

Kelemo's Woman

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We heard about the *coup d'état* on television. The twenty-year-old British sitcom dumped on our third world audience was zapped off like a page flipped by an impatient hand. Martial music interrupted our lovemaking and snatched us back down to earth. The tight rhythm of our bodies jolted, and Kelemo prised himself apart from me with a desperate urgency. Bold, block letters across the screen spelled out "Newsflash."

"What?!" Kelemo's eyes popped wide in shock. I should say I was shocked, too, but the coup was not unexpected. At least I didn't think so. A wave of public disaffection had been rumbling against our rulers for some time. The way I saw it, something had to give. And this was it.

Our country's coat of arms filled the small screen. The motifs looked like they had been painted on by a brush dipped in runny palette, thanks to the old television set whose color definition had long lost its sharpness. The coat of arms faded away to reveal an army man whose skin was rendered a pink-dotted brown on our screen, his uniform turned into an unflattering blue. Our flag hung limp, downcast next to the goggled general, whose halting rhetoric informed us that we were now under martial law. The Army Ruling Council was being constituted to govern and to set a timeline for return to civilian rule.

"Civilian rule? Not if they can help it." Kelemo flopped back onto the pillow. "The army will want to sit this one out for years and years." He propped himself back on one elbow, the better to see the rising dictator on television.

A nationwide curfew had been imposed, the general intoned in a wooden voice. Any miscreants or saboteurs seeking to destabilize the nation would be arrested or shot on sight.

"Miscreants? We are in for it now, for sure." Kelemo buried his face in his hands. "Now the spectacle! The spectacle of ordinary citizens criminalized into saboteurs before our eyes!" Kelemo's eyes darted around the room. "This is the worst that could happen. Politicians were corrupt, but the army can only be worse. Soldiers belong in the barracks, not in government!" He pointed in frustration at the screen. "How can this, this goon, say that the army is doing this for the country's good? Who are they fooling? They are in this for themselves! See the Rolex on his fat wrist?"

The cover sheet peeled away as I slinked up to Kelemo. I let my breasts caress his back as I curled around him. It usually worked, but not this time. He sat up impatiently and planted his feet on the faded black and white of the checkered linoleum floor.

"Civil society must rise against this nascent tyranny. We have to lobby the international community, force them into taking a stand. We must agitate. Strategize. The struggle begins here and now. No time to waste. All right thinking people have a duty to resist this."

It was beginning to sound like the speeches Kelemo delivered on podiums at rallies ringed by the police, their teargas and batons ready. The one thing missing was his signature pose with fist in the air like some god invoking mortal anger to galvanize people into believing they were comrades with one societal vision. I knew it all well. The hiding underground, the imprisonment without charge, the dicey, precarious life we had lived in our four years together. A life to which I was vicariously sentenced. I had grown weary of it. We were lucky to have had some peace and quiet of late, lying low in this rented room, sharing inadequate kitchen and toilet facilities with others in an overcrowded tenement building. I avoided contact with the walls always, to keep the old curling paint from flaking onto my clothes.

But now Kelemo's activist zeal was rising again. It had never died away, no. And this time, the implications for our lives were even more unpredictable.

"Just don't start getting ideas," I said. "This is the army now, you know? The politicians just threw you in jail for kicks now and then. Soldiers are humorless; they will do much worse. I am tired of running, diving, and ducking. And for what, to live in some rundown neighborhood in Nimke?"

"Soldiers are humorless; they will do much worse--your words, Iriola, not mine," Kelemo hissed. "At least we are agreed on one thing."

"But..."

"But me no buts, Iriola," he cut in. "This neighborhood, this community, has potential. I believe in this place, decrepit as it is. It has given us sanctuary. But it is rundown as you always remind me, not because of what you call our diving and ducking, but because of government mismanagement. You've not been able to get a job since university, not because of my activism, but because of unaccountable leaders who destroyed our economy, and you know it! This country is being run to the ground, and soldiers will only speed up the burial. You, me, and others like us, are going to have to fight--and sacrifice--to turn around the course of this nation!"

"I've already sacrificed, Kelemo!" I cried. "Remember my mother?"

Kelemo looked away. "That's unfair, Iriola," he said softly. "She was like a mother to me, too. Remember that." Kelemo's late father and mother were activists. Personal suffering was in his blood; he'd become inured to it.

"I don't know that I want to do this anymore, Kelemo. Let's just lie low. It's best that way." I avoided his eyes. It was a shameful thing to him, to strive for oneself alone. "Maybe they will hand over to civilians soon, and things can go back to normal. Let's just wait and see, eh?"

"You should know me better than that, Iriola." Kelemo shrugged my hand off his shoulder and rose brusquely from the bed. The soft, natural light from the window cast a silvery glow on his bare skin. His face had a severe aspect now, with determination etched in his features. He stood in front of the television, worked his jaw and racked his brain. Hands on hips, he listened intently, head cocked to one side while the general droned on. The sound faltered, and Kelemo banged the side of the television impatiently. The volume cracked up higher as the general rounded off his address. "God bless our dear motherland," the goggled one concluded. Our national anthem swelled out of the television and filled the room.

Kelemo snatched his Y-fronts and trousers from the bedside chair. "Bastards!"

The countryside zips by in strips of rushing greenery on both sides of the road. The curfew has taken hold. Towns look deserted, their inhabitants harassed into their homes. And everywhere, the fatigued presence of soldiers. Hyenas in camouflage, they prowl to keep the nation compliant. The radio informs that crack teams of military officers have been sent to scour locations suspected to harbor subversives. Nimke is one such location, and I am in the clutches of one crack team.

The army jeep gobbles the miles and subdues the potholed road that runs west to the state capital. There are soldiers in the seats behind me. Now and then, I catch the driver spying on me in the rear view mirror. I hold his gaze steadily till he looks away, discomfited. I smile to myself and steal a quick glance at the senior officer in the front passenger seat. The brigadier has not looked back since we left Nimke.

A stream of news spews from the jeep's radio. New government structures are in place, and shadowy persons who now will steer our nation's destiny are stepping out of the anonymity of their barracks. Two decrees are announced. The constitution is illegal. New laws being made as though on the hoof.

Kelemo had been gone nearly an hour when the corporal kicked our door open. There were other activists to confer with, underground systems to be re-activated. It was war, and Kelemo saw himself on the front lines, to liberate our country from the military, to re-establish democracy, however flawed. He kissed me roughly. With one last look from the doorway, he was gone.

I rolled onto my back and studied the damp stains in the ceiling. My role in the struggle ahead was mapped out for me. I knew the drill. I would support as the loyal partner to the courageous, self-sacrificing activist.

There were many hardships in this activist life, but I was secure in the knowledge that the only thing Kelemo loved more than me was the motherland. We had a bond, he and I. I knew this, as did my mother.

Mother realized she would not live to see me wed Kelemo, and so on her deathbed she entrusted us to each other six months before the coup. Kelemo then left the hospital room in search of the administrative office to pay her medical bill. Mother drew her last breath while Kelemo was gone, and so he was not privy to her final words. They were never meant for his ears, anyhow.

"Iriola," Mother's voice was hoarse, her breathing labored. "You have no father, and now you will have no mother." She allowed a dramatic pause. "Iriola, this country of ours cannot be helped. No matter what the likes of Kelemo do, no matter the sacrifice, this country can come to no good. No good, you hear me?" Another pause. Her eyes burned into mine from sockets deep in her shrunken face. The light in those eyes tormented me with a vision of an end that lurked for me in some dingy hideout someplace. Mother spoke to steer me away from that end.

"Iriola, trust no one. Allow yourself to be pulled down by no one. I mean, no one. Don't be like me, slaving all my life to stand by men and for what? To die of a wasting disease before my time? Iriola, I beg of you. If the house is falling or the boat is sinking, secure for yourself a safe landing. A comfortable patch. Now you will have no mother. The person to watch over you, is you." Mother allowed herself another pause. A lasting pause.

I am yet to see my mother's grave. We left the hospital and returned to our city flat, but there was no room for my grief. A stone on the kitchen window's outer ledge alerted Kelemo to collect a note written in code from a nearby canteen. Such tactics were part of his underground information system. I caught sight of my face in our hallway mirror while he was gone and quickly looked away, repelled by my reddened eyes, swollen from crying.

"What is it now?" I asked, when Kelemo returned.

"Wait..." he raised a hand for silence and closed the door carefully behind him. One hand picked at several days' growth of facial hair as he deciphered the note. "Iriola," he said finally.

"Yes?"

Kelemo smirked bitterly. "Judge Bilando has dispensed his special brand of justice again."

"Bilando, that government stooge. What is he up to now? Whose head is on the block this time?"

"It's my head, Iriola." Kelemo drew a deep breath. "He has granted the police an arrest warrant."

I began to shake. "Oh God, not now." Kelemo caught me before I could slump to the floor.

"We'll have to leave this place. Tonight. The police will raid us by the morning, and they won't take prisoners. It will be a show of force for the restive populace. They will claim I was shot while trying to evade arrest. You are not safe, either. We've got to get what we can get, and go."

"Nooooo!!!" My cry was like an arrow through my own ears.

"Iriola, the neighbors!"

"Damn the neighbors! What about my mother?! I can't leave her in the morgue and run, Kelemo! You, you, you, see where it's led me? What about my mother?"

"I'm sorry, Iriola. I don't mean to put you through this, but it's better to be safe. What use are we to the struggle if we are killed? And you? You're no use to your mother dead. Think about it! She would want you to get away in these circumstances; she would understand. Listen to what I am telling you!" Kelemo shook me. He spoke in short, urgent bursts. "We have to go. A contact from my student union days will be by the harbor in an hour. We've got to be there."

I cried and cried, hitting Kelemo repeatedly on the chest. He grabbed my hands and held me tighter to him.

"Shhh," he soothed, "there's a safe house waiting for us in Nimke, a small town about two hundred miles from here."

We fled under the veil of night from the harbor. The contact kept his dark glasses on the whole time we were there, but he guffawed constantly to Kelemo the activist leader. Three motorbikes zoomed out of the darkness at the contact's signal, the lights rendering me temporarily sightless. Kelemo got on behind the first moped rider, I climbed onto the second, and the contact jumped onto the third. We would be in time to catch the inter-city night haulage vehicles from the motor park. The city's lights shimmered upon the rippling waters of the harbor as we sped off.

In the back of a goods truck later that night, among lumpy sacks of cassava and rice, I found I could not sleep. Kelemo snored heavily while I lay my head on his chest and wept into the dark, musty air. I wished I had not had to go on the run with him, but where else would I go? My mother's old tenement room was no longer there. Her landlord made me collect her things during the final stretch in hospital and locked up the place because of unpaid rent. I had nowhere to go. It was Kelemo or nothing. I was his woman. Stars twinkled in the sky overhead, and Mother's last words came back to me. I wiped my tears and wondered how it would feel to be my own woman.

It was a month after we arrived in Nimke before Kelemo could organize the money to pay someone who paid someone to arrange a burial for my mother in the city. From the window of the Nimke safe house that turned out to be only a single dingy room, I looked down the winding alleyway outside and dreamed of the day I would see my mother's final resting place.

Kelemo was one of the "subversives" whose names were being read out on the corporal's radio as he advanced further into our room. The army man's boots stamped dirty imprints on the floor. I could hear the commotion as other soldiers rampaged through the tenement. I rose from the bed and held the cover to myself. The woman in the next room screamed at the top of her lungs and begged a soldier, *please, don't, don't, don't*. I heard the laughter as her cries were defeated into whimpers. No use begging hyenas, I thought. I promised myself that whatever would be taken from me, I would freely give, of my own will. The corporal's eyes traced a lusty line down the length of my body, and I allowed my cover-cloth to slip to the floor.

Later, the corporal led me through the temporary encampment of the local primary school. Past its low hedges roughly cut by the lone gardener with his machete in the sun. Past the classrooms whose outer walls had in time acquired the color of dust. Past the browning lawn of patchy grass tuft, red earth, and stone. On a normal day at recess the school compound would pulsate with the noise and chatter of scores of pupils. Now silence stretched its hollow fingers over the place as we made for the headmaster's office, over tire tracks freshly etched by army jeeps.

I stood uneasily to one side as the corporal stiffened in a salute to his superior in the headmaster's office. The headmaster's wife and two daughters were in a photo amidst notepads atop the big mahogany desk against which the brigadier leaned. The family were likely under curfew in their home by now. A man in his mid-forties, the brigadier looked too genteel for my usual image of a soldier. I could not imagine him in a war. He had a thin, well groomed moustache over full lips, but was otherwise clean shaven and smooth skinned. His boots shone. They did not look like they had stepped on the grass outside.

"Sir! This young woman was found in premises believed to be the hideout of the activist, Kelemo Vela." The corporal was now at ease. "The subversive is at large, but we have taken his woman prisoner so she can help with our investigations into his whereabouts and activities. With your permission, she is to come with us to the headquarters, sir!"

The corporal saluted again. He threw a secret, reassuring half-wink at me as he exited the office. We had an agreement after all. I would give a routine statement at the barracks in the state capital and then go free. He could arrange it, if I would be his woman.

It was the brigadier's decision that I come with them in this jeep, the first in a convoy of five. No need to handcuff me, he instructed. His men obeyed.

The corporal sits to my left, his helmet garnished with shrubbery like he's been fighting in some bush. Yet all he has confronted in this coup so far are the likes of me. The ridiculous posturing amuses me, but I discipline my expression into blankness. I remember his boast to another soldier in the school compound in Nimke. Unaware that I was already inside the jeep and could hear, they laughed on the other side of the canvas as he said in Broken English: "I just dey take the girl to go play with am. I go fuck am, fuck am, fuck am--and after that, I go drive am comot."

I am the sexual plaything to be driven out once he is done with me. I smile. If only he knew, the corporal, that I view our agreement with as much derision as he. If he knew of my deal with his superior. A deal I negotiated at my shrewd best, on my knees, alone with the brigadier behind the closed door of the headmaster's office. The brigadier's fly was splayed open in front of me, and he gasped as he gave in to spasms. He touched the nape of my neck with such longing. His wedding band was cool on my skin.

He promised me everything I wanted and more when I rose to meet his eyes. I had a degree in Biology. I needed a job. I wanted to live safe and well. I had yet to see my mother's grave. No problem. The state's commissioner of education had just lost his job, along with other top officials. Politicians, they deserved no better. A woman would be a progressive choice for the important post. A fresh young face untainted by the corruption of the ousted government. A good way for the military junta to reassure the masses, to show that soldiers in government can bring fresh ideas. The brigadier's family lived overseas. He was not in the habit of going drinking or whoring with fellow officers. His quarters in the army cantonment were spacious but lonely and could use a woman's touch. I always had a fascination for a certain caliber of officer, I had told him.

More news on the radio. The driver turns a knob to increase the volume, so we all hear as the brigadier is named the new military administrator of the state. Soldiers cheer, and though his back is turned, I know the brigadier will be smiling. I am with a winning team. Army men roar in open jeeps behind us. They shoot repeatedly into the air in celebration.

"Are you alright back there, young lady?" the brigadier finally turns round to ask when the noise has died down a little. I nod and lock eyes with him to affirm our pact. Then I lean back in the seat and close my eyes in relief.

More news on the subversives. Kelemo has been apprehended in a nearby town. My eyes remain shut, and I steel myself to keep from wincing. I focus on the motion of the jeep gliding me on to a new life.

I pray Kelemo survives. I suppose he will wonder why, when he learns about the choices I have made. But Kelemo was not in that hospital room when Mother breathed her last. And I always obeyed my mother.