

That Night, the Silence Changed

(1984)

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That night, like every night, we switched on the six o'clock news on BBC, not because we were interested in what was going on in the world, but because we wanted to chase the unbearable silence that hung over our household.

We rarely got through supper without Mom and Dad getting into a fight. By the time we ate dessert, the air was filled with tension, thick as the custard on our bread and butter pudding.

Mom and Dad took their seats on opposite sides of the living room. Dad in his comfy chair, ashtray placed precariously on the arm rest—an act of defiance, because he knew Mom hated that. Smoke rose from his cigarette and blended with the unvoiced accusations hanging in the air.

Mom sat cross-legged on her chair, her lips tight and wrinkled, as if stitched to prevent the insults on the tip of her tongue from taking flight. We, the kids, bunched up on the sofa in between, keeping our parents physically apart, like a human Berlin wall.

Then came the eagerly awaited newsreader voice.

"Dawn, and as the sun breaks through the piercing chill of night on the plain outside Korem..."

At first, we thought there had been a mistake, that we had tuned into the wrong television channel. It was like watching a Star Wars episode. Colourless silhouettes in dirty robes drifted across a barren, washed-out landscape, like the Sand People in the desert world of Tatooine—ghostlike figures, indistinguishable from the land they roamed.

But this was no mistake. It was no Hollywood film.

"...a biblical famine... This place... the closest thing to hell on earth..."

Our eyes were glued to the television set. Dad's cigarette hung between his fingers, the ash getting longer as he forgot to tap. Mom's lips slightly parted—her arsenal of snide remarks, which had been waiting to be fired, had dissolved into thin air.

Emaciated children stared at the camera, too weak to chase away the flies crawling over their bodies. Bloated bellies, eyes turned away in deep, hollow sockets, streaks of tears running through the dust on their faces. A crying baby clung to its mother's empty, shrivelled breast.

The box of Quality Street remained untouched on our coffee table. Although we were allowed a chocolate after dinner, none of us that night argued over the Purple One, or the Green Triangle.

"Thousands of wasted people are coming here for help. Many find only death."

A young woman wailed as a blanket was lain over a tiny, skeletal figure. People stood in a circle, chanting songs of despair, while more shrouded bodies were brought into their midst. By the shapes under the sheets, we guessed most were children.

My little brother slid of the sofa and climbed onto Mom's lap. I tried to put on a brave face, but shuffled closer to my older sister who, although she hated me, did not object.

"Death is all around. A child or an adult dies every 20 minutes. Korem, an insignificant town, has become a place of grief."

The coverage of the Ethiopian famine ended and the newsreader moved on to the European Cup football matches of the night. Liverpool played Benfica. The fans sang "You'll never walk alone".

Dad switched off the television and the silence returned to our living room. But this was a different silence—as if it had changed colour, or taken on a different shape.

The world had come into our house. The images lingered. The alien-like heads, the knobby knees, loose skin around the bone, like parched leather. The winds of Korem whistled in our hearts.

This was no longer our silence.

This was the silence of the world.