

We Had Bodies

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We were born in Dallas. We were born in Perth. We were born in Brooklyn. We grew up in Poland, Nigeria, Palestine, sunny California. We grew up with money. We grew up without it. Our moms tucked notes in our lunches, brown paper sacks in our backpacks. We rode the city bus to school. We took the train to school. We went to private school. We hardly went to school.

We lived in the neighborhood with good Halloween candy. We lived in homes with lead paint. We lived across the street from our best friend. We lived above the yellow bodega that sold ripe green mangos. We lived where you could lay on your back in the dead grass and breathe in the whole summer sky. We lived where men screamed shameful things at us as we walked to the market. We lived where we knew to cover our bodies or face consequences.

Our mothers taught us how to avoid these consequences, how to cover our hair and our knees and our hands. Our mothers taught us how to sing the same staccato songs their mothers sang to them. Our mothers taught us the sacred prayers. Our mothers taught us how to practice the healing rituals.

When we went to school, a teacher pulled us aside and told us we were brilliant, the best in our section. A teacher pulled us aside and told us they could tell that we did not read *The Canterbury Tales*. A teacher pulled us aside and scolded us for our loud voices and lack of modesty. A teacher pulled us aside and asked us to come back after class. A teacher pulled us aside and asked us not to tell anyone else.

In our youth, we had teachers who taught us about God. We had teachers in synagogue, in mosque, in mass. We taught Sunday school for the younger girls. We learned from the older women. They taught us to deal with matters of blood, to ignore the dark universe of pain open inside our abdomens. We learned how to accept a mahr, how to crush wine glasses beneath our feet. We learned our place in the world. We learned about hard facts and soft sheets. We learned to please men. We learned that we were nothing if we were not pure. We learned that we were bodies.

Of course, our bodies were dirty. Our bodies were dirty so we wept in the oak confessional after we kissed our first boyfriend. Our bodies were dirty so we went under the knife. Our bodies were dirty so we anointed ourselves with oil and salt and water before the evening prayers. Our bodies were dirty so our fathers took us to purity balls and bought us tin rings that our future husbands could someday take off. Our bodies were dirty so we never told anyone about the time that we touched ourselves, about the time that our uncle touched us, about the time that we wanted to touch someone else. Our bodies were dirty. The logic followed that we were dirty too.

We were dirty, but we were good girls. We were always the first ones at the temple on the high holy days. We were always the ones who herded the younger kids to the sanctuary. We were always the ones who got asked to begin the prayer, to break the cleansing fast, to share our testimony before the congregation. We were always the ones who carried the communion, took up the offering, burnt the midnight oil. We were the good girls. We were dirty, but we were pure.

Once we left home, all we knew was to carry on this way. We took a job. We went to medical school. We woke up in the mornings like our mothers and cleaned homes in rich neighborhoods with wide sidewalks and huge trees that changed colors every fall. We married. We made love. We made money. We made babies. We made do. We woke up our

children in the mornings, singing the same ancient songs that our mothers sang to us.

We had questions. Every month our wombs burned; our breasts ached. We wondered why we always bled so much. We worried when we stopped bleeding so much. We never got pregnant. We didn't know how to stop getting pregnant. We wanted sex. We wanted to know why sex always hurt. We were always afraid to ask, afraid to be answered, afraid to be met with silence—so we stayed quiet.

We never scooted close enough to the end of the exam table. We hated the coldness of it, the little stirrups for our feet. We appreciated it when someone thought to pull patterned socks over the footrests but also wondered whether such a thing was sanitary. We flinched and grimaced when the doctor promised us that it would be “just a pinch.”

We shouldered a great deal of uncertainty and pain and curiosity and whenever someone asked whether we had any questions; we never made a sound. We never asked, not because we did not want to, but because we were not allowed to. Because our fathers, husbands, and brothers knew best. Because women were the problem. Because our bodies were shameful. Because we were our bodies and not much more.

A professor told us that there were health benefits to being in a tight-knit religious community. A pastor promised us that we would be saved through the pains of childbirth. A mullah reminded us that we would be blessed for our labors. A wise man assured us that God made women able to bear far more pain.

The doctor asked whether we had any questions.

But how can you have a question if you do not own your own body? How can you imagine a future without pain if pain might be what God created women for?

The doctor asked whether we had any questions. When we said nothing, she should have asked us to tell her our stories. Because how could anyone understand our bodies without first knowing something of our histories, the knotty roots of our humanity and our shame?

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