

Escaping the Pen

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“Faster, *akhi*,¹ faster! You’ll never catch up to me like that!”

I remember the sounds of laughter that filled the hot air as my brother and I took turns chasing each other as we made our way home from school that day.

School was a loose term to describe the single-roomed hut the children of our village gathered in to be taught by *Appa*² Halima. I didn’t care though as it was still a chance to learn and *Appa* Halima was always kind and smiling. That day, however, she had looked sad, and had given me an extra-long hug after school.

“You are a clever and beautiful girl, exactly as you are. Remember that, and always be strong,” she had said before letting me skip along with the other kids that afternoon.

Back then I was one of only three other girls my age who still went to *Appa* Halima’s classes, but they had not seemed to want to run around with me, so I often found my place with my brother and the other boys. A young, lithe thing, gangly like many of the men of our village who forced life off the land and fattened livestock, it was not too long ago that I was almost a mirror image of my twin brother, Haroun, yet so much has changed since then ...

“Noura! Wait till *Ummi*³ sees your skirts! I wonder how fast you’ll run then!” My brother’s words made my gaze fall to the dust-covered pleats of my skirt. I cringed when I saw the layer of brown dust that matched my dirty bare feet, and my faltering was all it took for Haroun to reach me, tugging my scarf as he did so, right over my head. I stopped abruptly to right myself, but I knew that he would beat me home.

When I reached home shortly after, I was met by the sight of my *jida*⁴ cooing over my brother. *Jida* loved Haroun to bits. Of four kids, he is *Ummi*’s only son. Imani, our

¹ Arabic: brother

² Arabic: female teacher

³ Arabic: mother

⁴ Arabic: grandmother

youngest sister, clung to my mother's skirts, but as I approached, she snuck me a quick smile that lit up her face. *Ummi* looked displeased at my dishevelled state, yet chose to remain silent. *Jida*, however, was not the silent type.

"This one! Look at her! Filthy and still so skinny! It is a good thing I came when I did!" *Jida* looked at me distastefully. "And how old are you now?" she asked me.

"Ten, *Jida*. Same as Haroun," I replied.

"Hmph," she began as she turned to my mother, "this one would have been better as a boy. I see I have work to do." As she spoke annoyance was etched into her brow, but still my mother remained silent. "Let us be off then. The sooner we leave, the sooner we can get to work. I can tell I am going to have my hands full."

My mother offered no explanation, but this time asked, "*Ummi*, let me at least stay with Imani for now. She is still young."

"Young! That kind of thinking is why I ended up with a daughter so late to enter marriage. Look at Zeenat! Do you think she would be envied now if she had waited? No, and now she is the pride of this village."

Zeenat was our eldest sister. She was ten years older than us. When we were younger, she was a lot of fun. Haroun and I learnt a lot of games from her, but when we saw her now, she was never in the mood to play. She was always complaining that she was too tired, or that her back was sore. That, or sprawled on cushions as plump as her, she would remind me that she was the queen in her home, and that kids' games were beneath her.

My mother sighed and didn't argue. Soon afterwards, I found myself on a wagon sat between *Jida* and *Ummi*, the latter with Imani held close, while I looked back at my brother who would be staying behind.

"What about *Abba*⁵? When will he come?" I asked.

With a snort, *Jida* replied as she adjusted her *mulafa*,⁶ which could clothe the entire village. "You think your *Abba* has time to involve himself in women's affairs? Must he leave his work for you instead? Silly girl! Your father has more important things to worry about. A daughter must know that she cannot burden her father forever."

⁵ Arabic: father

⁶ Traditional dress for Mauritanian women that is a long garment wrapped around the whole body and then around again to cover the head.

I did not know what to say. *Abba* was always busy working, yet he always seemed to make time for Haroun. It was no surprise then that he had not come to see me off.

The wagon pulled forward suddenly and my grandmother continued talking to me. “You know, when your sister became a woman, she had many suitors, more than even your mother! They all competed for her, and it’s said she received the highest *mehr*⁷ in twenty years! Her husband keeps her well, and while it’s a shame she lost the first two, she has already given him three sons.”

As we rode in the back of the wagon, I had been more interested in waving to my brother as he ran alongside us. I was grateful that with all their extra padding, my grandmother and mother cushioned me between them each time the wagon wheel hit a stone or dipped into a hole, but it made waving back at Haroun more difficult as my arms had been swallowed by the stomach rolls on either side of me.

I finally managed to shoot my brother a gappy smile, a gesture he returned just as he began to fall behind. We had lost our first teeth days apart; in fact, we had done most things together, so that was the first time that we were separated, and no one had said why. We had always been two halves of a whole, ever alike, but I did not know then that we were destined to be very different.

“*Jida*, why can’t Haroun come?” I asked.

“Silly child! Haroun is still a boy and has many years to go. You, however, must soon become a woman and so prepare yourself. It is you who will leave your father’s home and have a husband to serve, so you must be ready. Haroun will have time before he must take a wife.”

“But what about school? When will I see *Appa* Halima again?” I asked.

“Heh! That one, with her clever ideas, look where she is now! If your mother had any sense, she would have kept you away from her. How many men will look at Halima? At her age, who do you think will marry her? She is a shame to her family and village.”

“But *Jida*, what’s wrong with *Appa* Halima? She’s always nice to us and ... ouch!” I yelped as my grandmother pinched my leg painfully.

“I told your mother you were going to be difficult! What has that Halima poisoned your little head with? You want to be like her? Must your *Abba* be burdened with two girls for his whole life? Will Halima find you a husband who doesn’t mind a wife who will disgrace him, who will invite scorn and remind him of his failure?” *Jida* clicked her

⁷ Arabic: dowry

tongue in disgust before continuing, “No, I will never allow it. You want to be a good daughter, yes, Noura?”

“Yes, *Jida* ...” I replied uncertainly.

“... And you want to be beautiful and rich, like our Zeenat, yes?”

“Yes, *Jida* ...”

Jida smiled before saying, “Then don’t you worry about that Halima and her ways. Your *jida* will make sure that you are the next Zeenat. I will fix you like I did your sister.”

I looked up at my mother then, but she simply stared out at the burning sands around us. The huts thinned out the further we got from the village until we eventually arrived at a lonely group of huts in the middle of nowhere.

Hot and thirsty, I extricated myself from my mother and grandmother before taking Imani’s hand and swiftly hopping off the wagon while they both waddled slowly behind us. Relieved of its burden, the wagon groaned in relief as they clumsily dismounted. A flash of matching swollen ankles peeped out from under my grandmother’s *mulafa* as she trod on the ground.

I gazed around at my new surroundings, taking in the few huts that stood before us. Hot, dry sand stretched around us, and some way beyond the huts and paddock were low sandy mounds. There wasn’t much, but I wondered whether Imani and I would be allowed to explore. That naïve thought, however, did not last long, and it was that naiveté, that childish innocence, that kept me from ever imagining that either of us would ever permanently join those mounds.

We were far from the village, with the only sounds occasionally coming from the livestock in their pen, or the girls in what I now see was our pen. The fun and laughter I had shared with Haroun grew distant. We were imprisoned within our huts for the next few years of *leblouh*.⁸ Grain would be delivered for girl and animal alike, with each growing in girth and value with every mouthful.

While many in the village struggled with food—farming of any kind was a challenge in our dry lands—there seemed to be an endless supply for the girls my grandmother tended, even when we had had our fill. I quickly learnt where the girls from my school had gone; many villagers entrusted my *jida* with girls who would return women, no, wives, to make husbands proud, fathers relieved, and bystanders envious.

⁸ A daily diet of 14,000 to 16,000 calories force-fed to girls to prepare them for marriage.

Jida was right. I did not stay a girl for long. I was soon trapped in a cage from which there was no escape. I could not escape, could not leave that place because I carried my prison wherever I went.

Some of the scars I carry today are remnants of my body's protest against being forced into womanhood while I still had a child's laughter in me. With each stretch of my skin, I was comforted by being told that men would find it attractive, even if I did not. The other scars are remnants of the lessons I was forced to learn when I refused to give in to a womanhood imposed on me.

"Eat!"

"Have more!"

"Drink this!"

I was not lying every time I said I was going to explode. I could barely breathe then, and not much has changed now. For five years I had been raised a lamb to the slaughter, and the worst thing is that I am to do the same to my daughter, and them to theirs.

This is as it has always been. My mother and grandmother, perhaps they are content, but I wonder each time I see them hobble along, panting, gasping for air, as even the slightest task exhausts them. Yet still they persist.

"Please, no more!" I often begged. Despite the stomach aches and promise of being violently sick, the cycle would begin afresh. The 20 litres of milk and 2 kilograms of millet and *cous cous* were a part of our daily staple to becoming as desirable as Zeenat.

Not even little Imani was spared. Two years into our hell and her baby face was already rounded, cheeks plump with skin taut and shiny, toes bent and cracked when she refused another bite. When she joined the others behind the paddock, *Jida* comforted my mother by reminding her that it could have been avoided if she had had more sons instead. I took comfort in the fact that while she was a not-yet-ripe offering for the earth, at least she would not be offered like a cow for purchase. At least she was free.

I imagine Haroun's laughter today, and I wish we could trade places, but a woman, which I will be very soon as I am told by *Ummi* and *Jida*, must know her place. We must be prepared, be made beautiful, because how will we find good husbands otherwise? How will we let the world know how well our husbands take care of us, how wealthy they are, unless we look the part? No man desires a thin wife who resembles a man, or reminds him (and others) that he is not the best husband and man he could be. Here, a skinny wife is like a skinny cow, unwanted, useless and the symbol of a poor man. I must make my family proud, and I want to, but I also want to be happy for myself.

Another bowl of milk is pressed to my lips. I imagine that women prefer sons over daughters because this is what daughters must endure. I will be married soon, and kids will follow. But I will have daughters, and I will name them all Halima so that we are no longer livestock.