

Dangling Modifier by Uduak Oguamanam

A commonwealth short story winning entry, 2006

You were told it wasn't going to happen to you. Things were expected to change in the new millennium. Besides, you were your father's favorite girl. But you knew different. It would be as hard to change these things as it would be for a chicken to pass urine.

You are twelve years old now. Your father betrothed you when you were four. At thirteen, barely a year from now, the man will come for you. There will be a big celebration. Your father will be dressed royally, with a crown upon his head. You will wish the crown were made of thorns, piercing through his brain. He will be seated with his leg crossed one on another. You will be kneeling by his side, a veil over your face, your sudden hatred for him hidden behind the veil. You cannot believe that this is the same father that called you angel. You will remember how he used to put you on his lap and attempt to plait your hair, all your sisters had short hair, it was easier for your mum, but your father wouldn't let her cut yours. Long hair was a little girl's pride, he would argue. You will also remember how you were once beaten by a group of boys at school because you came tops in the village school. The one which holds inside the village square, overlooking the chief's palace. You came home crying; your father went to each of their homes and gave them a good whipping. Your mother called his behavior irresponsible but he didn't care.

"Nobody tampers with my baby," he had thundered.

You have seen three weddings, you cried for your eldest sister-Ramatu, and for Salatu and Malatu, on your own day, there will be no tears left to shed.

Your mother will be sobbing for her little girl. She had really believed things will change. She will blame the gods for cursing her with four daughters and no son, not even one son!

Ramatu, Salatu and Malatu were married off at 16, 13 and 13 respectively. Ramatu at 16 because your mother begged and cried and threatened to kill herself. So she was granted three extra years. She tried the same strategy with Salatu but failed. They still took her away. She cried throughout the ceremony, screaming at the top of her voice. They tied her to keep her still. Your father blamed your mother for her behaviour.

“You did not train your daughter well; you failed to groom her into a proper woman.”

His scolding ignited more hatred in you. You wanted to ask him if he was a man at thirteen. But you said nothing. On your wedding day also, you will say nothing. You will be as stiff as the security man that guards the chief’s palace. The man whose moustache is as long as your hair. You have always wondered how many lice live there.

Your sisters and mother will come together just before you leave. Ramatu will tell you it will be painful the first time, she will tell you how terrible it was for her. The pain continued for weeks, but it stopped eventually, She will coach. Malatu will advise you to try and look a little happy, it is not as bad as it seems. She will glance at her glittering watch and tell you with a wink that it is pure gold. She will give you stories of her trips to Dubai and Egypt.

“People always think I am his daughter and we let them think it , my husband is good to me and yours will be good too.”

Salatu, the one who screamed through out her wedding, will tell you marriage is horrible, she will insist your life has just ended.

Still you will say nothing. No questions, no responses, no facial expressions, your mother will start crying, she will beg you to be strong. She will hold you all together and whisper a blessing.

In your new home, you will be placed on a bed made with a shining white bed sheet where you will wait to be devoured by your husband. He will come in the middle of the night, the dangling

modifier between his legs swinging from side to side, gaining turgidity as he approaches you. He will smell of palm wine mixed with sweat from his fat body. You will not bleed, you will not feel anything, you have made your mind stronger than your body.

One year will come and go swiftly. Your baby will die stillborn. Your husband will return to the city, to his city wife. You will be left alone, only you and the stench of urine that fills the room, since the baby's birth, the urine won't stop oozing; slowly, consistently.