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## Auburn Sun

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## **Auburn Sun**

### **Tiffany Scales**

I lay on one of the few patches of grass that the Somalia landscape has to offer. I look up at the sky only to observe the auburn sun; the heat from its waves touches my skin. Though the heat is smoldering, I can't help but to find it comforting. I close my eyes and let the sun radiate over me, unwinding in its tranquility.

“Saafi!” I hear my name being called from a distance, “Saafi! Saafi!”

I open my eyes and lift my head; the brightness of the sun makes it hard to see who is running towards me. I place my hand above my eyes to block the sunshine, hoping it will make my vision clearer. I see the small figure running towards me with a huge grin spread wide across her face. “Saafi, Saafi,” Fatima says breathlessly once she finally reaches me.

“Yes, Fatima, what is it?” I ask, already knowing what she is going to say.

“Today is the day, Saafi! We are finally going to become women! I am so excited!”

Fatima begins bouncing around animatedly like a young gazelle.

“I know.” I reply in an indifferent tone. I know what is to happen today, and to be honest, I am not looking forward to it. I wish I could share the same excitement my little sister has, but I cannot.

“Mother sent me to come get you. She said we must wash up and prepare for today.”

Fatima informs me.

“Okay, I'll be along in a minute. I have to do something first.” I glance up one more time at the sky, again looking at the golden-brown sun.

Fatima lets out an impatient sigh, “Fine. But hurry, it’s my day too, you know. I don’t want you to ruin it.” Fatima gives me a stern look before running back in the direction she came from.

Sometimes Fatima surprises me; she is only 10 years old, 3 years younger than I, but yet she seems more mature than me. Often, I wonder why she is in such a rush to grow up and become a woman. I stand up and rub my bare feet against the soft, sun-warmed grass. I need to go see Jabir before the ceremony begins.

As I approach Jabir’s *aqal*, I notice him standing in the doorway of the small hut. He has a stick in his hand, carving his name in the dirt in boredom. My heart flutters a little bit; it feels like a dozen butterflies are dancing around in my stomach. Jabir is very handsome, and he holds my heart. We have known each other our whole lives; we have grown up together and have had many fun times. Last spring, Jabir told me that he loved me, and I did the same. We made a promise to each other that we will be each other’s loves for the rest of our lives. He told me that once he turns 18, he will put in a request to take me as his wife, which made me feel very loved and special. Jabir looks up from the ground, he smiles. He drops the stick and walks towards me.

“Saafi, what are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be preparing yourself for your ceremony?” he asks me.

I lower my head and look down at the ground. “Jabir, I am having doubts about the ceremony.” I say, looking back up at him intently.

Jabir looks puzzled, “What do you mean?”

“I don’t want to do it, Jabir. I am afraid; I have heard stories of the pain I will have to endure. I don’t want to do it.” I lower my head once again, almost ashamed as the words escape my mouth.

“Saafi, you must take part in *xalaalays*. It represents purification; that is the only way you will be worthy of marriage. That’s the only way that I can marry you.” Jabir looks at me as if he is insulted by my doubts.

“But I don’t want to do it. My father said I don’t have to do it. In fact, he is against it. *Aabbo* told mother to never let grandmother and the other women touch me. He does not want to have me cut. They are supposed to listen to him, he is the man. They are disobeying his orders only because he is out of town.”

“Usually I wouldn’t say this, but in this case I think they are justified in disobeying your *Aabbo*.” Jabir shakes his head, almost as if he is surprised by his own words. “They are protecting your honor; Saafi, this is your rite of passage. This is the only way to ensure that you are a pure woman. If you don’t get cut, men will assume that you are a whore. I will consider you a whore.” Jabir’s face holds a serious expression mixed with a bit of anxiety.

I am shocked by Jabir’s statement. “You would not claim me? Even though you know that I have not given myself to anyone, not even to you.”

“No, I would not claim you. If you do not get cut, you will bring great disgrace not only to yourself but to your family as well. The whole community will associate your family’s name with shame.” Jabir’s words hurt very deeply; they hurt because I know he speaks the truth. I do not want to bring shame to my family, and I refuse to lose Jabir. These thoughts bring tears to my eyes; I desperately try to hold them back. I do not want to cry in front of Jabir.

Jabir, noticing my struggle, approaches me, places both hands on my cheeks, and lifts my head so our eyes can meet. “Saafi, you must do this for us for our future. You are 13 now; if you choose not to take part in this tradition you would never be considered a woman. Do you want to be a kid forever? Now is your time.”

“Okay, Jabir I will do it for us, for our love.” I sigh, defeated and disappointed.

While walking home, I replay our conversation. I’m surprised by the lack of support I received from him, but then again, what was I expecting him to say? He is a man, and in our culture, most men expect women to be cut, especially if they are seeking a wife. I walk slowly, not at all in a hurry to begin the ritual; I am not looking forward to experiencing the pain of having my “female parts” removed. I know it is an important tradition to guarantee that the woman remains virtuous and pure, but why does purity have to come with such sacrifice?

As I walk through the open field, I consider running away. I wouldn’t know where to run to though; maybe I would be able to rely on the sun to guide me to a new place. It can take me to a place where I can escape the tradition, a place where female cutting isn’t necessary. I consider it seriously for a brief moment and realize that running away will only bring disgrace to my family. I finally came to a conclusion: I have no other choice but to be cut.

Once I reach my family’s hut, I see my little sister Fatima, intently asking my grandmother tons of questions about the process of female cutting, *Ayeeyo* answers them with great patience. Once again, I wish I could share her enthusiasm. My mother comes rushing out of the hut: “Saafi, where have you been?! Go wash up, hurry. We have no more time to waste.”

“Yes, *Hooyo*,” I reply. Once I finish washing up, I walk back to the hut where *Ayeeyo*, *Hooyo*, and Fatima are waiting for me.

“Finally!” Fatima says impatiently. She turns to *Ayeeyo*, “Can we begin now?”

“Yes, we may,” *Ayeeyo* responds. “Follow me.” We began to walk from our hut to the spot where the ritual is to take place. As I trailed behind *Ayeeyo*, I notice her carrying a brown sac, almost protectively as if she did not want anyone to run up and snatch it. From the opening of the bag, I see a gleam of light reflecting off the silver sharp tool. At that instant I knew those

were the tools that were to be used on me today. *Ayeeyo* leads us up a hill to a hut where the cutting is to take place. When we enter the hut there is a group of older women waiting for us; they are there to assist *Ayeeyo* with the cutting.

*Ayeeyo* turns to me and says, “Saafi, you will go first since you are the eldest.”

“That’s not fair; I want to go first!” Fatima exclaims. *Hooyo* snatches her by the arm and tells her to be silent. *Hooyo* and Fatima leave the hut to give us privacy.

Fear returns to me once again. I begin to sweat, so much that it could create a lake on Somalia’s dry landscape. “I don’t want to this, I can’t do this; please don’t make me do this!” I beg. I begin to breathe heavily; I feel as though a huge rock is resting on my chest. My anxiety begins to rise.

“Saafi, do not be a coward. This is an honorable tradition given to us from God.” This was *Ayeeyo*’s way of comforting me, “Saafi, you must be strong and do it.”

“I won’t!” I scream, in a panic I try to run, but the other women restrain me. I try with all my strength to fight them off, but I know that my efforts are wasted. I’m not strong enough, I begin to cry. “Please, no.” I beg once more, but my pleas are ignored.

They pick me up and carry me to the wooden table. They began to remove my pants and underwear. I try my hardest once again to fight, kicking my legs in the air. I scream “No!” Two women grab my legs and spread them while the other women pin my arms down. I feel helpless; I was pinned down with nowhere to escape. I am exposed; *Ayeeyo* steps between my legs with the sharp knife in her hand. I close my eyes tightly, hoping that I will feel no pain.

“Ahhhhh!!” I cry out once *Ayeeyo* makes the first cut. The pain is almost unbearable, I cry. I am unable to control my breathing at this point. “Ahhhh!! Please stop!! Please!” I sob. Tears are streaming down my face, but *Ayeeyo* keeps cutting. *Ayeeyo* makes another cut; this

time blood shoots on to her clothing, but she is unfazed by this. *Ayeeyo* has no mercy for me, it doesn't matter that I am her family. She sees this process as something that must be completed, despite the pain it is causing me. At some point, during the process, I become numb; I no longer scream with every cut *Ayeeyo* makes. I watch my blood drop on to the hot sand. With that my vision becomes a blur, and I pass out.

When I awake, *Ayeeyo* is sewing me up, leaving a hole only big enough for me to pee out of and for my menstrual cycle to flow out.

“Done.” *Ayeeyo* says. With that, I sit up; I feel nothing but sharp pain shooting through my entire being. I proceed to walk, but it's more like I am wobbling.

Once we exit the hut, *Ayeeyo* turns to Fatima and says, “You are next.”

When I look at Fatima, she is looking at me. Her almond shape eyes that once contained excitement are now filled with fear. It is clear to me that she had been outside of the hut listening. My heart drops; I don't want her to experience what I just did, but I can't do anything about it. I can't protect her. I walk past her. As I am walking away, I hear Fatima protesting like I did right before I was cut. Tears begin to fall from my eyes. I make my way back to that isolated patch of grass. I lay down gently so I can minimize the pain that keeps running through me. I look up at the sky, now filled with oranges, reds, and gold. I watch the auburn sun begin to set. I close my eyes, hoping this pain will soon go away.