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Solitude

Written by

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Adapted from "A Woman Named Solitude"  
by Andre Schwarz-Bart

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BLACK.

INT. SLAVE SHIP HULL - NIGHT

CU of an eye as it snaps open and looks frantically around before finding the camera. The darkness softens and the camera slowly pulls back, allowing more details, and the second eye, to come into focus. We hear the splashing of waves and the creaking sounds of a ship. The face of BAYANGUMAY, a broken, war exhausted, teenage girl encompasses the whole frame. Her eyes look directly into the camera with a mixture of pain, fear and panic. The sound of sailors voices are heard and the gaze is broken, it flashes upwards towards the origin of the sound.

SAILOR #1 (O.S.)  
Laaaaaaaaand ho!

Our perspective yanks back to reveal her surroundings. A door opens and the scene is bathed in moonlight. Men and women lie packed against each other, like a tomb inside the hull of an old ship. Deep purple flesh breathes under heavy, beaten chains. Some bodies stir awake, others sleeping or dead. The stench can be tasted in the air. Small cries and moans are heard from the ones who still cling to their past lives. Bodies roll with the tide. Golden lantern light breeches the cavernous, tomb-like space. Figures flicker on the hull walls as they are being selected and unlocked. The shadows play out the scene like predators swooping down upon their prey. Rough hands grab Bayangumay. Her eyes plead with the audience before the screen is abandoned.

EXT. SLAVE SHIP MAIN DECK - NIGHT

In the fire light of the main deck, Bayangumay stands alongside some TWELVE CAPTIVE WOMEN surrounded by about TWENTY SAILORS. The women are filthy, covered in sweat, grime and dried blood with matted, knotty hair. Buckets of cold water are released on the women and they are forcibly soaked, stripped, scrubbed clean and dressed on deck. Only tight shots of beaten backs, unhealed wounds and bruised limbs are seen being manhandled by the crew. Among the body parts, a small blackberry birthmark on the abdomen of Bayangumay. Wider shots show large demonic shadows closing in on the smaller innocent human forms, projected against the sails. The women are then chained to one another. Their borrowed dresses hang awkwardly on them. The captain positions himself between his drunken crew and their captives.

CAPTAIN

(indicating the lights on the horizon) Look there. Your new country. So before our time together draws to an end... (looking back at his men) you need pay tax to Atlantis.

The women panic and try to flee, pulling one another down. Bayangumay runs for the edge of the ship to jump overboard and is tripped by the bodies falling under her feet. The sailors close in on their captives. It takes three of them to wrestle Bayangumay down to the deck. The captain mounts her. His nose pressed against hers.

CAPTAIN (cont'd)

This one still got some life in her!  
I like that! (looking up to his men)  
Hold her down.

Bayangumay struggles and spits against her captors. The captain tears at her dress revealing a squirming blackberry birth mark on her tensed stomach. The camera pulls away as they begin to assault the women, and flies high above the ship, revealing it's not the only one. The cries of women ring out in the night air among a line of seven slave ships that have anchored just out of land's reach. Demonic shadows exaggerated on all the flapping sails. The camera flies away from the lantern lights of the ships. Away from screaming. Across the open water. The sound of the tide mixing with the rhythmic beating of African drums.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Once upon a time in Africa...

EXT. CASAMANCE RIVER - DAY

Aerial shots follow the river's current, over rice patties, Palmyra Palms, Mango Trees, and into a clearing, where the circular huts built by the Jola people reveal the village of Seleki.

NARRATOR (CONT)

On the South-Western tip of, what is now known as Senegal. On the left bank of the Casamance River, where the fresh water mixes with salt; there was, and still is today, the small village of Seleki.

EXT. SELEKI VILLAGE, SENEGAL - BOABAB TREE - DAY

THREE ELDER WOMEN are surrounded by VILLAGERS in the ample shade of a Boabab tree. Everyone is dressed in traditional fashion, most wearing robes or a Bubu (long shirt over drawstring pants that taper on the ankle), the women with their heads wrapped.

NARRATOR

The Jola people had been here for over 200 years. They believed, their ancestors would blow life into the roots of the rice patties from beyond, to ensure a good harvest; until they were ready to return and walk among the living again.

A NEWBORN BABY cries off screen and is carefully passed from hand to hand. Brought out to be inspected by the elder women. Weathered, powerful hands contrast the smooth new flesh of the little girl. A small, blackberry shaped birthmark is on her tummy. The elder women smile knowingly at one another.

NARRATOR (cont'd)

They would call her Bayangumay. She would possess the rebellious spirit of her grandmother. Strong. Resilient. Determined.

EXT. BASSE-TERRE SLAVE MARKET - DAY

Bayangumay now stands, swaying, with a blank stare as her body and teeth are inspected by the dirty hands of potential buyers. Hands smooth over her blackberry shaped birthmark on her stomach.

NARRATOR (CONT)

Unyielding.

She pulls down her rags to cover the scraps of modesty she harboured. Fingers point out purchases of flesh. Money is exchanged. Wounds are reopened. Bayangumay is whipped onto a cart and wheeled off with three males and another female.

EXT. SELEKI VILLAGE, SENEGAL - DAY

VILLAGERS move about in their daily routine, making herbal medicine, weaving baskets from palm leaves, tilling rice patties with the kajandu (a long type of shovel that rests on the knee and lifts the earth so seeds can be sowed), tending to the animals (cows, pigs, goats, chicken, sheep), etc.

NARRATOR

Still in her infancy, Bayangumay was promised to Dyadyu, a friend of her father, after a successful fishing trip. The path was carved clearly by our ancestors.

A BAYANGUMAY walks with KOMOBO, a local teenage boy who carries an Ekonting (a three stringed lute made from bamboo and stretched goat skin - like a ukulele).

NARRATOR (cont'd)

As she grew older, life had other plans. And Bayangumay preferred a local boy with whom she was raised.

KOMOBO

Bayangumay, you know this is not the way of the elders. We who live, draw our very lives from those below.

BAYANGUMAY

I will not marry him Komobo.  
(stealing a glance at Komobo) It is another that I choose.

KOMOBO

You're already promised to Dyadyu.  
You must go and marry him. We can not control our own destiny.

BAYANGUMAY

You are a silly boy. Perhaps I am better off with an older man.

KOMOBO

He is still our greatest warrior!  
Besides, no one rebels against the law. Even the law must obey the law.

BAYANGUMAY

Then it will be my own feet that  
carry me to destiny whether it is  
good or bad. I pray to Emit that it  
will favour me.

EXT. DU PARC PLANTATION, FRONT YARD - DAY

Bayangumay sways next to another female slave and three  
males. They are surrounded by three overseers on horseback  
and a handsomely dressed Frenchman in his early-thirties,  
LOUIS MORTIER.

LOUIS MORTIER

Until your confinement, you now  
belong to the du Parc Plantation in  
Basse-Terre. That volcanic mountain  
behind you is Le Grande Souf--

Bayangumay drops. Her limp body hits the ground with a thud  
and is left unattended on the ground as she froths from the  
mouth. Louis Mortier looks down on her without a trace of  
emotion and continues.

LOUIS MORTIER (cont'd)

Any runaways will be severely  
punished... if they survive the  
treacherous forest.

Louis Mortier gestures to one of the overseers who dismounts  
and drags Bayangumay to her unsteady feet. Overseer #1 holds  
her up in place as Louis Mortier closes in. His hate is  
reflected in Bayangumay's unresponsive eyes.

LOUIS MORTIER (cont'd)

Cost me damn near 9 dollars cause no  
one else wanted the trouble. We can't  
have it dying on the first day. Find  
out what's broken and fix it.

Bayangumay is dragged off towards the house.

INT. JOLA HUT - SELEKI VILLAGE - NIGHT

A candle is reflected in the eyes of Bayangumay as she  
awaits her new husband. She has been washed, cleaned, oiled  
with tulucuna oil and prepared for their wedding night. She  
lay on a straw mat with only a white loin cloth to protect  
her modesty. Sweat beads on the flesh illustrated with her  
blackberry birthmark as a shadow twitches against the walls.

DYADYU, an older warrior and longtime family friend, now in his early fifties, enters the hut with his eyes turned downwards.

DYADYU

Is my wife ready? I can come back in a little while if you're not ready to receive me. My youth and impatience are both beyond me.

BAYANGUMAY

No Dyadyu. I thank you for making me your wife. My womb is honoured to bear the seed of such a tree as you.

Dyadyu lifts his gaze to Bayangumay and crosses the room towards her. The candle is extinguished. Not a moment passes before we hear the sound of war drums beating and faint, sporadic screams of women. Light flickers back inside the room from outside. Dark shapes of Dyadyu rising and moving to the window as the light gets brighter and the screams more consistent. The animal skin curtain is pulled back and Seleki has been transformed into an inferno. Dyadyu turns back inside, frantically looking for a weapon to go and fight.

DYADYU

Its the white man! I've heard of this! Come to feast on our flesh! Must defend our people!

Finding nothing, Dyadyu rushes outside empty-handed. The flames reflected on his glistening back and broad shoulders.

EXT. JOLA HUT - SELEKI VILLAGE - NIGHT

Dyadyu is instantly met by the invading tribe. He ducks the first spear and with the mobility of a young warrior, leaps onto two oncoming attackers, killing one, then the other, by breaking their necks with his bare hands. Four more advance and one manages to drive a spear into him. Wounded, Dyadyu rises, struggles and kills the closest attacker. Finally succumbing, he pins one more enemy underneath his body, as the others thrust their spears into them both. Bayangumay watches, suspended in a silent scream. Surrounded by carnage. Huts in flames illuminating the night. Children cry in terror as they are separated from their parents. Screams of "Protect us from the sellers of men," are heard in the night. Flashes of women fleeing into the rice patties with their babies. Anyone attempting to fight is immediately put down. Whoever remains is taken prisoner. Collared like animals and dragged off.

This whirlwind of chaos is suddenly all around Bayangumay. The panic strangles her in fear. She can't breathe.

NARRATOR

But nothing, not even the spirits  
could prepare Bayangumay for this.

She sees Komobo fighting until being surrounded. Finally, he is struck down and collared. Her last view of Seleki, is of her honeymoon hut in flames. Dyadyu lifeless in the light. She too is collared and dragged off.

INT. SLAVE HUT, DU PARC PLANTATION - DAY

Her blackberry birthmark scrubbed by her own hands, as Bayangumay uses an old wooden bucket full of brown water with hay floating on the surface, to wash herself off. She lay on a straw mat as a LARGE AFRICAN NURSEMAID, her flesh darker than night, kneels between her knees. Empty eyes stare into the womb of Bayangumay. She shows no sign of feeling as the nurse performs her check-up.

EXT. DU PARC PLANTATION, FRONT PORCH - DAY

Louis Mortier sits and looks out at the sugarcane fields sprawling before the main house. OLD PEG LEG, an aged, thin, tamed slave, hobbles forward on a wooden leg with gray, receding hair on his bowed head. His appearance alone begs for forgiveness on account of his mere existence. Louis Mortier looks down his nose at this pitiful creature before him as if observing an ant making his way across the porch. Old Peg Leg speaks in barely a whisper. Aware that his voice alone is offensive.

OLD PEG LEG

Beggin your masser's permission sir.  
It would appear your new girl is with  
child.

LOUIS MORTIER

With child? This is a brand new  
shipment! Those sailors ought to be  
castrated! Pariade!

Old Peg Leg flinches and chances a look from underneath his bowed head. He slinks off at the wave of the hand of Louis Mortier.

LOUIS MORTIER (cont'd)

(to himself) No matter. Two for the  
price of one. She'll work it off.



EXT. GOREE ISLAND

We follow an overcrowded ferry. Slaves row over the waves to the shores of Goree Island. It washes onto to the beach. Captives are dragged from the boat and ushered towards a French Colonial style house with two spiral staircases on either side of a door leading out to sea. The House of Slaves.

NARRATOR

After months of marching by foot, survivors would reach Goree Island. It is here, in the House of Slaves, that unspeakable torture would haunt generations and scar history.

EXT. HOUSE OF SLAVES COURTYARD - GOREE ISLAND - DAY

Pandemonium. Black-skinned bodies being herded in every direction by white sailors from countless nations, under the watch of uniformed members of the French army. Foreign languages exchanged (French, Spanish, English). Confusion and panic, mingle with violence, blood, sweat, exhaustion and fear as people are being unloaded from ferries bringing them in from Dakar. They are roughly pulled ashore, scrubbed, oiled and forced into holding cells where they wait to be paraded in front of prospective buyers.

NARRATOR

Oiled for presentation, slave traders would consider age, gender, strength, teeth and overall health to gain the most for their dollar.

On the platform, they are examined, auctioned, and forcibly dragged off to another holding cell where they wait to be shipped off to the unknown darkness of slavery.

EXT. DU PARC PLANTATION, FRONT YARD - DAY

A heavily pregnant Bayangumay is tethered to a post in the front yard. Overseer #1 has her mouth forced open and is jamming his fingers inside while she struggles against the chain choking. He retrieves a stone and throws it to the ground.

NARRATOR

Bayangumay, known now as Man Bobette, had tried everything to prevent her bastard child from coming into this strange world.

Her blackberry birthmark stretched around her heaving belly as she gasps for breath. The overseer grabs his knees and catches his own breath from the ordeal.

OVERSEER

Man Bobette, as G-d as my witness,  
you will have this baby.

MAN BOBETTE

(in her native tongue) That traitor  
will kill me from inside! Whipping at  
my organs like you and your people!

OVERSEER

Whatever you say. I damn sure hope  
its a boy with a stronger back and  
softer spine than you.

EXT. HOUSE OF SLAVES COURTYARD - GOREE ISLAND - DAY

Prisoners, still shackled at the ankles, eat with their hands from the tubs of manioc (cassava), boiled meat, eggs and kola nuts placed in the yard. Some get sick from the food after so much time in hunger and vomit on their feet. On the balconies above, white men watch their human cattle while being fanned by small black women. With a nod, guards descend onto the courtyard and corral the slaves toward the door between the two spiraling staircases. Huge masts could be seen rising over the House of Slaves.

NARRATOR

It was unknown how long they would be  
held in captivity here. And when the  
day finally came, they were fed a  
last meal and marched aboard a ship  
to the New World.

Mangled feet, battered hands and a blackberry shaped birthmark pass thru the Door of No Return. The prisoners are stuffed back onto the overcrowded ferries and forced to row towards the tall trans-Atlantic ships. Then they climb up the slippery rope ladders.

NARRATOR (cont'd)

Some would take destiny, and a  
captor, into their own hands.

They make their way across the deck. Bayangumay witnesses one man has managed to smuggle in his Ekonting. The sailors confront him. In desperation, he grabs a sailor and launches them both overboard. Red ribbons of blood, shark fins and frenzied splashing are all that was seen of them both.

NARRATOR (cont'd)  
Others would still cling to hope.  
Praying the light they saw was not  
from the flames of hell.

Down into the hull of the ship. Where Africa and light are  
seen no more. Bayangumay whispers to her neighbours.

BAYANGUMAY  
Jola? Are there any Jola people here?

Darkness.

INT. SLAVE HUT, DU PARC PLANTATION - DUSK

Orange and pink colours of the sunset pour in from the  
window of the dilapidated wooden shack and across the face  
of Man Bobette. Like the opening shot of the film, the CU is  
on her face as it contorts in pain.

MAN BOBETTE  
(in her native tongue) Let me swallow  
my tongue and be finished with this  
nightmare.

She chokes and is immediately restrained by overseer #1. The  
African nursemaid is back between her legs. Her thighs flex.  
The stretched blackberry birthmark on her stomach rolls with  
contractions. She cries out in agony. From between her legs,  
a small white baby is pulled.

NARRATOR  
It is here where our story begins.  
With the birth of an outcast.  
Rejected by her people.

The baby is towed off and handed to the overseer who takes  
it outside to Louis Mortier.

NARRATOR (cont'd)  
Deplored by her masters.

The baby's cry falling on Man Bobette's deaf ears. She turns  
away.

NARRATOR (cont'd)  
Unwanted by her mother.

Louis Mortier examines her infant body and takes note of a  
blackberry shaped birthmark on her hip. He turns her over.  
The camera pulls in close to her face to reveal her opening  
eyes. One green as the sea, the other brown as her roots.