

Omnia's Silent Scream

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* Some events are based on a true story, but the names of the characters and places mentioned are imaginative.

He spat on my face, and said that I should be married to him, because he had promised him and he had to fulfill it, or else I would disgrace him. I said that he had enough women and that I would not accept a man three decades older than me. He got a stranglehold of me and banged my head against the wall, yelling that he was not consulting me, but just informing me of his male decision. "You are a woman and I am the man in this house...I am the one who decides when and to whom you will be married...In addition, you will lead a life that any girl of your age dreams of...Jewelry, deluxe food, and a real house. You will be envied for your marriage, and one day you will thank me for having rescued you from poverty". That wicked smile was on his face as he turned and counted that wad of banknotes one of my father's relatives had given him as the bride-price when I was not yet sixteen years old. I had a completely different vision: I had already started to pin my dreams on pursuing my studies and traveling to the capital in search of a job worthy of my educational level.

Weeks passed and I hardly saw my father at home to ask for help. I realized that he was still alive through the sound of his snoring at night on the other side of the room where we were staying. He used to come home late, often empty-handed, and sometimes carrying two loaves of bread or two bags of milk, avoiding meeting us, denting the fact that our simplest dreams were just a real dinner table. My mother whose voice always reverberated in my ears used to call me and my elder brother, saying, "Come along... I have prepared baked

onions for you. Praise God that your brother left school to win bread for you. He is a chivalrous man, "May God spare him". All of these were phrases accompanying the taste of onion broth caressing my teeth while I closed my eyes, trying to replace it with another palatable dish, to enjoy satiety and go to bed to clinch the rest of my school year, if the "breadwinning man" would grant me permission.

On Tuesday morning, there were two women knocking at the door in the morning. They blamed my mother, "Where is she? Gadi is pressing us." My mother woke me up and pulled me by hand to the bathroom. I did not realize at the time that it was "the bride's bath," "the farewell bath." My mother did not come to bathe either because she was not really used to the women's bathroom. She forgot about being a female. The women fell to dying my hair and putting a plastic bag on it, then washed my body. I remember that I smelled a lot of good smells like those of hair and body lotion at that time, and when I opened my eyes for a while, I saw the types of lotion and soap that my eyes had not seen before. I kept contemplating the shape of each bottle separately until one of the women dressed me with soft and expensive bath towels, and told me that I would be her co-wife at Master Ahmed's, and that he only loved a submissive woman at his service and to spend her life to please him. In return, "He is the master of all men. Whatever you wish will be yours."

Here is the next morning. I woke up as usual, but at an unusual noise and sight. I saw women who had never entered our house, sheets, utensils, and new clothes that my father, mother and brother were wearing. I also saw my school satchel too, but it was torn and

thrown in the garbage, in the corner of the entrance. It was me, me, in exchange for all this. That man who had bought me from my brother came in, walked up to me, took the veil off my face, touched me with his coarse hands, and whispered in my ear that he loved fresh flesh. I did not understand what he had meant, but I burst into tears as soon as I heard his rough voice in my ear, so my father told the audience, “Farewell tears,” and my mother said, “A woman’s habitat is her husband’s house. She must be patient as I did.” She also whispered in my ear, and it was the first time that my mother had spoken to me in private and on a subject other than that of calling for a little food or for recognizing my brother’s favors and sacrifices for us. She was saying, “You must thank God you got married to man not penniless like mine. You’ve said goodbye to misery!” I then realized that I was embodying one of my mother’s dreams. I said goodbye to my childhood, my innocence, the scattered pieces of my school satchel, and I went to the arms of “Master Ahmed”. I gave him my body smiling, smiling because I realized then that I was the female who fulfilled the pledge of the “breadwinning man”, so that he would not be stigmatized in the alley.

Every day, he would come back to me at different hours, after his workday, sweaty, and smelling disgusting, banging on the door with his leg. He would yell, “Omnia!” and he would ravish me...

My mother would open the refrigerator’s door and heave a sigh of relief, “My daughter, you are in clover.” She would open her black cloth bag, fill it up and leave. I used to prepare meat, fish, salads, and fruit dishes, but it still tasted and smelled of that dish of onions that my mother used to cook for us almost every day. I was still submissive and vulnerable because I was still a female.

Every evening, he would return from his business exhausted. I would leave what I

had in hands to put his disgusting feet in the bucket of warm salt water, dry them while he ate and burped. I could hardly lift the first bite to my mouth masked with fear of him and every male than his voice roared, “Omnia! Go clean your little body, wear make-up and perfume for bed,” as if he too was cleaning himself and perfumed! It was that moment at which I willingly lost consciousness, at which one could hardly differentiate between me and the doll because of motionlessness, calmness, beauty and fragility.

My silence stemmed from my fear, my fear of the “stigma” that I grew up hearing its reverberation, my fear that I am a female and I have to accept this fact. I remember well that in our social code, there is an axiom stating that: “Men are infallible. Everything men do is permissible.” Unfortunately, I was not among that axiom, so I had to accept to forfeit my childhood, my youth, and the rest of my life as a driven slave to that person who, no matter how guilty he may be, he will never be stigmatized because he was born a man.

But what about my dreams? What about my principles? What about the fact that the age of slavery is over? What about my dignity? Do I have to be a carbon copy of my mother? Is this how every woman is, or is my mother one of the few who have turned themselves into a shroud in the hands of a man In order to make us happy, forgetting elapsing youth and forfeited femininity? But what happiness was she talking about? And I, the one who never sought strength in my mother, did not glimpse an iota of strength in her. She was vulnerable, or she liked to appear so, thinking that she would be pitied. But what kind of pity while her wildest dream was a new dress not worn by any woman before.

This time, I was the one who asked my mother to prepare herself what she wanted to take, and gave her a bag larger than her

black one. Simpering naively, she said, “I have always told you that a woman is not worth anything without her husband, being ugly or...” “But...my mother...” My silence overpowered me again and swallowed me up. My mother left like every time, but this time not like every other time. I unpinned the wall painting. I took money and gold, and put in their place the pajamas he was fond of, and the contraceptive pills he forced me to take, and by taxi I left from the Mostaghanem countryside to Oran.

I did not have any identification card that would allow me to stay in a hotel, because I was a minor, so I kept roaming the city of Oran. I could hardly talk to the driver because I was afraid of him, because he was also a “man.” I only asked him to roam the streets of the city until I told him to stop and I would pay the amount indicated by the meter. Time stopped me in the “Al-Ayoun” area. I alighted carrying a small bagful of banknotes and jewelry. I approached a woman accompanied by her daughter, who was my age, but she avoided talking to me because she saw me in my home robe, with henna on my feet, and the wedding ring on my finger. It was never that easy.

I remained wide awake all night in one of the entrances to the old buildings. I knew that I had to do what I entertained because there was no way to go back. I had stigmatized them. I headed the next morning to streets teeming with shops. I conversed with the saleswomen working in the shops, and they sarcastically stared at me surprised. Stammering, I asked one of the saleswomen,

who patted my shoulder lightly and told me she was the shop assistant, that I wanted to buy a similar dress to hers. She understood what I was looking for and quickly brought me jeans, colorful T-shirts, sneakers, and a few white socks. I bought enough of them to look like those saleswomen, and I took the remains of Master Ahmed ‘s clothes off my body. I showered and went back to the entrance of that building. This time, I was not alone: there was a woman older than me, but she was not conscious; she was drunk. I spent a night near her on a carton mat. I gave her 2000 dinars in exchange for protecting and guiding me.

Within a few days, I managed to find a place. I feigned a fake name and age. Nothing was free as I expected.

I reached my final destination. I was leaving Oran at night, but this time I left by sea, I left for the other bank, in the hope that I would find in it a bit of my dignity, or at least stay away from whoever swallowed it. I left and only destiny was separating me from my death. I departed, leaving behind the “stigma” for them, leaving for them the ruins of my dreams and my childhood, leaving behind me a bit of my femininity, leaving my mother disappointed that I was not a carbon copy of her. I left my brother disappointed in my rebellion against his “male decisions”, and my father disappointed that I would be a reason for depriving him to earn snippets of living from that “male” who buried that submissive woman in me and revived within Omnia’s silent scream.