

BUTCHERED

Jacqueline Sanchez, Class of 2017

I had been warned by my grandmother and mother, but I suppose I had never fully understood what the warnings meant, or that one human being could actually be so cruel to another. It was a rite of passage, they called it. It was part of our religion, they had told me. No man would want to marry me, they said. In a strange way, I had grown to want it done. So when the day came, I decided to be the brave 7-year-old child I knew everyone else wanted me to be.

I waited in the room all day long, the same room my grandfather had died in that summer, until the time came that my mother ushered in four or five older women, and a man. He was intimidatingly large, with a poorly tucked in shirt, sweat trickling down his side burns, and as he came closer, I realized I had seen him before. The man who had trimmed my father's beard so many times, the village barber, was now going to trim me. He now stood at the edge of the bed between my legs. I lie there, exposed in all the glory I had. He took out a pouch, opened it onto the bed, and made his choice: a straight razor.

I held my breath as he made the first cut. I tried desperately to focus on the ceiling, but the stinging of my sliced flesh prevented me. I struggled to escape, but I couldn't move. Two of the women were holding my legs down, and I was being restrained from behind. I frantically searched the room. I couldn't find my mother.

"Mama," I cried out, wondering where she had gone, why she had abandoned me.

"Hold still, my love," she whispered, "it's ok." I quickly realized she was the one whose arms were wrapped tightly around me. My own mother. How could she let this strange man put his hands on me? Did she know what he was going to do?

"Mama," I pleaded. "It hurts, mama!"

"Cut it! Cut it quickly," one of the women yelled.

As the barber got closer, I could smell stale tobacco on his hot breath, see dirt under his fingernails. I cried harder. Periodically he would lift up, and drop a piece of my womanhood on a

nearby table. If this is what it took to be a woman, I didn't want to be one anymore. What was wrong with what I had before? What was wrong with what I had been created with?

I could feel the wetness of my blood under my legs, and the tugging of my lips as they sewed them together with wire. After the man was done, the women brought my legs together, and bound them with cloth, so that my footsteps wouldn't be too far apart to rip the stitches. To them, and to my mother, I was now a woman. A 7-year-old woman, ready to be bought for marriage.

I really was a walking shell, a mere womb. They had made me nothing but a hole that defined my worth as a human being. Sanctified and mutilated, I was now worth nothing but the price a man would one day pay to marry my tightened vagina and my virginity, only to have me for his own consumption; for me to bear his children.

When I was 11, I became very ill. It wasn't until I was taken to a doctor that they realized I had been menstruating, but the blood had had nowhere to go. So he cut me open, only to sew me back up to a little less than I had originally been, so that I could properly bleed. It was just enough to make the infections go away.

Now at 32, I live with several constant reminders of how my mother and village took away my womanhood that day. Not only will I never experience sexual pleasure, but I will never experience childbirth, as the infections took that from me. I will also never know what it truly is to feel like a woman.

I was very angry for a long time, but I have since forgiven my mother. She did not know that what she had me endure was not a religious obligation, but a morally corrupt and selfish tradition. Countless generations of women before me were butchered and circumcised, and there have been countless after me. I just hope these women one day come to forgive their mothers, and protect their own daughters, allowing them to grow up to be the whole women we were prevented from being. ■