

^{the}New Physician

TNP presents Mehr-Afarin Hosseini's short story, "The Birth of Venus," in its entirety.

The Birth of Venus

by Mehr-Afarin Hosseini

*And suddenly, it called my name,
And I became the bride of Acadias....*

– from Forough Farrokhzad, *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*

The day after, as she opened her eyes, she first felt the heaviness of the blanket on her chest and then the sweat that covered her body. Rays of light had pierced through the blinds and disturbed her early morning sleep. As she opened her eyes, an anxious feeling swirled within her body and brought to her mind the deafening silence of those hot Sunday afternoons when Grandma, covered in her praying veil, took a nap on a sunny spot on the rug, and she worried as she was whispering to her doll, that she would wake Grandma up and make her grumpy.... She closed her eyes again, still feeling the heaviness of the blanket. Grandma had sewn that blanket many years ago, and if Ma had not taken it out again a fortnight before – on her 18th birthday – she would have left it to rot at the bottom of her closet for the rest of her life, as she had done since she was 13.

She could hear the dishes clatter in the kitchen. Someone was impatiently scrubbing a pan and a voice argued with itself in a whisper. Her dad banged the door and left. The burbling of water in a bowl and again an indistinct whisper. Tea, how much she wished for tea! Her mouth tasted bitter. Uneasily, she swallowed and with one hand grabbed and pulled the blanket on top of her head. On

the blanket, little *khorshid khanooms*¹ were sewn in between the white and yellow squares, with their unibrows, almond eyes and innocent smiles that made their round faces, lined in small orange scarves, even rounder. Underneath the Qajar² miniatures, however, was only darkness. She wiped the sweat from her forehead and opened her eyes in the dark.

With last night, it had been exactly 14 nights. Last night, like the nights before, she had heard the woman's voice in her head. Frightened, she had sat up on her bed and in the darkness of the window in between the blind strips had seen, for a slight moment, the faint ghost of the woman. Every night, she had groped her way to every corner of the house looking for her, only to find not a soul but herself by the living room window, staring out at the black shadows of the mountains that surrounded Tehran. At nights she felt the city was even more closed in by the smog that descended like a blanket. Every time, she had returned to bed with a suffocating cough and had squirmed restlessly on her pillow until morning. Last night, too, like the other nights, she had gotten up. She had waited in the corridor for her eyes to adapt, but froze when she reached the living room. By the window, the moonlight made apparent the curvy edge of a body. At first she could only distinguish the curve of her spine, then arms drawn around her chest and bent knees that seemed attached to the wall, indistinguishable from the ground in the darkness. The woman's face was hidden behind long black hair. When she called, the woman turned, and then she saw them with her own eyes, the moonlight lining the circle of her large breasts and the two red, ripe apples that were suspended within her loins, right under her navel. She saw them both through the transparent skin, with her very own eyes....

¹ Iranian Qajar miniatures that depict a prototypical Persian female face

² The Qajar dynasty was the ruling family of Persia from 1781 to 1925.

At first, she had decided to run away. She had rushed back to her bedroom, her white nightgown twisting around her bare ankles. But as soon as she had reached the door, without any hesitation she had turned around and had run all the way back to the living room, but had not seen the woman by the window anymore. She had put her forehead on the cold window, gaining her breath. A strange feeling crawled in her body like a snake. Cautiously touching her waist, she did not know why she had felt so anxious....

Distressed, she ripped the blanket away from her head. She could hear her heart beating. She kicked the blanket away and sat up, feeling her sweaty stomach.

Grandma was snoring under her flowery praying veil. Her huge rear that moved up and down with every breath hid her face. She was sitting at the corner of the rug, with a bowl of plums that Grandma had soaked well in water since morning, and she did not dare to move a finger lest she would wake Grandma up and make her grumpy. She crammed a fistful of wet plums in her mouth and the black shadows of her eyes roamed about the bright room in wonder.

She could hear Ma grumbling from the kitchen, calling and announcing to her that it was noon already and then to herself: *discipline has no meaning in this house anymore!* She pressed her palms on the bed and dragged herself to the edge. The nightgown crawled up to her middle. She hesitated, slipped back, and with both hands grabbed the blanket and pulled it up to her chest. She sat there for a while, with her gaze mindlessly fixed on the framed Persian cashmere on the wall. After a while, she lay down again and pulled the blanket all the way up to her chin. Cautiously she moved her hand under the nightgown and touched her waist. She pressed, higher, lower, underbelly. As her hand touched the thin hair, she withdrew it, curling it up under

her breast. It was then that she remembered him. First his hands that yesterday in the secrecy of the stairways had circled around her, and then his lips that had stung her neck and the same good feeling.... But her eyes had stared at the white wall past his shoulder and the crack that had crawled up the wall like a snake. And her hands had involuntarily thrust away his hands that had glided their way up to her breasts, and now she could see his questioning eyes in front of hers again. His beautiful eyes, almond, almond eyes and the tasty bitterness of his mouth. But they were not kids anymore, they were not kids.... She pulled the blanket up to her mouth and bit it.

As the peddler peddled through the valley with his worn-out four-wheeler and sang with a cracked voice his "salt for bread³," Grandma jerked under her veil and woke up. The sunlight bothered her eyes, and she held up the veil in front of her face. She had stayed still with cheeks full of plums. Grandma turned to her.

"Little, little imp, with all the noise she makes, doesn't spare her old granny a little nap," Grandma said.

"It was the peddler," she tried to reply with a full mouth, but Grandma did not hear. She just pulled herself off the ground and wrapped up the veil and threw it to the corner of the room. Then as she rearranged the little combs in her dyed thinning hair, she came toward her, her heavy body tottering from side to side and ripped the bowl away from her hands.

"Your tummy will get sick from all the plum you're eating. I better go make some sugar tea for you," she said. Then she walked away towards the kitchen and left her motionless in the room with a lump in her throat.

She could hear Ma's flip-flops on the mosaics. She thought to herself that if she had not seen the woman last

³ In Iran, it is customary to have peddlers that trade salt for dried out bread.

night, perhaps she could get up like previous mornings, appear without a word by the teapot, and if Ma told her that it would be better if she wore her black skirt for tonight's gathering, say nothing but *all right*. But now that she had seen the woman and had seen the red, ripe apples, Ma's grumblings had become strangely meaningless to her. Her voice had evolved into an annoying high-pitch noise that even if she covered her ears, still penetrated the bone and skin of her hands and found its way into the narrow passageway, so that gradually she felt that the noise came from inside her ears or the same old words bounced back against the little drum and echoed over and over, preaching to her about matters that she just didn't understand. The problem was exactly that she just did not understand anymore. She did not even understand the red Persian cashmere on the wall anymore, nor the narrow-necked blue pot from Isfahan⁴ with the fish design. Now that she thought about it, she actually realized that, in fact, she had never quite understood. Even in those childhood years when she stood up by Grandma's side and imitated her praying moves. Merely since these things were always there, she had imagined that they had to always be there. Or perhaps somehow she needed them to be there, to give harmony to the doings and sayings and hours. A harmony that had the calmness of Grandma's home in it. But now that she had found the woman, she realized that it was more real to her than anything else that she had ever assumed to be real: the peace of Grandma's home, or the red cashmere, or the morning tea, or the khorshid khanooms, or even Tehran. Or even herself.

Ma's distant voice disturbed her train of thoughts. She was asking something but her words were longer comprehensible. She rubbed her chest. It was covered in sweat from the heat. For the thousandth time she told herself that it was spring already, and covering up with such a

⁴ A city in Iran, best known for its historical monuments and Islamic art.

heavy blanket in this temperature was insanity. If Ma had not taken the blanket out, there was no way.... She kicked the blanket away and let her thighs cool. She remembered the bareness of the woman, the curvature of her thighs and her waist and the two suspended apples...and she saw his questioning eyes in front of her and the crack on the wall that like a snake...and her hands that involuntarily grabbed his hands and...no, she really had no choice. This time, she got up.

She stood by the mirror and with a quick look made sure one more time that the door was closed. She gently pulled the light dress up and took it off. Her heart started pounding. No, she was not mistaken. No, they were right there, in her loins, ripe and red, ripe and.... A moment of hesitation. Frightened, she leaped and pulled the blind's rope. Blinds closed. The rope rubbed against her bare thigh. She smiled and her mouth filled with the taste of bitter almonds.

"We should have a small ceremony for the anniversary of grandma's death...."

Terrified she turned toward the voice and bent over to cover her bareness. The black of her pupils had filled the white of her eyes. Her mother was standing by the door, with Grandma's flowery praying veil in her hands.

She ran into the kitchen. Grandma was singing for her: *My girl is demure, my girl is beautiful, I won't give her to just anyone, I won't show her to just anyone....*⁵ Rising up on her toes, she reached for and grabbed another fistful of plums from the bowl on the kitchen counter and jammed it into her cheeks, wiped her hands with her dress and ran onto the mosaics barefoot. As she opened the door, she heard Grandma's voice from behind: "You little imp, the indecency, half-naked you run into the al—.... " The chilly

⁵ Translation of an Iranian folk song, usually sung to unmarried young women or little girls

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wind that blew in the narrow alley in the shade of the trees
crawled under her summer dress.