

Break the cycle

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Beauty. It can be seen in the smallest of things. I see it everywhere, for it is better to focus on the beautiful things rather than the ugly. I also see a lot of ugly things. It's easy to pick out the negatives when seeing the same things every single day. Confined inside one house, with the same women and one man. Although he is allowed to leave.

The man spread across my small single bed is both of these things. Beautiful and yet ugly at the same time. Shiny black curls fall across his eyes, and I can't deny that he is a beautiful man. Dangerous. Beauty can be manipulated.

There is no way to tell time in this sorry excuse for a house, but I know that this morning he has overstayed his visit. As he does every Saturday. I'm always awake hours before him, left alone with my thoughts. Sometimes I picture my hands ripping through his chest and pulling out his heart, just to check to see whether it beats. Read it as a book and decide whether a man of such ugliness can be capable of love. Surely not.

But mostly I try to relive the past. Another dangerous activity, I remember the beautiful parts. Images of my family crowded around a table, sitting cross-legged on the ground, eating curry. Always curry for special events, was it someone's birthday? The memories fade each day I spend locked inside my cage, his house. My mother securing my hijab before allowing me outside to fetch water, feeling the wind on my small

face and the dirt underneath my feet. I dig my feet into the mattress and pretend I'm standing outside once again.

He turns in his sleep, knocking me with his hairy arm and pushing me into an uncomfortable position, yet he doesn't stir. He's an expert at causing pain without even realising. The room begins to fill with a warm, orange hue through the dull, floral curtains. Almost the same every Saturday morning, I wish for anything to break the cycle. Tears pool in my eyes, only ever while he's asleep, I refuse to give him the satisfaction of seeing me at my lowest.

He smells the same as the first day we were introduced. Aftershave and a peculiar combination of ginger and turmeric, the smell of my childhood nightmares. The smell of my last day of freedom, before I was bought by a man I had not met before. "But you haven't been bought," the other women argue, "you just became his wife." What an honour, the fifth wife of a monster. Bought by a man I had not met before, to settle a family debt.

Sometimes I reason that it was society that corrupted men and it is not his fault. Women are not allowed outside in the northern parts of Mali; he can't be wholly to blame. These are the mornings that I feel pity for him. I'll think about the mornings he kisses me before I leave and sometimes, I might try and convince myself that I love him. But I know that's a lie. An ugly, beautiful lie just to try and make myself feel something. Anything.

Outside I begin to hear the tell-tale signs of vendors opening their stalls, the clatter of pots and pans, the sounds of fathers shouting at their sons. The smell of cumin rises through

the thin, wooden floorboards and fills my head with memories of my childhood. The childhood that was stolen with such disregard. Malai kofta was also for special occasions, my younger sisters' favourite, I hope that my family can afford it now.

Now he wakes, and I know that my imagination has to cease. He grins at me and offers a nod of greeting, but I know it's just a formality. I can hear the other four women talking downstairs; Aminata will be preparing for her special Saturday night. And repeating the process again on Wednesday night. Sometimes I wonder if they enjoy it, sometimes I can recognise the beauty. But mostly I just find myself surrounded by the ugly panting, the unfit stamina of a man forty years my senior.

I smile back at him, as I do every Saturday morning. Do nothing to anger him, nothing to break the cycle. Downstairs they will be feeling sorry for me, but I'd much prefer to think about all the ways I've helped my family. I know they get sent an allowance by my keeper.

The blankets have been disturbed strategically as he rises from the bed, as they always are, my dark skin contrasting with the stark whiteness of the mattress. The only colour of purity in this house. What a sick joke. He dresses himself now, strangely boyish for a man of fifty-six years, half crouched as if to hide the beginning of his pot belly. His beautiful face so different from the rest of his body.

My head has begun to throb, along with other parts of my body, and I pray to whatever God is listening that my period comes soon. Every Friday night releases the terror of childbirth, I'm too young, but that doesn't stop him from rubbing

my stomach before he turns to leave. A lucky rub for an unlucky girl.

Silence greets me from below, as I know he descends the stairs. The other four will be up very soon to talk about him. But I'm not in the mood today and itch to smoke a cigarette, something to relieve the stress. The kitchen door slams in the typical male fashion as he exits the house. And yet the room still feels ugly. And no matter how hard I try to find the beauty while laying on these sticky, white sheets, I'm convinced that this time the ugliness has been planted inside me. Something to break the cycle, an ugliness I won't be able to escape.