

Rabia Raihane

A Short Story

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A Red Spot

To join the girls in their afternoon play means for me to change into a free bird, whose insides are bristling with a strong desire to fly here and there, or to hide just like a wild rabbit or a restless gazelle that knows how to enjoy being free in a wide open space.

While I was still a young girl of fourteen – an age at which I was supposed to show obedience to my parents as well as timidity – my mother decided she was going to marry me off. It happened because one of our distant relatives, who had visited us unexpectedly, could not lift her eyes off me when she saw me, head bowed and looking at my feet, carrying out to the letter my mother's commands and explicit instructions. Prompted by her intuition, which was never wrong, she told my mother that I'd make a good wife for her son.

Confused, I felt as though I had grown up fast into a full woman when my sister broke the news to me. My mother's face beamed with joy: I would have a husband, unlike my aunt's daughters. But when the subject was mentioned in the presence of my father I became very shy and embarrassed. However, by sunset, I had already completely forgotten about the matter. Halima had peeped round the door – our door which is never shut. 'Come and play!' she said. So I joined her, but after hopping for two squares, I stopped playing and withdrew to a corner. She called my name out several times, and when I did not respond, she walked away: 'May God strike you down, you rotten thing!'

What's happening to me? I remembered the policeman's daughter and her domineering mother. I also recalled the frightened women, some of whom had become spiteful and begun to rejoice at other people's misfortunes. A terrible thing had happened in the policeman's household: his beautiful daughter's handsome bridegroom left her. He just opened the window, in the dark, and jumped out. That gave our mothers a good excuse to call us all in and to reprimand us – from the youngest girl to the oldest one amongst us.



‘You girls bring shame and disgrace upon us!’ they said.

The policeman’s daughter was not a virgin. Shocked senseless when he found out, the bridegroom, feeling betrayed, left her. Her mother retreated into a corner and began slapping her cheeks. Her father got on his motorbike and drove off. No amount of consolation was any help. As for the bride, she just sat there, helpless and vulnerable. Wicked tongues said it was a logical consequence of all the wrongs her parents had done other people: her father, the policeman, was rude and cruel and had a heart of stone, sparing no one with his belt or stick; her mother, emboldened by her husband, bubbled with evil and wickedness.

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The women made fun of the policeman: ‘He was too busy watching others,’ they said, ‘he should have been watching over his daughter’s virginity!’

We girls grew even more anxious and worried. We’d meet and talk. We were wondering where all that astuteness had come from, all that wisdom which we discovered was our shield against losing our virginity: avoiding jumping too high, sitting on anything that had a sharp edge, and peeing where boys urinated.

My heart pounded from fear whenever older girls asked us younger ones to stick out our tongues – that was their way of taking revenge upon us: ‘You’re a virgin.’ ‘And so are you!’ ‘You’re a virgin, too!’ ‘No, you’re not!’ they would tell each one of us as they ‘examined’ our tongues. Imagine the distress we had to endure from that disgusting way of telling who was a virgin from who was not, even if it was just a crazy game.

We had never experienced sex but we had thought about it a great deal. Our mothers’ warnings against having sex, and their admonishments, were like the tolling of bells they rang without cease, which dampened our desire for it altogether.

Mariam lost her virginity behind an unfinished building.

I was not her friend. She was a little older than me, and she was too busy looking after herself and her siblings; maybe because she was the oldest, her mother shifted the burden of looking after them from her shoulder to her daughter’s.

Mariam’s brothers were keeping a low profile; they could no longer draw self-assurance from their father, the policeman, or from their own

physical strength. They knew that they were the talk of the town, reviled and condemned – the kind of response one attracts from people when one commits a sin.

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The idea that Mariam's family would not let this humiliation go unpunished was in the air; the women even brought to mind the father's pistol and the brothers' big knife. But due to a certain divine wisdom, the father and the brothers heeded the old women's talk and their good offices, and abided by the saying 'Fate and the Divine Decree – you want this, and I want that, but God does what He wills.'

The town revelled in the gossip about the policeman's daughter until people eventually lost interest in her story. Mariam kept herself out of sight, becoming meek and totally submissive. She was the household's very obedient slave.

When my mother broached the subject of my marriage to my cousin with me, her face radiant with joy, I stammered and burst into tears. Mariam's beautiful face loomed in my mind. I imagined her alone, kneeling, cleaning and scrubbing, being violently abused by everybody, and accepting it all.

I implored my mother: 'I don't want to get married. I really don't.'
'But I want,' she said.

'Then you marry him!' I retorted, feeling rather disconcerted. I held my head bowed for some time, and when I raised it to look at her, I saw her face had turned ashen at my response, but she soon regained her calm, saying: 'He's nice and rich.'

My face contorted with pain as I said, threatening: 'If you force me to marry, I'll run away.'

My answer seemed to stun her and she sat there brooding. Then I heard her say in an aggrieved voice: 'Why would you do that?'

'Because I don't want to be anybody's slave!' I said, full of anguish and staring hard at a red spot on the tiled floor.

Translated by Ali Azeriah

