

He

*Dorell Ben**

The water danced and glistened like sapphire jewels. The sun's powerful beams drew sweat, and its warmth swaddled him. He could taste the salt in the air and hear the wind through the trees and bushes behind him that carried the sweet scent of flowers.

He would always remember his Rotuma this way. Crystal clear ocean all around, shades of blues, sweltering breezes of fragrant salt, and the soft waves rhythmically beating the white, sandy beaches. He sighed as though a weight pulled him inwards, picked up a small rock and tossed it at the waves, somehow hoping the rock would take his worries into the sea with it. He watched the waves reclaim the small rock, wash up to touch the fishing net lying on the beach, and return to the same ocean. He sighed again. A fear was brewing in his chest, where an aching pain gripped him.

He knew today would be the day he'd tell his father, the day he'd soon leave his island. He knew he'd miss it and its people. He would miss home.

On his walk back home, he forced himself to cheer up. The walk through the coconut tree plantations was meditative. The tall trees reached for the skies, the grass all around his feet sprouted like the land's caring spirits. His little home was not too far from the beach.

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At night, he would sometimes stay awake just to listen to the waves purr a lullaby.

As he approached home, he could smell his mother's cooking and the smoke of his father's cigarette. He saw his father sitting at a table, staring out of the open door. He greeted his two younger brothers and put a flower in his mother's ear. He glanced at his father. The man took the shirt hanging over his shoulder and swatted at the flies. He flinched at the sound of it hitting the table, reminding him of the temper that slept within his father.

'Where you been, ay? Daydreaming again? You lazy!' his father said.

'I went to the beach,' he said and hung his head respectfully low.

'Ha! To fish? You lazy bum. You don't know how to fish.'

'Leave him alone,' his mother said, gesturing for him to stir the pot. It was a temporary reprieve from his father's cutting words.

'Your aunty is coming by the boat today. You should go help her bring some things home.'

'I want to go!' his little brother piped up.

'No! You have to stay here and help me cook the food,' his mother said. She was a very softly spoken woman and was full of all sorts of stories. Today, she chose to talk about Kirkirsasa and the Giant. The legend of Kirkirsasa came up because of the *täbroro*¹ she was preparing for dinner that night.

The story went that, one day, a woman named Kirkirsasa sent two girls to the sea to fetch seawater. Taking their time with the chore, the girls came across a sleeping giant. They began to throw rocks at the giant, whose angry eyes cracked open and who, in a rage, chased them back to Kirkirsasa's home.

His mother lunged for the boys on the floor, imitating the giant chasing the girls. Laughter and shrill little screams of excitement erupted from the boys.

'Ay!' came his father's shriek that filled their house with fearful silence. 'Shut up!'

He exchanged knowing glances with his mother. She gently stroked his back, then continued the story with a hushed tone while she served the food.

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To appease the giant, Kirkirsasa began to dance and sing for him. She revealed her tattooed armpits and slapped them, which calmed the giant's rage. After her dance, Kirkirsasa and the giant made a bargain. She would tattoo his armpits for him, and in exchange he would not eat the two girls. Kirkirsasa got everyone in the village to build a great, big fire and heat stones on it until they glowed red. But in an act of trickery, Kirkirsasa and her people placed the hot stones onto him instead, killing the giant and saving the two girls.

He could never understand why Kirkirsasa had tattooed her armpits. Perhaps Kirkirsasa's story was about what happened to people who did not do as they were told. Or maybe it was about how graceful her dance was to appease the giant.

He looked at his father with the giant still on his mind. The old man slapped his thigh like always and lowered himself to the mat to eat. They were sitting in a circle but no one touched their food. The man took in a long sniff, then coughed wetly. Phlegm was stuck in his throat, which his sputtering couldn't dislodge completely.

'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,' he said praying in Rotuman. It was a very long prayer, thanking God for everything and asking God for more. 'Amen,' they all said in unison, opening their eyes at the end.

He will miss his mother's *tābroro*. It had a very distinct taste. And whenever he'd asked her what she did to make it taste different, she'd said the same cryptic thing. 'Love. Just add a bit of love,' she'd said ruffling his hair.

'What are you smiling about,' his father said. 'Tomorrow, you going to your *ma'piga*² to cut her grass. Do some work, eh, you lazy bum.'

He felt a heavy hand hit the back of his head.

'You listening? Or you daydreaming again?' his father said.

'I won't be coming home.'

His words felt like a flame wavering in a heavy storm.

'What did you say?' his father said, holding his fork in mid-air just outside his gaping mouth.

He felt his field of vision shrink. His clammy skin was burning up. Was his father really the giant? Would he have to sing and dance

for this giant? A new feeling took hold of him. It was not fear. Perhaps, now, the stones were hot enough for him to scorch his giant.

‘I said...’ he began with a shaky voice, taking a deep breath to continue, ‘...I won’t be...’

He did not get to finish his sentence. The giant’s hand came down hard on his face. It sent him sprawling on the mat. He could smell the frond leaves woven into it. His ears rang, muffling the sounds of his mother attempting to soothe his father. He saw his own blood and sweat mix together on a weave, forming a cloud. His hearing slowly returned. He took in another deep breath and, getting up, found his voice to yell back at his father.

‘I’m going to *Fiti*!³ Then I’m going overseas!’

‘With what money, huh? You lazy all the time. Who will pay the ticket to *Fiti*? You stealing from me!’

His father stood up and kicked him without warning. His legs slid back as he took the blow and coughed up blood. Still standing, he faced his father.

‘My boyfriend gave me the money.’

He saw the twitch in the giant’s confused eyes. The room grew so quiet that he could hear his shallow heartbeat thumping in his ear. Then his mother’s soft singing broke the silence. She sang Kirkirsasa’s song to soothe her two younger boys. And to placate the giant. He hugged his mother, breathed her in. He kissed his two brothers, grabbed his bag, and left quietly.

He could hear his father’s voice fading behind him with each step.

‘Don’t come back here!’

‘You’re a disgrace!’

‘You will suffer in hell!’

‘You lazy bum!’

He paused to feel the sand between his toes, and left the giant and his family.

His smiling boyfriend was waiting for him when he disembarked from the boat. They had spoken many times about him leaving his father, in so many letters exchanged over the years. And when he was finally ready to start his new life, his boyfriend was there to help

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him do it. The first thing he was going to do was to be brave and get himself a tattoo. He had thought about it on the journey over to Fiji. He was adamant about getting one before leaving for overseas.

‘Why a tattoo? I didn’t know you were that sort of a bad boy,’ his boyfriend said chuckling and draped an arm around him. ‘I have a friend who can help you.’

Over several days he sat on a chair, listening to the buzzing sound of the tattoo machine. He absorbed the pain differently, noticing how it didn’t hurt as much as when his father struck and kicked him. When the tattoo was completed and the swelling had begun to subside, he went home to his boyfriend and a small gathering of unfamiliar faces, all beaming back at him. In the weeks that followed, when the swelling had begun to subside, he had come home one evening to his boyfriend and a small gathering of unfamiliar faces, all beaming at him.

‘Who are these people?’ he asked.

His boyfriend squeezed his hand reassuringly.

‘I learned that you needed a *hapagsi*⁴ performed after the tattoo. So, I had a few friends help.’

He hadn’t had one done for himself. But he remembered being part of a larger ceremony back home. A man would say some words in Rotuman, and people would respond to appease the spirits. His uncle had an operation and needed a *hapagsi* performed. His uncle passed when he was a little boy. And now here he was, getting one for himself. He was not sure if performing one was required for him. He was not sure if his father’s curse would affect him during one and if he would eventually end up like his uncle. After all the formalities, they had a feast and danced. Then, when it was just the two of them, he felt all his worries disappear.

‘Can I see it now?’ His boyfriend grinned at him.

He nodded. ‘I want to see it too.’

They stepped into the bedroom, and he stood in front of the mirror, shaking. He took his shirt off and saw the marks protruding just above the waistband of his trousers. He felt his boyfriend touch the middle of his back as he unbuttoned his trousers and pulled them off.

‘Whoa!’

He faced his boyfriend.

‘What? What do you think?’

‘It looks amazing! He tattooed you really well. One day you have to tell me what these mean. Can I touch it?’

He turned to face the mirror and looked at himself. He could see the ocean waves rising, the trees around his home, the fishing net he left at the beach, and the flowers that were once in his mother’s hair.

‘They are me. These represent me and my *hanua*.’⁵

His boyfriend hugged him.

‘We will reconnect you with your family, my love. One day.’

He felt so much freedom and happiness. They embraced and he knew that, no matter how far he would go now, he would always have these memories with him.

Notes

- 1 *Tābroro*: fermented coconut condiment.
- 2 *ma’piga*: grandparent.
- 3 *Fiti*: Fiji.
- 4 *Hapagsū*: feast given to / for a person after an operation or illness.
- 5 *Hanua*: home or land.