

Stories Seeking Shelters

Asad Gabi Rahji. Syria

Siwar:

I was born to a porter father and a jobless mother who had no business except to raise her ten children: nine girls and an only son. I never went to weddings with my mother, occasions which were considered a prime chance for marrying off girls. The destitute life I led with my family put me off the mere idea of marriage or family making.

The one son was my father's long-life dream, after my mother failed nine times out of ten, bearing him daughters instead. Those failures were accompanied by high blood pressure, joint pains, insufferable moods and consistent bouts of anger and complaining.

I remember once screaming in my father's face about the terrible fate he forced on us when he brought us into this world. I recall it was right after my sisters and I were diagnosed with vaginitis because we could not afford sanitary pads and were forced to use pieces of cloth instead. Pads were a luxury we couldn't afford on my father's meager salary, by the way.

Even my one poor bra was purchased by my mother from a very cheap store, made of very poor material. Whenever the strap broke or holes found ways inside it, my mother would sew it for me, saying "When you get married, your husband will buy you such wonderful clothes." "No thanks," was always my reply. I would not repeat the same vicious circle of poverty that my father and her started years ago.

Then high school came and I passed my final year, but the awful financial situation made it nearly impossible for me to go to college. My father's unshakeable belief was that education does nothing for a girl. With that final blow, my dream of becoming a journalist like Oprah Winfrey was gone with the wind. I thought if she could be who she was after years of dysfunctional family and poverty, I could make it too, but alas!

I could not become rich or famous but, my God, I became a housekeeper for the rich and famous. Lucky me! Not only that but I also refused to marry any of those who proposed to me. This miserable world does not need more needy people.

My father, however, did not share my point of view. Like the rest of this society, he believed the worst about me. He forced me to undergo a virginity test, in several testing centers, believing that I could have really lost my virginity. While the physicians sympathized, he was anxious, then elated when the tests came back to prove that I was not lying. He looked like a lottery-winner at that moment, and you can only imagine what I looked like at that moment too. Such degradation and humiliation!

Batol:

I am now awaiting the capital punishment. Down that hall, there is a thick noose with my name on it. I can hardly wait until that rope is choking my neck to death like a snake choking its prey before swallowing it entirely.

My story started with a man that I saw frequently at a bus stop on my way to the university. My impoverished family survived on my dead father's military pension, which was not much. Somehow, the man collected enough information about me to know enough to lure me in. He said he was an employee in the ministry's office for student loans and that he could help me get a student loan.

He was kind, decent and bore no evil intentions. And so, I found myself tangled in his web. I visited his office to get that loan. And I loved him. I did. How could I not? His gentleness and his keenness to keep it professional painted him as the ultimate gentleman and the suitable husband for me.

My fault was that I let things get too far physically. It happened only once! I bled after and he reassured me that he would marry me. He promised me that. He even took me to the doctor, who said that I had indeed lost my virginity and that she could fix that with an 800 dollar operation. He said there was no need, we were getting married.

Then he dithered, and dithered and dithered. Two years later and we were still unmarried and I had just finished college and ran out of excuses why I would not marry any of my suitors. How could I have accepted any of them when the possibility of finding someone who would accept me this way was slim to none. If I were found out, my reputation would be tarnished forever. I would be killed!

So, I begged him to marry me, even if he would get it dissolved later. Then he promised me that he was close to getting a new house ready for our marriage and he would propose to my family very soon. Then came the blow!

My ideal man was indeed getting a new house ready for a marriage, but not ours. He intended to marry a rich Gulf girl.

I called and called and he turned a deaf ear.

That is when I shook off the delusions I had been having for two years. Why did I ever think he was going to marry me?!

Extremely incensed, I decided to myself that I needed to take revenge. He was not going to get away with this. I was going to present him as a sacrifice to the gods of this stiff, customs and traditions-obsessed society.

I took the only memory my father had left me, his gun, and showed up at his office. Upon seeing rage on my face, he tried to calm me down and asked if he could take me to a suitable place to talk. He drove us to an empty spot somewhere. There, he proceeded to lie about why he wanted to marry the rich Gulf girl and that her money would give us a chance to lead a prosperous life together.

A lot of drivel to get rid of me. If he married that girl, I would never see him again. He would leave me to a sealed fate. So, I lost it!

He tried to touch me, kiss me, sleep with me!

This is when it got very serious, and I don't regret it. Not one bit.

I snatched my gun and silenced him once and for all.

The coroner wrote in her report that in the moment he died he was sexually aroused, which made my story believable in a way to the investigators.

The rest of the story, however, was a web of lies to them. The doctor who said I lost my virginity and the girls who worked in his office all swore they had never seen me before in their lives. I can't really blame them. I know what this society is like and what they would be embroiled in if they spoke the truth.

Anyhow, I knew the noose was not for me. If it was not in my cards, my family would take care of that.

Nadia:

Ever since I was a child, I had ambitions, perseverance and so many dreams. So it was no surprise when I graduated from high school and college with honors, surpassing all my peers. I went to work for an architecture firm for eight years. Throughout those eight years, I was an

exemplary employee, always looking forward to being the head of my department.

So it made complete sense that I applied for that position when it was announced as an internal vacancy. I was sure with my remarkable work experience, employee evaluation and impeccable resumé that I would get it.

The hiring committee for the position did not think these qualifications were enough. They went in another direction, hiring an engineer from outside the firm called Nader, with less experience, no knowledge of our policies and working context.

But who was I to object?! It was the firm's call, not mine, even if it was completely incomprehensible.

After a while, the stranger quit the firm, having found a better opportunity in a Gulf firm. It had no other option but to give me the position I had always strived for, just for a slightly smaller salary, only 75% less than the stranger's salary!

Amal:

So my father was a polygamist and a womanizer.

And my mother was defenseless.

Both of them made me marry my maternal cousin at the age of fifteen.

My husband was not much of a worker, uneducated, always angry, and constantly anxious, and would beat me whenever I asked for food or clothes for our children.

In the blink of an eye, he became different. He wore his clothes and styled his beard like those Jihadists. He followed a group of his likes like a puppy. He would travel with them for weeks and months at a time.

And he decided to pull our four children out of school so that the boys could join the "masjid's service" (as he called it), and the two girls could work for a lady who took them in, in return for teaching them the Quran and providing religious lessons (child labor obviously).

And so my life turned upside down again and I was desperate for help in any way. I would ask my neighbors for whatever they could give me. And a neighbor's son did give me something.

Just not food or drink.

He gave me what my uncaring husband in name only could not.

So I found myself with child after a while.

Months later, my husband came back from his travels. My fears led me to the police. I admitted to committing adultery. I figured that jail would be a safer place for me then.

So here I am, five years later, in prison.

I have no relationship with my children because now I am no different than a slut. My daughter from adultery went to a foster home.

The neighbor's son had been jailed for adultery too. But he was released a long time ago. And yes...he is now back to normal. Like nothing ever happened.

What a luxury that would be!

Ahlam:

I am currently talking to you from beneath the ground.

I am dead, you see.

I did not just die. My father killed me.

So the story in a nutshell is that I was a religious convert.

I won't go into details about what I was before and what I am now.

This is not an advertisement for a certain religion.

What I am here for is to tell you that this story would have taken another turn if I were a man.

If I were a man, no one would even bat an eyelid at my decision.

How do I know this?

Because my male cousin did the same years ago. He walked away scot free.

But I am not a man.

I am a "girl". I carried the whole world on my shoulders, including my family's reputation and honor. That is what my father believed.

One day, he asked me to go for a stroll to discuss my change of heart. I went with him, excited about his changed demeanor. Maybe he did see me as an equal human being.

We stopped at an empty picturesque area, where nature was the only witness to my murder. As soon as my father made sure no one was around, he beat me with no mercy.

There was kicking, swearing, stabbing with a long iron stick. The stabbing went on for longer than the rest.

He did not even give me a chance to defend myself or a chance at redemption by going back to my religion.

After I closed my eyes forever, a huge boulder fell on my skull, smashing it into pieces.

But I was already gone after the stabbing. He probably did not know that I could see him smashing my skull from above, or maybe from down below.

I do not regret leaving that awful world. I am now in a better place. But I can't help but wonder why my father would do all that!

My cousin did not meet such a fate.

Are we, girls, that much of a burden to our families?

When I came into this world, lots of other girls were waiting here like me. They came to this world the same way I did and for similar reasons.

Every day more girls come in.

We are all happy here. We are not complaining.

But how long do we have to wait until all the other living girls would still suffer on the other side?

Asaad:

Hello.

This is Asaad.

I am the only real voice talking on these sheets of paper.

The previous characters were only archetypes of people we see every day.

In Syria, like many other countries, a huge chunk of its population lives an obsession regarding females and crimes of honor. Sometimes I think to myself, Thank God I was born a male.

Then I think, this is very selfish of me. While I am living contently because of my sex, the other sex lived in perpetual fear, torture and terror.

Some are slaughtered, some are tied in a dark room and others are yearning for protection. It is then that I am sure that my role should be more than being content. I need to be there for them; for every girl who lost her way in the dual standards of this society, those who found the worst judgment on the hands of those who were supposed to protect her.

Sometimes I laugh at my naive, rose tinted dreams and I am aware of what my peers might call me. But I am also sure that the seedling of good still exists and that it will continue to grow and flourish. Females will get their chance at equality some day. One day it will happen!

Until that day comes, I stand with all helpless women, offer my condolences to those who suffered, and support those who fight for their sisters' rights everywhere.