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Scarred

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by Phrae Jaru

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I was afraid of my father. When he died, I was glad. She really said that, I did not mishear.

When Dad reached his hand to hold my arm, I suddenly shook it off and he slapped my face. That was the first time he punished me. I was his only child. He loved me. I did not understand then why he hit me. Today I understand what he wanted to tell me. He probably wanted to remind me that he was the father; I am your father, don't you dare do that to me. He died when I was in my last year of primary school. I was glad but then I was sad.

She stopped speaking. There was a clang when the train went over a bridge, so the speaker had to shout louder to compete with the noise and the listeners had to try hard to hear; better to stop talking until the train went past that bridge. There were not many people on the train today. There were plenty of empty seats on the second-class sleeper train. We could talk comfortably, not having to care if it would annoy anyone. *Sister, don't be irritated by what I am about to tell you. It may be too stressful and heavy.* I felt deep heaviness inside me as a listener, but it would not compare to her having kept this to herself for over 30 years.

There are always stories on a train ride. I used to say that it could be a large legendary book that we may never finish recording. Just take, for example, the farewell to us sisters, Mum and Dad seeing us off and waiting for our return. However, we should not talk about that now, we'd better go on and pay attention to her story.

When the train went past the bridge and the loud noise was over, she continued speaking.

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Now that I speak out, I feel like crying.

Go ahead cry, who is going to blame you? said the travelling companion.

Then she started to cry as if she had been waiting for someone to give her permission. She cried about incidents that took place 30 years ago. Those that she thought she had forgotten. Tears streamed down her cheeks while she tried to suppress her weeping. We had been friends for many years, but that was the first time I really saw her crying. I have seen people cry many times, but I never looked attentively at it. There was pressure, which she tried to suppress and force out at the same time. Now she restrained herself to end the weeping and swallow the sobs back inside. I offered my scarf to her to dry her tears. It smelled of sweat from the morning walk, of dirt and dew from the night walk that I took to watch the moon, mixed with saliva formed during my sleep. I had used this scarf the whole time during this trip. But it had not collected the smell of tears. What would it be like when the smell of tears combined with the others? Could it mix well with those other smells? Or would it blend in with the smell of my sweat? I received it back and smelled it.

But I was lucky, much luckier than many other children, I was not raped. Her voice got lost down her throat.

The train attendant came to check if we were ready for him to make the beds. When we were children, you may remember that we wanted to travel in sleeping berths, but we did not want to spend the money. Money was really limited, and Dad said that sleepers are meant for the elderly and sick people. You are strong and healthy, so you can travel by third class and cat nap there. I now use sleeper berths even though I am not old or sick. The train attendant has gone. Our friend said we would go to bed at 9 pm and told him to come back then.

It is easy to do it to girls with short skirts. Put her on your lap and let the fingers in. I remember it only hurt a little bit.

She raised her own thumb and sniffed it deeply a couple of times. She said that the visual memory stuck in her eyes. She remembered how he sniffed it. He did it more than ten times over many days. It fades in and out of memory. Her mother sent her to school, and in Grade One he sometimes came to take her from her mother's hands. *He was a janitor and liked carrying children. He did not threaten me or do anything, but I did not dare to tell my mother or anyone else. I didn't know what to do, but I remember I tried to avoid his hands and him carrying me. I remember vaguely he went on to carry other children. He always carried a child every day.*

The story was with her for 30 years. She thought she had forgotten all of that, but whenever there was news of children being molested and raped, she would go back to that incomplete scene that she thought she had forgotten.

There were many times when she was sad and afraid. But there were also times when she wanted to stand up and tell everyone; tell the parents of the children to protect their kids from bad incidents that may happen to them. But she did not dare to. It was very shameful.

She met him again when she went to visit her hometown. He was still a janitor. He faced child molestation allegations, but it was settled with the parents and he was still not expelled from work.

I almost coughed up blood but could not do anything. I was afraid that people would know. I hated him and was afraid of him. Her eyes were not fully open; in fact they were dropping down as she breathed out rapidly like she was exhausted from a long run.

There were many times when she said she was a troubled child. She stayed alone reading, made no friends and talked to no one. I did not pay attention to that kind of problem child. She was a problem child who got an MA and a government position where she had the privilege of choosing her appointment because she came first or second in each exam. She would get her PhD in no time because she had a better chance for further education. I did not believe that she was a problem child, Sis. I did not even believe that a problem occurring during childhood would affect adult life, and I did not even believe that she would have experienced such a problem. A social worker told me, in his long-term experience handling children and families, that a high percentage of family problems affected children. Children who were born into dysfunctional families were likely to follow the same path. Cases of molesters and rapes sometimes involve psychiatric issues, but they also involve power, including domination and violence. Most abusers are those who had troubles during childhood, and they are likely to have been abused in the past. They may or may not have been sexually abused, and sometimes they have been mentally or physically abused. Most are children of a father who was disturbed and had prior family issues. Fathers who used to be beaten by their own fathers, transfer that violence to their children. Doing it to one's own children or other children is easier.

This is an academic finding that I discussed with experienced social workers.

My childhood was dark. It was black and really dark. I liked to confine myself in a room with all the windows and doors shut. When someone wanted to talk to me, I just put my head down in my book. Books are my tools. I bent my head down. I had no friends. I went to read in the library and liked to imagine that I was a princess and a good person.

She laughed now that she was talking about princesses in fairy tales. She said that is what made her patient and able to endure everything. Because to be a good princess, you would have to be patient enough to live happily ever

after in the future, to have a boyfriend to marry, to have no wish for a different partner, to marry and never divorce, but just to endure it.

My friend then asked when she stopped being afraid of men. She said during her university years. She was happiest when she was away from home and staying in the dormitory. She told herself that from then on, she was going to forget everything, and she believed she had achieved this. She enjoyed making friends and started to realise that having friends is really fantastic. She did not return home during semester break, but instead went to student camps or friends' houses, or she turned to reading when she could not find things to do. Books could help when she did not have friends, although she still felt like she was a princess all the same. She wanted to help others and do good things.

But if you saw this princess today, how she sat on the seat with her knees up, with her eyes so red in front of two friends, like she was confessing a sin in front of God. I can only imagine what it would be like, Sis. I had never done that, but I might presume I understood. The two friends who sat in front of her were not God, but only friends who were willing to listen.

I did well in class and teachers always made me stand in front of everybody. But I put my head down with fear in front of the male teacher. He wanted me to solve maths problems on the blackboard for the class. When he came near me, I hardly breathed. I feared everything. I was afraid of my uncle. When he died, I was glad. She lengthened her voice at the end of the sentence.

But I was also sad. Uncle was a doctor, he was a kind man. When Dad died, Mum went to work with him at the clinic as an assistant and we moved to stay at the clinic. I was afraid of him and told Mum I didn't want to stay. The doctor did not have good intentions towards us. Later on, he had this kind of strange gaze towards me.

She paused a little and continued, *Now that I have told you, I might as well tell it to the end. Now it's out, let it all out.*

He placed his hand on my breast and pretended that he was examining me. He held my bottom for a long time when he gave me an injection. He fondled my bottom. At the time I felt confused and wondered why he was so nice to me, and why he was not being kind and attentive to my brother too. He had never paid attention to my brother. He could not have meant well towards me. He could harm me. Mum may have believed me, or maybe she just felt annoyed with me, so she took us, brother and sister, to stay in a rental house. She did not break up with the doctor and continued to work at the clinic. I don't know if Mum had an affair with him, but I think they could have had a relationship. I still don't know now. Mum never talked about it. She only told us that we owe him an obligation. We are obliged. Mother did not care how

he spoke or gazed, it was like she wanted us to keep on reciting that we are obliged. But I was always glad when the good people to whom we felt obliged died. Not only in the situation with the doctor but worse still, I did it to a monk too. I drove this monk out of my house. He was a relative who visited and stayed over. I could not tell Mum that I did not trust him. He looked like he did not mean well. I just expelled him and did not want to wait for Mum to invite him again.

To think that I have committed sins. The doctor may not have intended to do anything to me. He just attended to me because I was sick, so he simply cuddled me, perhaps thinking that I was his cute niece. Towards the end I turned my face away from him and pretended to speak rudely. He must have been irritated so he looked at me strangely and oddly. He might have thought what is wrong with this little rascal?

She stressed that she would forget everything and completely wipe it out.

“Forgetting is the worst solution to any problem.” My friend said this after listening quietly for a long time. “Crying and talking it out is a form of therapy. This is what has already taken place in the past. It is not what is happening right now. If we have not forgotten about it, then don’t try to. Understand that it was not our mistake.”

I now noticed that she frequently uses the phrase ‘forget it’. Sometimes she suggested to her friends to forget it, *Why don’t you just forget it, stupid?* Why hadn’t she forgotten? She used this suggestion to advise me too. This sister is very respectable, Sis. She always helps others, because she idolised the image of those ideal princesses from fairy tales.

My mother is beautiful. I had a problem, I never wanted anyone to be close to her. I didn’t want her to dress up. When I went anywhere with my mum, there would be comments such as “My, is this your daughter? She doesn’t look like you at all.” I heard this all the time.

Her mum is indeed beautiful, Sis. I met her once and I told her that her mum was so strong. She brought up her two children, even though her husband passed away when she was still young. She gave them a better chance at life, as much as the two hands of a mother could do. It was like a TV soap opera. Talking about soaps, I recall how one time she made me watch a foreign film. She said that it was very good. The sister of the protagonist was a writer who suffered from mental health issues. Oh well, she just wanted me to watch it, because it was a story about a writer. I was not prepared to watch the video. It was not my intention to travel in such heavy traffic just to watch a movie.

She insisted and made me watch it by telling me the plot first. It’s a family story. One day the father was out when three thieves broke into the house. They raped the mother, then the daughter and left. He (the protagonist) took

his sister to a psychiatrist who asked him: "If one raped your mother and another one raped your sister, what about the third one?" He howled and said, *He raped me, he did me*. She broke down at this point and spoke out while still crying. Their mother told them to forget all of what happened. Forget it, nothing happened. Just clean up the place and when Dad comes back, we can have supper.

I then let her replay the movie one more time for me to watch. I watched and fell asleep from time to time. I understand now why she was moved by this movie. She wanted to show me and let me know what happened to her then. She admired the woman psychiatrist who resolved the issue for him. She had full confidence in all sorts of knowledge.

She is my funny close friend. I felt like saying sorry to her and wanted to talk to her about these issues, but now the attendant came back to make the bed. He made the bed with skill, so tidy yet so fast. He pulled out the seat to make the lower bed first and then pulled out another from the ceiling to make the upper berth. I climbed up to my bed on the upper level and thought of a hammock and then of a *pahkhaoma* (a man's multipurpose cloth) cradle. The *pahkhaoma* cloth was tied at both ends to the crossbeams of the house or to the trees when the weather was too hot. Babies in the cradle swung back and forth with pushes that were accompanied by a lullaby. They played and smiled after a good long nap in there. Do you remember, Sis, when Dad made the knot at both ends of the *pahkhaoma* and tied it to the mango trees when my first niece was little? She fell fast asleep then. You didn't want her to go to sleep in there; you said that it's unnecessary for children in modern times. When you came back from work, you would complain that the cradle would break the mango branches, that ants would come or that caterpillars would drop from the tree into it. Dad was mad at you and said that both of us had slept in it before. No other product could match a cradle made from a *pahkhaoma* wrapped up into a cocoon shape. The next morning you went to get a new red swinging bassinette which was pretty, but our niece would not go to sleep in it, which was very amusing. When you were off to work, Dad would put her back into the *pahkhaoma* cradle, which could make her feel like she was being embraced.

I could not help asking myself what I could have possibly done if this happened to me. Clearly, I would tell Dad to shoot him. I would tell Dad, although I did not realise at that time that he had never shot anyone, except a few squirrels in our garden. But I did believe that Dad could handle it. I kept thinking that my self-confidence would make me go through childhood without suffering any wounds.

She wanted me to write her stories about these incidents and her childhood wounds. I did not make any promises, but I thought I could perhaps write and confide in you. I told you I never wanted to have a family of my own, no children. It was because having a family and children would make one selfish, thinking only of oneself, one's own family and one's own children. But I now realise and feel that a childless person like me could well be a coward. I was afraid of knowing about what had happened to my niece. I did not want to know and acknowledge what happened to her. My lovely niece, who was smart and attended a good school that only well-off people were able to afford to send their children to. When she was in grade four, we found that some money that belonged to an aunt had been stolen, and discovered that it had been taken by her. The very first time, she admitted that she took the money to pay for ice cream for her friend's birthday. There were also earlier incidents in which we suspected that she took the money to donate to the class she represented. She was the class captain.

During the fundraising to build a multi-purpose building, there were stage shows and performances. The school sold tickets to the parents; each class collected donations and presented it on behalf of the class. She was the leader and she mentioned that her teacher had told her not to fail the class, and that we all should contribute. Those who have rich fathers can ask for contributions. I remember that at that time my nephew was annoyed. He was older than his sister and was in sixth grade. He complained that the school just wanted money. His sister, however, said that the activity was about showing fraternity and harmony, as well as involvement. That was the last time she was on the committee for the Christmas fair.

Teachers said that she was a good student, that she was diligent and enjoyed helping others, teachers and peers alike. When you asked the teacher to take care of her, the teacher replied that it was her that she wanted to take on the role of caring. She needed to be responsible for class tasks while the teacher had other businesses to attend to. That's what she said, and we happily obliged. We were proud that she represented the class. When I came home, I told each of our family members about her role.

See what has happened to her now. We found a cigarette butt in her pocket. We knew that was a sign of drug use looming. Then money in the house kept going missing.

I believed that my sister and our niece's father would come out of this bad news clean. I mean that our niece would escape all the bad things that had happened, with the help of these two people, her parents. We feel that we had better luck than many people. We knew about it earlier, we found out before it became a scar, before it accumulated over and over for 10 or 20 years.

It had accumulated for too long. She was the friend who was getting a divorce. She said that she could not have sex with him and when this continued, her husband got suspicious, lost confidence and didn't know who to blame. At some point, they had to be together just for the sake of being together.

She went to sleep, the bed lamp was off, and she would then wake up refreshed and smiling like a baby who had just woken up from the *pahkhaoma* cradle.

I tossed and turned on the sleeper train, which looked narrower and narrower each time. I shook the retainer belt to see if it worked all right, feeling warm and snugly, in the narrow space, like being in a *pahkhaoma* cradle.

I felt amused. This old-fashioned train, the carriage was so old, the bed so much narrower than it used to be, now that I have grown bigger.