

# They Stole My Body

Aziza Sebai, Tunisia

That touch was my premature entry into adulthood. I remember that a rough hand slipped under my clothes and began to grab me. It was then that a barrier grew between my body and me. The first time I suffered a sexual aggression was a time of rupture: a rupture with my childhood, that state of innocence where you have no fear. The scene is still difficult to recall, it was so abrupt, but I know that a brutal hand grabbed me from behind and began to touch me. It was not a good start. I think that its aggressive touch was a revelation, an awareness of the heavy mass of my body. I then understood that it didn't belong to me; that I had to carefully swaddle it for fear of it being stolen from me; in a word, that it could be sexually assaulted at any moment. I learnt then to conceal it, and this is what most women around me did. There was always this constant fear every time I went out, every time I walked in the street. So I began to limit going out. This fear has become part of me.

I am not going to tell the story of my life but of Fatima's, my double, who I have invented in my mind but who shares this paralysed body with me.

Fatima was a puny girl; she was eighteen but looked younger. Her curly short hair gave her an androgynous appearance. Her body was slim and her flowery skirt gave a glimpse of her bony legs and prominent veins. But this fragile, almost childish physiognomy clashed with a strong character: Fatima was always at the forefront, ready to firmly stand up for her ideas. She always spoke her mind and did not hesitate to put anyone in their place. It is that paradox that made her a perfect heroine for a

romantic saga. That summer, she had just finished secondary school studies had to leave her family to study in the capital. The last farewells were long and moving but finally gave way to a new chapter in her life. Fatima was relieved with this departure: she could pursue her dreams, she would be an independent woman and would no longer hear the sexist comments of her elder brother. She would be free, liberated. Moreover, she had always been reproached for being stubborn, wanting to impose her ideas in a family conversation or often repeating the notion that marriage is just a form of modern slavery. She could now live her life as the rebel she felt she was. But there was something that hampered this freedom: her body. At the age of nine Fatima had been the victim of a recurring practice in Tunisia called the "tasfih". Although it is increasingly less common in the country, women who have suffered this violence still bear the marks. This ritual is a practice very close to witchery. It seeks to control the sexuality of young girls and is done before puberty, mostly between the ages of six and ten. The mothers who want to maintain their daughters' virginity take them to a woman's house to "close" their bodies. She inflicts seven wounds on their left leg, which, according to the tasfih practitioners, is possessed by demons, and later soaks dried raisins in the blood. The girl has to eat these dry raisins, which are the symbol of her suffering, and from that moment her body automatically rejects any sexual intercourse, whether forced or consensual. This practice is intended to remove both demonised female desire and possible male predators. But in this process of removal, the victim

loses herself, and a part of her being and her dignity is destroyed.

However, Fatima chose to forget, or rather to feign oblivion. For some time she had been going to parties organised by her friends to feel a bit more cool. One Saturday, her classmate Anass invited her to his house for his birthday. The sitting room was decorated with balloons; the atmosphere noisy with champagne corks making loud pops as they were opened. Fatima drank her full. She danced clumsily and made fun of her partner's erratic steps. She followed Anass with her eyes: for some months, she had had a strange feeling about him. She found him charming but despised his pride. She wasn't aware of the nature of this feeling: was it love or simple fleeting desire? But she disliked love and its mannerisms and saw desire as an end in itself. Do I have to talk to him, to tell him my craving? Would he think I am an easy girl? But after a few moments, she made up her mind: let them think what they like...Guys are not afraid to show their desires, why should I be? And she moved towards her target.

'Fatima, don't feel disappointed; sometimes it doesn't work the first time, it has to come naturally, we shouldn't have forced things. You know, I like you a lot, you're very beautiful and... why are you crying?'

'It's closed...'

'What's closed?'

'My body, they managed to block it. It's impermeable.'

Anass was surprised. She began to tell the story of her stolen body.

'So, as far as I've understood, you can only take back control of your body by repeating the ritual?'

'And it has to be done by the same woman who did it ten years ago.'

'Where can we find her?'

'She's dead.'

'So?'

'So, it's over for me. I'll be closed in this desirous yet paralysed body.'

A long moment of silence.

'But one of her female descendants will do.'

That day was the starting point: a new search began, of finding that 'woman' among thousands. Fatima and Anass decided to return to the village where she had spent her childhood and look into it. The winter holidays were approaching and our two travellers started to prepare. The journey was exhausting and the minibus was so crowded that Fatima felt suffocated. When they arrived, they stayed with her auntie Fadhila: she welcomed them kindly, and from time to time Fatima tried to find out about the old "affair". The day after the mission began: they knocked on the door of the Riahis. A young servant opened the door and showed the visitors into the sitting room. Anass became impatient with the waiting. Fatima was overcome by a gloomy and nostalgic feeling: she remembered that room well, that marble table, that wall with cracks. It was there where she had been taken, against her will, ten years earlier. While she was thinking about it, the owner turned up. She was a big woman in her thirties, with long hair. She was called Myriam. The greetings were formal and cold, and Fatima had the impression that this affair would never be resolved.

'May I ask why you came to visit me?' asked Myriam.

'To ask you for a favour...'

'To repeat the tasfih ritual,' Fatima interrupted.

'I don't do it anymore. It's true, I took over after my granny died but I must confess I'm no longer convinced about this practice.'

'What about me, my body? Will it remain broken forever?'

‘Your body needs your care, your caresses; it needs your love to be restored.’

The days went by. Fatima spent most of the time in her room, stuck to the bed. There was only one ray of hope but it had now vanished. With her clothes scattered on her bed, she lay on her back and checked, for the thousandth time, her Instagram account: no news, she said to herself, the country was suffering and the new government didn’t inspire any hope. Suddenly, an ingenious idea crossed her mind: given that she wasn’t able to take her body back, perhaps she could prevent these crimes from happening. After much thought, Fatima clicked on her profile, began writing about her experience and then posted it.

Next morning, she woke to her friend Anass calling:

‘Good morning, why are you calling so early, Anass? I didn’t sleep well...’ ‘Didn’t I tell you that you were a clever girl, Fatima?’

‘No, but, I never doubted it...’

‘Everybody’s talking about it! Lots of feminist associations have shared your story.

Your story is news.’

Fatima jumped; she knew that from that moment on nobody could stop her. She took her phone, the notifications had reached astronomic figures, some important names in the feminist struggle had contacted her in private. But what had really moved her were the messages from the victims: she read over and over again stories similar to hers, or that sometimes surpassed it because of their atrocity. These victims wanted to be heard and asked Fatima to be their spokeswoman. She posted a story, a second and a third, and every time she moved her fingers, a voice was freed. Then, Fatima, the woman with her body stolen, learnt to love herself.

However, it should be remembered that the female body is still an enormous taboo in Tunisia: its status moves between commodification and demonization. The Tunisian woman is sometimes that body offering given to her husband who regards her as just a vulva to satisfy his desires and establishes her value with a dowry, and other times that shameful body that must be concealed.