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Background

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Chapter 9

Fina and Cammy transitioned into a loving relationship without the usual hiccups. There were no awkward first dates, no current relationships that had to be ended and no traumatic past loves or lovers that left either jaded about the opposite sex. Neither had family traditions, religious beliefs, ethnic or racial ideologies that restrained their headlong plunge into a full-fledged relationship. They simply absorbed each other. They spent all their non-working nights and days together, either at his or her place, coordinating their schedules or planning things to do. Weekends involved attending socials or traveling—her all-time favorite scene being the first time she beheld the night-lit New York skyline as it suddenly appeared in majestic focus from the Brooklyn Bridge with Cole Porter’s “Night and Day” playing softly in the background.

As a result of her relationship with Cammy, Fina never followed through on the job at Wal-Mart, and she consigned completing the associate degree in business management and funding Isa to start her own business to a list of future tasks. On the nights when Cammy got called away to an emergency, she experienced some disquiet about the standstill in pursuing her dreams. But she chose to settle down with the more satisfying thought that she had a right to some personal happiness, to indulge herself with this man who made her feel alive and valuable. He drove her to and picked her up from her late evening telemarketing job and agreed with her ideas about how to help Isa but had enough

sense not to sully her dreams and offend her dignity with crass offers of financial help. Frequently, she came home to piping-hot curried chicken and rice he had prepared, just for her. One day he surprised her with West African *Jollof* rice and goat stew. He had prepared it, he explained, after watching her cook it for him just once. The goat was a Caribbean touch, “to inflect the food, man,” he said. And his rendition tasted good too! What *Salone* man would cook for me after he worked a fifteen-hour shift, Fina mused.

Their evenings together were simple. After he picked her up and they ate dinner, they would cuddle, watch television, playfully disagree about the topic du jour, compromise, and seal the compromise by making love, beginning in front of the television, and ending in odd places that provided fodder for their countless phone conversations the next day.

Thus, they were one evening, cuddled together, discussing how they could outdo their previous night’s bedroom antics, when a television report captured their attention. It was about an American court granting asylum to a Togolese woman who feared her daughters would be forced to undergo female genital mutilation if she was deported to her homeland.

“Outrageous and criminal,” Cammy exclaimed after the report ended. “FGM should be banned and those who force children through it jailed.” He looked to Fina for support.

“Making judgments about something you know little about,” Fina replied, her tone trapped between being playful and being combative.

Cammy heard only the combative part. “What? Are you saying it’s okay to mutilate little girls?”

“No, I’m just saying you don’t know anything about the people or cultures that practice circumcision.” Fina un-cuddled herself from Cammy, shifted far enough away to look directly at him.

“Ah don’t need to know ‘bout culture,” Cammy shot back, sensing Fina’s resolve. “All ah know is that FGM is wrong.”

“Well, I guess it’s wrong if *you* say ‘it’s wrong’,” Fina mocked. She got up from the sofa and walked toward the bedroom.

“Why are you defending the indefensible?” Cammy’s irritation gained pace like water rushing to a precipice.

“I’m not. I just don’t want you passing judgments and making decisions for women in Africa,” Fina shouted back and disappeared into the bedroom.

Cammy scooted to the edge of the sofa but did not get up. He took a deep breath and waited. Several minutes later, Fina emerged from the bedroom, looking fresh and radiant. She did not say anything as she walked past him into the kitchen. She pulled out a packet of sliced bread, a jar of mayonnaise, and a packet of Oscar Meyer cold cuts from the fridge. She scooped some mayonnaise and lathered the bread in two quick swaths.

Cammy resumed the conversation in a tone of studied self-control. “Tell me something. Why are you getting so defensive about FGM?”

“I’m not defensive. What’s it to you anyway? You just said you didn’t need to know anything about the culture or the people who practiced it.”

“That’s because FGM is not about culture. It’s about medicine—about whether the mutilation is necessary. You forget what I do for a living? FGM can cause serious medical problems.”

“Yeah, but I don’t hear you getting indignant at those who practice male circumcision. What’s the difference? Why don’t you try to stop that?” Fina returned to making her sandwich. From the packet

of cold cuts, she pulled out slices of ham and laid them on the cutting board. Cammy observed her preparations from the sofa.

“Come on now, you’re not seriously comparing male circumcision to FGM?”

“Yes, I am. And why do you keep calling it FGM? It’s circumcision.”

“Circumcision, mutilation. It’s all the same to me, Fina.”

“No, it’s not! How you label something affects how you think about it. ‘Mutilate’ makes you think violence, suggests something negative. It forces you to see the practice only one way.” Fina laid some ham, lettuce, American cheese, and tomatoes on the bottom slice of the bread, sprinkled some salt and pepper on it, and capped the sandwich with the second slice. Fina did not know why, but she had a visceral dislike of sandwiches with ingredients protruding from the edges of the bread, so she picked up the knife and trimmed off the protrusions. Bits of meat, lettuce, cheese, and tomatoes lay discarded on the cutting board and the big ugly sandwich was transformed into a small, contoured piece of art, beautiful to behold, layered like a sectional drawing. Cammy watched as she cut the sandwich into two and laid the halves on a side plate. For a moment he considered making a grab for them, but a glance at Fina and the knife in her hand dissuaded him.

“You have it backward,” he said. “It’s the forcing and the cutting that lead to the word mutilation.”

“But that’s not the word the people use to describe what they do. So that means they don’t see the act the way you do.”

“Well, they must be blind. Mutilate works fine for me, ’cos they’re disfiguring.”

“So do you and your patients call what you do at the hospital male genital mutilation—MGM, like the movie studio?”

“Don’t make light of something serious. Like I said, it doesn’t matter what I call it. The practice is wrong and should be banned.”

Fina opened the fridge and pulled out a carton of orange juice. She poured herself a glass, returned the cartoon to the fridge, and set the glass next to the sandwich. She picked up the side plate in one hand and the glass in the other and stood directly in front of him.

“All right,” she began, “so why don’t you object to MGM?”

“You’re not serious. It’s not the same. The medical complications—”

“Do you want to ban circumcision because it violates children’s rights or because it causes medical complications?”

“Both.”

“Ok, then start right here in America! Fight for the rights of innocent Jewish and American boys who are forced into circumcision because their parents and grandparents believe it’s required by their religion or tradition.”

Fina paused, as if waiting for Cammy to decide. He was not sure how to respond, and he sensed that answering the question or speaking at that moment would weaken his argument. He also realized that he had not thought as deeply about the topic as Fina obviously had, and he glimpsed a steely, battle-hardened persona underneath her pliant exterior. Surprised and suddenly aroused, he wanted to make love to her right there and then. That would surely stop the argument!

Indeed, the argument did stop that night, but only because Cammy was called to the hospital. The misunderstanding, however, did not. In fact, it mushroomed. The subject had exposed a troubling side of the other person. It was in this more chastened emotional state that the topic next came up.

Fina had suggested they discuss it over brunch. “At least in public it won’t become a shouting match,” she reasoned.

They were seated at a corner table in the cafeteria of Memorial Hospital where Cammy had just finished surgery. Fina poked at the gigantic salad in front of her and occasionally took a bite from it. Cammy gobbled his chicken fried rice.

“Cammy,” Fina took a deep breath after they had gone back and forth several times. “Instead of being up in arms about female circumcision in far-away Africa, why don’t you do something about male circumcision here?”

Cammy felt his heart racing. With his knife, he swiped the last bits of his food onto his fork and shoved it into his mouth. He swirled the crushed ice in his drink, poked at it with a straw, and sucked. He was rewarded with air and a few fragments of ice. He frowned, determined he would speak to the manager of the cafeteria about soft drinks that were eighty percent ice.

“Well, the reality is,” Cammy began, determined to put up a more vigorous defense of his views, “the risks and consequences of FG... uh... er... circumcision, as you want to call it, are far less for males than females.”

“You know, it’s the double standards and hypocrisy that make me mad. You respect the rights of adults in America and Europe to practice circumcision in the name of religion and personal freedom, but it doesn’t cross your mind that Africans are entitled to the same respect.”

Fina poked at the bits and pieces of her salad, put a forkful in her mouth, and immediately spat everything back onto the plate. She pushed her plate to the side, leaned back on her chair, and took two deep breaths. She wanted to tell Cammy that ever since their first conversation on the subject, she hadn’t been able to ride the high tide of pleasure in their lovemaking; that now her pleasure trickled along and ebbed but never rose and crashed like when they first met; that now it fluttered like a moth around a light bulb, unable to settle; that now it was weak, tinsel-like, and no longer the massive explosions that thrilled and reduced her to pulp.

For his part, Cammy was irritated that Fina seemed to have an answer for everything and was forcing him to retreat. Although he sensed there was more at stake for her, he felt he had to hold his own. Early quarrels are defining moments in any relationship, he reasoned. If he backed down now, he could set their relationship on a course he might not be able to reverse. He did not want to be either the real or the perceived loser in this their first real disagreement, so he felt he had to respond—not to say anything mean-spirited that would escalate the quarrel, but something that would let Fina know that he, too, was firm in his convictions.

“FGM kills a woman’s sexuality,” he began. “You don’t care about that? How can a man enjoy himself if his woman does not?”

“That’s what it boils down to for you men, isn’t it?” Fina chuckled. “The ones who support circumcision do so to control women’s sexuality. The ones who oppose it do so because they want the woman to be able to give them pleasure.”

Cammy became angry. “Ah doh’n mean it like that, but ah doh’n see much wrong with it either.”

“Understand this, Cammy. Most circumcised women do not end up psychological basket cases unable to enjoy sex, okay!”

"That's not my understanding. How would they know what they're missing, anyway?"

"Oho. Did you know research now shows that circumcised males lose about fifty percent of their sensitivity with the removal of their foreskin? You know what that means don't you?"

Cammy looked puzzled but Fina continued. "It means you're no different from a circumcised woman. "You're the doctor. Do you accept the medical evidence?"

"Yuh being silly. Ah talking medical facts and yuh talkin' 'bout sensitivity. Yuh jus' a blind lover of tradition. Ah tell you this. Holding onto the past is like walking on a treadmill. You may be in motion but yuh going nowhere fast. Ah shut my mouth now."

Cammy slid to the edge of his seat and picked up his tray, as if physically to enforce his decision to end the conversation. Fina remained seated, watching him.

"Cammy, I want to make a difference," she said with quiet insistence. "Instead of arguing, you should be doing something about circumcision here and I should be *doing* something about it back home."

"What yuh saying, Fina?"

"I want to go back home and open up a center for girls and women who have suffered because of this operation."

Cammy pushed the tray to the side, turned so he was looking straight at Fina, and grabbed her hands.

"What about us, Fina? We've got something here. You know it." Cammy looked at his watch and then back at Fina. "Ah got to go. Let's talk some more tonight and figure out something, awright?" He planted a kiss on her forehead.

Fina liked both his idea and his tone. For the rest of the day, she rehearsed what she would say. She would begin by explaining a village girl's longing to know about the secrets of womanhood, to become a woman, and to walk in rhythm with other women. Then, she would share the description her cousin, an initiate, entrusted to her about some of the wonders of womanhood. After that, she would tell him about Dimusu and explain the paradox of loving a grandmother who put her through the pain and loving the pain that made her a woman, of accepting the loss that sometimes comes with the cutting. Next, she would justify her respect for the rights of those who would put their daughters through the cutting. After that, she would share her desire to return home, to talk to Baramusu about the rope, the path, and the night of her initiation. But most of all, she would explain how much it would mean to her to have him by her side as they set up a center dedicated to preventing others from meeting Dimusu's fate. Finally, she would tell him, if he had not already guessed it, that she, too, had been through initiation, of sorts.

When they entered her townhouse after a quiet dinner, Fina went to her bedroom, supposedly to change but really to rehearse the points she wanted to make. However, when she returned to the living room, she found Cammy slouched on the sofa, beer in hand, and engrossed in a basketball game. She strode over to the TV, turned it off, put her hands on her hips, and announced, "I went through circumcision you know."

Cammy stood up, like a soldier at attention when a superior officer walks into a room. His instincts had been right all along. Fina's defense of FGM had too much passion for it to have been just a matter

of principle. His pride in his perspicacity was tempered only by a burgeoning recognition that his other senses had let him down. He hadn't noticed anything. He had assumed...thought... believed she was all there, yet she had just said she was circumcised. Had she been faking? She couldn't have been! He'd heard her and seen her many times. But *that's* the goal of faking, to make the other person think the fake is real. His heart pounded. He stared at Fina's dress to see if he could see through it. He wanted to lay her down on the coffee table and to examine her. His lips parted, but the words stuck in his throat.

"Well," Fina broke into his thoughts, "aren't you going to ask me if I really have orgasms?" Cammy opened his mouth, but Fina cut him off. "Don't bother and don't you dare feel sorry for me. I've heard the 'you-don't-know-what-you're-missing' argument. The circumcised, the blind, the deaf, the dumb, and the gay? Yeah, we all know our lives are not as meaningful, satisfying, or as pleasurable as you normals."

And with that she strode back into her bedroom. A few minutes later Cammy climbed into the bed and cradled her from behind. "Ah jus' want you to know ah love you, Fina. Let's not allow anything, anyone, to come between us." The last thing Fina remembered before she fell asleep was Cammy's light snoring and her realization that he was a tender man she wanted to love forever. So, the next evening when he proposed marriage, she agreed.

Later that same night, his chest heaving, his hands roaming, his mast bobbing, Cammy edged his tongue to her ear and whispered, "Ah wan' see the front. Lemme turn on the light."

"No!" Fina arrested his arm as it reached toward the lamp by the bed. "No, Cammy," she said more gently but kept her vice-like grip on his arm, "I like it when it's dark."

He had backed off then, confident that in time he would see her, like his patients on the operating table, exposed, inert, fully at his mercy. But as a doctor who daily saw the naked body, he was surprised at the strength of her aversion to his desire. During weekend days, she studiously limited contacts with him to places where they would have no opportunity to make love, so the battle of the lights became part of their lovemaking ritual.

Sometimes he cajoled. At other times he sneered. He even secretly installed a clap-activated lamp in his bedroom and once, as Fina relaxed expectantly, he pulled back and clapped. Light engulfed the room, but Fina's reaction would have been the envy of any U.S. Navy Top Gun. Before he could see the object of his subterfuge, she had ejected herself from between his legs and from the bed.

"You bastard!" she shouted.

"Come on Fina, ah fed up with all this foolishness! A man can't see his wife?"

"I'm not your wife. And *your* need to see gives you the right to play games when I say I don't want to do something? What do you want to see so?"

"Ah want see de front!"

"No, you want to examine me, like I was one of your patients."

"Maybe ah do. Wha' wrong with that?"

"Look, I'm just not ready for that yet. I don't want to become an object for you to study. This is our bedroom, not your operating table. I just can't do it, Cammy. Maybe it's cultural, but I just can't."

"Don' come with this culture business again. You think your shit don't stink?"

"Ooookay, let's stop right now. What you don't understand, you mock and insult. I just don't like the idea of you examining me."

"We're getting married! What more do you want?"

"Oh, so marriage means I must turn myself over to you? Let's just say I don't feel comfortable with you."

"What happen to you? First, everythin' awright. Now everythin' not!"

"Hey, sex should come naturally. You shouldn't sneak around installing clappers, and we shouldn't be debating. Let it come to you. Maybe on our wedding night."

And so, with the prospect of an end date, Cammy let the issue go.

But leaving things unresolved was not Cammy's style. The next day at work, Fina received a call from a coordinator from Wedplan, a company that specialized in upscale weddings. "Dr. Priddy asked me to call you," the voice on the other end of the phone explained. "Have you decided on a date?"

"Er...I'm busy right now. Let me call you back in two or three days?"

"Well... er...okay, but if you want a summer wedding, we have to start planning right now."

That night at Fina's townhouse, the evening started with some tension. Fina claimed that he was moving too fast and that they should figure things out together. Cammy argued that the plans would move more smoothly if one person made the decisions and consulted the other as need be. But they navigated their irritations and settled on a July wedding. Cammy ordered some food, and it was in the midst of their meal that he proposed that Fina move in at once. He was lonely in his newly completed, seven-bedroom home with the Olympic-size swimming pool.

"No, Cammy, let's wait till we get married before I move into your palace."

"It's not a palace. It's *our* home."

"Let me at least pay for some of the furnishings. I won't be a complete charity case."

"Oh, don't feel that way," he sidled up and hugged her. "It's done then. You take care of the furnishings and anything else you want. We won't sleep there together until we marry. How about that?"

"Well, now that you mention waiting until we get married, maybe we ought to suspend activities altogether till our wedding night." She got up, twirled her skirt, and raised it just enough to expose her underwear. Then she ran into her bedroom.

Cammy sprang from the sofa and gave chase but lost his footing on the area rug and slammed his shin into the edge of the coffee table. He limped into the bedroom, cursing.

Gathering supporting evidence

Constructing Thematic, Character, Style and Techniques Claims using the Subject and Predicate Pattern.

Themes and Issues:

Arguments For and Against Circumcision

 **QR Code Returns Ernest Cole Podcast**

 **Group and Individual Worksheet for Themes**

 **Group and Individual Worksheet for Characters**

 **Group and Individual Worksheet for Style and Technique**

 **Classroom Activities and Ideas for Classroom Discussion and Writing**

 **Essay Questions for Discussion and Writing**

 **Feedback: Essay Evaluation Rubrics based on WAEC Examiner's Report.**