

Brown Sugar

This story is based around the silent protest conducted on the campus of St Hilda's Anglican School for Girls as a mark of unity in our prayers for the Nigerian school girls, who were abducted by terrorists in April, 2014.

Chibok, Boko State
Nigeria

*St Hilda's ASG, Mosman Park
Western Australia*

We don't know what has happened to us.

When they came, wolves in the night, dressed in the uniforms of a group we didn't recognise, they told us to get in the vans.

"Terrorists will come," they said, "and they will kill you. We are here to help. You will be safe."

But then, some of us were moving too slowly. There were things to pack, clothes to change, questions to ask.

"Do not ask. Little girls should not ask questions."

And it was dark, so dark, that we couldn't tell if it was the dead of the night or the black hours of morning, and we were drowsy, and we didn't understand why we couldn't turn the lights on.

Even so, we all saw the guns. They should have been a comforting sight, proof that we were being protected from the unknown evils that these men spoke of, but instead they loomed, threatening, in the backs of our minds the whole time we were organising ourselves.

"Faster," they growled. "Leave that."

We had to go, we had to leave. We were exposed without our headscarves, still dressed in night clothes, and as our skin bled into the black sky, our white gowns seemed to float like ghosts.

"Where are we going?"

That was the question that screamed out so loudly in the silence. Were we brave enough to voice it?

Yes.

One voice spoke, to no reply. We tried everything then, every language we knew.

"Where are we going?"

"Ina mu?"

"Olee ebe anyi na-aga?"

Brown Sugar

“Nobi àwa ýýó?”

If the men heard us, they didn't react, just kept walking, and we followed, not speaking again, not stopping for anything, until we heard the scream. We turned to see our school, our home, replaced by a bright orange flower, its centre a swirl of black smoke. In the moment of reverent silence that followed, we mourned the loss of the one place we knew we all belonged.

“Girls! Come on, stand up!” Cam’s voice rings out through the Great Court and around the St Hilda’s campus. Mrs Kemp-Smith is standing at the entrance to the Forrest Foyer, her iPad in her hands, ready to film the silent protest march. There’s a roar of sound as a wave of pale blue rolls over to where Cameron is standing, motioning for more girls to follow. The group around her is now at least seventy strong, many of them holding posters. Even from here, I can make out the blur of black blocks, glued onto angry orange card. The same message has been posted everywhere for the past few weeks. #BRINGBACKOURGIRLS.

“Let’s go,” I tell my friends, rising from the bench I’m seated on.

“Seriously?”

“Why not?”

There’s a silence.

Then, as if to break the solemnity, there rang out a single gunshot. Another followed, and then a whole ream of bullets shattered the night. We knew that some had stayed behind - out of stubbornness or fear, the motive was irrelevant – and we felt the possibility of a bullet meeting its target like lead in our stomachs.

Run.

We begged them silently.

Run until your feet bleed.

We were grabbed by the men standing beside us, their claws digging into the fleshiest part of our arms, physically ripping us from the place we stood. We whimpered in pain, stumbling to find footing as we followed them.

“Get in the truck and shut up. We follow the commands of Allah. He has branded you as sinners,” they told us, sending shockwaves through us. We were of multiple religions, we praised many Gods, but being condemned by Allah was a terrifying thought, perhaps more so than that of dying at the hands of our captors.

We had to hold ourselves together, arms wrapping around shoulders, hands touching cheeks, fingers intertwined, as we climbed into the back of the truck that the men opened. Inside, it was dismal. There was a single bench that ran along the perimeter of the trailer, and the roof was low, and there was no light, no window, no way to escape. We all knew

Brown Sugar

now; the fear we had run from and the protection we had turned to were lies. We had walked into the den of a hungry beast with our eyes closed.

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With an almighty crash, the door of the trailer slams, and we are trapped. How big are we? One hundred, two hundred, more, and we can barely breathe in the tight space of the truck. The road beneath the tyres is rough, covered in potholes, and every time we feel the trailer shudder, we fall, in all directions, like the skittles we used to try and knock over with balls or stones.

“Are we...?”

The words are dry, and cut off before the sentence is finished. All the possible endings are going through our minds.

Are we... safe?

Going to die?

Leaving Nigeria?

Missed? By anyone?

“What difference will it make?” Kate asks. She’s not meeting my eyes.

“More of a difference than sitting here will!” I exclaim. I’m getting impatient now, and Cam is making people line up. They’re about to start.

“We’ll just look stupid,” Phoebe murmurs. “And Kate’s right; it won’t change anything.”

I look around. Aside from the throng of girls behind us, all shushing each other and squabbling over who gets to hold a sign, we’re the only ones here.

“Maddie?” I plead. She’s an activist, and on any other occasion, I know she’d stand with me. But today, she seems to crack.

“You really want me to just walk around in circles?” She asks. “With everyone watching?”

It’s true, we have an audience, but I’m angry that would deter any of them.

“I can’t believe you, any of you,” I say, actually shocked. They ignore me, and I don’t have time to convince them further. But then, I feel them move behind me.

“Alright,” Kate sighs. “But for those girls. Not for you.”

I grin and nod, and we all grab each other’s hands and race over to the swirl of activity, where the march is about to begin. Cam smiles at me.

“Okay girls, looking over here. Line up! Hey, year eights, I said in pairs! Now, everybody be quiet. Girls, it’s a silent march, if you can’t – Ella, I’m talking to you!”

Brown Sugar

Eventually, the group settles down. Some are struggling to keep straight faces, and as the front of the line sets off at a slow, steady pace, there are definitely some sniggers going around. My friends have their eyes on the ground, trying to avoid the gaze of the audience. Even I have to admit, the walk feels dramatic in this context. There are easily a dozen cameras on us, and the teachers aren't sure if they can talk, and we're just doing laps around Caedmon's cross.

School was never perfect. There were nights where we ached with missing our families, and we got yelled at by the Sisters, and we fought with each other, and there was often a shortage of food, and the classes were hard. The boarding house was crowded and the beds were small and the floors were cold in the morning. There was never enough hot water, and during the summer the mosquitoes whined so loudly that they kept us awake for hours. Even so, we were there because we were lucky, because we had been given a chance that so many millions of other girls would never have.

We were learning.

And despite all the fights, despite all the tears, we know that we would give up everything we have just to get back one more day at school, to learn one new thing, one new word, to get one more question right, even to get one more question wrong.

The possibility of going back seems so very dismal.

How long have we been driving for? We have no sense of time, but it feels like hours. If the sun has come up, we can't tell. We're hungry.

"Does anyone have any food?"

We don't, of course, but we check anyway.

"Imagine being at breakfast now."

We all stop to listen to the speaker, the groan of our empty stomachs dying down.

"Come on, picture it. There would be bread, thick cut because it is Wednesday. Remember?"

"And tea," a voice adds. "There would be tea."

"With cold or hot water.

"And sugar!"

We so rarely have sugar with breakfast that the suggestion would, in any other situation, be absurd. But now we all chime in.

"Yes! Brown sugar, in the little dish."

"And we could have as much as we wanted."

"Imagine rolling your fingers in a pile of sugar, and sucking on them for the rest of the day."

Brown Sugar

“Remember when we put sugar on our yams?”

We laugh, remembering the way the Sisters scolded us. Then, the punishment had been severe and we had sulked about it for days. Now though, we could laugh at it. How naïve we were to cry.

“It was so sweet,” someone whispers dreamily.

“And we licked the bowl afterwards.”

“Remember?”

We smile, the memory of sugar and warmth filling our bellies almost as well as the real thing. There is nothing like a wish-fulfilment fantasy to keep our nerves in check.

However, as the march continues, we feel something. Our silence is matched by the rhythmic pounding of leather soled shoes on red brick; it is the sound that seems to float across Bay View Terrace and down over the resting waters of the river, and beyond. It feels comfortable, purposeful, and I can feel the shift, as we start to realise why we're doing this. We think of the girls who ran, who hid, who may have burned in the flames, or bled out from the wounds of a hundred bullets.

Above all, we think of those who got away, who are safe in the outskirts of Chibok.

We all know that by staying, we sealed our own fate, and now there is bitterness in the air. We smell it in the smoke woven through our hair; we taste it in our regret.

And we hear it in the rumble of the truck as it drives, endlessly, through the hours of our lives that we will never get back.

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