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Stories 4 Wings

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Resilience

Jawara





My name, Jawara, means “the one who values peace.”

For many years, I did not honor my name and coped with situations that filled my heart with resentment, fear, and hatred.

I was born and grew up in Senegal, more specifically in Matan’s area, where lack of money, water, and food gradually wiped away our youthful playfulness and motivation to learn. I remember how the desperation grew at the same time as my body during adolescence.

When I reached 12 years old, I started going out with my cousin Ibra and his friends, who were two years older than I was. I was fascinated every time they told me about places where water flowed from taps whenever you would open them and where you could walk in enormous markets where you could find anything you would like to buy or eat. I remember how we would press ourselves in the mayor’s patio, where an old phone, precious good of one of us, could reach a ridiculous amount of signal that would allow us to see pictures and videos of strong and healthy people eating things we had never seen before, wearing and owning colorful and shining outfits, and having cars and phones.

Bit by bit, we replaced school attendance with contemplation and fantasy of this other ideal world, Europa, dreaming we could go there and finally live well. This quickly turned into an obsession: we started making plans on how to go, how to buy a car to come back to visit our families sometimes, where to work, and how we would send money back here, how water would flow from our tap whenever we would open it... We were very moved by this project, furthermore, because we thought it had the potential to better our lives. We were so far into the dream that we could not imagine the consequences of our decision, though from this moment, my life became hell.

I know so many people have had much worse experiences than I did, but when you are 30 years old and you see this innocent 13-year-old child rushing into what they think will be an adventure, I would like to tell them, “Be cautious; it is not as easy as it seems. Think, balance, imagine other options, and prepare yourself for the consequences.” No one warned us, and one night we absconded to Europe.



I won't get into the details of our struggles because I don't want to revive them every time. I might just say that we were sequestered, mistreated, forced into labor, cut off from contact with our families, and imprisoned (even dying, as Dauda, best friend to my cousin Ibra, did) and that we, little by little, lost hope and innocence.

When, two years after our departure, I finally entered Europe hidden in a truck (I had lost Ibra and had been alone for several months already), my heart was so disturbed that I had lost whatever peace had previously remained. My name was completely estranged from my identity, and I felt I could never rise to participate in, or even enjoy, the peace it promised. I felt like I could not love anything or anyone anyway. Truly, I only wanted to mourn and sometimes dream of Matan's life in Senegal, where hunger was such a fair price to pay to be close to my mom and sisters.

After hiding in that truck for days, we finally reached a country in Central Europe. I remember it was winter, and I didn't have enough warm clothes. I hadn't eaten for several days and was very weak. When I left my hiding place, I walked around the city and heard a few words in French, and that cheered me up a little. I approached a man who was standing there, staring at his phone, and I said in a faint voice, "Sir, I'm cold, and I'm hungry." When he didn't hear me approaching, I think he was frightened by my presence and quickly went off in another direction. I tried again with several other people, and they all looked at me in fear and left. When I saw my reflection in the window of a brightly lit cell phone store, I understood: I was completely dirty, with very long, untidy hair, very thin, and with dark circles under my eyes that gave me a sinister appearance. I was frightened and didn't recognize myself. Then I knew there was no hope, and I lay down, powerless, on a porch on the floor and fell so deeply asleep that I think I fainted.

A soft voice awakened me, calling out, "Boy, boy, wake up!" When I opened my eyes, I thought I saw my mother's face, and I was able to smile for a moment. But it wasn't her, but a woman with brown skin and light eyes who spoke to me in Fula, my native language. She helped me get up and, somehow, took me to a large house where I spent several days, very sick, half-conscious.





There were people there from various parts of the world, some like me, newly arrived, being cared for by others who had gone through very similar experiences. I also met kind-hearted locals who could put themselves in our shoes and imagine and even feel our suffering and who, as they told us, couldn't look away, or at their cell phones, or run away. I learned that this is called “empathy” and “compassion.”

When I regained my strength, I asked for what I had been wanting to do for months: call home. They lent me a phone and asked me to keep my voice to a minimum, as it was very expensive. I had a hard time remembering the number of my mother's neighbor, the only one with a phone in the neighborhood. When she heard my voice saying, "It's Jawara," she screamed like crazy, calling my mother, who took less than two minutes to get on the other end. During the conversation, I could only hear her crying with joy as she repeatedly said, "You're alive, you're alive..." I realized that, yes, I was alive, and that, deep down, that was a blessing.

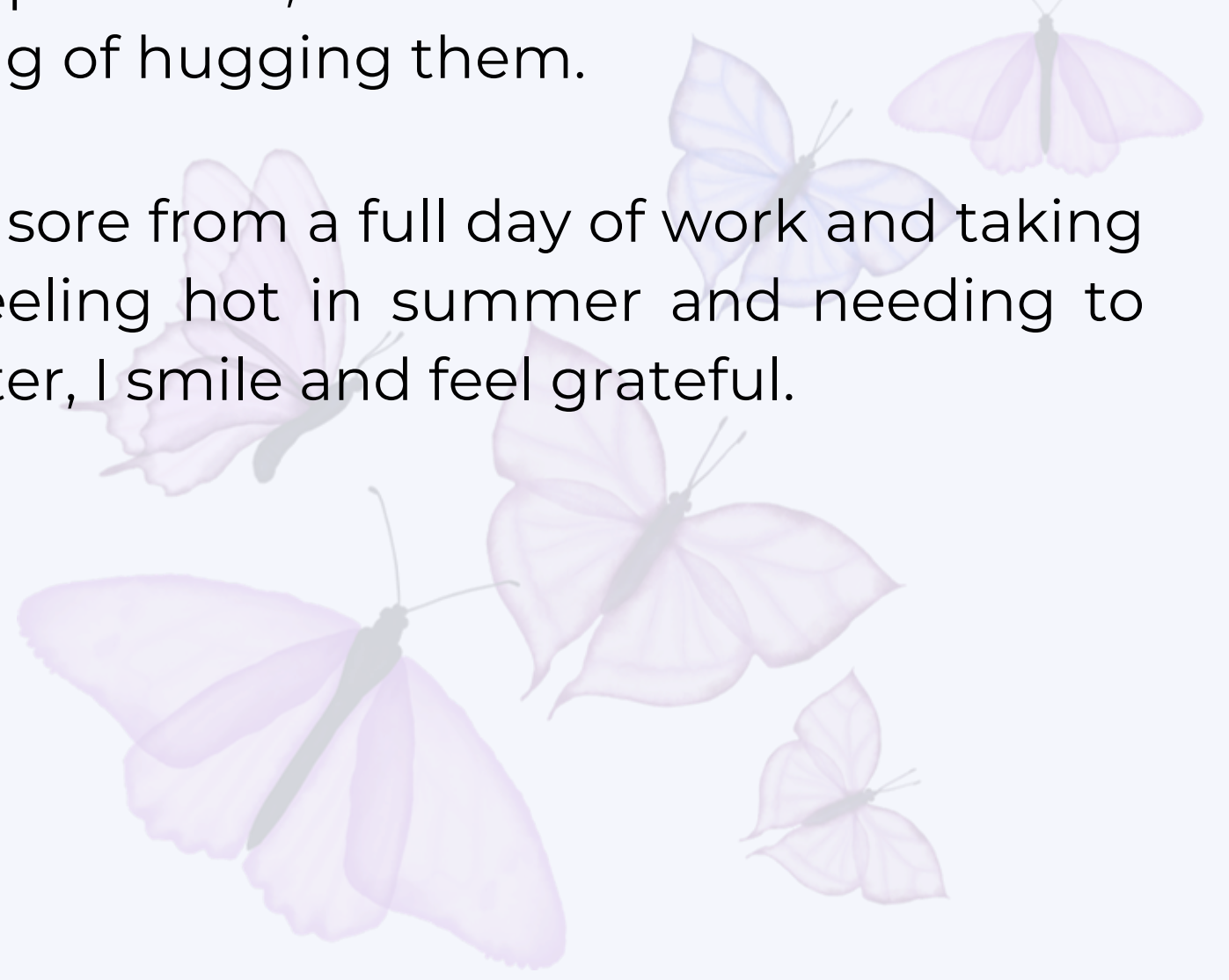
Now, fifteen years later, I have experienced excellent things, as well as terrible, even though they never reached the horrors my travel here included. I decided to honor my name finally, the same as my father's ("Jawara, the one who values peace"), and do everything I could to live in peace and enjoy every day in a place where clean and fresh water flows from the tap every time I open it. I realized how easy it is to fall into despair and fill ourselves with fear and hatred whenever we are socially considered a threat, a risk. I lived through situations of rejection, discrimination, and sometimes violence. I suffered for many years when going out in the street was synonymous with fear because my papers were not legally sufficient, and I put much effort into avoiding falling into the traps of abandonment and anger. To battle against these feelings, I was to assign myself to thinking every night about the good things that happened and not about what I was lacking.

With much effort, I finished my basic studies, legalized my situation, and started working in construction; consequently, the young man of 15 years old became a strong man. After many years of living in foster homes and supervised housing, I could finally pay for a small flat by sharing it with my co-workers. It has also been some years since I started sending some money to my mom, which allowed my sisters to pursue their studies.



Next year, if I have enough to put aside, I will visit them for the first time. I am thrilled just thinking of hugging them.

Each day, after coming home sore from a full day of work and taking a hot shower in winter, or feeling hot in summer and needing to open the tap for a glass of water, I smile and feel grateful.



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