

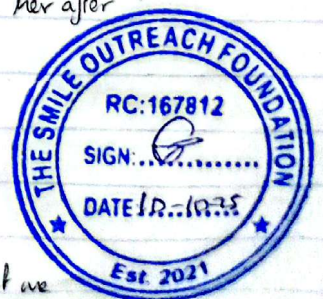
My Voice Against Violence: The Uncut Veil

The sun hung low over Awash Village, painting the salt flats in bruised oranges. Mama sat me by the crackling fire pit, its embers flickering as the flames rose high. "Tomorrow is the day of your sealing, hiya," she hummed, braiding my hair with <sup>the</sup> wooden beads that clicked like secrets. "It'll make you strong—strong like the swaying acacia tree, one that bends but never breaks." The women nodded in agreement. Mama continued, "You will be pure, as it is our way." I nodded shyly, but a thorn in me twisted. I'd seen the girls after their cuttings—their bodies whole but souls empty. How they ~~mask~~ walked with masked limps and laughed with ~~sh~~ shadowed eyes. ~~And~~ Tradition, they mused—our armor against the world's sharpness.

That night, ~~when~~ <sup>and listened</sup> when the sun dipped below the horizon and camels groaned in the far distance, I lay on my mat, ~~listen~~ <sup>drifting</sup> to the chatter ~~as it drifted~~ from the men's circle. Uncle Haman, with his plump cheeks and ~~plumper~~ plumper belly, boomed, "Those Issa dogs have arrived with their teeth bared and blades sharp. They fight for our wells and take our women as spoils. The seal protects them, keeps them pure." The elders' grunted in approval, striking their staffs against the jutting rocks. But ~~is~~ it wasn't just the cutting. There were raids—when the sun rose too high and the ~~desert~~ desert stayed barren, and the clashes that occurred too frequently to be mere happenstance. The Issa came for our wells and stole our girls. I remembered when they took Aunt Zahra's daughter, Ameena, fourteen like me, and disappeared behind the rocky cliffs. When she returned later that night, her clothes ripped, body battered and legs numb, the elders were quick to wed her to a ~~causing~~ cousin twenty years older, to "restore ~~here~~ her purity." No one spoke of the men who had ~~fore~~ torn her, or of ~~the~~ her quick marriage to another.

Mama had her own scars. When the storm had settled, she told me ~~about~~ of the day of her sealing, how the cutters came with their blades and blessed spirits, their gazes ~~unyielding and~~ <sup>unflinching and</sup> grips unyielding, how with each slash ~~she~~ she screamed and thrashed. "But mama," I had asked one night, "isn't it bad? Like the beatings the uncles give when the girls are caught dancing by the salt flats?" She shook her head. "No, my dear hiya. This is love, ~~not~~ all of it. The cutting makes us pure. Without it, ~~who~~ which man would offer marriage?" But ~~she~~ her eyes told a different story. Her gaze drifted ~~to the~~ beyond the desert, ~~as~~ as the sun peeked from behind the clouds. ~~I always noticed~~ She called it ~~strength~~ strength, but ~~I saw~~ I'd seen the scars between her legs whenever she'd ask me to bathe her after a long day of rearing sheep. I'd seen the way her eyes glistened ~~as~~ as she watched the small girls—so young for their cutting—giggling with no need to ~~mask~~ the pain in their walls, ~~as~~.

I could not shake off that feeling—a feeling of wrongness, forbidden yet persistent. If tradition loves us so, then why does it carve us? ~~take some~~ Why must we



bear the price of purity? Why does 'purity' entail us having wounds that heal, but scars that don't.

The next day, the day of my sealing, the cutters came; grabbed my hands and pulled me from ~~Atama~~ my hut. I fumbled and squirmed, while they dragged me through the village square, but I pulled free, and stood, voice wavering as I spoke. "Listen!" I began, "For the people of Awash, why do we do this? ~~Why~~ ~~is the price~~ If tradition loves us so, why ~~it~~ does it carve us, why does it savor the sight of blood? It comes, like a wolf in sheep's clothing, under the guise of purity, it steals our purity? ~~Mama~~ I have seen the <sup>uncles</sup> women, with hollowed eyes and hidden limps, like lambs to a slaughter, ~~given~~ traded off to wed our ~~father~~ <sup>uncles</sup>. Mama, you wish for me to be strong like the acacia tree - bending but never breaking, but I refuse to ~~bend~~ be ~~to shelter~~ the tree that bends to shelter ~~the~~ a man that strikes it! We are not pebbles you cast in the river without a second ~~thought~~ thought, we deserve our voices to echo beyond the hills, to carry real songs of strength, not cries of pain!" The village erupted into a sea of hushed whispers, and the storm ~~quieted~~, quieted, but a new wind blew in me. Change had begun, ~~one voice at a time~~ ~~at~~ in Awash, ~~for~~ one voice at a time. My ~~mother~~ <sup>Mama</sup> I could see Mama's eyes, glimmering not with sorrow, ~~but~~ but with pride. My cutting was ~~delayed~~, <sup>as</sup> and the sun finally ~~dipped below the horizon~~ ~~final time~~ dipped behind the clouds.

