THE TAXIDERMIST’S NIECE

A novel by

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Sample translation by

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*To my elders, to our children,*

*To my mother and my father,*

*To Daughter and Son,*

*Because heads must turn gray*

*so that others will reflect.*

*To all the women in my life.*

i stand on the sacrifices

of a million women before me

thinking

*what can i do*

Rupi Kaur, *Legacy*, *The Sun and her Flowers*,

Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2017

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It happened four times. Or maybe only once. It depends on how you count. And besides, there is no word for it that fits me in ordinary language. I’m a stranger to myself in that vocabulary. And it really aggravates me, too. The first time was at a taxidermist’s place. I was twelve years old and a few days earlier, while I was sitting cross-legged on the plastic table under the fig tree in the garden of the houses my grandmother rented every summer, my cousin suddenly yelled that my panties were gross. I was wearing a T-shirt and white underwear. It was right after the siesta and everyone was busy behind the house getting ready for the children’s dinner. My grandmother was grilling corn on the cob, my aunts were preparing the meal, and on the terrace the men were setting up the rummy-poker table. It was hot and my younger cousins were chasing each other, some threatening with a bucket full of crabs, others with a jar containing a toad or with the snot from his runny nose. I leaned over to check the crotch of my panties and there I saw a huge brownish spot, as if I’d pooped from the front end. I felt humiliated that I’d been caught in something filthy by the cousin whom I both admired and detested at the same time. And when he saw my embarrassment he, obviously, made me feel even worse, shouting: ‘Dirty Baya, do you know her with her dirty ears and her hair full of lice, ooh, ooh, ooh!’ I threw down my cards and ran to the toilet for a closer examination. When I lowered my panties, there wasn’t any doubt, there really was a big stain in shades of brown and I didn’t have a clue what might have caused it. No sense of having defecated from the front and not a single logical explanation. I pulled my panties back up and, as I was rushing off to my room to change, my grandmother appeared on the patio that all the children’s rooms looked out on. Not far off I heard the chorus of my cousins pick up the song we all knew, preceded by my first name. ‘Dirty Baya, do you know her with her dirty pants, in which she pooped, hee, hee, hee.’ My grandmother asked me what was going on. Terrified and in shock, I answered: ‘Nothing, nothing, I didn’t do anything.’ She came to my room with me to have me show her my panties. She was smiling and I thought that was mean of her. I was all alone in the midst of the pack of cousins. Too old to play with the little ones, too young to hang out with the big kids. The perfect buffer between the adults and the little ones, not old enough to enjoy the immunity of the adolescents. Then my grandmother said: ‘Mabrouk, you’re having your period, you’re a young girl now!’ I don’t know if that was the last straw, but from that moment on nothing was ever the same again.

Until then, despite a shaky standing among my older cousins and an ambivalent attitude toward me from the adults with whom we spent every summer, I’d managed not to be noticed too much. Sure, I still wet my bed from time to time, which was my drama. But my grandmother covered for me. When it happened I’d go to her. Very early in the morning she’d put my mattress on the roof, allegedly to air it out. When the other children were awake she would also take theirs up. A strategy that resulted in her being the only one who was aware of my nocturnal accidents. But after this stain my summers changed. And I was never ever a child again.

I changed panties and my grandmother left with the dirty ones. While I tried to make up my mind whether to confront my cousin, she came back with Auntie Melkharej, a friend of my mother’s and her sisters. For me she was primarily the mother of two boys who were staying with us for a week. My Aunt Tsakhef was with them. They were wearing bikinis and sarongs and came into the room with big gestures and ululations. Auntie Melkharej congratulated me and asked me whether I knew what this meant, whether my mother had talked to me about menstruation yet. She had, although it didn’t help me in the least but to cut her off I answered yes, I knew what it was and that it wasn’t a problem. Auntie Melkharej and her family lived in Vienna, like my mother’s younger sister, Farkha. Freud’s city. I don’t remember anymore what that meant to me at the time, but I was familiar with Freud and the Oedipus complex. I knew there was something shady about it. The something that isn’t talked about and shouldn’t be mentioned. I thought she must have been engrossed in it to ask me such a question and, since she then simply kissed me without insisting any further and my Aunt Tsakhef and my grandmother didn’t pursue it, I told myself that Freud had saved the day.

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My grandmother came from a prominent family and she was famous. Her marriage to my grandfather was one of those they would talk about for generations. Obviously, I wasn’t there and I didn’t even know my grandparents when they were still married, even if in Tunisia I only saw them when they were together. The legend around their union, fed by her sisters, brothers, daughters and sons, was but one of many tales that turned my grandmother into a star that can only be followed and admired in the heavens. Nothing that she did or said was ever quite normal for a woman of her time, but since she was well born, came from an affluent background above the ordinary folks, she was free to drink like a fish, smoke like a chimney, and swear like a sailor, as was the case for certain daughters of upper class families, tired of putting up with the shenanigans of their husbands. She was moreover of an unorthodox modernity for her era, and for ours. She knew everything about everything, had spent her life traveling, and from the ups and downs of her experiences she had developed a somewhat ambiguous form of feminism since it was rooted in Tunisian tradition. It was clear to her that the world was run by women and ruined by men. This conviction, whose propaganda she spread in different ways, was the source of her virile relationship with the opposite sex. In her adult life she had had no other man besides my grandfather, but her brothers, sons, nephews and sons-in-law, even her workers and other domestic personnel, revered her more than they did the women in their own families.

She had high cheekbones, like my mother, soft skin, and a voice that could be deadly both in its candor and charm. She seemed to be stating the truth on every occasion, at least the truth that others didn’t want to hear and, contrary to my mother, did so with such detachment, such indifference, that nothing could be said in opposition to her. Where my mother would right wrongs, fight against an injustice, put things back in their place, be capable of smashing cars, hitting policemen or turning a plane around to get her way, my grandmother needed none of that. She felt no attachment to being right. She told her truth, period, that was it. Take it or leave it and just get lost. When she’d rail against me for one thing or another I knew she was right. All by herself she gave me enough for a lifetime of reflecting upon who I was. She loved crossing the line. Every line, the line of decency, of civility. Every one of them.

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And then my mother arrived like lava erupting from a volcano. Her suitcases filled with gifts and chocolates, her arms hungry for our cuddles and kisses and more. She had gotten a tan in Geneva and she was so beautiful that in a few hours there was no one but she who mattered, to all of us. The men in the family commented on her glasses, others on her blouse, her lovely legs. The women were envious of her shape and her radiant voice. The children wouldn’t stop carrying on with Auntie this and Auntie that. My sisters and I chafed from having to share her, but we were also flattered to see everyone try warming themselves in her light. From the first evening on she took her place at the poker table and the meals following her arrival were brightened by her laughter and the chocolates. She came on Thursday and from Friday night on through the weekend the house was full of her cousins who’d come from Tunis, Carthage, and La Marsa in her honor. There’d been no more blood in my panties for several days and although I knew that my grandmother or my father surely must have told her about it, I’d let myself believe we would talk about it together once we were back in Geneva. But my mother, unperturbable, was more sensible than that. Sunday night, when all her working cousins had gone back to Tunis and its suburbs, she pulled me over to her under the fig tree. My grandmother was busy putting the children to bed and the adults were playing their first round of cards on the other side of the house. My mother took me in her arms. She stroked my hair and said that my father had phoned her, that she knew I’d gotten my period. I cried a little and told her it wasn’t serious, that I was all better now. She laughed and explained that no, it wasn’t serious, that it was this blood that would make a mother of me one day and was making me into a young girl now. She told me it would happen every month, she reminded me we had already talked about it before. I asked her to do something to make it stop, that I didn’t want it every month, that I had to use napkins that had made it hard for me to walk, that I couldn’t swim or dress the way I wanted. I told her about the jeers and the four dinars five centimes. She smiled as she kept stroking my hair and said: ‘My darling, you’ll grow up, and you’ll see it’s not all that serious. You get used to it, you’ll see.’ She asked me if I’d been in pain and explained that sometimes that might happen, too. Then she told me to go to her room where I’d find some more comfortable napkins that she’d brought from Geneva. On the bed I also found a gift-wrapped package with my name on it. It was red and gold and contained a white box that held my first ring. A gold ring with a small tear-shaped red stone. I tried the ring on, it was too big, and I went back to my mother under the fig tree. She kissed me, told me to put the ring away for later and that she was proud of me. Two days later, my father and she drove me to the taxidermist’s.

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One afternoon when we were all together in the room at the back of the patio supposedly having our siesta, the boys joined us. We had to close our eyes and guess what they were doing. The winners would get some chewing gum, which the little ones thought was very funny. We were playing for quite a while when I felt another mouth on mine. I opened my eyes right away but couldn’t tell who had kissed me. The four of them were very close to me and all had the same mischievous look in their eyes. We kept going and every time we closed our eyes I got another kiss. I didn’t know who was doing what but I ended up being able to identify two different mouths. One of them tried to open mine with his tongue and was dripping with saliva, the other one didn’t. I’d started by being intrigued, then flattered. I was surprised, and even if I found the stuff with the tongue disgusting because of its rough texture and the saliva I couldn’t keep myself from thinking about it, I was titillated. Worried, too, that the little ones would find me, as these moments were going on forever in a long silence that could only alert them to the fact something funny was going on. I was convinced that not every child had its eyes closed. Then there was a more insistent kiss, harder, and I abruptly left the room to join the adults who were playing poker. Despite the arousal I’d felt at this game, I told myself again that the situation was linked to the blood in my panties and that all that would come of it would be chants of ‘‘Dirty Baya, her ears are dirty and her is hair full of lice, ooh, ooh, ooh!’, fingers in my vagina, and still more secrets.

Upset about my parents’ absence, I fussed around to keep the adults from sensing my discomfort before I sat down next to my grandmother. She let me stay with them and I didn’t see the bunch of them again until after the poker game ended. They acted as if nothing had happened, the little ones who were following them were carrying on wondering what we were going to have for a snack. I was afraid someone would divulge our games but nobody talked and the group of boys ignored me until nightfall. When we went on our daily walk I was still nervous about that strange moment and fearful that Samra might notice my state. I felt emotions arise in me whose existence I was unfamiliar with, and the stories of my classmates came to plague me. I was intrigued to find out what might be next, but sad also to see that my inquiring looks and my gestures trying to recreate the secretive contacts of the past few days were not eliciting any reaction from the boys.

As the days went by the memory of Ghalta faded. That business became a blur and was replaced by the sensations connected to Maridh’s group. If it weren’t for the constant inspections I had to do of the state of my panties, I could have forgotten it perhaps. I dreaded the boys’ presence while seeking it at the same time and doing everything I could to find myself alone with them. It was stronger than I, between one chore and a moment of quiet at my Uncle Sidi’s or on the roof, I was watching out for them. I tried to read but no book seemed to want anything to do with me anymore. My knowledge of Italian was rudimentary and it took a great deal of concerted effort for me to grasp the narratives, it was a struggle. Moravia gave me a lot of grief and every word or phrase I came up against was an excuse to dream of what the boys might be doing, to wonder when they might come back and when I could expand my meager knowledge of the science of kissing again. Siesta time was now wholly devoted to this game and, even if I didn’t let them mess with me every time, I still made sure that when it did happen I let the moments last as long as possible.

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I wanted to stop time, grab God, I still believed at times that He existed. Grab Him by the collar and ask Him to explain himself. Did every child in the world have to spend their life fleeing from the wily, from a spanking, from fingers or a penis in their vagina or between their buttocks? Is it like earlier in the day[[1]](#footnote-1) or during my experiences in Tunisia, that it would happen while adults were playing rummy-poker or other children could come in at any moment? Is that what growing up is all about? Spending your time protecting all your orifices, your breasts, trying to make sure to never let anyone come too close? And if parents couldn’t do anything about it, if sometimes they were themselves the aggressors like the uncle in his tank top with his kids when he’d beat them with a belt, who could do anything about that? I think that my definitive quarrel with Him dates from that time. How could it be otherwise when He, with complete impunity, decided to let bad people choose the wrong path and cause suffering all around them, while He was saying that, well, there would be plenty of time to punish them later on, at the Last Judgment?

Until that year I hadn’t asked myself any further questions. Without pondering over it, I was content to simply register the contradictions on this issue in the adults’ conversations. So while He was *rahmane* and *rahim*, compassionate and merciful, *wahad* and *wahid*, unique and singular, He was expecting us to make the right decisions and choose the right options to follow the just path? And all the while He could watch the big kids torture us, my Aunt Tsakhef tell lies, Lella and Mlawha have their childhood stolen from them, the boys in my neighborhood hound the only Indian they had around, me, let Assal’s hands burn and let it go? While He had all the power necessary to make it be different? I would also see the contradictions the adults, in all serenity, seemed to carry within themselves. Whisky in hand and witty words at every turn, here take a whack with the belt but let Him show you the path. Come let me abandon you and leave you without anything to eat and then I’ll go on a pilgrimage. And when, as with Ghalta, Maridh, Zoufri, and Lise’s uncle, I called on Him, He wasn’t there.

I owe it only to my sister that I was saved. I could have an adult rubbing up against my behind and penises and fingers inside my vagina while He’d wait a very long time to punish their behavior, and for me to be dead as well. Giving them all the time they needed to start up again? What good is it to be alive if it meant serving as a secondary character in the life of every tormentor to whom He gave the opportunity to choose between the paths of right and wrong?

1. This refers to something described previously in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)