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Death Wailing

*As shaman and translator stood eyeball-to-eyeball,
time seemed to stand still.*

"Ayee-oh! Ayee-oh!"

Marilyn Laszlo bolted upright in her rough-hewn bed, swept aside the mosquito netting, and forced her sleepy eyes to scan the darkness of Hauna village.

"Ayee-oh! Ayee-oh!"

The distressed wailing came from one of the more distant houses yet was intense and penetrating as if nearby, gripping her heart with eerie foreboding. Marilyn visualized the "spitter" hovering over his patient, surrounded by people wailing in the anxious hope that the spirits could be repelled and a life spared.

Marilyn had only a faltering grip on many aspects of life in the upper regions of New Guinea's great Sepik River. She and her fellow translator, Judy Rehberg, had only recently arrived among the Sepik Iwam people. But she knew that Hauna's traditional healers were called "spitters," since ceremonial spitting was one of their major functions. Spitters

also had detailed knowledge of rain-forest herbs that were effective to cure common ailments.

"Ayee-oh! Ayee-oh!"

"Marilyn," Judy called from across the room.

"I hear. I'm awake," Marilyn responded. "One must be dying, Judy."

Life expectancy in the region was thirty to fifty years, with a 90 percent infant mortality rate. A village downriver with a 100 percent rate of infant mortality was becoming extinct.

This was their first month in Hauna village, and Marilyn and Judy were experiencing their first encounter with death wailing—people crying out from a darkness that was deeper than the night surrounding them.

Marilyn had looked forward to village living with a sense of personal destiny. As expected, during these first few weeks living in a borrowed house, she had struggled to adjust to the ever present mosquitoes, the lack of privacy, and the oppressive heat, along with the rodents and reptiles sharing their living space. But neither she nor Judy had come to Hauna village anticipating an idyllic experience. They had come to make the Word of God available to the Sepik Iwam people.

They found the people to be delightful. Every daily activity seemed to be a game, from men setting their fishing nets and women preparing food while chatting among themselves, to the children running races and playing. Laughter resounded throughout the village. Many aspects of Sepik Iwam culture impressed them: the love of parents for their families, the code of conduct undergirding all of life, and the dignity and respect they showed one another.

However, the reality of the spiritual darkness and bondage in the Sepik Iwam world would in the next few hours

cause Marilyn and Judy to rethink some of their first impressions.

Slipping out from under her mosquito net, Marilyn smeared on repellent. She looked up at the fishing tackle/first-aid box sitting on a makeshift shelf. It contained quinine for malaria and penicillin for infection. Neither woman was a nurse, and Marilyn had reservations about treating illness and injury. Her stomach churned at the thought of cleaning a festering sore. But her Wycliffe training included basic health procedures, and she prayed that soon she and Judy would be able to demonstrate the value of medicine. But since they were still new to the village, and since Hauna's traditional healers rejected outside medicine, she knew their help would not yet be welcomed.

She turned on her flashlight, illuminating for a moment the shortwave radio, their precious link to mission headquarters in Ukarumpa, 350 miles away. Colleagues there had already become like family, but tonight they seemed as far away as the stars overhead.

Looking out across the village, Marilyn took a fortifying breath and caught the smell of sago supper. Lingering in the air were wisps of dying fires and the aroma from the evening's meal of fish, coconut, and jungle greens mingled with the dank odors of the river and the encroaching jungle.

A cacophony of nocturnal bird calls escaped from the surrounding wall of trees and vines. Fluttering bats swept from roof to roof and from tree to tree.

And the relentless, heartrending wailing continued.

Marilyn was apprehensive but not fearful. Although it would take time to accept the villagers' near nudity and vastly different lifestyle, she found it hard to believe that these people had been ceremonial cannibals only a few years past. They were gentle folk, kindly curious of the

fragile, fair-skinned oddities who had come to share their habitat.

Judy touched Marilyn's shoulder. "I think the mourning is coming from Makapobiya's house," she whispered.

Just that morning Makapobiya had come to call with a half-dozen members of an upriver village, men journeying by canoe to barter clay pots for woven baskets and mats. Makapobiya knew the traders would be fascinated to see the white women living in his village.

Concerned as she was for their friend Makapobiya, Marilyn couldn't help noting the special beauty that darkness gave to the village with its houses on twelve-foot stilts, its intersecting river tributary, and the surrounding jungle and backdrop of mountains. The view was like a page from a childhood story-book or a scene from an adventure movie.

The wailing increased in intensity as Marilyn crawled back under her mosquito net and eventually fell into a fitful sleep.



"Marilyn!"

It was Judy calling, as if in a dream.

Judy shook her lightly. "Come look!"

In the early dawn they could see people moving toward the burial area.

Several men carried the small, bark-wrapped body of eleven-year-old Bopia, son of Makapobiya and Nibiare. Consumed with sorrow and exhausted from lack of sleep, the parents were half carried by members of another clan. Immediately following them were two men carrying wood strips that had once been the boy's canoe.

From all directions a large crowd was assembling, wailing a discordant chorus. The tributary experienced a near traffic

jam as dugout canoes arrived. Makapobiya was a man of distinction, and his cherished son was being buried.

Marilyn and Judy joined the procession, careful not to cause a distraction on such a somber day. They eased into their canoe and made their way to the cemetery on the other side of the river.

Were they up to this? Marilyn wondered as they left their canoe and walked toward the gathering crowd.

"Yiubiyie!" shouted several village children. *"Ghost!"* In hours of discussions over many communal fires, most Hauna people had decided that these pale creatures were not humans but visiting spirits of departed ancestors.

Marilyn and Judy eventually worked their way to the front of the crowd and came into full view of the burial site, reaching the shallow grave just as Bopia's body was lowered into it.

Without waiting for the bearers to step fully away, Makapobiya and his wife plunged forward. Falling first to their knees, they toppled into the grave. Other family members joined them, among them the guardian uncle and aunt who had been as responsible for the boy as his parents.

"Ayee-oh! Ayee-oh!" everyone sobbed loudly.

The tree bark shroud had opened as it was lowered into the ground so the family could touch him one last time. Marilyn cautiously stepped closer. No one seemed to mind. But what she saw pierced her heart with horror, like a thrown spear. The *"corpse"* moved his hand across his chin. He was struggling for breath.

"He's alive!" Marilyn gasped. *"Judy, what can we do?"*

Sauperi, Hauna's paramount leader, arrived just then and stood somberly at the head of the grave. Marilyn stepped back in deference. Sauperi cut an imposing presence. A wild boar's tusk, trophy of a recent hunt, hung

from a dried animal-skin string around his neck. Earrings fashioned from vine fragments, streaks of white paint on each arm, and a headband of feathers further set him apart from the other men. In his mouth he bit tightly on an unlit pipe, bartered from an Australian official who had visited Hauna years earlier.

Even more than Makapobiya, Sauperi was a man shown great respect, a wise man with unchallenged authority. He spoke to the clansmen with courtesy but with firmness, and they drew Makapobiya, his wife, and others out of the grave.

Marilyn and Judy watched in shocked silence as slats hewn from the boy's split canoe were placed across the top of the grave. Then attendants placed leaves over this initial covering. When the first shovel of dirt was thrown onto the leaves, however, Marilyn lost her poise.

Taking a step forward she cried, "Bopia's still alive! Your boy isn't dead! He moves; he breathes! That means life!"

Engrossed in grief, Makapobiya didn't respond. His gaze remained fixed on the burial proceedings.

Even if the mourners had understood Marilyn's words, the parents could not have possibly believed Bopia was still alive. The attending spitter the previous night had pronounced the moment when the boy's spirit had left his body. Bopia had neither spoken nor responded to words or touch. Burial was inevitable.

Marilyn turned toward Sauperi. It was he who had granted their initial request a few weeks earlier to live in Hauna. Speaking through an interpreter in the trade language—Melanesian Pidgin—Marilyn and Judy had explained that they wished to live in Hauna to observe and learn. It was Sauperi who had arranged housing until their own house could be built. Now, however, he stood like a totem, as if ignoring them.

"You can't bury that boy! He's alive!" Marilyn gestured toward the grave. "He's only in a coma! We have medicine that could help him. Please! Don't bury him!" In her panic she forgot she was speaking in English.

Slowly Sauperi turned toward Marilyn, his eyes drilling into the distraught visitor. Although he didn't understand English, he fully discerned the passionate intent of Marilyn's voice. Anger spread across Sauperi's face.

Marilyn began using Pidgin, "*Dispela pikinini em i gat laip!*" ("This child is alive!")

Sauperi stepped forward. He reprimanded her in his language, which she didn't understand, but his gestures, attitude, and intonation clearly conveyed his meaning. "You shut your mouth! You don't know anything!"

Marilyn's heart pounded.

Sauperi, the dominant leader, would be strategic in reaching these people. It was vital to remain on good terms with him. Had he just become an adversary?

Marilyn wilted. What had come over her? She was conducting herself exactly opposite from her training. She knew nothing of the cultural meanings here. She was an outsider, a stranger with zero rights to speak.

These gentle people had accepted her as a friend. The men respected her and Judy and would protect them as faithfully as they would the women of their own clan. Now she had insulted them in their time of anguish.

Overwhelmed with frustration, she rejoined Judy.

Villagers continued to throw dirt onto the canoe slats and leaves. No dirt would touch the body. Many months later, Makapobiya's wife would come and retrieve the skull and then carry it with her, to help her feel close to her son.

"Why are they burying him alive?" Marilyn couldn't resist asking Judy. "If he can move and breathe, he's not dead."

As they started to walk away, Marilyn stopped abruptly. Looking back, she saw the mourners in renewed travail with friends supporting and consoling them as they left the graveside. She took a step as if to return to them, but Judy restrained her.

"We've got to get down to him, Judy! We just can't leave him there to smother and die. One injection might save his life!"

She looked alternately at Sauperi and back toward the grave. The mound of earth lay in symbolic terror against the hillside. It was like a scene from some horror movie, only there was no director to call "Cut!" A living boy lay beneath that cruel mound.

The chief's eyes remained stern, judicial. He held the scepter of authority for Hauna. This had been the accepted custom of burial, practiced by generations long preceding him. The boy had been properly pronounced dead. Sauperi was responsible for what happened here.

Dare she defy the great man?

A plan formed in her mind. She would stand her ground until Sauperi walked away. Then, in moments, she could fetch the medical kit. Given a half hour, even with bare hands, she could perhaps dig back into the grave to save Bopia!

As though he read her thoughts, Sauperi stood like a sentinel.

Marilyn wanted to cry out to him, "We don't want to cause a problem here; we're here to help you. You know the meaning of human love. We want to share the message of God's love."

Unable to speak his language, she could only stand in awkward, demeaning silence. As shaman and translator stood eyeball-to-eyeball, time seemed to stand still.

Death Wailing

Finally, Marilyn lowered her gaze. She and Judy shuffled back toward their canoe.

“Oh, Marilyn, I can’t believe this! How will we ever get through to these people?”

“I don’t know, Judy. This is beyond me. Only God can help us.”