



THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER

PERTUNIA LEHOKA

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The Green-Eyed Monster
A Short Story

By
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A Lethal Injection

She had been looking frail, going to the clinic every Thursday for checkup. As delicate as she was, she held on as we both stood outside the building where we both worked, waiting for our transport to take us home after work. Bertha looked at me and mumbled a few words to me, “Pat, I’m ill; I’m really ill.”

I looked at her, as if to prevent her from telling me what her ailment was. Truth be told, I had had a hunch for a very long time, simply by looking at her physically emaciated stature and constant cough, that she was really ill. Her light skin tone bore a contrast between pale and red with bloodshot eyes.

What she was about to tell me, simply affirmed what I had already known for a while, that she was truly ailing from

Pertunia Lehoka

something that was likely to be chronic. My colleague turned very close friend, insisted on telling me what was wrong with her. My heart pounded and I shivered, while my ears barred me from listening attentively. I had to, as it was becoming evident that she needed an avenue of release and had at the time, chosen me to be that emotional deposit box. I was her friend after all.

“What is wrong Bertha?” I asked, my heart continuing to thrash sporadically, hoping that what I feared wasn’t really her reality. However, my suspicions were confirmed.

“I have that dreaded disease Sis and my CD 4 count is very low,” she told me hastily in a fading and shaking tone, her watery eyes presenting the physical and emotional pain she was experiencing at the time.

“Oh Bertha, I’m so sorry to hear this. Did you find out recently?” I guess her conduct at the time when she told me about her illness, made me think that reality was only sinking in, that she had been diagnosed with what was deemed back then, to be a life threatening illness with no cure or, with very little management care for it.

“No Pat, I have known for five years now, she responded.”

I was frightened and mystified to hear her say that.

Tears ran down my face and in implicit accord between the two of us, we hugged, as she sobbed on my shoulders, while I held

The Green-Eyed Monster

her tightly very close to my torso. I could tell that she still had a lot to say.

“I, I ...,” her voice trailed off.

An unexpected wail emanated from her, so loud that within a couple of minutes, we had an audience. A few colleagues encircled us, curious about what had transpired and very eager to help. They had no idea that their help, although possibly well meaning, wasn't what she was looking for at that moment as it was indefinable and there was really nothing much they could do for us... for her at the time. I politely asked them to please give us some time as I needed to speak to Bertha alone. They indulged us and moved a few steps away from us.

Bertha then told me that she had been going for counseling ever since she was diagnosed and, was now having a breakdown of sorts. She had no idea why she was feeling that way. She told me that her heart was beating in an unusual manner, as if she had just run extremely fast.

I was really worried even though I had thought at the time, that she should have dealt with the knowledge of her status better by then, seeing as she told me that she had known of her ailment for five years already. I guess the reason must have been that, it was the first time she was telling someone outside of her family. That's what I convinced myself was the case.

Pertunia Lehoka

Two of our older colleagues who had moved away from us a bit, couldn't take it anymore and insisted on joining us.

“Pat, this looks serious. What can we do?” I looked at the women and shook my head.

“Please..., not now. I know you'd like to help but Bertha is not well emotionally. So please, let us not overwhelm her at the moment. I'm sure that when she's doing better, she will tell you what's bothering her,” I sternly stated.

I had to take charge of the situation as it would have gotten out of hand. Honestly now, those ladies were simply being inquisitive as opposed to wanting to be of help; well known gossip-mongers in the company!

I tried in vain to get my friend to calm down but the more I spoke and pleaded with her, the more it seemed like I was making her weep some more. A bus halted at the bus stop nearby, prompting the many colleagues around us to leave, rushing to board and wishing us the best – some genuinely concerned about what could have happened.

I knew when they left, that the following day, they would be all over us, demanding to know what was going on the previous day. Bertha kept crying and my blouse was soaking wet, so was hers.

The Green-Eyed Monster

She eventually pulled herself together - only just, asking if I could accompany her to the same bus onto which our colleagues were embarking. I declined to do so because I knew that should she get onto that bus, everyone would make demands, wanting to know what the problem was. Who knows where that information could have landed?

Remember that it was still taboo back then to talk about HIV, let alone AIDS. It was even more painful for those suffering from the disease, as people were bound to disassociate themselves from them, believing that by breathing the same air, or sharing the same cups even if they are washed, they would somehow catch the illness. Very ill-advised I know!

Most sufferers lived in complete misery and perhaps still do, despite a lot of information available all over the Internet, at health facilities, in the media and even in schools and institutions of higher learning. The government also tries its best, to always provide appropriate teachings on the subject. At this stage, the HI virus is no longer a death sentence, provided one adheres to all instructions and takes medication as prescribed.

I immediately offered Bertha a lift home because I was very distraught to see her in that state. While awaiting my husband to pick me up, I kept glancing at her. Her chest depicted that of a

person about to burst. I could literally see her upper body moving up and down, more like when a person is trying to prevent herself from queasiness.

“Do you know how you got it?” I asked and then later regretted posing that question because, before I could even conclude my probe, she had released one of the sharpest wails I have ever heard, the type of squeal we usually associate with people who have just been informed of the death of a loved one or of a serious calamity.

“Oh my God! Bertha please don’t cry like this, you’re scaring me,” I declared, troubled beyond measure.

“It was a nurse Pat, my home-girl; a nurse who hated me. When I went to deliver my son, she injected me...,” she mentioned, amidst her deafening screech. I froze and immediately experienced a mother of all headaches.

“A nurse!?” I asked, exclaiming at the same time. I couldn’t comprehend what my friend had just told me. I stopped asking her questions as I was now the one who was beginning to feel woozy – sick to my stomach from the reveal alone.

By this time, Bertha’s eyes had become swollen and fire red. She began trembling as I took my cellphone out from my handbag and called my husband, to establish as to how far he was at the time, as I had a crisis that needed immediate

The Green-Eyed Monster

attention.

He told me that he had only then, fetched the kids from their respective schools (twenty kilometers apart) and that the traffic was very hectic. Naturally, he wanted to know what the problem was and I simply told him that my friend was unwell.

I had to think quickly because her flushed face was turning blue at the time and her body was continuing to quiver. I told my husband that I was taking Bertha to the doctor around the corner and that he and the kids would find me there when they arrive. It was just a five minute walk.

As I was about to end the call with my husband, I could hear the kids in the background, asking him what was wrong. I could not hold on to listen to his response to the kids.

“Come... hold onto me, we are going to the doctor. Give me your bags,” I instructed, not at all awaiting any negative response from my friend.

“Pat, I don’t want to go to the doctor because my medical aid funds have been exhausted,” she cried out – wailed actually.

“It’s okay - please stop worrying so much, I’ll cover the charge. You cannot go home looking like this. All I can offer you at this stage are my shoulders. However, the doctors and nurses would know what to do to calm you down, both emotionally and physically, particularly due to your condition.

Pertunia Lehoka

As your friend, it hurts seeing you like this and I'm really of no use to you right now as I'm busy crying with you. Bertha, this hurts me, please let's go." She looked at me and gave me a half smile, powerless to argue with me.

'At least she's smiling, even if it's barely.' I comforted myself.

My heart was aching terribly after her pronouncement earlier about how she got infected, even though she couldn't mention exactly how that took place.

I told myself that perhaps she'd still tell me after much poise, even if it wouldn't be the very same day or even that month. I wasn't going to push further for more information at that time. I could just imagine how much it must have taken her to finally break her silence. It was lucid then, that someone or some people had abused their positions at the hospital. The bravado to do such a thing – how devilish can one be?

"Fine – let's go then," she cheekily spoke up, obscuring that half smile I saw a few moments ago from her face.

As we walked back into our company yard, two of our male colleagues saw us and immediately came rushing towards us.

"Hebanna! Pat bothata ke eng?" ("My Word! Pat, what's the problem?")

"I need to take Bertha to the doctor around the corner," I

The Green-Eyed Monster

responded. “Please help us as she’s not looking too good as you can see,” I pleaded.

Without any hesitation, one of the gentlemen lifted Bertha up carrying her like a baby, imploring us to rush, while the other one took our heavy work bags.

The three of us had a small talk of concern, while I was trying my level best to maintain equanimity, eager for us to reach the doctor’s rooms before Bertha could blurt out to the guys what was wrong with her. For some reason, I felt the need to protect her, knowing that she was no longer herself at the time. I was also frightened by her unexpected lifeless body, scaring us terribly.

Arriving at the doctor’s rooms, our macho man rushed inside calling out for help, “DOCTOR PLEASE, DOCTOR! THIS IS AN EMERGENCY!”

Awaiting patients raised their heads and those who had taken quick naps on the couches woke up - they had no choice as it had become noisy. Nurses and receptionists raised their eyebrows, showing signs of concern.

One of the nurses quickly brought us a wheelchair that was at the reception area at the time. Thato, the Good Samaritan brother who had carried Bertha, carefully placed her on the

Pertunia Lehoka

wheelchair, as one nurse swiftly wheeled her into one of the doctors' rooms. This was a practice that housed at least six doctors and other medical practitioners. I figured at the time, that one of the rooms Bertha was wheeled into was empty with no patients.

“Ms...,” one of the receptionists called me, startling me as I wanted to go in with my friend because she wasn't going to be able to speak for herself due to the state she was in.

“Yes...,” I responded.

“I'm going to ask you to complete this form please.” She handed me a form placed on a hard-board, while she continued launching questions at me regarding the patient we had just brought in.

“Can I have her medical aid card please,” she continued and then extended her right hand towards me, looking a bit goaded. She was probably about to knock off hence such frustration I could see in her eyes. I must say, I was affronted by her attitude.

“I'll pay cash,” I mentioned.

“Has she been here before?”

My God! The woman wouldn't let up, not even realizing how galling she was being. I mean, how was the doctor going to find out what was wrong with the patient if he/she was alone with her in the room? I know I shouldn't have lost my temper

The Green-Eyed Monster

but I swear I did!

“Lady, I think this can wait until the doctor has seen her. Just take out her file in the meantime as I know very well that she has been here before. Her name is Bertha Mthobi,” I instructed, in a very harsh tone and handed her my credit card to pay, which she elected not to take.

It’s only now, as I pen this chronicle, that I’m beginning to truly understand my anger towards that poor receptionist then. My mind must have still been processing the information I got from Bertha, that a nurse had injected her with blood infected with the deadly virus. So, clearly everyone who worked in the medical field, was about to experience my rage – unfair I know, but that’s what happened and how I felt at the time.

“I apologise Ma’am,” the receptionist said ruefully. “I don’t mean to be insensitive but, I really need to record all this information in the system because we will be closing in an hour.”

Did I really care about her apology? Of course not; however, I am able to laugh at myself now because of the time that has elapsed since I got the news.

“Like I said, she has been here before so when should I pay?” I continued with my defiant approach, or rather my fear disguised as boldness. It became evident only later to me, that I

Pertunia Lehoka

hadn't handled the situation fairly at all, largely because I was too close to it and needed people to feel the way I felt at the time. We all know that it was an impossible ask, but that was what I had expected from those around. What an iniquitous expectation that was!

“Pat, please calm down. They're just trying to help and to make sure that Bertha is attended to as speedily as possible without any glitches,” Thato chided me, looking at me disapprovingly and shaking his head. “Please Pat, we are all worried... yes perhaps you are more affected but let's let them do their job okay,” he added.

While all the back and forth was going on between myself, Thato and the receptionist, one of the female doctors approached us, clearly about to direct her inquiry towards me.

“Ma'm, are you the one who brought the lady in just now?”

“Yes, yes it's me,” I responded ardently, feeling relief of some kind.

“Come with me please Ma'm,” she said, extending her right hand to the receptionist to get the file. I felt so bad for the poor lady and sense finally prevailed. I knew that I had to quickly apologise. I whispered to her, “I'm sorry; I'm very frightened. I know that's not an excuse for my behaviour but I really am sorry,” I said, mortified.

The Green-Eyed Monster

“It’s okay really, don’t worry about it,” she said smiling, eventually taking the file out and handing it to the doctor.

“Let’s go this way Ma’m.” The doctor directed me to the room Bertha had been placed in.

When we got to the room, I noticed that my friend was truly out of it and was lying on the bed, her body convulsing uncontrollably. There was a nurse in there with her, holding her down so she wouldn’t fall.

The doctor sat on her chair and motioned a chair on the other side for me to sit. She quickly went through the file, while advising me not to worry as they had given Bertha some sedative and that she would soon settle down.

“Oh I see..., mmm,” she murmured and continued reading. “I take it you know what her issue is?” The question was rhetorical and innocent enough – well, I thought.

“Yes, I do. She has just told me about forty five minutes ago to be precise.”

“Oh, I see. Are you family?”

“No, I’m not family; I am her friend and colleague. She doesn’t have family around here. She comes from out of town.”

The doctor continued going through Bertha’s file, totally ignoring her as well as the poor nurse, whose arms were probably aching from extending them and letting them dangle in

Pertunia Lehoka

the same position for long, while holding Bertha down.

The doctor finally finished going through the file and stood up, going to examine my friend. I faced her way as well, once the doctor had reached her on the bed.

The nurse quickly gave way, while Bertha had ‘rested’ somewhat, responding to whatever they had given her before I came in.

The doctor took her time examining Bertha and once she had finished, she informed me that she would be fine as she was probably just reacting to some medication she had been taking.

She then went back to her chair and scribbled some notes in the file. It was very quiet in the room and I saw Bertha opening her eyes slightly, only then coming to terms with where she was at that moment, calling out to me and smiling. I was relieved to see her smile.

The doctor then handed me a script, advising that my friend would still be lightheaded for some time and that she needed to rest for a couple of days and not go to work.

We left the doctor’s rooms and I found the guys still waiting for us at reception. I was given a bill by the receptionist and I paid without hesitation, while Bertha was walking by herself by then, even though she was still not 100% better.

We left the practice and as I was about to call my husband, I

The Green-Eyed Monster

saw the car parked in front of the building. He came out on seeing me holding onto Bertha, visibly worried. I related the whole story to him and that there was a prescription that needed to be filled. We both rushed to the pharmacy nearby, leaving the kids in the car and Bertha with the guys from work. We returned quickly after having had the script filled.

As we were about to help Bertha to get into the car, Thato and his friend volunteered to take her home and to make sure that she was okay. Bertha affirmed that she would be okay and I released her into the guys' care, handing over her medication to her.

I had no idea that, that would be the last time I would see Bertha in a better state of health – the condition I had thought at the time, was horrible but stable.

Weeks passed and my friend didn't make it to work and I had to go and see her, together with three other colleagues. I remember when we arrived at her home at a small town in another province, she had lost enormous weight.

She made so many jokes that day, telling me that when she gets better, she was going to scold me and boss me around the same way I did her. We laughed so much that day in spite of her ill health. Although I could see that there was no way she would be able to do so as she was frail, I had to indulge her to make her

feel better.

When we eventually left, she stood by the door and waved us goodbye, her hand visibly too heavy to lift up. I knew then, that it would be the last time I see her beautiful face again. That wave proved to be the last she would ever direct at me.

Two weeks later, we got a message that Bertha was gone, her fate having been decided by a jealous nurse, who abused her position as a health care worker, entrusted by the state and the citizens of the country, to help foster patients to good health. All this was because her ex happened to leave her and was now involved with another woman – Bertha. As much as my friend's relationship with that man never really lasted long, there was a baby born out of that relationship.

Although the nurse and her accomplices were ultimately arrested, that was little comfort to those of us who loved Bertha. A deadly virus had been forced to dwell inside my friend's blood through diabolic means.

Parents lost a daughter; a son lost a mother and I lost a very dear friend – all because of a green-eyed nurse. Each time I think of Bertha, I cannot help but to shed tears and wonder why God was silent when all these things were taking place.

It has been thirteen years since my friend was taken away from us but, to date, I still become very nervous when I go to

The Green-Eyed Monster

hospital. I even, at some point, developed a phobia of some kind for hospitals, particularly the ones from the area my husband comes from.

Since the year 2007, I have lost four members of my family (father, mother, sister and grandmother), who all died in hospital. I have made peace with their passing but, somewhere deep down, I would always wonder as to whether there wasn't anybody who might have abused his or her position, leading to my loved ones departing earth before their time.

But then again, nobody knows when our time will come. As humans, we sometimes forget that we all live on borrowed time and when things do not make sense, it is when we believe that we can somehow control the events. We disregard the fact that there is the all-pervading higher power around us, which happens to be a Master Strategist on everything earth.

Was this bertha's destiny? Should all deaths be accepted, even when unnatural and carefully orchestrated by human beings who play god with people's lives? I pray all the time to get over bertha's death. This hurts though, it really hurts.



