

Shattered

It begins as a traveller's tale.

It's Spring 2002. I've just moved to London.

Gazing out at the overgrown garden, burbling softly with migrating frogs, I pour the tea, and turn on the radio.

"Is Feminism Dead?" A stern voice interrupts the frogs.

"Which way for Feminism, now that the job's done?"

Women, it was announced, had good jobs, enough money, and sexual freedom.

Excellent I thought, reaching for my coat.

Spring it may have been, but warmth it seems is not as forthcoming as sexual freedom and equal rights.

Glancing next door, I recall the previous weekend when I had the unexpected pleasure of entertaining my neighbour's one-year-old baby girl for the afternoon. An hour or so later, at the request of the police, I had the less pleasurable task of photographing her mother's beaten distorted face to provide evidence for the CPS. Her boyfriend, the baby's dad had been to visit.

Three months travelling had told me, that far from dead, feminism was alive and kicking, and scattered across numerous places.

Princess Hymen: How To Eat A Pomegranate.

The first story begins on a dull winter's night
In a small town in Central Iran.

I'm visiting Afsoon

The evenings are long with not much to do,
But gaze at the ceiling,
Gaze at the telly,
Gaze at each other,
Or chat,
And eat the pomegranates
Grouped together on the carpet.

The dictionary sits between us,
Feeding us words when we need to talk,
And Afsoon is showing me Ab Lambu,
A particularly satisfying way of eating the pomegranates.

The telly's on as always.
There's a woman interviewing a group of young men,
Would they marry their girlfriends? She asks,
No they all chorus, they'd marry a virgin.

Afsoon turns to me.
They all say that, she snorts.

We talk about blood, the virgin body, the hymen,
And does a woman bleed the first time she has sex?
I insist she doesn't.
There is no hymen, it's a story, a fairy tale.
And she insists that she does;
That the hymen tears on penetration and that causes the bleeding.
Of course we're both sure that we're right.

I'm saying,
I've never met a woman in my life who's told me she's bled.
It's chicken blood or I don't know beetroot juice or something.
It's blood, she persists, I've seen it. My mother's showed me hers.
She's kept her sheets, and my sisters'.
Are you telling me they're lying?

Afsoon summons the sisters to the house the following day.
The argument somehow has to be settled.

The conversation meanders.
I'm in the kitchen when Afsoon comes in, clearly troubled.
It seems you may be right, she says,
And ushers me into the room.

We sit down, the five of us, and Afsoon translates.

My sister says she was nervous on her wedding night.

So nervous, Afsoon, explains, that the trusted older woman, present in the house
Feared that the required act of penetration might not take place.

Afsoon continues:
She says the woman went to the kitchen, took a sharp knife, came back and with the knife
Cut into her vagina so she bled.
That was the blood that stained the sheet,
The blood that everyone saw,
That was the blood that proved her virtue.

We distract ourselves a while with the pomegranates,
Squeezing them firmly to crush the fruit and release the juice inside.

The knife in this story has not yet finished, however,
It has some further twists to explore.

The other sisters have their say, and Afsoon continues to translate.
One bled a little.
Two more didn't bleed at all.
And all three have been socially ostracised. Only the first sister isn't.
They were all chaste, as social custom requires.
But all are punished
They fell just short of the demands of social protocol.

Ah, now before we leap to judge the old woman
Consider this.
The next time I see my friend she's speeding across a hillside, towards Bahman.
I've been to see the doctor, she calls,
I had to know.
And?
I said, Why don't you tell the people? Why don't you tell them the truth?
She told me she'd spent two hours this very morning. Two hours.
With a couple newly married.
The woman didn't bleed.
The man's demanding a divorce.
She says she's explained again and again.
But says he won't believe her.
He's demanding a virginity test. Says she's lying, and his wife's a whore.
So she's having the test.
But she doesn't stand a chance.
The woman.

It's the man who decides.
And the mullahs of course.

Afsoon's parting shot was interesting,

You had some kind of revolution about these things in England, didn't you?
I say, I don't know if it was a revolution. I need to find out more.

I now know I can find you half a dozen clinics in London that do Hymen reconstruction.
There're two within a mile of my house.
One in West Green Rd,
One in Green Lanes.
My local practice nurse says the hymen does exist,
But laments the presence of those who mutilate

And call it circumcision,
She deplores the double standards,
Which prompts a small but growing stream of women
To come to the surgery asking:
Can you make upstairs bigger,
Leave downstairs as it is?

Cherry Blossom.

Seven years after she hung herself,
Selma's branch shuddered and snapped.
No one saw the papery shred
Flutter noiselessly to the ground.
That was all that was left of her,
Barely discernible from the cherry blossoms
Swirling in the damp Spring air.
The cold wind was sharpened with oncoming rain
Gradually turning to snow.

We were driving, must have been early in the year still,
Not summer, not there anyway.
I just remember the sleet, sticking wet cherry blossom petals to the windscreen.
We met a man.
I didn't think to ask if he was a Bosniak or a Serb.
He was just a man in the rain on the road from Sanski-Most to Priedor.
It was really pouring by now, and I thought we should ask him if he wanted to come in
the car with us.
I was there to give DNA to try and identify my sister.
Well,
The man turned out to be one of the camp commanders in Omarska.
He'd worked 30 years in the mine.

It was just a holding centre for refugees he said.
Huh, they had it better than us.
What about the mass graves I said. Driving as carefully as I could
There aren't any mass graves he said.
Keep driving.
Well alright, they found one.
But only one.

Waitress was a teacher before. She taught maths and economics, I remember her.
She's just returned from Sweden.
Thought she was lucky to find a job so quickly,
Even if it is waitressing in a down at heal coffee bar.

She wakes early,
Shuts out the last few shreds of unwanted memory that plagues her sleepless nights.
Strong coffee and nicotine. "I'm staying off the vodka now," She told me.
Broken English, broken Bosnian, broken German.
I remember that, I used to get all the emotions, and none of the sense.
Oh, the internationals are long gone but just occasionally someone comes in with a clip board to count returnees, and congratulate themselves on reconstruction.

Sun bursts through the clouds. Warms her back.
The snow doesn't settle now.
The cherry tree over the road is shedding its blossom.
She starts the coffee machine,
Hears the door go and a chair scrape the floor.
She doesn't turn round.
She knows who it is.
"It's the same every day."
Serving him breakfast, she fills his cup.
"He's looked at me often enough.
It's clear he has absolutely no idea who I am."
For 55 days, he among others detained her in the foetid shack off the Tuzla road, and raped her repeatedly until she was pregnant and near starvation.
There were seven women there altogether, two of them died.
It was he who watched her as she buried them with her own hands.
She still counts herself lucky though,
She was exchanged in time to get an abortion.
At least she doesn't have to wait for the inevitable day when her own - what would it be now, 15 year old child walks through the door. Not like her neighbour
Who daily watches the children emerge from the school with mounting anxiety.
Or the mother who went to see her daughter's maths teacher, and found herself discussing the child's progress with her rapist.

We're meant to be reconciling now. Some sick mind thought to paint the wall of the school by the paddocks pink. As though that will somehow eradicate the memory. The ice cream van playing its jolly little Serb folk songs remind us who dictates the terms of our survival now.

And the men hang out together, drink brandy, and remember the old days, and the youngsters, think about jobs and the future, but imprinted in my body, is a constant reminder.

I don't live in the past, but the past lives in me,
And anyway, who the hell are you, callow youth, telling your mother and grandmother to forget it all, put it behind us and build your civil society surrounded by criminals and their collaborators?

Green Lanes Traffick.

I'm standing outside the kebab shop,
Watching the cockroaches vying for position in the meat tray.
Rain's collecting in hopeless puddles,
Tumbling down windows, fragmenting the coloured lights of the fruit machines.

There's a woman inside. She's looking back at me.

"There are 40 brothels between here and Manor House."

"I know, I see the men."

My name is Svetlana,
I know my own story.
If I'm dead when you meet me,
There's a woman at the bus stop can tell you.

Exchanged at the border
For \$3,000
My lover,
Who kissed me tenderly,
Touched me
Tenderly,
Took \$3,000
And handed me over.

Locked in a room, the soldiers came,
I worked in the Balkans,
The peacekeepers came,
I worked in the Gulf,
The UN came,
I'm in Green Lanes,
The policemen come
Once a week,
We get a hot shower,
All week,
Cold,
Once a day
Twice a day,
Fifteen times a fucking day,
Waitress by day,
Hooker by night,
The bruises scar
2 broken teeth,
He thought I could suck dick better.

Waitress by day,
Hooker by night,
Sleep 2-3 hours,
Exhaustion,
Frozen,
Glistening white powder,
Sweet love from the trafficker,

2 girls drowned in the Sava,
Trying to escape.
Every night I hear their cries,
As the river churns its warning.

The bus comes,
Only for God.
So, I'm back in the Gulf,
God where does this end?

Survival.

Survival is glimpsed in the way you sew a button on a dress,
Darn a sock,
Make coffee.
It's in the patterns you see on the ceiling as you wake up,
In the way you interpret shadows in the evening,
In the way you feel sound at night.

Leaning on your hands on a wall,
Tears drip down your wrist,
"Everything's fine," you try to convince your mother.
She watches, stony faced,
While the screaming inside tears chunks out of your stomach,
Poisons your food,
And withers your courage.

Ten years later you leave a cinema suddenly
Leave a bar inexplicably,
Cry in the streets for no reason,
Glide through the internet
Talking with strangers,
Never settle.

Fifteen years, you still have to explain the scar on your elbow,
Tattoo decorated,
A pathetic attempt at irony.

Your slightly misshapen nose
Seen as characterful,
Still prompts enquiry.

It's never going home
Not wanting to go home
Longing, yearning for home, for sanctuary, for relief,
But recalling only violation.
Never learning to trust,
Making copies of other people's lives,
And learning to live in parallel.

I was seven the first time I heard my mother laugh.
Really laugh I mean.
It was awe inspiring, terrifying.
Jolts of belly clutching howls,
Eyes squeezed, tears pouring,
Then gulps of air, gasping as if drowning,
Then another explosion,
And calm.
A string of gurgles follows,
Baby-like, bewildering, infectious.
I'd seen other people do it,
But it always seemed like a kind of madness,
Or something preserved for very small children.

Survival is a memory carved deep into the landscape through which you are wandering.
It's the way you gaze across a field at cows munching, ignorant of bloodshed.
You notice the bindweed threaded round the scars of houses,
Discuss the weather with the torturer's son,
Whose steely plough turns the top layer of soil,
Disturbing tiny fragments of bone and pollen.

He recrops the fields.
Birds take flight,
Flowers carpet the valley,
Atrocity becomes an imprint etched in buttercups.

News

So, it ends as it began,
As a traveller's tale.

I keep thinking I should write a carefully worded, detailed reply to that programme.
I could start with the small town in central Iran,

Progress to a big city in Western Europe,
Go on to a provincial town, say in Eastern England,
Where trafficking is domesticated, and renamed grooming
Where if five women are killed,
It makes national headlines,
But if it's one,
"Only one,"
Even locals
Don't think it's news.