

Skin

Mara Menzies

The old woman sat on a woven grass mat on the floor of her veranda. Her legs were outstretched, and on her lap, a thin, square piece of wood supported a heavily decorated sheet of canvas. The gold colour on the tip of her paintbrush flashed brilliantly in the sun as, with surprising speed and skill, she added the final details to her painting. A cockerel crowed in the distance and the sound of laughing children echoed around her. She held the small but detailed piece up to the sun for a closer look, when out of the corner of her eye she spotted that old familiar face gazing down at her from the picture above the door frame. She lowered her arms and gazed back. His face was as stern as it always was, with even more wrinkles around his eyes than her. She chuckled quietly to herself, fondly remembering her claim that she was the only one who could make him laugh. He may not have expressed himself openly, but to her, he was the most joyful and honest person she had ever known. In moments of

tenderness, he would simply lie there, stroking her bare shoulder with one finger. It was a beautiful memory.

She no longer thought about how he had been received by her family. 'He offers nothing, not even a laugh!' they had said. But she knew that she laughed enough for both of them. 'It is never going to work,' her friends insisted. 'He is not like us!' That was probably the reason she loved him most. She looked down at the greens, blues and golds on her lap, and could almost hear his voice, 'That will make an excellent wedding gift.' Even after three years, she still missed him terribly.

Suddenly, a familiar hum filled the woman's ears. She looked around and her eyes sparkled as her granddaughter approached. Her pride and joy. A young woman with a kind and generous nature, a little more cautious than her grandmother would have liked, with a dream to sing forever.

'Come, sit with me,' the old woman beckoned. The young woman smiled brightly, lowering her head to receive her grandmother's blessing, and then sat as close to her as she could. 'Careful with my paints!' Reaching out for the palette of colours, near which her granddaughter had firmly planted herself, and placing it carefully out of danger, they both laughed.

'I have come to see you, Shosho.'

'I see! And tomorrow you will be married!'

'Yes,' came the joyful response.

'Are you happy?'

'Of course. Everyone is happy.'

'Good!' the old woman retorted. She gazed down at her painting, deep in thought. There was a heavy pause, then she asked, 'Does he see who you are?'

The young woman was surprised by the question. 'What do you mean?'

The grandmother stared at her, then suddenly, with eyes narrowed, she leant forward, gripped her arm and squeezed it tight. The young woman gasped, her eyes widening with apprehension.

'Shosho.'

'When he looks at you, who does he see? Hmm? And how does he respond to you?'

The ancient eyes set in folds of papery skin probed the eyes of the young woman. After several uncomfortable seconds, the old woman relaxed her hold then inhaled, and exhaled deeply.

'You hum less than you did before! You are free to choose whomever you want. So choose wisely, because that decision will either make your wildest dreams come true or will hinder you every step of the way.'

The youthful eyes looked around her grandmother's home, simply yet beautifully adorned with paintings large and small.

'Did you live your dream?'

'I saw the men paint when I was a child. I would sometimes steal their colours because I wanted to learn, but they said, "Not for girls. Paint will stain your fingers and your clothes. It is not right for girls to paint!" I wanted to paint. I have lived my dream, but I had to fight for it!'

The woman chuckled, but her granddaughter detected a faint sadness.

'I must tell you a tale,' her grandmother continued. 'If you are to be fulfilled in your marriage, you must learn the value of staying truthful and loyal to yourself. If you do that, your words and silences will speak loudly and your roots will grow deep, but if you betray your story, then even your silence is meaningless, you remain like a pretty, dying flower that bends itself to any breeze.'

The young woman breathed deeply. 'I am ready to listen.'

The old woman began.

'Beyond the land where the desert meets the sea, there was a village so vibrant and prosperous that the inhabitants wanted for absolutely nothing. They indulged in the finer things of life. The houses were exquisite with intricate patterns of yellow ochre, red earth and sparkling blue dyes crushed from the

wings of butterflies. They valued beauty and perfection above all else, and it could be seen painted on their faces and embroidered into their clothes. Their hairstyles were outrageous, and truth be told, they were an impressive sight to behold.

'But to live in such a paradise comes at a cost. To maintain their way of life and tradition, there were strict rules that everyone had to obey. Each person knew their place. Friendships with villagers from the North were forbidden, for those were a wild and unruly people and anyone who sought union with them, or were found to have behaved outside the acceptable boundaries, would be disciplined severely. For those who did step beyond the line, speaking their mind when silence was required, or whose values appeared 'different', they would be led to what was fearfully known as The Plank, a thick, heavy flattened log where the rebellious individual would be held down and flogged with a cowhide whip. It was a brutal and cruel punishment, designed for those who threatened the stability of their community, who brought shame on themselves and their families, and therefore, understandably, the people followed the rules.

To reward this excellent behaviour, as well as preserve tradition, the elders of the community regularly organised mouth-watering feasts for which livestock were slaughtered and roasted, the sweetest, juiciest, most succulent fruit was harvested, and dancers and musicians were invited who titillated and

entertained outrageously – the merriment continuing deep into the early hours of the morning. The villagers enjoyed these celebrations, and almost every conversation included an excitable discussion about which one was coming up next. There was one, however, that surpassed all others. It was the Day of Union.

‘It was held once a year, so that anyone who wished to get married would marry on the same day, binding couples to other couples who would form part of a larger family. Their children would grow together and participate in shared rituals. Naturally, it was a fine time for each family to show off their good name, wealth and power. It would also provide an opportunity to seek a partner for the following year.

‘Due to the large number of unions, and the desire for each family and couple to show themselves off at their very best, it was the most spectacular event of the year. While the families and friends glittered in their shimmering robes, many adorning themselves with so much jewellery they could barely stand, the couples were in another league all together. Planning for the following year’s celebrations began immediately after the Day of Union had ended. Partners were selected, then healers were brought in to rid the young people of any flaw in their characters, to absolve them of any words spoken in anger and to forgive them for any wicked thoughts they may have had. Once their spirits had been corrected, the physical work began. Their bodies were scrubbed

weekly. They were dipped in perfumes, lotions and massaged thoroughly until they gleamed. The men would be groomed and the women's hair oiled, combed, braided in extravagant styles, weaving in shimmering threads and cowrie shells. The bride and groom would do little work in the months leading up to the Day of Union, and specially made palanquins were brought in to carry them wherever they wished to go.

Each outfit was planned months in advance. Brightly coloured glass and clay beads of all shapes and sizes, feathers from the rarest of birds and exquisitely fragile shells from the deepest oceans were brought in by merchants who had scoured the earth for them. The designs stunned in their own unique way, each one so different from the next, save for one detail. The most sensual part of the human form was considered to be the base of the neck due to its sensitivity to the slightest touch or breath, so each wedding garment was designed to showcase this delicate piece of skin to the greatest extent. Each year the designs grew more audacious, with breath-taking brides flaunting their snakelike spines, spending fortunes to ensure their bodies were primed with the serum from snails to fight age, lotions infused with drops of peacock blood to guarantee beauty, flecks of gold to demonstrate the incredible wealth from which they came. Mothers fought over necklaces for their daughters, and fathers insisted on the softest calf leather shoes for their feet.

Year after year, the spectacular procession of dreamers and lovers made its way through the madding crowds who gasped at the sight of smooth, bare shoulders, whose pulses quickened at the allure of gleaming, glistening backs. Stories would be told of those whose dark, satiny skins thrilled the crowd, while gifts and praise would be showered on each couple. The grooms would proudly perform their dances and serenade their wives-to-be with sweet songs of their beauty, their kindness and softness. The wives in return would extol the achievements of their husbands-to-be. Jaws would ache at the end of the day with the frenzied laughter.

There are many stories of the Day of Union. Yet the story that is told most often, the one that moves you to moments of quiet contemplation, is that of a young woman who remained true to herself and who respected her story resolutely. She walked through the crowds with her head high, and did not hoot and holler like the others. Proudly clutching the arm of her intended, she walked with such confidence that she took everyone's breath away. They will speak, not of the glittering blackness of her hair tied up on her head. They will not speak of the softness of her hands. Instead, they will speak of the large ferocious scars, unmistakably carved by a cowhide whip, crisscrossing her back, protruding defiantly above the low-cut wedding robe. They will comment on how unruly her lover's dreadlocks appeared. But what they will elaborate on in the greatest of detail is how the entire time his eyes gazed into her own, sparkling with a furious passion, his rough hands gently caressing the old

wounds with a care and unswerving love unlike anything anyone had ever seen before.'

There was a moment of quiet before either of the two moved. Then the young woman leant forward and embraced her grandmother gently.

'Thank you.' she whispered.

The old woman smiled. Slowly raising herself off the ground, she bent to pick up the paintbrush that had fallen to the floor and turned and headed to her room. As she glanced up at the picture of the old man just above the door frame, her granddaughter noticed her shawl had slipped to one side and there, peeking out just over the top of the fabric, was the undeniable scar of a cowhide whip.

Mara Menzies

Mara Menzies is an award-winning performance storyteller, having won THE STAGE award at the Edinburgh Fringe 2022 and her debut novel *Blood and Gold*; won the Saltire award for best fiction book of the year 2022. She draws on her rich dual Kenyan/Scottish cultural heritage for inspiration while crafting narratives and her passion for myth and legend, enable her to explore contemporary problems through ancient ideas. She builds worlds and invites us to enter within.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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