

A close-up photograph of a woman with dark, curly hair and black-rimmed glasses. She is crying, with her eyes closed and her hand pressed against her forehead. She is wearing a black t-shirt. In the background, a hospital bed with white linens is visible, suggesting a clinical or hospital setting. The lighting is soft and somewhat dim, creating a somber and emotional atmosphere.

PERTUNIA LEHOKA

A Widow's Tears

A SHORT STORY

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By
Pertunia Lehoka

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To everyone battling depression one way or another and to all widows, suffering in silence while enduring abuse from family that's supposed to look after them, after the passing of their husbands, I am with you in prayer.

Chapter 1

Mateu had battled chronic depression for a protracted amount of time, long before him and Mathato could even think of marriage. Unfortunately, he had never disclosed his condition to his wife, nor did he even let her in on his struggles at work as a consequence to his disease.

Chances are that his choice of career could have been the reason his depression escalated as what is required of soldiers on mission, is courage; strength; tenacity; good physical, emotional and mental health.

A year and a half ago, he was relieved of his duties as a combatant – dishonourably discharged to be exact. He was accused of having violent streaks with his colleagues and, he was hardly ever at peace with himself; always negative and had become a burden to the force.

Although it was revealed only later that the peace keeping mission he had been deployed to at some point, had left

him traumatized, more than any other missions he had ever been installed to, that was proof enough that he had become a liability and had to be laid off.

After being sent home, he made no attempts to come clean to his wife about his illness. He reasoned that the move would shame him and make her disrespect him.

Mateu had a massive mental breakdown at work and was hospitalized in the military hospital. This privileged information was inadvertently divulged by the man's friend and colleague Lucas, who had called to check on him after he was sent home.

As fate would have it, Mateu's wife answered the call. There was no reason for Lucas to believe that it wouldn't be appropriate for him to talk to Mathato about her husband's condition and what had transpired in combat. He was however bewildered to learn that Mathato had no clue about the condition as well as the real reason her husband was laid off work.

The official message from the force was that, a number of soldiers were not coping well, after witnessing some of their colleagues' limbs and heads being blown off by grenades during one of their missions. However, this was simply half the truth. Mateu had appeared to have been the only combatant who was struggling heavily to cope, even though others did attend counselling sessions as is customary in combat.

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When his wife confronted him with the news regarding the information she received from Lucas, Mateu was peeved and accused her of having an affair with his friend and colleague, otherwise why would Lucas call her to talk about him? This unfortunately, brought about countless problems into their already strained marriage, which was hanging by a thread.

Mateu's temper, verbal and emotional abuse, had begun weighing heavily on Mathato, so much that she was contemplating divorce. She felt that the longer she remained under his grip, while she was hardly ever happy anymore, the more she would lose her authentic self and jeopardise her already fragile state of health.

Her husband's reaction to the realization that his wife knew about his illness, drove him over the edge and as a 'good' wife, Mathato elected to never divulge what was happening in her home to anyone. She however told her children, swearing them to secrecy as she sought to protect her husband's dignity and honour.

The more she tried to do what she believed was the right thing for her husband and marriage, the crueler he would become. His mistrust of his wife left her perpetually despondent, as threats of her becoming a secondary depression sufferer

loomed large.

She questioned herself and her sanity often, wondering if it had been a good idea to confront her husband about his depression - the condition he had carefully concealed away from her. He made her believe that she was not a good wife and that she was deserving of his abuse and that it was her fault he was behaving that way.

She found it difficult to cope with his constant erratic moods and disinterest in any family activities. Her small supermarket business she had started with money she inherited from her parents, was beginning to take a knock as she now had to take care of her husband, who was unappreciative of her efforts.

He was always irritable and each time he saw his wife happy and laughing with their two teenage sons, he would become so upset that he would do everything in his power to dampen the mood, leaving everyone seriously piqued as a result.

It appeared as if he loathed the idea of his family happy with life while he was battling with demons he couldn't identify. The sprites that kept whispering evil words into his ears every moment and every hour, became his friends and difficult to ignore.

He took every conversation his family had, as an attack

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on his dignity somehow. This made it unbearable for his family to share space with him at ease as all they now had to do was to continue walking on eggshells where he was concerned.

Mathato plucked up the courage one day and asked her husband if she should speak to his family about his illness. He blew a top, barking and swearing at her, throwing a barrage of vile words at the woman. He threatened to kill her should she dare mention his condition to his family or anyone else for that matter.

It became lucid then, that Mateu's family was also in the dark about his condition, leaving Mathato in a more grave state of panic, as she now had no one to turn to.

They got into an argument about the matter, with Mathato insisting that her keeping silent about Mateu's illness meant that she was meant to carry the burden alone – the saddle that was already proving difficult to carry.

So bad was their quarrel about the issue that before Mathato knew it, her husband had launched an onslaught of blows to her diminutive stature, causing a gash on her upper lip. Her screams did nothing for persuade the man to stop assaulting her.

In fact, that fuelled him in some way, so much that the children had no choice but to enter the fray. When they

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protested against their mother's battering, the man unashamedly howled at them, roughing both of them up and throwing them inside one of the bedrooms, locking them inside.

It was at that moment that Mathato, all bruised and battered, ran to one of the guest rooms, locking herself inside. She could hear, amidst her shallow sobs, the insults her husband was hurling at her, threatening to kill her, accusing her of being the source of his condition and for having an affair with Lucas, the concerned married soldier friend who broke the news about his condition to her.

Eager to defend herself from what she believed was an unfair accusation and to by some means take her power back, Mathato retorted in a high pitched tone, "It's not my fault you have depression. I found you this way and had I known you suffered like this and was bound to be abusive, I would never have married you!"

The woman was well aware that was a bad move as her life was more in danger than ever before but she did it anyway.

Unfortunately, that was a very bitter pill for Mateu to swallow, as he attempted to open the door to the guest room Mathato had retreated to and then barking at her, "OPEN THIS DOOR YOU GOOD FOR NOTHING WOMAN!"

Mateu's verbal onslaught pierced deep within his wife's

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heart, even more than the blows he had earlier inflicted upon her delicate body ever could. She felt as though she had wasted her time, her youth and her energy on tending to a man who now suddenly found her unworthy and good for nothing.

Mathato made excuses for her husband, even in that state she was in, reasoning that he was probably having a severe episode of his depression and could never have meant what he said – couldn't he have?

She begged her husband to calm down, promising to cease provoking him. Irrespective of how much she pleaded, Mathato's husband made no effort to stop scolding her. In fact, it appeared as though she was fuelling him even further with what he deemed to be patronizing and continued swearing at the woman, demanding that she get out of the bedroom before he broke the door down.

Terrified, Mathato opened the window and screamed to the top of her lungs for anyone who might be around the vicinity at the time, to come to hers and her children's rescue. No one came – whether they heard the screams or not, we would never know.

The brute in Mateu's essence intensified its spite, as Mathato heard by the sound of his fading footsteps, that he was moving away from the door, seemingly to fetch what she had

believed could be a crowbar to aid him in opening the door to the room she had run away into.

Little did the woman know that her husband had something more sinister in mind. All she heard after a few minutes, was her children's screeches, as they begged their father to stop hurting them and to please leave their mother alone.

A mother's instinct kicked in and Mathato opened the door at once. A horrible scene of a man she loved terrified her; the man she perhaps still loved, albeit the love that was now obscured by hatred as a result of the monster he had become.

Mateu held the children by their necks and threw the younger one Tumelo, on the floor with no care in the world. As she launched herself at her husband, trying to prevent him from doing more harm to the older one Motlatsi, the man disdainfully taunted, "Perhaps I should slit his throat huh?"

He took out a knife from his pocket and placed it against Motlatsi's neck as the boy begged for his life.

"Please, please, rather slit mine. Why would you even say something like that to your son?" Mathato wailed.

As Motlatsi kept shrugging in his bid to disentangle himself from his father's clutches, Tumelo charged at his father who was still placing a knife against Motlatsi's neck. The boys

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struggled for some time to overpower their father, a very fit and burly man.

They ultimately managed to pin him down, as their mother struggled for a while to take the knife out of his hands. Eventually she managed to take it out of his hands and threw it away on the floor in the foyer.

That episode ended with the man finally retreating to his and Mathato's bedroom as he picked the knife up, continuing to scream and to make threats to Mathato and her children.

The woman wanted to leave but her children begged her not to leave so she resolved to sleep in the guestroom, hoping that in the morning, her husband would have come to his senses and calmed down.

Chapter 2

Morning felt barbed for Mathato as she woke up very early and still very much disturbed by the events of the previous day.

She reached for one of the drawers of the night stand and scribbled a note for her children, letting them know that she had gone to her parents' place as she was afraid. In the letter, she begged the children to follow her should they also feel unsafe in the house, as they had no idea what their father would do that day.

When they woke up very early, the boys decided to knock on their parents' bedroom door as they believed that their father might have calmed down by then.

However, the man's silence even when Tumelo, the younger son kept knocking on the door and making such a clamor, prompted the boys to push themselves inside the bedroom, leaving the door ajar.

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The smell infusing the room was unbearable, as the boys stood still in the middle of the room after witnessing a knife in their father's chest, with both his hands still clasping it barely.

A scream ripped from Tumelo's throat after seeing his father's lifeless body on the bed, with blood still gushing from his chest as well as his neck. At first glance, it looked like he might have first begun by slitting his own throat, ending the ordeal by forcing the jagged steak knife into his chest. He had committed suicide. That was the most gruesome sighting for the children, both only 16 and 14 years respectively.

Tumelo was a very sensitive soul and he could not stop weeping, while rushing outside to seek help from neighbours, as Motlatsi called an ambulance explaining the finding. Before long the paramedics had arrived.

Mateu was unfortunately declared dead by the paramedics after examining his injuries. They then called the coroner, who arrived with the police and the house was now declared a crime scene.

The yard was now abuzz with neighbours who came to check what the commotion was about – the same neighbours who never bothered to come to Mathato's aid when she screamed for help. Someone in the neighbourhood called Mathato as well as the man's family.

His two brothers, mother and two sisters came and once they arrived they launch themselves inside the house, as they watched in agony as Mateu's body was wheeled away, covered in foil paper.

His mother demanded answers from the distraught children, asking them where their mother was. When they responded that their mother left them a note subsequent to their father beating her up the previous night, Mateu's mother immediately concluded that Mathato was the one who killed her son and then ran away.

She showed no compunction for what her son had subjected her grandchildren and their mother to, as she continued accusing their absent mother of the crime, yelling and telling the police that Mathato should be fetched from her parents' home and arrested.

Mathato and her parents came in as her husband was being wheeled away, screaming and asking what happened. When her mother in-law saw her, she charged at her, with no care in the world of her already black eyed face and bandaged arm. She had to be restrained by those around but she wouldn't let up.

Unfortunately for Mathato, her leaving her matrimonial home at the time didn't look good for her as she became the

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number one suspect. The police didn't even bother asking her about her battered face. All that was going on in their minds was that she left her connubial home and her mother in law's accusations were too damning.

In her bid to protect her husband's dignity by not mentioning to anyone what was happening at the house ever since Mateu came back home, she got arrested for a crime she didn't commit.

Her finger prints were all over the knife as she had also held it after taking it out of her husband's hand the previous day. Unfortunately, Mathato was not ready for the lengthy legal process that awaited her. She quickly got advice to engage an attorney, who would also apply for bail on her behalf.

It was on the third day post her husband's passing, that Mathato was released. This was due to lack of concrete evidence linking her to the death of Mateu. It had been determined that indeed Mateu's death was suicide and, some of her neighbours did come forward to mention hearing screams that had emanated from the house on the night before that fateful day. Like everyone else, people no longer wish to attend to women's cries,

Pertunia Lehoka in fear of being killed by their husbands. This testimony helped Mathato a great deal and her attorney brought her home after she was eventually released. She had elected to not let anyone know that she would be coming home that day.

She had heard rumours while at the police station, that her in-laws, in their bid to arrange the funeral, had unashamedly moved into the house, creating more misery for the boys, who were mourning their father and distraught by their mother's arrest. Seeing her being dropped off by her attorney, her mother in law as well as her brother and sister in law, hurled insults at her and swearing so much that some elders had to intervene. The woman simply went inside the house, waiting to perform mourning rights for her husband.

Her in-laws had not bought the mourning clothes for her, insisting that she killed her husband and had no right to mourn him the traditional way. This was followed by a series of family meetings between her family as well as some elderly members from her husband's family. Eventually her mother in law was overruled and mourning attire was bought for Mathato, even though it hadn't become clear as to how long she was supposed to mourn.

Mateu was buried amidst the disheveled funeral service as everyone fought to take charge of not only the service, but

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everyone wanted to have a say in how the daughter in law would be expected to behave.

She was not supposed to work until the mourning period whose duration was purposefully left unspoken of, was over. It did appear though, after the funeral that the in-laws' intention was indeed to cause havoc in Mathato and her children's lives, as they not only invaded her house but her supermarket too, calling the shots and reveling at the fact that an elderly uncle had decided that Mathato was not supposed to work nor meet with people outside of the family. This gave her in-laws ample time to steal money from the store and to mess up everything she had worked hard for.

Chapter 3

A year passed since Mateu's death and Mathato had to make 'peace' with the fact that her mother in law and sister in law had invaded hers and her children's space, barring her from making important life decisions as they reduced her to an invalid. The relationship was discomfited and not pleasant at all. Unfortunately, as much as her resolve was to not ignite any brawl in her bid to finally remove the mourning clothes before she could reclaim her life, this left her constantly crestfallen and she even suffered from a secondary depression as a result, seeing her visiting the family doctor often.

She enlisted the help of her uncles when it was lucid that the matter to perform a ritual to get her to undress the mourning clothes was always evaded each time she asked about it. The woman was however hell-bent to salvage what was left of her life and dignity and to take back her power. Her supermarket

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was in danger of closing and she was now left facing major debt due to the store's mismanagement by her sister in law and brother in law, who claimed to know the workings of this type of establishment – only for them to turn every cash the store made in a day, into an ATM.

It was only after a meeting between the elders from her family as well as elders from Mateu's family, that it was finally decided and agreed to by all parties, that she would be cleansed so that her life could get back to normal. It was such a pity that this epiphany only came to light after her in-laws had left her destitute with no money and a litany of debts.

They eventually went back to their own place after the cleansing, while she scrambled to pay the house mortgage and her children's school fees. She made the decision to sell Mateu's car hastily, as she was still reeling from the humiliation she had already suffered at the hands of her in-laws and she didn't want to suffer anymore.

Currently Mathato is slowly rebuilding her life, while being helped financially by her family, who had undertaken to pay for the children's school fees until she could get back on her feet.

The End

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To contact the author and to explore her oeuvre, please find her contact details below:

pertunia@pertunialehoka.co.za

www.pertunialehoka.co.za

Whatsapp number: 067 078 2658

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<https://www.linkedin.com/in/pertunia-lehoka/>

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<https://hubpages.com/@pertunialehoka>

After being dishonourably discharged from combat and sent home, Mateu's depression, which he had hidden from his wife, takes a very dangerous turn as he chooses to not divulge to his wife the real reason he was laid off.

What follows is a trail of hurt, abuse as well as disengagement as he battles to deal with life's never ending woes.

Mateu's illness becomes that obnoxious unwelcome guest at a party, which just won't go away. Is it too late for anyone to save him?



Pertunia Lehoka is an Inspirational Speaker, a Mentor, an Internal Life Skills and Relationship Coach, a Business Woman as well as an Independent Researcher. Her mission is to leverage most of her real life experiences to help everyone navigate this life journey, in order to reach their full potential.

Her delivery style is that of scenarios, as well as parables and a number of personal stories. Her aim is to ensure that her audience can easily identify with the message, connect with it and understand it, thereby able to apply it into their lives.

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