

The Virgin Divorcee

By

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About the Story

“The Virgin Divorcee” is a harrowing tale of the demerits of female genital mutilation in nomadic communities in Africa. The protagonist, Sam, narrates her love encounter with Zeitun, a Somali girlfriend; he is confounded by the barbarity of female genital cutting when he is unable to make love to her. He apologizes to her for making the attempt at lovemaking because Zeitun’s private parts are too mutilated and stitched to permit it. Sam wonders how Zeitun, a divorcee, preserved her virginity even in marriage. The answer to this reveals a deep-seated hypocrisy that all conservative communities ought to shun.

“Sam, do you want to snatch her from your colleague?” Major Owour asked.

“Far from it,” I replied, “other people’s problems should matter to us.”

This is the conversation that followed after I received a call in my office at Kahawa Garrison to settle a few issues about Ludfiya’s marriage. A childhood idol that ended up in the hands of a fellow soldier, Ludfiya was a person I would not have ignored. Although she was neither a sibling nor a relative, I decided to commit myself to her welfare. Most of my friends were often shocked at my passion to assist people with whom we were not related.

In spite of philosophizing my reply, in the heart of my hearts was the elevated pedestal upon which were ladies of Cushitic origin. For me, a wife was the idealized image of ladies from North Eastern parts of Kenya, and Ludfiya offered the criteria by which every woman that came my way was judged. My happiest moment came when I learned that she had gotten married to a man from my county. I wondered why Simiyu would start cheating with a belle beside him in the house. It was sad that he should do this after inspiring me to hook up with a beautiful Cushitic girl. Social, slim, and brown, Zeiton came to adore my company. She used to sell at her father’s wholesale store in Roysambu, Nairobi. Her cousin, Mohamed Amin, was a fellow sergeant at Kahawa; that’s where we first met.

As a young man with nationalistic rather than ethnocentric attitudes towards life, I dreamed of intermarriage as a means to bolster national cohesion in our polarized nation. To demonstrate this, I aspired to marry a Cushitic woman. Her curly hair and smooth skin endeared her to my pubescent desires, and I would pounce on such an opportunity at its earliest appearance. In primary school, I had admired Ludfiya, the only Cushitic immigrant in our village. She was brown, slender, and shy. Permanently in *hijaab*, she could be easily spotted from afar, and many a boy did whisper that the outfit was a symbol of virginity. We could not see her hair. For boys like me, whose definition of beauty was brownness, Ludfiya did not leave our secret dreams.

At high school and military college, I did not have the opportunity to interact with Cushitic women. I thought that perhaps their remote homeland was the culprit. But after pass-out, I was posted to Mandera for a military operation for three months, and that is how I had the opportunity to find Ludfiya at Simiyu’s house. I reckoned that, having spent her childhood at Lwandanyi on the slopes of Mount Elgon, she could easily opt for a Bantu husband even in Mandera. To me, this was the land where all beauty lay. Although the paths were dusty and the

sun was hot, the ladies were beautiful. Of course, I was too busy with the military operation to woo the object of my desire, but I could not miss an opportunity to talk to fellow constables such as Simiyu, who had been married to Ludfiya for five years.

“Given a chance to marry the second and the third, I would choose the Cushite and the Cushite,” asserted Simiyu one evening. Kariuki’s attempt to dissuade him over certain cultural rites that maimed the girls in this part of Kenya fell on deaf ears. For Simiyu, the Cushitic woman was the epitome of beauty in Africa. His heart had reached a still point, he said, and I felt that something that gave a person such peace of heart was worth pursuing. I dismissed Kariuki’s argument and took Simiyu’s path to find love from women from these parts of Kenya. In any case, most Cushitic people were immigrants that I would walk into in other regions of Kenya. As the days went by, I idealized my love object into an obsession and acknowledged that no other girl would give me happiness except one of Cushitic origin.

September 7, 2007 remains indelible—the day when the world promised love, the day I discovered that beauty does not lie in what things seem but in what they actually are. It was the day I learned that the way of life of a community is a building block to beauty or ugliness. Still, I will not (like Roosevelt) refer to it as “a day in infamy,” but just a day that opened a new page with insightful lessons. I invited Zeitun to my residence. It was a self-contained apartment on the third floor of Brandom House in Kahawa Wendani. The living room was spacious, with a glass table in the center, a twenty-one inch flat screened television set on the left end, and a dozen quotes from the great books I had read on the wall: HAPPINESS IS ONLY ACCESSIBLE TO THOSE THAT SHOW CONCERN FOR OTHERS; WE BEGIN TO SUCCEED WHEN THE PROBLEMS OF OTHERS MATTER TO US ...Girls who had paid me a visit seldom noticed these quotes. It was amazing how Zeitun drew my attention to them. She had arrived five minutes before the stipulated time and proceeded to prepare lunch: a dish of spaghetti and beef for two. Although I would have preferred cornmeal or any other meal that was filling, I fixed spaghetti to accommodate my new-found girlfriend. On our previous date, I had learned that their culture and ours were wide apart. I was quite surprised to learn that she could sometimes have boiled beef and tea for breakfast. Moreover, they could not be permitted to eat until they had brushed their teeth. I reckoned she derived her interest in the written messages on my wall from her cultural background. They learned to memorize their holy book as soon as they outgrew infancy. She surveyed her eyes on the wall and singled out the one she

loved most: WE BEGIN TO SUCCEED WHEN THE PROBLEMS OF OTHERS MATTER TO US.

“Which problems would you find in my life?” she asked.

“I don’t like that veil and long dress,” I replied.

She gazed at me innocently. I touched her cheek; her skin was as smooth as glass.

“Why?”

“The dress is dark and long on a hot afternoon.”

“It’s very cold here. I wear it in Mandera, which is ten times hotter than here.”

“Oh, darling, that is amazing.”

“That is nothing compared to what I have experienced.”

“Those traumatizing experiences matter to me, darling.”

“I am glad to hear that,” she blushed.

Within the first hour, she had fallen in love with me. She said she no longer believed the rumors her people held about Bantus. Her easy spirit, optimism, and talkativeness fell in place with my melancholic nature. She was a weaver bird, and I loved to hear anything she set her mind to say. Her prattles made all sense to me; she talked of hundreds of restrictions, laws to be obeyed, and the fortune of having a humane person in her cousin, Mohamed Amin; the rest were lions and buffaloes she dreaded. My surprise gradually turned into shock. Hers was a community I had worshipped the ground they walked on.

“What do you mean?” I had ventured to ask.

“Sam,” she said and glared at me, “I would now be an engineer; I’d be a civil engineer, darling!”

She removed her *hijaab* and went on,

“My...dad...I dislike that old man!” I did not know what to say. Such a beautiful soul deserved better feelings than hate. I found my gaze fixed on her long hair.

“Honey, don’t hate your dad,” I found my tongue at last, “a father’s love is key to a daughter’s success.”

Listen, Sam,” she continued, “I had passed my exams well and got admitted at a national school. My father dismissed it as a school for devils and dumped me in a small school in the remotest parts of Mandera district. Hark!”

“Oh, dear, don’t use swear words....”

Listen, Sam, in that same compost pit, the old man terminated my studies.”

“Why, Zeitun?”

“Because my *ngurale* (non-Somali) teacher, came home to encourage me to work hard and become an engineer.”

“Was that enough reason?” I asked, shocked.

“Oh, dear, our culture forbids men from visiting girls—worse of all, *adhon* or foreign men. My father accused the teacher of carnal knowledge with a student and demanded his immediate sacking from the private school.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed.

“The school refused to sack him and dad halted my formal education to hand me over to Mahat Dinow for ...”

“Did you get married?”

“Oh, Sam, don’t hate me for tha... Don’t...” she said wiping tears.

Sincerely speaking, that revelation dimmed my romantic affection for Zeitun.

“Darling, I won’t, tell me the story,” I probed.

“And that’s how I lost my ambition...cause I was close to a *ngurale*.”

“Did you get married?” I probed further.

“To a fifty-year-old I could not tolerate it for a month. He divorced me, Sam...” she sobbed.

“So they’ll not permit you to marry a Bantu man?”

“In fact if they see us talking as we’re doing, then I’ll be in for it.”

I sympathized.

“But I have one person to thank God for: my cousin, Mohamed Amin. Otherwise, I’m only supposed to be in the presence of a man with somebody. I must be back home by 6 p.m. Oh, darling, I feel oppressed that a man should not see my hair, even as a divorcee. My father insists that I should be a virgin, even as a divorcee. Oh, darling! Have you ever heard of a virgin divorcee?”

“Zeitun, I can’t understand you!”

“You’ll understand... You’ll understand because you’ve the privilege to see my hair”

“Why, Zeitun?” I asked, surprised.

“Because in your eyes I see freedom... love, Sam. I do love you... but may not marry you.”

I stared at that glittering passion on her eyes. What innocence, such a belle deserved full love and attention. Instead, she was a victim of rejection and so was her desperation. I gazed at her eyes and declared, “I love you, Zeitun. Feel loved. Know that there is a brother who cares for you.”

She leaned on my shoulder and cried the pint. “Kiss me...kiss...me...Sam...I want...love!” Her shrill voice moved me. It was very sentimental. I stooped and kissed those clouds of despair out of her bosom. She clung to me, her heart beating. Like any normal man curious to taste a new intimacy, I wooed her into my bed. The result was embarrassment. She hardly possessed the tools of passion. I saw something like...a dot? ...nay... a pin hole. Believe you me, any attempt to make love was self-torture. “I’m sorry for ...” I apologized. “Have you now seen a virgin divorcee?” she asked.

“Oh, sweetie.... How did it happen?” I asked.

“Dad took me for a hymen replacement surgery to deceive the next man!” she declared, “and that’s how empty our society is! There’re so many out there—virgins with a number of children! Oh, how deceptive virginity can be!”

Zeitun’s honesty was so angelic. She was the kind of girl I could forgive all wrongs by virtue of her open confession. I kissed her again and cried. She whispered to me how she had wished to show me all her love had the stitch not barred her. We parted tearfully.