

from: Aman: Story of a  
Somali Girl, by Virginia  
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## CHAPTER

### 5

WE MOVED WITHIN MANGO VIL-  
lage a couple of times. The third place we lived was the same  
house that Mama had sold when we went to Mogadishu, be-  
cause she really liked that place. Mango Village, that's where  
paradise is: water and trees and grass and oh, it was good to be  
back there. Outside it was dirty, dusty, and hot, but inside the  
houses it was always cool. We painted flour sacks white, red,  
blue—whatever colours we liked—and we put them under the  
zinc roof to keep out the heat. We painted animals, flowers, and  
trees on the walls and it made our house look really pretty. We  
would lean over the fence and talk to our neighbours: "Do you  
have any sugar?" and they would call back, "Sure," and hand us  
some. We didn't need to go to the store; if we needed something,  
we'd just ask a neighbour.

One of my aunts on my father's side and her children were  
living in the group of houses we moved back to. She had three  
daughters—one was about my age, one was younger, and one  
was older. Her two younger daughters hadn't been circumcised

yet. So my aunt and another aunt were planning their cir-  
cumcision, and they asked my mama if she wanted to have me  
circumcised on the same day. But my mama said no, because  
she didn't have enough money or time. You have to invite a lot  
of people and cook a lot of food for them, so you have to have  
money, even though the people you invite bring you money too.  
My mother didn't want to take money from anyone—she wanted  
to do it with her own money, invite people to eat, have the party,  
and let them leave without giving her money. She was a religious  
person, and our religion doesn't allow you to take money because  
it would be as though you were selling your food, and that's no  
good. So she told my two aunts that they should go ahead and  
do it just for my two cousins.

But my aunts said to themselves, "No, that's not fair. We're  
leaving Aman out by doing the other two. It's not good for our  
name—our brother's name. And besides, she's the oldest and it's  
shameful to do the younger ones and not her." So they decided  
to do me too, without letting my mother know. They knew that  
Mama had to go milk our cows before sunrise and that she  
wouldn't be back until midmorning. When they do circumci-  
sions, they do them early in the morning, before it gets hot and  
before your blood gets hot and begins to run—early in the morn-  
ing, as soon as you wake up.

They invited *everybody*. They killed one bull, two goats, and a  
sheep, and cooked the whole night. The next morning my  
mama left to go and milk the cows. My aunts and their friends  
had spent the night over at our houses, and they had to get up  
early in the morning to cook tea and coffee and a big breakfast  
for all the people who would be coming. That's when they woke  
me up. They were giving a shower to my two cousins, and they  
told me to go take a shower too. I asked them why, and they  
asked me if I wanted to be circumcised as well. I told them yes.

I wanted to—all the girls my age wanted to because it's shame not to—but I was afraid, and besides, my mama didn't want me circumcised today.

They talked to me nicely and let me know that they were going to do it whether I liked it or not, so I should be good and take a shower and come back. I went with my cousins, and when the three of us were finished with our showers they wrapped us in the old scarves that women wear around their shoulders, and we each had a new piece of cloth—they cut us each a big piece. They shaved our hair, and two *shaihs* read the Qur'an over us. They told us that there was no pain and that we had to be good, and that they were going to give us a lot of gold and a lot of money, and the one who was the best would get the most. You know, they were deceiving us children. They were mainly telling me, because I was going to be the first one, because I was nine—the eldest. So I told them, "All right." Outside, the women and children were already singing and dancing. They do the circumcisions outside, with a lot of clapping and singing so people won't hear you cry. They were going "Lulululululu" and singing my father's name and my lineage's name, saying that they were the best. I was so proud when I heard all this. I said, Yes, why not? to myself. They put gold on me everywhere, and money everywhere, and they took me outside under one of the tall trees in the yard.

There was a big woman there who holds the girls while they are being circumcised—a strong woman. They gave her a low four-legged stool. There was another tall, skinny, black woman named Fatima to do the circumcision. The big one grabbed me by the hand and held me. I told her, "You don't have to grab me hard, I'm not going to run." She said, "Oh, you're a good girl! I've never met one like you before. You're a big little girl, aren't you?" I said "Yes!" She said, "Are you sure you're not going to

run away?" I said, "No, and I'm not going to cry either. And you're not going to tie me," because I knew they usually tied the girl's legs. And she said, "Good. I like that." She made me sit on the ground, on some dry grass that she had laid down. She told me to take off the piece of cloth I had on. The way she did it was, she sat on the stool and spread her legs and put me on the ground with my back to her, with my legs next to her legs. Usually she would tie the child's legs to her legs and then spread her legs wide and the child's legs with them, and she would also hold the child's arms so she couldn't move. But I told her, "You don't have to tie me," because I wanted everybody to be proud of me. If she had tied me, it would have seemed as though I was frightened, and I didn't want to do it that way. She said, "All right." She trusted me, she really did; she didn't tie me, but she wrapped her legs around mine and held me that way, in case I jumped. I sat there, and she told me what was going to happen. She said, "It's not a big thing, it's not that painful." She told me to be strong the way I had said I would be: "Don't let your family down. Don't let yourself down. The children will laugh at you tomorrow if you cry today." I told her I wouldn't cry—I was going to be strong. And I was. WALL CRY

She put a small white container with charcoal ashes in front of me, between my legs. And now the other woman, Fatima—she was a beautiful woman—came towards me. She told me her name, and told me how calm she was. She talked to me nicely so I wouldn't feel pain. She said that if I was bad she could be bad—and while she was talking to me like that, she was getting out her knives and all the other equipment and wiping them to make them clean. Then she took some of the charcoal powder between her thumb and forefinger and started playing with my clitoris, pulling on it so that it would become bigger as she kept on talking, and I was talking to her too, asking her questions—

when was she going to do it?—and she answered me, even though she was lying. After she got everything ready, that was the time she told me to close my eyes. I asked her, “Is this it?” She said, “This is it. This is it. It won’t take a second. Close your eyes. When you open them, the pain and your clitoris will be gone.” I told her, “All right!”

This time, she even pulled out the knife—a little knife, shiny and sharp, with a little hook on it. Now she pulled harder on my clitoris, and this time I turned my face away and told the other woman, “Hold me tight,” and gritted my teeth. And then my God, Rahima, everything happened. My body was gone in a second, just as they had said. I could hear *shuuu*... like the sound when they are slicing meat—just like that was the way she sliced my body. She cut everything—she didn’t cut the big lips, but she sliced off my clitoris and the two black little lips, which were *haram*—impure—all that she sliced off like meat. Oh, Rahima, I thought I was going to die. I opened my eyes and looked down at myself, and the blood was coming out. Part of me was bleeding heavily, and in the part where she had peeled the flesh off, the meat was white.

Rahima, my God, it had only just started. I asked her if she was finished, and she said no, she was going to do it again. Again she said, “It won’t take a minute,” and I believed her. And everybody who was watching began putting gold and more money on me—on my head, on my legs—and they were singing. Every time I wanted to cry, I looked around to see if someone would help, but I just saw smiling faces, and I felt shy again and I opened my mouth and pretended I was laughing, but I was dying inside. She sliced the top off my big lips, and then she took thorns like needles and put them in crossways, across my vagina, to close it up. She put in seven thorns, and each time she put one in she tightened them together with string. When she

was finished, she put on some black paste to stop the bleeding and make the wound dry up fast, and then some egg yolk to make it feel cool. Then she took some cloth and wrapped it around my legs, from my ankles to my hips. And they wrapped me up in my cloth again and carried me inside to the room they had ready for us. And that’s what they did to the other girls.

Afterwards I was sick and had a fever. And when I peed, it felt as though it would kill me. It felt like fire! Or like alcohol when you put it on an open wound. It was hot, that pee, and I cried. They had to cover me up and my teeth were chattering and I was shaking all over my whole body when my mother came back. She was angry. She didn’t say anything though, because a lot of people were there. They were giving me some soup when she came in. She was furious, but she went out for a while and came back after she had calmed down. She was trying to control herself, but she was really angry, because they hadn’t respected her wishes. They had let her down and treated her as if she was nothing, and she hated that. I think everybody was a bit afraid of Mama, but they all stayed calm and nobody said anything. And she controlled her anger.

I talked to her. I knew she was angry, but I was proud, so I told her to be happy for me. I said, “They did it because they love me. Why didn’t you want me to have it done with the other girls? I don’t want you to have a fight with them, because you’re both my family. I love them, and I love you.” She understood how I felt, but she was still angry.

I kept the thorns in for three days. Then the woman who did the circumcision came back and took them out. All that time your legs are tied, even when you pee. You don’t drink much so you won’t have to pee much. You don’t eat a lot so you don’t have to doo-doo—they give you only a little soup, with vegetables in it, and dry bread, because they want your body to get dry

fast. The more liquids you drink, the more you pee and the more that place gets wet, and they don't want that. Every time you pee it stings, so they pour warm water with salt in it over your genitals while you are peeing. The salt is a disinfectant, and the warm water eases the pain. After you pee, they dry you off and take you outside. Out in the *daash*, they have dug a hole in the ground and put in some lighted charcoal covered with ash. They put incense on it. They have you sit over the hole, still with your legs tied, leaning against a woman sitting on a stool. Smoke from the fire with the incense makes you smell good and the heat makes your wound dry. After three days of doing that every morning and every evening and every time you pee, you heal up fast when you are a little girl.

After the woman who circumcises you comes back to take out the thorns, she examines your circumcision to see if your hole is small or big. She uses a stick about the size of a round toothpick and puts it into the hole. If your hole is much bigger than a toothpick—maybe because you peed too fast—she puts in another stitch with a thorn to close you up again. If not, if your hole is all right, you just rest for seven days with your legs tied together a little more loosely. They give you a walking stick, and you walk slowly and sit slowly and lie on your side with your legs tied together. And in six or seven days, you're all right, and you can go where you want.

I was all right in seven days, but one of the girls who was circumcised with me—the one who was nearly my age—she had to be circumcised all over again, because when she first peed after her circumcision she felt the pain, and then she didn't pee at all for three days. So when the woman came to take the stitches out, she shat and peed at the same time, and opened her hole up wide. Fatima had to stitch her again—the girl had more pain and had to stay in the house almost a month.

The reason they do that extra stitch is so that when you get married, your husband will know you are a virgin. If he sees you have a little bit bigger hole, he'll think you played around. So the women—your mother and the woman who circumcised you—have to make sure your hole is the right size. That's why they do all this stitching and sewing. The other kind of circumcision is *sunna*. They don't cut anything off and they don't sew anything, they only make a little cut or just a pinprick so blood will come—a little blood. It doesn't even feel like a pinch. These days a few people say, "Don't cut it. Make it *sunna*." But then, people preferred it the old way, to make sure their daughter didn't play around, and the husband preferred it so he could make sure his wife is a virgin. Many people still prefer the old way.

A girl who is sewn won't play around, because she is scared of the pain, and she's scared her family will be able to tell when they check her every week. When one door is closed and one door is open, which one is easy to get into? A thief doesn't go to a locked door.

The people your parents invite to your circumcision arrive around two or three in the afternoon. The party is only for women and children, with a couple of *shetiks* to read the Qur'an. You take all the furniture out of two or three rooms and lay mats and cushions on the floor. Before people go in, they take off their shoes. They come in groups of relatives or friends, and they usually sit together with the people they came with. You bring two bowls of warm water, one with soap in it and one without, for them to wash their hands before they eat. Then you bring the food. Each group has a big plate of rice, meat, and salad, and fruit that you bring on another plate. After they eat, you bring them the bowls of warm water again, and they wash their hands again because they've eaten with their hands. You bring them a cloth to dry their hands with, and perfume to

take away the smell of the food. After that, they drink coffee, and have sweets and dates and tea and soft drinks. You bring incense for everyone to smoke their hair with, and then strong perfume for their hair, and after that they have to go, because other people are waiting to sit down and eat in their place. People are waiting outside, singing and dancing, because you may have only two houses, and one house is taken up with the *sheikhs* reading the Qur'an and with a couple of young boys waiting on them, who ask them if they want coffee or tea.

Before each group of women leaves, the women who have been serving the food collect the money. Each woman gives some, no matter how much. And the serving woman has to remember how much each person gave so that she can tell the woman who is giving the circumcising party. Because if you bring five shillings, next time when I go to your place I have to give at least five shillings, or more. It's a payback system—I don't know what to call it exactly, but it's a good system. The only other time they do this is when a woman marries. You collect all the money, the women leave, you clean the room, and another group comes and sits until eleven o'clock at night. At the end of the night, you wash dishes and clean up, and count the money—you know what you spent for the party, and you know what you made afterwards—and then the circumcision party is over.

## CHAPTER 6

NOW I WAS A BIG GIRL, AND MAMA put me in school. She bought me tennis shoes! Most of the time I went barefoot, but now I was starting school. The rains were so heavy the water came up as high as our knees. We wore tennis shoes so the grass on the ground wouldn't cut us on our way to school, and when we got to school we washed the shoes, and sometimes we couldn't get all the mud out. We just painted them and made them new. We wore the shoes over and over, and every time they got dragged through the mud, we painted them again.

When I was in school, I loved it; I was so excited. I was happy, you know. For the first year, I was the best student. Many of the teachers were white nuns, and they were kind. I learned Italian fast. A Somali man taught Arabic, and at first I thought he was nice too. I loved learning things in school. But the girls—all the children—started to call me names. They said I had TB and that was why I had stayed in the hospital for seven months—in those days, having TB was like having AIDS—people wanted to stay away from you. They also said that my family had turned