

The Anatomy

Suad Ali

1. I have something to tell you, a secret.

I don't want to tell you, not really, but something, or perhaps someone, is trying to make me. This thing or one is whispering in my ear, sticking needles in my arm, poking me in the side.

Go ahead. Tell them. Tell them everything.

But who is this person, a whispering presence, this force? Sometimes I think my real face has been painted over, again and again, like stage scenery that's been used for many seasons. I can no longer remember what I'm supposed to look like.

2. Father asked me to get milk and a bag of onions from the

grocer. I took the usual route through the wadi, across the sand, around the green apartment buildings. I passed the crumbly shacks where the laborers live, with bedsheet front doors, clothes hanging on metal racks in overgrown thickets, old carpets pounded into the dirt. This leads to an alleyway that smells of sewage and spoiled milk. You can see into the silent homes without doors. Untended children, as young as two, play with broken toys and discarded furniture, while cars race down the narrow lane and delivery men shuffle past on ancient bicycles. Between the mosque and the white walls of a large villa, the alley becomes dark. Trees and vines clog the passageway.

This is where Yahia and Percy called out to me. Something told me to keep walking, but something else made me stop and listen and walk into the squat stone building. There were no lights, but after a few moments I could see. Broken light bulbs and bottles, tin cans, brown paper bags, straws, newspapers, chicken bones, two mismatched shoes. A dead bird lay on the windowpane as if it were only sleeping.

There was a smell, hard and clean and violent. There was a bucket of yellow liquid and Yahia had to turn off his phone. Percy

came up behind me and grabbed my arms, twisting them into a painful knot behind my back. I tried to speak, but Yahia hit my face. I remember how his eyes found it so difficult to find my own. He spoke but I could not hear the words, or rather I could hear the sounds but could not assemble them into the correct shapes. I only noticed what his face was telling me: that he had something to do but was afraid and compelled to do it. I felt sorry for him, even as I discovered what this thing was.

Percy tightened his grip and reached under my abaya. He pulled down my underwear. Yahia reached under his dishdasha and was doing something. It seemed to take great effort. His eyes were closed, his jaw clenched.

Percy was breathing hard. His breath smelled like cardamom, ginger and curry powder. Yahia opened his eyes and stepped forward. I could see what he'd been doing under his robe. The room was suddenly bright. I saw the white flashcards Mother had bought three years before when I was having trouble with multiplication and division. Yahia touched me. He tried to kiss me, but I turned my face away. He lowered himself, pushed up inside me, and that's when another girl came to take my place. She was a holy person, a superhero. She took my place and carried my suffering. I felt bad for her, but it was impossible for me to stay. I had to get home. I had to buy milk and onions for dinner. Mother would worry if I was late, and Father would be upset.

3. I have always had a weak memory, but an hour later, eating dinner, I had somehow managed to forget everything. I was still a normal girl. Nothing bad had happened. Everything was okay.

I ate as though I had never eaten, as though it were my profession, as though I had not been watching my carbs and calories for more than a year, weighing the pleasure of each cracker and biscuit against the future unhappiness of fat. Mother smiled and patted my arm. She is old-fashioned and superstitious. She thinks it is healthy to eat as much as you can force into your mouth. My older brothers

seemed confused and slightly disappointed. They looked to Father, but he only stared at his plate. He left the table early without finishing his meal. He went outside and did not come back for many hours. He does not take alcohol, of course, because it is forbidden, but when he came home early the next morning, his eyes were red and he smelled of cigarettes, beer and things for which I have no name.

Later, I began to remember. I turned on the radio so that no one would hear me cry. I was glad, for once, to be the only daughter because it meant I had my own room. I began to see what had happened, one image at a time, like a video running on a slow computer.

The girl was quiet and still, a corpse. She did not scream or kick. Her eyes changed color as soon as it began, wearing the knowledge that it was useless to fight. It would only make things worse.

Our bodies do not belong to us. I see that now. This is something else I see in the girl's eyes. She is beginning to understand. If I stop and squint at the first image, I see this, a dull yellow speck in her eye.

They own our bodies and they always have. I was too stupid to see this before, or maybe I saw but did not understand. Or maybe I understood but pretended not to.

My body, especially the unnamable part, is not my own. I cannot even touch it now, or feel it, or see how it is connected to me. It is a diagram from one of Father's anatomy textbooks, or an exhibit in one of those museums where strange objects are pickled in old jars. It is a cadaver at the medical college, a thing to be probed and cut and divided from itself. At best, someone, a struggling medical student, will see my body's weight and substance, the screams that make no sound, and he will be moved to nausea.

4. I'd thought I was safe here, I really did. How could I have been so foolish?

I'm ashamed of my stupidity. I'm almost sixteen years old. I should have known better.

5. We don't have to do it, you know.

Of course we do.

We could do something else.

What?

She's a whore. It doesn't matter what we do with her. Her body is unclean.

But that would make *us* unclean.

No, we are pure. We are here to do God's work. To cleanse the act, to make the clocks run backward as if what she did, that filthy act, had never happened.

She carries the shame herself.

Yes, we are doing her a favor. We are preserving her beauty. We aren't condemning her, not entirely.

I couldn't do that to her.

No, that would be cruel, but we will make her even more foul on the inside.

This is the right thing to do.

Yes.

Okay, let's do it.

6. I read a book once, a secret book we weren't supposed to read, that said it was an act of love, not sin. It was something beautiful shared between two people. This was not how the clerics had described it.

Now I wonder if they were right. They must be clerics for a reason. They understand how the world moves.

They never meant to rape me, you see. That wasn't what they were sent to do. They had mercy on me. They spared me. Because of my great beauty. Everyone always says how beautiful I am. Such a lucky girl. A marriage will be easily arranged.

It won't be easy now.

They had been sent to throw a bucket of acid on my face, to eat the flesh and melt it into a thing of great ugliness. I study at the English-speaking school. The teachers would call this irony.

They were supposed to watch the features drip off one by one. I can see how they might have enjoyed this, or rather, how it might have had a peculiar sort of attraction. Like when you're swimming underwater and your sister swims by and her face ripples and bends and blows like the desert sand. Except when you come up for air, your face is back to normal. Your beauty has not been erased.

It would have taken courage to throw the acid and watch it burn, to be victimized by the violence of my screams and wails. But of course it was not only my face that was supposed to be deleted. It was the shame that I brought upon myself and my family. That's what had to be expelled, like an obscene word painted on a school-yard wall.

7. It came early. I was only eleven. I was frightened. Mother was unprepared, which caught me unprepared. Some of Mother's friends looked at me funny after this. Like there was something wrong with me. She did not speak to some of them anymore. Or maybe they no longer spoke to her.

Father stayed away. Mother spoke to me.

You are a woman now. You must cover yourself. Make peace with the shailah and abaya. You will never walk outside without them again.

Think. When you have something precious, you cover it. You do not want it to spoil. You do not want anyone to touch it, to steal it.

I understood the metaphor but not what it pointed to. What did I have that was precious? No one had ever treated me as if I were precious or as if I owned something of value. Not at all. They had always looked at me, especially now that I was a woman, as if I were a thief who could not be trusted around their valuables.

The black robe and black veil were hot and sweaty and uncomfortable and awkward. That's all I understood. I could not play most of the games I enjoyed. I could no longer run or kick a ball. I could only return to myself when I went into my bedroom, locked the door, and removed the costume that everyone agreed I must wear.

I thought the clothing was the worst of it. The clothing, the bleeding, the headaches and terrible stabbing pains in the stomach. But no, that was only the beginning.

My female beauty, if that's what I have, and the way my body is slightly different than theirs, is a great curse. All the men say it is, and I thought this was wrong and unfair and hurtful, but now I see they were right.

8. We came from Syria—we had to escape from Syria—because father is a progressive man. He is a middle-class professor who opposes the regime. We came here to the United Arab Emirates because it's safe, comfortable, affluent, liberal, tolerant and good. At least I thought it was. But maybe that's only Dubai. Maybe Abu Dhabi is different.

This was the mistake I made, to assume that one thing is the same as another. I can be very stupid sometimes.

9. She deserves her punishment.

She deserves worse.

Much worse.

Alhamdulillah.

She removed her veil in the presence of a man.

They were not related by marriage or birth.

This is a great sin.

A crime.

An insult.

She was racing from one sin to another. Where would it have ended?

We saved her.

She is indebted to us.

She should have thanked us.

10. It could have been worse. They might have killed me. Honor killing. They use phrases like this without irony.

Would death have been worse? I'm not sure.

11. Do you want to know a secret?

Yahia is my cousin. Percy is his best friend. I was supposed to marry Yahia one day. I won't have to now. It almost makes everything worthwhile.

That's the first time I've laughed since it happened.

My brothers asked them to do it, and Father didn't stop them.

I didn't want to leave Syria. My friends, my school...

Father made us leave. Assad is too oppressive. He is a tyrant. I watch Father's eyes and lips when he speaks these words, but there is never a flicker of doubt or self-consciousness.

12. Do you want to know a secret? I want you to tell everyone you know about what happened.

But I don't want you to tell anyone. Forget everything I said. Cut out your tongue. Torture your memory. Burn your eyes. Forget that I ever existed. Forget you ever met a girl with my name. When people ask you, say nothing.

13. This is the last secret, I swear. After that, I will leave and you will never see me again.

They were right. I feel shame. I hope it wasn't too difficult for them, being forced to immerse themselves in my fetid waters. They had such unrelenting mercy. I should thank them.

I want to scratch out my eyes and tear my skin from the bones. I want to bathe in acid and paint my face black so I will never have to look at it again. I hate my beauty and I hate this body that is not mine. I want to staple the shailah and abaya to my flesh so that It will never come off and no one will ever look at me again.