

A CUT ABOVE THE REST

A short story by

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“My best friend had rings in her nose and lip and shells in her ears. The holes in her ears were so large I could put my finger through. They didn’t hurt because they were done when she was a baby and just kept stretching larger.”

They giggled. She ignored their bad manners.

“We had the same age but I was taller. She loved my blonde hair. They shaved her head, as was their tradition. They used the hair with brightly colored feathers and shells and snake skins to make incredible head-dresses for special ceremonies. Even with no hair she was very beautiful with skin like polished queen ebony. Her fingers and toes were longer than mine, her breasts much larger.”

Giggles, strange looks. She was embarrassed for these girls, wrapped in their ignorance.

“And her family, tell us about her family, Faye,” prompted Mrs. Smith.

“Her parents had the only bed and her baby brother slept in a hammock

underneath it. When he would cry their mother would reach down and give it a push so that he would go back to sleep swinging. And she carried him everywhere in a sling so always he was close to her heart and could drink milk whenever he wanted. I would have liked to have been her baby.”

“Please tell us about their home,” Mrs. Smith spoke above the whispers.

“The floor was packed earth, they ate on a mat woven from long grass, and the roof was of layers of grass. They changed it at the end of each rainy season, I never saw it leak. The walls were of tree bark. They would strip a whole tree, one big piece. They’d soak it and beat it, again and again and again, until it was thin and soft like leather. Then they would paint it with dyes they made from plants, berries, and roots.”

Mrs. Smith was nodding and smiling. Faye was making her very happy. “Those must have taken a great deal of time. They didn’t have the modern techniques and machines that we do, did they Faye?”

“Tapas. They were called tapas. I’m sure it wouldn’t have worked with machines,” she frowned.

“Perhaps you’re right, Faye. It sounds as though they filled a practical need with an art form. What did they paint on the tapas?”

She tried to recall the patterns. “I saw trees and people and animals and dancing. But mother said they were abstract.”

“How did you come to live in Papua New Guinea before returning west to study with us at the Academy, Faye?”

“When I was little we moved there because my father was helping them try to build a highway through the jungle and over the mountains. It still isn’t finished, but Mother sent me here when I cut off my hair and gave it to them for a head-dress for my friend’s wedding.” She patted her short bob proudly. “It was to my waist before.”

She noted the shocked looks with amusement. They knew nothing of commitment, of dignity. She would never tell them her friend’s name, she would not insult her so. They must always stay on the outside.

One of the girls asked with a sneer, “And did your ‘friend’ go naked?” A chorus of snickers and snorts followed.

“No more so than you in your bathing costume,” she smiled, “and she had dignity.” There was appreciative laughter.

Mrs. Smith lifted her hand for quiet. “Were there ceremonies in preparation for the wedding?”

“I wasn’t allowed to see the men’s, no female was. But, they let me share my friend’s. I was the first ‘outsider’ ever allowed. I held her hand. There was dancing and singing and chanting, all the women together, sharing. The spirit woman brought something to drink. And then she cut out my friend’s clitoris.”

Faye watched the horrified expressions, pleased. They were weak, none could have earned respect.

Clearing her throat, Mrs. Smith said, “It’s a fact that some societies still perform circumcision or ‘clitoridectomy’ on infant or adolescent females. In the

West it is illegal. There is no medical benefit, it is cultural or religious. It is usually unsanitary, unprofessional and very painful. Death can result or childbirth can be complicated.”

“But, it’s their custom. You have no right to condemn it,” Faye stated evenly.

Mrs. Smith smiled tolerantly, “I understand you loved these people and feel defensive. But Faye, this is a primitive and dangerous practice. It has been outlawed in the West with good reason.”

One of the girls spoke out. “They only do it so women can’t enjoy sex, so they’ll stay with one man no matter how bad he is. It’s to keep them as slaves, cleaning house and having babies. It’s barbaric.” There were voices of agreement.

Faye lifted her head. “It is their shared tradition of honor. The women are bonded as you will never be.”

The classroom erupted with insults and ridicule, questions and condemnations. Faye stood solemnly erect, seeming to look down on the scene. Mrs. Smith finally achieved order.

“Faye, you witnessed what your friend went through. Surely you can understand everyone’s negative reaction. They picture unnecessary surgery without anesthetic or sanitation. And, they imagine a future without the enhancement of orgasm where sex is only for procreation and a man’s pleasure.”

“It is painful,” Faye acknowledged, “but you condemn it without understanding. You think your way is the only way.” She stared at her teacher defiantly. “I

didn't ask to be born into your shallow culture."

The room came alive with gasps and murmuring. She looked around, decided. "My friend showed dignity, she never cried out." She looked around the room. "And neither did I."

The classroom was completely silent as she gathered her things and walked out the door. She knew that it would be okay if her mother made her stay at the Academy. They could not understand her, perhaps never would, but it did not matter. She was above them, all of them, and for that they must respect her.

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