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Blood Lines

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BLOOD LINES

Farideh Dayanim Goldin

The salty ocean air was pleasantly mixed with smoke rising from gas grills using volcanic stones, plain old-fashioned ones using regular coals, and smokers using mesquite wood chips. As my American husband and I stepped out of our car and walked around to the back yard of the Bechars, the only African Sephardi family in Virginia Beach that Fourth of July, the aroma of sizzling hot dogs and hamburgers stirred our appetite. In her all-American neighborhood, Sonia welcomed us with a platter of spicy Tunisian meat and herbs rolled in phyllo dough and fried to perfection. I made myself comfortable by her pool, feeling at home as I took in the pleasing aroma of the lamb kabobs that Sonia's Moroccan husband was turning over the charcoal. I knew that my husband, standing next to him, found wonderfully adventurous and exotic what was so familiar and comforting to me.

Sonia inquired about my youngest daughter: "How is Rachel doing at camp?"

"She is fine. But I am not," I told her. "Rachel called yesterday asking for me, but I was out running errands. Since the campers are not allowed to call home unless there is an emergency, Norman was frightened for her."

"What's wrong?" he had asked, "Is everything okay? Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, just let me talk to Mom."

"Mom's not here, Rachel. What's wrong?" He was panic-stricken by now.

"Nothing, nothing, I just want Mom."

Then he guessed. "Rachel, did you get your period? It's okay! You're fine."

My husband was proud of himself for being the one to be entrusted with receiving this mysterious feminine news. But I had missed the experience. I felt devastated about not being at home for my baby.

Sonia looked at me with her big black eyes. She offered me her specialty,

soft fresh almonds marinated in brine. “Rachel is fine,” she reassured me, rolling the *r* in her melodic French accent. “She is with her friends.”

“I know,” I said, trying to hide my jealousy of those friends. I peeled an almond and chewed it slowly, enjoying its silky texture. “She called the next day to say that she had had the best experience. Her bunkmates threw a surprise party for her that night. Her counselors gave them permission to order pizza instead of eating in the common dining hall. They sat on their bunk beds eating cake and ice cream. For tables they used fruit crates from the cafeteria, which they decorated with vases of sanitary pad leaves and tampon flowers.”

Sonia put down her mint tea, spiked with rose water, and joined in my laughter.

“See,” she said, stopping for a moment to reassure me. “Her friends created original initiation rites for her!”

“I still wanted to be the one,” I insisted. “It is okay, I guess,” I sighed, thinking that, after all, my daughter had not entered womanhood alone, but with good friends and their best wishes.

Now Sonia told me how it had been with her daughter.

“Tunisian women have an initiation ceremony,” she said. “When Michelle had her first period, my mom brought her a mirror and lit a candle, telling her to look at herself to see how beautiful she was. We took her out for lunch and showered her with beautiful feminine gifts, lacy bras and underwear, apple-scented bath salts and shampoo – her favorites.”

She lowered her eyes. I knew she was trying to hide her emotions, just the way I often feel ambivalence about sharing deep feelings. She lifted her head up, brushing her chicly cut hair behind her left ear with slightly trembling fingers.

“I don’t have the rest of my family here. In France, Michelle would have had a more elaborate ceremony. Women would have worn their long, gold-embroidered *bouzaglou*, belly dancing to the rhythm of my cousin’s drum. Each aunt, cousin, and friend would have made her specialty for a full day of feasting and celebration: almond Basbousa, pistachio Menenas, date bars, Dabla, those rose-shaped pastries drenched in honey”

Funny! She talks of France as just a place she used to live. As if it were not really home, even though she lived there from the age of thirteen, the same age as our daughters are now. The customs she is talking about are not French, but Tunisian from her background and Moroccan from her husband’s first home.

Why should she? Didn't she tell me herself that she is called pied noir in France, as though the touch of Africa had blemished her forever? Her accent, so French to me, is tinted with a Tunisian impurity to the Parisians

"I fear that my daughter has missed out on all the warmth and love the extended family could have given her," she continued, her big black eyes filling with tears that she was trying to hold back. She paused for a minute to compose herself. Then she looked at me and told me with absolute certitude: "I know you have similar customs as well. You know what I mean."

My friend has the familiar cultural snobbish attitude so many of us foreigners have adopted. The old countries – Iran, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, South Africa – were so much better, we often tell each other, ignoring our own efforts to escape their oppression, their bias against the Jews, their constant threats to demolish us because of our colors or religious beliefs, or simply because of disagreements with their governing bodies. We left the familiar sights and sounds of our own cultures in the hope of better lives for our children, yet we hold tightly to the same cultures, hoping to preserve bits and pieces of them to pass on. We struggle to preserve our religious customs. When faith is not adequate, we attempt to transmit the feelings of those different worlds – worlds our daughters have never seen – by feeding them exotic morsels: Persian *khoresh* made with dill, coriander, and dried lemons; *polo*, basmati rice colored with saffron; Tunisian spicy cigars made from phyllo dough, ground lamb, and spices. We remember now only how the fruits were fresher and more exotic, the herbs more available and fragrant, the family more loving, the customs more authentic. But were they?

I thought back to when I was the same age as my daughter is now. The passage to womanhood was considered supremely private, yet it was so very public. Women spoke about it in hushed voices while shelling fava beans or rolling mung beans on a platter to separate them from pebbles. Men never mentioned it. Then, when I was a child, I often answered the dreadful call from various women in the family:

"Farideh, come, come here to the bathroom and pour water over my hands." Pouring water was the euphemism for helping them wash their rags and bloody underwear. They rubbed the leftover soap into the unclean clothes over the hole in the ground so as not to contaminate the sink or the

wash tub. *Did Sonia have the same customs? I dare not ask. We habitually reminisce about our cultures in their best lights.*

My mother always mumbled curses under her breath, made faces while drinking the bitter spinach juice to delay her period before Passover. Otherwise she could not hold the seder plate as all the adults did, reciting “*Ha lahma anya ... This is the bread of affliction ... Now we are slaves; next year, may we be free.*” Otherwise, she could not dip her bitter herbs in the same bowl of vinegar as everyone else did.

When it didn’t work and she had her period during Passover, she would beat her breast and cry, “Damn the day I was born a woman! There is nothing for a woman but sorrow and pain!” She would drag the unclean mattress, pillow and quilt out of the special closet and spread them in a corner of the bedroom that was away from the traffic. That was her *tame* spot, the impure corner. Strangely, I doubt she minded that part of the custom. During her period, she had her own little space that no one approached, for fear of becoming unclean.

My father took the bed at these times, while my siblings and I huddled under the blankets in another corner of the bedroom floor. There was an indiscernible space around our mother where no one dared to intrude. Somehow even the air touching her body contracted the same invisible filth. She ate from plates that had to be washed separately and stored in a hidden space, where no one could touch them by mistake.

I knew all the rules of the monthly curse, the separation, the untouchability, the fatigue, and the blood. All of it should have been frightening. Yet when my turn came, something was different. I woke up on an early summer day to a wetness between my legs. When I withdrew my hands, I was not terrified of the blood. I was unexplainably euphoric. I felt grown up. Now, my grandmother wouldn’t allow me to bend over with the low broom, sweeping the carpets. I could almost hear what she would tell me, since she used to tell it to my single aunt Farangis.

“Go lie down. Your back is hurting with your flow, go rest.”

Now someone had to bend over the toilet pouring water over my hands to wash my soiled underwear. Now I would not be sent out of the room when women gathered to gossip. I was going to be a part of the sisterhood of women.

My mother beat her breast when she heard my happy news. “*Vay behalet*, misery will be your share in life, for you have become a woman, with all its

inheritance of pain and suffering. This is the beginning of your miseries. Be prepared!”

I looked at her, shaking, not knowing how this catastrophe was going to enter my life. Could there be an antidote to the poison that she felt would destroy me? Yet I could not help the ebullience that surged in my flesh with the hormonal change.

I knew the secret was out when I entered the kitchen that morning. My grandmother was busy mixing potatoes, ground beef, and eggs. My mother took small balls out of the mixture, flattened it between the palms of her hands, and dropped it into the frying pan with oil and turmeric to make *shami*. My uncle’s wife, the bane of my mother’s life, was chopping tomatoes, cucumbers, parsley, and onions to make a Shirazi salad. That was usually my job. She had a meaningful smile on her face and an evil twinkle in her eyes. She was happy for my misery, I understood.

“Don’t touch, don’t touch anything,” my grandmother screamed.

Just the day before, my help would have been welcomed, and orders would have been given rapidly to wash and clean. Now, I was a nuisance. Had my mother known of this reaction? Had she, then, betrayed me by not warning me to hide the secret of my blood? Had she abandoned me by exposing my secret herself? *Could I share this memory with Sonia?*

“Grab a broom and sweep the back yard,” my grandmother ordered, trying to find a job away from the food area for me. When she saw the sadness and hurt on my face, she added, “Go stand in front of an orange tree and tell it, ‘Your greenness shall be mine, my yellowness yours.’ That should bring you luck, a good husband.”

I went out to our big garden, looking at the long rows of orange, tangerine, sweet lemon, *bahtabi*, and sour orange trees lined up against the two walls. I compared them. Which one would I want to be? Sweet lemons were delicacies with their medicinal magic. They had to be wrapped up each winter to save their delicate limbs from frostbite. *Bahtabis* were reserved for special guests only, since they were so rare, large, and beautiful. Sour oranges were used for flavoring the food. They were too tart to eat, but every Iranian dish tasted better with them, more complete.

I had watched my father cut one or two sour orange trees halfway down the trunk, gently making an incision and placing a cutting from an orange or tangerine tree. All our trees had originated from their species, which was hardy and immune to drought and disease. I stood in front of the tallest

one and wished to be as strong, to be needed so as to add flavor to life. I wished that, just like its fruit, no one would dare bite into me for fear of the pungent taste. And I wished to stand erect, as the tree did, not bending to the whims of others.

I went back to the house to face the other women. I took the kettle and made myself tea with the blossoms I had snipped from my orange tree. To everyone's horror, I used a regular cup. I was going to wash my underwear in the bathroom sink and sleep on my own mattress. Let it all be *tame*, impure, every day and forever.

I woke up during the night, hearing my mother tell my father, "Your daughter's misery has started. Pity on her who will soon know the cruelty of life." I buried my face in my pillow and cried for a long time. Why? Was it the humiliation of something so private being discussed with my father? Was it pure sadness, because of the loneliness and separation from the women whose company I had desired? Or maybe I just knew that I had a long journey to make against the strong tides of superstition and feminine inferiority, a lonely journey without my mother.

"Yes, we come from similar cultures," I told Sonia deceitfully, as I bent over to put a slice of eggplant cooked with tomatoes and hot peppers on a piece of pita bread. "When I had my first period, I stood in front of an orange tree and wished for my life to be as green as its leaves."

"Oh, see! I didn't know greenery is the symbol of health and good luck in the Iranian culture, too!"

"Yes, yes," I nodded, my mouth burning deliciously from the spices. "We do have cultural similarities." I winked at her. "That is the reason we get along so well, because we have so much in common!"

We smiled as we each filled up our plates with the delicious morsels, adding a new twist to the menu of our shared American culture. My husband and I praised the lamb kabobs and cumin-spiced fava beans. Sonia and her husband applauded the dilled basmati rice and Shirazi salad that I had brought. We talked of our dreams of visiting our countries. If we could all go to Morocco and Tunisia over some summer, we would fall in love with the food, with the open markets filled with fresh produce. Maybe one day the doors would open again to Iran, where the wine is sparkling, the bread to die for. Maybe one day we could visit each other's countries and enjoy the food where it is most authentic. Maybe.