

I was born in 1975, in a small rural village off the coast of lake Mwari. My father had three wives and twelve children. I was the seventh child out of twelve. I had seven brothers and five sisters. In the compound of the village, we lived alongside my great aunt and great uncle. They also had many children, nine to be exact. Life in the village was simple, we would wake up, wash up, make breakfast and play with each other until it was time to do it all over again.

We were Maasai, for those that do not know; we are one of the very few tribes that have managed to retain their traditions. We make our houses with clay, mud and sticks to sustain the structure, we rely on cows for food and milk, we wear bright red colors in the form of blankets, the men have long hair and the women remain bald. The men hunt and herd the cows and the women take care of the children whilst cooking and cleaning.

When I turned thirteen, my mother told me that it was time to get married. I did not know what marriage was, what I had to do, or who I was going to be with. I just knew it was going to happen very soon. On Sunday, it was my turn to fetch water from the nearby stream; I woke up early to gather my buckets and headed out, right when the sun touched my skin. It was always sunny on Sunday but chilly. I made sure to wrap my brightly striped cloth around my fragile body.

The stream was not too far from my home, but it was always busy on Sunday. People from nearby also needed the stream to sustain their lives. I made sure to leave as quickly as possible, not forgetting to greet my parents and everyone else, I met along the way. Today was like every other day, children playing, women milking cows and the elders sniffing on tobacco. I walked quickly to the stream, hoping that I would not wait too long for some water. I had to take the donkey with me, we needed donkeys to help transport our goods.

After a few minutes of walking, I could see the stream. The water glistened, while it splashed on everything around it. Luckily, it wasn't as busy as I thought it would be. I removed the buckets from the donkey and filled them both with water. Two buckets full, this will last us for a week. By the time I was done, my stomach was rumbling. I gathered my strength and hung the buckets on the side of the donkey and began my commute home. As I positioned myself to turn my donkey, I heard a loud motor noise. It was Mr. Rurari, he was my best friend's father. I approached him without hesitation and bowed my head down to greet him.

"How are you doing my child?" he said

"I am well, just fetching water for the family" I responded.

"Wow, I wish Sanai could join you but she is preparing for school tomorrow"

Sanai was his daughter.

"Oh she is starting school tomorrow?" I asked

"Yes, you should ask baba to enroll you as well" he happily responded. I shrugged my shoulder and told him that I would ask baba. We said our goodbyes and I began my commute home. I was wrong, this was not like every other day because I had questions, lots of questions to ask baba. I thought about school, what it would be like, who I would see, what I would learn. The rush I felt, felt impeccable. I was excited and it showed.

Days passed and all I could think about was school, I couldn't focus and was often quiet; thinking about all the possibilities learning could bring for me and my family. In the evening, I decided to talk to mama about my thoughts. I was nervous but it had to be done. I practiced what I would say and how I would say it. Hoping that my parents would understand my perspective. It was dinner time and mama had just finished preparing the food. My twelve siblings and parents sat around the fire, waiting for the food to be dashed our way. We said grace and began to feast. This was a perfect time to speak my mind and tell everyone why my heart was so heavy.

"I spoke to Mr. Rurari and he said that Sanai is going to school" I said.

"Oh, that is new" mama responded.

"I want to go to school too" I said.

Everyone directed their attention to me.

"If you go to school, who will help mama with things around the house?" Baba replied.

"Everyone else can help, and I will only be gone in the morning" I quickly responded.

"No my child, that is not possible because girls do not go to school" Baba responded.

"Why?" I said

"This conversation is over, and when you're done eating help mama to clean up" baba said.

My heart sank, is this what life has for me. I could not sleep that night. Constantly tossing and turning. As I thought about the future, my eyes became heavy. And I drifted off to sleep. My dream was vivid, I wore a blue uniform and headed off to school. I sat in a classroom with all my friends, listening to the teacher teach. Suddenly, I was awoken by a tug on my shoulder. It was mama.

"Get up and get washed up, you are meeting your husband today" she said.

"Husband?" I asked

"Yes husband" she responded

"But I do not want to get married, I am only thirteen" I exclaimed.

"Girls here get married at ten years old, you are already late" she said.

I had no choice but to get cleaned up, and go meet my husband to be. I walked towards my father who was sniffing on tobacco and drinking gin. There were three other men beside him. Their eyes were fixed on me, examining my every move. I was not nervous, I was scared. Scared for my life.

"My child, this is going to be your husband" my father said, as he pointed to the man on his right.

He was old, very old. His face was wrinkly and eyes baggy.

I did not like this one bit.

"Yes I will make you my wife in the next couple of days" the man said.

"You should be happy my child; we have received fifty cows as your dowry" my father responded.

I only shrugged and remained silent.

That night, I thought about the man I was going to marry. I was going to have his children but I am only a child myself. Tears fell down my face, uncontrollably. But then a thought popped in my head. I remembered that, my uncle lives in the city. He is married to a white woman, and he was my only hope out of this. I had to plan to get to him. I gathered my things and decided to leave at dawn.

Leaving the hut was going to be difficult, we all slept in one place. I had to be quiet. It was almost dawn and time to get going before everyone woke up. I tip toed around everyone and silently made my way out. The air was cold, and the stars were twinkling in the sky. I was nervous but excited for what laid ahead.

I started my commute to the city, singing all the hymns I knew. Hoping I would not run into a buffalo or hyena. I was strong, that is what I told myself. I continued to walk for hours, passing nearby villages, wildlife and endless rivers. It was getting dark and I was almost there. I could see dim lights from the distance and the honking sounds from the traffic. I had finally arrived.

The last time I visited my uncle, I was almost seven. I could barely remember where he lived. But I had to think hard enough in order to make it. I passed a familiar looking

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compound and walked up to the door and knocked on it. I waited for a minute until his wife opened the door. By the way her eyes widened she was surprised to see me.

"Are you okay my love? What are you doing here?" she said

"I left home, I wanted to speak to my uncle about something" I responded.

She let me in. Their home was beautiful and big. Different from mine. She led me through to sit down and offered me some water.

"Let me get your uncle" she said.

"Okay" I responded.

Momentarily, my uncle appeared from the shadow and much like his wife he too was surprised to see me. He was much bigger in size since I last saw him. His head was full of grey hair. He was aging and it showed.

"What are you doing here my child?" he asked me.

"I need your help, baba and mama will not let me go to school. I want to go to school but they said school is not for girls" I pleaded.

"Do they know you're here?" he asked

"No" I responded.

He sighed, but chuckled.

"So, you ran away from home to get an education?"

I nodded my head in response

"You can sleep here tonight and we can talk about this tomorrow" he said.

He didn't say no to helping me but he didn't say yes either. He led me into the spare room and gave me a change of clothes. I sat at the edge of the bed, hoping I would get an answer out of him by tomorrow. Mama and baba must be worried. I thought about how sad they must be, not knowing my whereabouts. But I could not think about them now, I could only think about me. Falling asleep that night was not hard. The commute to my uncle's home was long and physically drained me. I closed my eyes and that was the end of day one.

I was awoken by the sound of birds chirping. My eyes slowly opened, looking at the unfamiliar room. I stretched my body and made my way to the living room. I locked eyes with my uncle and sat down.

"You will start school today" he said.

My smile lit the entire room; this is what I had hoped for all this time. That afternoon he took me to the school. The administrator handed me my uniform and I was assigned a classroom and teacher. We learned about shapes and colors, mathematics and even how to structure sentences. At lunch time, I played with the friends I made and I could not wait tell my uncle about the day I just had.

The school day was over and I headed home. I unlocked the door and my father and uncle were sat next to each other. My heart sank, he was here to take me back home.

"Sit down my child, did you really have to run away?" baba said.

"Yes I did, I needed an education" I exclaimed

"we are all very disappointed in you" baba responded.

"I know, but you were going to marry me off to that old man" I said.

He sighed

"Are you happy?" he asked

"yes" I replied

"All I want for my children is happiness, your uncle and I have decided to you stay here with him" he responded.

My head raised, hoping I was not hallucinating what he had just said.

"I will let you stay here my child, on one condition. You must visit your mother and I every two weeks" he said.

I was speechless, I could only run and hug him.

This was all I wanted, an education with the support of my family. It took a lot of courage to stand up to mama and baba, to leave home with uncertainty. But fighting for your future is never easy.

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