

# Healing scars, chasing dreams

One thing Rukia equally loves as much as she loves books is probably her village, Yebu. A rural kebele around 18 kms away from Jimma.

It wasn't easy to leave behind her village and family and what she called home for her entire life. But it was a necessary price to pay for a chance at her future.

The stretched dusty road to Jimma town welcomes her with a ray of hope and she embraces it with the excitement of a fresh affair.

On days she feels homesick and misses her tiny village she reminds herself that this is the city where dreams come true. Sometimes on her way to school she steals glances along with hopes from Jimma University.

"Soon I will earn my place in that university to fulfill my dreams of becoming a surgeon. She would repeat the promise to herself."

Besides, she has Sirgut, her childhood friend. Growing up Rukia and Sirgut were inseparable. They always wanted to live together. And when they made this move to Jimma for their final year of secondary school, they pooled together their student money and rented a cramped room in the bustling old town.

They don't have a lot of staff in their tiny room, just the basics. They brew coffee on the weekends as most Jimma folks do, Sirgut says it helps her to be alert and study. But Rukia talks like a different breed.

"but you usually go straight up to sleep after you had a cup of coffee" she would ask

"what about last week I stayed up all night for that chemistry exam" Sirgut replies comically

They both love coffee, but Rukia stays up late most nights reading whether or not she has coffee.

"you know you are a nerd right" Sirgut teases her jokingly

However Rukia's passion and determination is something she really admires.

They study together when there is an exam, but other than that Sirgut is carefree. But since the time is nearing for the national exam, she joins Rukia more often.

Rukia is pouring all her energy into preparing for the national exam that would determine her future at university.

Looking at Rukia's whirlwind of focused energy, her nose always buried in books, days filled with a blur of lectures, frantic note-taking and late night studies one would wonder how these two possibly become friends.

Sirgut, on the other hand, was more carefree, playful and often drawn to the social swirl around them.

Across the street, a few houses down to their rented room lives a young construction worker named Abdi. Abdi has always been friendly and respectful when their paths cross. One day, Sirgut gets the idea to invite him for coffee.

Another time, Sirgut leaned in close to Rukia and whispered, "Abdi has been talking about you non-stop. He has a crush on you."

Rukia didn't respond. She has her own reservation. But she somehow liked the attention. The next day, Sirgut invited Abdi over to their room for coffee. Rukia was hesitant but went along with it.

They started conversing, and Abdi started telling them about his childhood and the village he left behind to find work in the city. As conversations run smoothly and laughter starts to emerge, Abdi asks if there are any soft drinks in the house.

They didn't have any. So Sirgut excused herself and went out to the nearby shop to buy drinks.

"I will be back soon" she said smiling

But as soon as the door closed behind her, the air stifled and there was a sudden quiet that replaced the earlier laughter. Before she could process any of it Abdi's hand clamped onto hers forcefully. His grip was tight, and everything was unexpected. Shocking. Suffocating. scary, confusing all at once.

Tears welled up in her eyes, blurring the room around her. Her throat constricted, making it impossible to form a single word. Abdi's hand moved again, this time reaching for something she wasn't ready to give. Panic flooded her. She wanted to scream, to run, but her body felt frozen.

Rukia was caught off guard and was at a loss for words, unable to defend herself against Abdi's forceful actions. She felt shocked and disbelief wash over her, too afraid to say no and seek help. Shame burned through her. How could she have been so naive? She'd trusted him.

In despair, she blamed herself. she thought she brought this upon herself. Despite feeling desperate and helpless, she couldn't bring herself to confide in anyone, not even her friend Sirgut. How could she explain the confusion, the fear, the violation? So, Rukia kept her secret locked away, a heavy and lonely burden in the pit of her stomach.

Rukia tried to put the traumatic incident behind her and return to her normal life, but every day was a struggle, the trauma gnawing at her. It becomes a festering wound beneath her brilliant mind. Nonetheless, She pushed herself to continue studying for her upcoming exam, and her studies became a sort of sanctuary.

Textbooks offered solace and equations provided temporary escape from the turmoil within.

Everything bad seems to vanish from her memory when she finished the National School leaving exam with a high point, which is a green pass to join medical school at Jimma University. She was ecstatic but soon came a nagging pain, and it started to consume both her body and mind.

She began experiencing bouts of weakness and stomach cramps that wouldn't go away.

To her shock and dismay, the doctor informed her that she was pregnant. The words that come out of the doctor's mouth in the sterile room, each syllable a hammer blow. Pregnant. The weight of it crashed down on Rukia, stealing the air from her lungs. Tears streamed down her face as a choked sob escaped her lips. "No," she rasped, the word a desperate plea to rewind time.

Shame burned in her throat, a bitter echo of Abdi's violation. But shame couldn't erase the truth, the reason for her visit. Taking a shaky breath, she blurted out the horrifying details of what happened. Her voice trembled, each word a shard of her broken spirit.

The doctor, however, remained impassive. His gaze held no sympathy, only a flicker of annoyance. "This clinic doesn't offer those services," he said curtly, his voice devoid of warmth. "You'll need to go somewhere else."

He seemed more intent on delivering a sermon than offering medical guidance. With a disapproving sigh, he began, "So, Ms. Rukia, you find yourself in this predicament. Did you consider the consequences of your actions?" His tone implied carelessness on her part, not the complex circumstances that led her there.

Rukia, already battling shame, felt a fresh wave of despair wash over her. Tears welled up as the doctor continued, his voice laced with judgment. "This isn't just any medical procedure, Ms. Rukia. We're talking about God's creation, a potential life lost." He emphasized "potential" as if diminishing the weight of her decision.

The sterile room felt suffocating, filled with the doctor's words rather than empathy. Rukia opened her mouth to speak, but the judgment in his gaze silenced her. Defeated, she rose unsteadily, the doctor's parting shot echoing in the sterile silence: "Remember, Ms. Rukia, these choices have consequences."

Feeling lost in a new town with no support system or knowledge of where to turn, Rukia spent the next day desperately searching for a clinic that could provide the care she needed while keeping her decision private. But without any money for transportation or medical expenses, she found herself wandering aimlessly through the city, feeling ashamed and alone.

At one health center, Rukia was told she needed an ultrasound to determine the gestation of her pregnancy, which the center did not have. She was sent to another clinic, but exhausted and overwhelmed, she decided to return to her rented room and confide in Sirgut.

Sirgut was gentle and knew exactly who could help Rukia. Together, they went to see a nurse she knew very well, who listened attentively to Rukia's story. Understanding the urgency, the nurse immediately contacted a fellow colleague who works in a hospital that provided comprehensive abortion care services. With the nurse's guidance and support, Rukia was able to schedule an appointment for the very next day.

As it turned out, Rukia was in her early second trimester and required more attention from the providers. Although her journey to becoming pregnant, realizing she was pregnant, and accessing the care she needed was filled with challenges, Rukia persevered with the help of her friend and the nurse.