on the carpet. He had travelled all the way from Armah to his mother with the handkerchief spread before him. He was not like the thief because Armah had given him the seed when she kissed him goodbye. Nor was he like the planter who had removed the seed from the soil. If he was neither planter nor thief, what should he do with the seed? Should he place the seed in a glass box or wear it as a ring? He should have asked Armah, but she had been crying.

They lived like this for two months in the house, the young woman carefree and the boy maintaining his distance from her, unable to call her 'mother'. At night when longing welled up in him for the comfort of the old woman's arms, the warmth of the fire, and the stories created around the fireside, he hardened himself against such weakness, holding back the tears. She had chosen to live here, he hadn't. They had decided he should live here. He hadn't.

Then one day a plain white card was slipped through the letter-box and landed on the red carpet. She rushed around the house hiding everything that belonged to him. She packed all his clothes into a suitcase;

picked up every toy and bit of toy that she could find; packed all these into plastic carrier bags which she then locked in the garden shed. She stripped his bed down to the mattress; the bedding was folded away in the airing cupboard; she even packed his pyjamas away each morning so that his room appeared unoccupied. All the curtains were kept drawn during the day, even the one across the front door. This routine she stuck to with scrupulous attention to detail. When the doorbell rang he knew as if by instinct that he should tip-toe out the back door. 'Is he the Group Areas man?' he whispered on his way out. It puzzled her. Did he imagine they were in South Africa?

She opened the door and stood there in the manner of a thief who opens the door to the proprietor. And with the air of a proprietor, the man confronted her without speaking a word. He knew who she was. She had approached him personally for a house. He knew to whom the house was let. He was the housing officer. He had both the power to provide her with a house, and to evict her.

Without a word he stepped past her through the door, down the passage into the kitchen and without any preamble began opening cupboards, drawers, the oven, the grill, and the pantry door. She stood to one side of the kitchen with her back to the two mugs of steaming tea on the worktop.

He walked into the lounge, ran his finger across the polished table-top, looked fixedly at the carpet then turned to go upstairs. She followed him mutely.

Halfway up the stairs, she suddenly remembered the toothbrushes, and couldn't recall if she had put the boy's away. She could only reassure herself when the man moved out of the bathroom doorway, that she had.

She was afraid he would notice the suitcase alongside the wall in one bedroom. He seemed to ignore it. He was almost through inspecting the house. She had nothing to fear now except that he would ask when she would vacate the house to the students to whom the university had let it. Then he seemed to pause more than was necessary in what was the child's room. She knew it was as empty as the spare bedroom, and worried about what could have caught his interest. She turned from the room, not wishing to look inside, not knowing what he would say.

He remained silent, giving her a false sense of security. He descended the stairs, at a casual, leisurely pace, then paused to look up at the curtain which had come down from the rail, and reached up to slide it back.

'I couldn't reach it,' she mumbled.

Reaching up to slide the curtain back, and without looking at her he

said, 'You don't happen to have your child with you, do you?'

'Oh, no. I wouldn't dream of doing that,' she said with a clear note of shocked disapproval in her voice.

'The university doesn't cater for women with children. You know that.'

She should have remained silent, after all she had broken university regulations about sub-letting. Yet, she couldn't allow the opportunity to pass. 'But the university accepts registration from women with children. What does it expect us to do with our children?'

'That's not for me to say. The university is geared to the needs of teenagers. You'll be hearing from me.'

He left the front door wide open and she was alone. She ran up the stairs to the child's room to find out what the man had seen. On the bedside cabinet, perched with a distinct air of provocation, was a child's pair of cricket boots.

She didn't know what the boots signified. He didn't play cricket. She didn't recall that he had a pair of cricket boots. Why had he put it there? What did it mean to him? Would he be able to explain to her, or would she have to wait until he was older? Would he have forgotten, by then?