

## **BROKEN GLASS**

By Juliet Barnes (Kenya)

It was that time when lengthening shadows lick away the breathless heat of afternoon.

She'd walked barefoot from school because her shoes bit her toes. There was time to lie down on the narrow bed she shared with her mother, who would still be on duty in the big house. She felt tired – it was long since the tin mug of sweet tea in the pink swell of dawn. Before closing her eyes she looked at her feet, powdered gently by dust.

There was no time to wonder what the bwana was doing here in the servants' quarters as he swelled and stooped through the doorway. His bald, pale head had always reminded her of the naked geckoes that zigzagged up the walls, hunting insects. Now she didn't look, she could only feel darkness as he thrust her back into the hardness of the bed.

"Keep quiet!" he hissed, spitting in her face. His mouth smelled old and sour.

She didn't cry out at the shocks of pain.

"That's what God made you for!" He left, laughing to himself.

She held herself tightly against the trembling.

Outside the wrinkled branch that extended too far out from the pepper tree creaked in the dry wind. Her mother worried it would crash onto the tin roof, crumbling the mud-walls.

"Ha! da da!" shouted the Ibis, making her jump.

Her mother noticed blood on her lesa:

"You are young, Wairimu," she sighed. "But now you are a woman. Here are two pads: wear one and wash one."

The dust kicked up by the bwana's car puffed rust-red above the hedge: The night watchman once told her that after too much beer at the golf club the bwana often drove into the gatepost. He went daily - to escape from the memsahib's shouting. Yesterday she'd screamed at Wairimu's mother: "Sarah? Sarah! Did YOU break Bwana's crystal whisky glass?"

"Keep clean or memsahib's dogs will bother you!" Her mother gently pushed her out towards the washroom. (They'd bitten her once. They ate meat every day. Wairimu only tasted meat at big occasions, like her uncle's funeral.)

She leaned against the pit-latrine door, her breaths whipping her chest. The stench made it easy to vomit down the hole. Her mother had given up asking for a new toilet. The big house had four: gleaming white bowls with lids, so clean you could have cooked in there!

The memsahib's bedroom was bigger than Wairimu's classroom. His bedroom had precious medals behind glass doors which her mother dusted: she told Wairimu he'd won those for bravery.

Wairimu closed her eyes against her terror bubbling up from her stomach.

Through cracks in the wall she saw smoke. Her mother would be preparing their meal with slumped, aching shoulders, but jobs were few: without this there'd be no school:

"Wairimu? Can you bring water?" she called.

A fat, mottled snake startled Wairimu beside the leaking tap. She swallowed her scream as it slid sluggishly under the sisal plants.

What if he came back tomorrow?

The sun was setting behind a bulge of cloud, shooting scarlet spikes into a silent sky.

“Ha!” rasped the Ibis, settling on the pepper-tree branch.

As darkness folded into Wairimu’s fear, a sudden shaft of light swiped the path.

The memsahib stood wailing in her doorway, her hair shining white like those pictures of angels: “Sarah? Sarah! You stupid girl! You’ve broken the glass doors of his medal cabinet...”