

GIRL FACT

More than 900 million girls and women are living on less than a dollar a day.

FIVE COWS AND A CALF

THE STORY

I'm not sure the exact day he decided to sell me. There was a drought. For three months it was like someone erased all the green from the bushes and grass and trees. The earth turned brown. The rivers became stone. Everywhere was dust. In our mouths, our beds, our dreams. The cows. It was all about the cows.

I am a Masai girl. I live in Kenya. My name is Mary. I am fifteen. I was fourteen when it all happened. For as long as I can remember we have moved. I like moving. We move with the cows. They eat and then, when they need more grass to eat, we move again. Our people believe the rain god Ngai gave all the cattle to the Masai for safekeeping. We live on milk and blood.

I was in school. I was smart. I could remember things and I learned to write faster than anyone in my class. The teachers said I could go far.

My father was very powerful. He had many children and cows. At least forty children, but they don't count girls so it's hard to tell. He had married off several of my older sisters before

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me. Sold them to old men and they had each gone far away. Sold them for cows. I knew that before they became wives they were cut with a razor. I knew they were in enormous pain. Their faces changed. And they stopped asking questions. I didn't want to stop asking questions.

WHEN IT CHANGED

The drought got worse. The cows were so skinny their bones were sticking through their skin. They were exhausted and could hardly move. No grass, no water. Some were dying. My father was becoming poor. He got grumpier by the day. I knew the morning they called us into the field. I could tell by their expressions. Ntotya was dead. That was my mother's cow. My mother was crying. I don't remember her crying before. I realized later she was crying for me. The vultures were already there. They are so patient. They can wait forever.

My father did not wait. I heard them talking. An old man was sitting with him. They would pick a date. My father's voice was harsh. It was about my dowry, the number of cows. The old man was missing an eye. I tried to imagine kissing him. I tried to imagine never reading again. I tried to imagine them cutting between my legs.

RUNNING AWAY

I didn't even wash. I had three hundred shillings in my pocket. I saved them instead of buying my Christmas clothes. I escorted my friend Sintoyia down the road. Then I just kept walking. I had heard of a Rescue Center for girls. It was far away. At first I felt freedom in my step, but after six hours it grew dark. I tried

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