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Author

Gomez, Diedre L.

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AFRICAN SPRING

- A Short Story -

by

Diedre L. Gomez

The approaching warmth and freshness of spring fought desperately against the last surviving days of winter. Although a dusky wind rushed to torment the busy crowds on Lenox Avenue, the sun struggled to warm the chill of a late March frost. Earlier that same day, robust Harlemites lavished in the brief display of spring fervor proudly decked out in an array of rainbow mohair sweaters and solid pullovers. Lenox Avenue danced as the music from record shops, chicken shacks, and bars rang through occasionally windy streets.

The sun retired as Lilly Perkins rose from the Seventh Avenue local at 135th Street, leaving the chilling wind to deal with the Apple as it wished. The transition from warm to cold caught some unaware, but Lilly, a native New Yorker, had twenty-eight years of experience with the inconsistency of the city's weather. Her well-structured frame was draped neatly in a black and white pants suit. A pair of laced boots hugged her legs and a multi-colored maxi coat wrapped her warmly. And as she stood in front of Harlem Hospital awaiting a chance to cross Lenox Avenue, Lilly remained oblivious to the growing cold.

Several elbows and shoulders began shoving her, warning that the crowds had found their opportunity to continue their hourneys. Lilly's mind began wandering through the barren years of her womanhood -- barren without children, barren without meaning and purpose. As with too many trapped by the city's shallow pursuit of escape, Lilly's rush to acquire, her hesitation to seek the essence of life had left this beautiful woman but the shell of a ripening fruit. As each day grew longer, the insignificance of her world grew more abrasive to her soul. The realization that nightclubs, restaurants and partying had overcrowded her life and clouded her perceptions caused a once exuberant smile to disappear. And now she moved within the confines of a thousand Harlems. Slowly, she receded from the crowd, drifting further back; melting into the battered tenements and berated tenants of 135th Street.

For a moment, Lilly contemplated Harlem. She became scarred with lifeless bricks of corner liquor stores and tormented by the secrets of Harlem's music while the distant laughter of its

earlier inhabitants filled her ears. An echoing laughter blended with the throbbing of Harlem's progeny: screams, laughter, cries, louder, higher, piercing, stabbing, killing, dying! She too was dying! And the laughter clung to the flourishing winds as they swept through the semi-darkness of a Harlem sunset.

For a moment, Lilly became Harlem, caught within its walls of awe and subdued fear, a captive of her own quest, drawn by the inner history of Harlem's hysteria. A history warmed by a captive people embracing one another, sharing motivation and destiny, believing in one another and dying for that belief. A history chilled by unwarranted cruelty, by needless deprivation, by vacant stares of a people afraid to dream.

For a moment, Lilly fought to release herself from this strange prison. Stretching forward, her trembling hands grasped the metal handle of a tenement. Her fingers traced the laughing gothic image of a rising Christian nation while a strange light seized her, commanding her attention. Bewildered, without control, Lilly ceased her war and drifted further into the walls of Black antiquity.

As she penetrated the other side of the mystical metal object, Lilly found herself in a spring green forest. Beneath her now bare feet lay warm ebony soil, fresh with the smell of mud pies she baked and ate as a child.

Somehow, she experienced no fear. Her eyes beheld the long graceful trees that kissed the soft blue sky. A spectrum of multicolored leaves and flowers rose from the earth caressing her feet and legs. Walking through the forest, Lilly's once mechanical pace began to rhythmize with the pervading chorus of Nature. Suddenly, she stood before a stream. She gazed into her own image and saw beauty burning. A molten fire danced to free itself from a core deep within its own being. Swirling around and around, Lilly drifted into the center of the Banji village.

Dancing gently among the swaying cypress trees was a group of young African girls who chanted songs before their mothers, aunts, and elders. They begged blessings from their kinsmen, ancestors and gods as they prepared to enter womanhood. Lilly joined them in singing:

*What will we be
To our society?
What will we be
To our men?*

*The bearers of fruits
and customs strong
The bearers of fruits
planted and protected
by our men
Through our mothers' mothers
and mothers
Secrets to us
now pass
Of our rites
Through which womanhood
grows
Through which womanhood
grows.*

The elderly women of the community formed a circle around the girls as they continued singing a chorus,

*Through women
the fruits of our people
remain young and ripe
remain young and ripe
forever giving life
to children
to our children
immortality to men.*

As the tranquil blackness covered the village, the chanting which lasted for several hours slowly faded into the quiet of night. The young women were then led into a huge circular hut. In the center of the hut rested a carved ebony bust. At its foot a warm fire danced. Its glow reflected the oblong facial structure of man, woman and child that tapered into one long, smooth neck. Lilly was captured by the power within the eyes of the man which followed her every move. The woman, with the seed of love glowing in her eyes, gazed upward solely at her mate. In the child's eyes, the faith and fulfilment of the future rested.

The young girls gathered together on the rich earth around a fire awaiting the "secrets" of womanhood. Each held within her breast the kindling of rebirth as she prepared for those responsibilities which would continue until her first grand-daughter would sit in her place. Each was given a *mali* doll to place at the foot of her bed to care for as a child. Around them were placed fresh gourds representative of youth still bearing their seeds.

Nana, a round elderly woman sat in the center of the girls. A seemingly ageless woman, Nana humbly passed her wisdom to her children. Her round, brown eyes pierced each young woman searching each soul. Only Nana's heart knew the secrets of these girls, their capacities, their talents, and their limitations. Her eyes fell upon Lilly's youth and warmth. Within this young woman, Nana saw the trials of future generations.

*Daughter of my daughters,
Child of the night,
Woman of love,
Child of fear,
Goddess of the Earth,
Freedom lies in you
through your womb.
Daughter of my daughters
Child of many journeys
Remain a part of the soil
Remember in your travels
the essence of life
lies always beneath your feet.
Come, sit beside me.*

As she rose, a small multi-colored gourd was given to her. Nana began the instruction.

"As you remove the seal from these fruits, so shall the seal be removed from you. As you expose these seeds to a new life, so shall your seeds be exposed. As you remove the seeds from the womb of these gourds, so shall the seeds of your womb be removed. As you plant the seeds of these gourds, so shall your seeds be planted. As you nurture these seeds with love, so shall your seeds be nurtured. As you protect these gourds, so shall you be protected. As you properly use these gourds, so shall you be properly used. As you respect in their age the service these gourds have rendered to you, so shall your age be respected. And when their usefulness has been completed, within their barren wombs, place the violet seeds, for she grows outward from each flower giving to her progeny her wisdom, strength, and understanding of nature.

"Remember, as you abuse these gourds, so shall you be abused. As you allow others to tamper with them, so shall you be tampered with. But as love touches them so shall it touch you."

As Nana spoke, the young women were directed to carve an opening in the gourds. At each phrase, their hands smoothly followed the instructions for their future. Nana instructed the

initiates to remove the seeds after they entered their homes, then plant all but the first seed in their mothers' gardens. The first seed must be potted in a small earthen shell, then placed above their beds. Nana continued their preparation for several hours, then advising them again of their duties for the following day, she sent them to rest on a ritual bed of banana leaves.

In the morning, as the sun was rising, they drank, slowly, the milk of the fruit, then proceeded quietly to the river where they washed the inner walls of the gourds. Each girl then placed the shell in the sun to absorb its warmth, to grow in the protection of its light. From that time, these young women prepared in the shells nourishment to sustain the life of their families.

At marriage, the gourds which would represent their spiritual and physical union, would be mixed with the fresh spring waters and drops of rich blood from the couple to be wed. During the ceremony each would drink from this cup of unity. And so, as Lilly entered into the hut, the meaning of her life blossomed before her. For her ancestors had led her to the doors of their wisdom.

Early the following day, the village buzzed with excitement as the new flowers of the community rose to complete the ritual which started several days before. The sound of much singing and laughter climbed through the trees, echoing near the streams, filling the air with music. So joyful was the village that it seemed a festival was occurring. The African spring celebrated these budding blossoms. From the earth came the sweet smell of fertile soil. In this way, the earth rewarded her tillers for their care and respect. As the girls caravanned to the river, the chanting continued. Lilly felt the freshness of the earth as it penetrated the soles of her feet. Her voice was a natural blend of beauty as she participated in the celebration of their first sunrise with womanhood. Her pace was the rhythm of life that surrounded her. A glowing smile followed each word that she sang. And as the wind swirled around her body, she felt a oneness with the universe and with time.

Caught within the walls of antiquity, Lilly had become all time in present time. She was the roots of Africa, the seeds of slavery, and the branches of the massacred freedmen. Her life was, indeed, a cycle, as she now moved through her history returning to the walls of Harlem's hysteria.

Lilly, the blossom of her ancestry, arose from the hard, used chairs of the Schoenberg Library, with a calmness that accompanies only wisdom. As she looked around, the ivory bust of unity filled the wall before her. A poster of Lake Nyasa hung on the left wall while to the right, an elderly round, serene, black woman smiled at her,

"You've found yourself."

Lilly felt a rush of emotion rise to touch these smiles with her own knowing eyes. But there was no need. The moment had come, the energy transmitted. The two generations eased quietly through the door back into the Harlem night.

* * * * *

Diedre L. Gomez is a graduate student of African Literature here at UCLA.