
Opening Extract from...

Blood of Flowers

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THE BLOOD OF FLOWERS

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1

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Prologue

First there wasn't and then there was. Before God, no one was.

Once there was a village woman who longed for a child. She tried everything – praying, taking herbs, consuming raw tortoise eggs, and sprinkling water on newborn kittens, but nothing helped. Finally, she voyaged to a distant cemetery to visit an ancient stone lion, and there she rubbed her belly against its flank. When the lion trembled, the woman returned home filled with hope that her greatest wish would be fulfilled. By the next moon, she had conceived her only child.

From the day she was born, the girl was the light of her parents' eyes. Her father took her on mountain walks every week, treating her as if she were the son he always wanted. Her mother taught her to make dyes from orange safflowers, cochineal bugs, pomegranate rinds, and walnut shells, and to knot the dyed wool into rugs. Before long, the girl knew all her mother's designs and was deemed the best young knotter in her village.

When the girl turned fourteen, her parents decided it was time for her to marry. To earn money for the dowry, her father worked hard in the fields, hoping for a large harvest, and her mother spun wool until her fingers grew rough, but neither brought in enough silver. The girl knew she could help by

making a carpet for her dowry that would dazzle the eyes. Rather than using ordinary village reds and browns, it should glow turquoise like a summer sky.

The girl begged Ibrahim the dye maker to reveal the secret of turquoise, and he told her to climb a hillock in search of a plant with jagged leaves, and then to search for something inside herself. She didn't know what he meant by that, but she gathered the leaves and boiled them into a dye, which was a dirty purple colour. When her mother saw the liquid, she asked what the girl was doing. The girl replied in a halting voice, watching her mother's eyebrows form a dark, angry line across her forehead.

'You went to Ibrahim's dye house alone?'

'Bibi, please forgive me,' the girl replied. 'I left my reason with the goats this morning.'

When her father came home, her mother told him what the girl had done. 'If people start talking, her chances of finding a husband are finished!' she complained. 'Why must she be so rash?'

'Always has been!' roared her father, and he chastised her for her error. The girl kept her head bent to her mending for the rest of that evening, not daring to meet her parents' eyes.

For several days, her bibi and her baba watched her closely as she tried to unlock the riddle of the dye. One afternoon, when the girl was in the mountains with her goats, she hid behind a boulder to relieve herself and a surprising thought struck her. Could Ibrahim possibly have meant . . . that? For it was something inside herself.

She returned home and made another pot of the purple dye. That afternoon, when she went to the latrines, she saved some of the liquid in an old pot, mixed it with the dull purple dye and the wool, and left it overnight. When she lifted the lid on the dye pot the next morning, she cried out in triumph, for the dye had paled into a turquoise like the pools of paradise. She took a strand of turquoise wool to Ibrahim's dye house and tied it round the knocker on his door, even though her father had forbidden her to go there alone.

The girl sold her turquoise carpet to a travelling silk merchant named Hassan who desired it so much that he paid silver while it was still unfinished on the loom. Her mother told the other village women about her success, and they praised the skill of her hands. Now that she had a dowry, the girl could be married, and her wedding celebration lasted three days and three nights. Her husband fed her vinegared cucumbers when she was pregnant, and they had seven sons in as many years. The book of her life had been written in the brightest of inks, and Insh' Allah, would continue that way until—

'That's not how the story goes,' I interrupted, adjusting the rough blanket around my shoulders as the wind howled outside. My mother Maheen and I were sitting knee to knee, but I spoke quietly because the others were sleeping only a few paces distant.

'You're right, but I like to tell it that way,' she said, tucking a lock of her grey hair into her worn scarf. 'That's what we were expecting for you.'

'It's a good ending,' I agreed, 'but tell it the way it really happened.'

'Even with all the sad parts?'

'Yes.'

'They still make me weep.'

'Me, too.'

'Voy!' she said, her face etched with distress. We were quiet together for a moment, remembering. A drop of freezing rain struck the front of my cotton robe, and I moved closer to my mother to avoid the leak in the roof. The small oil lamp between us gave off no heat. Only a few months before, I had worn a thick velvet robe patterned with red roses, with

silk trousers underneath. I had painted my eyes with kohl, perfumed my clothes with incense, and awaited my lover, who had torn the clothes from my body in a room kept as warm as summer. Now I shivered in my thin blue robe, which was so threadbare it looked grey.

My mother coughed from deep in her lungs; the sound ripped at my heart, and I prayed that she would heal. 'Daughter of mine, I can't get all the way to the end,' she said in a thick voice. 'It's not over yet.'

I took a deep breath. 'Thanks be to God!' I replied, and then I had an idea, although I wasn't certain I should ask. My mother had always been the one with a voice like mountain honey. She had been famous in our village for spinning tales about Zal the White-haired, who was raised by a bird, Jamsheed, who invented the art of weaving, and the comical Mullah Nusraddin, who always made us think.

'What if – what if I told the story this time?'

My mother considered me for a moment as if seeing me anew, and then relaxed her body more deeply against the old cushions that lined the wall of the room.

'Yes, you are grown now,' she replied. 'In the last few months, I believe you have grown by years. Perhaps you would never have changed so much if you hadn't done what you did.'

My face flushed and then burned, although I was chilled to the bone. I was no longer the child I had once been. I would never have imagined that I could lie and, worse yet, not tell the whole truth; that I could betray someone I loved, and abandon someone who cared for me, although not enough; that I could strike out against my own kin;

and that I would nearly kill the person who loved me the most.

My mother's gaze was gentle and expectant. 'Go ahead, you tell it,' she said.

I swallowed a mouthful of strong tea, sat up straight, and began speaking.

Chapter 1

In the spring of the year that I was supposed to be married, a comet launched itself over the skies of my village. It was brighter than any comet we had ever seen, and more evil. Night after night, as it crawled across our skies spraying its cold white seeds of sorrow, we tried to decipher the fearsome messages of the stars. Hajj Ali, the most learned man in our village, travelled to Isfahan to fetch a copy of the chief astronomer's almanac, so we would know what calamities to expect.

The evening he returned, the people of my village began assembling outside to listen to the predictions for the months ahead. My parents and I stood near the old cypress, the only tree in our village, which was decorated with strips of cloth marking people's vows. Everyone was looking up at the stars, their chins pointing towards the sky, their faces grave. I was small enough to see under Hajj Ali's big white beard, which looked like a tuft of desert scrub. My mother, Maheen, pointed at the Sunderer of Heads, which burned red in the night sky. 'Look how Mars is inflamed!' she said. 'That will add to the comet's malice.'

Many of the villagers had already noticed mysterious signs or heard of misfortunes caused by the comet. A plague had struck the north of Iran, killing thousands of people. An earthquake in Doogabad had trapped a bride in her home, suffocating her and her women guests moments before she was to join her groom. In my village, red insects that had never been seen before had swarmed over our crops.

Goli, my closest friend, arrived with her husband Ghasem, who was much older than we were. She greeted me with a kiss on each cheek.

'How are you feeling?' I asked. Her hand flew to her belly.

'Heavy,' she replied, and I knew she must be worried about the fate of the new life inside her.

Before long, everyone in my village had gathered, except for the old and the infirm. Most of the women were wearing bright bell-shaped tunics over slim trousers, with fringed headscarves over their hair, while the men were attired in long white tunics, trousers and turbans. But Hajj Ali wore a black turban, indicating his descent from the Prophet Mohammad, and carried an astrolabe wherever he went.

'Good villagers,' he began, in a voice that sounded like a wheel dragging over stones, 'let us begin by heaping praise on the first followers of the Prophet, especially upon his son-in-law Ali, king of all believers.'

'May peace be upon him,' we replied.

'This year's predictions begin with poor news for our enemies. In the north-east, the Ozbaks will suffer an infestation of insects so fierce it will destroy their wheat. In the north-west, troop desertions will plague the Ottomans, and

even further west in the Christian kingdoms, inexplicable diseases will disarrange the lips of kings.'

My father, Isma'il, leaned towards me and whispered, 'It's always good to know that the countries we're fighting are going to have miserable luck.' We laughed together, since that's how it always was.

As Hajj Ali continued reading from the almanac, my heart skipped as if I were climbing a mountain. I was wondering what he would say about marriages made during the year, which was what I cared about the most. I began fiddling with the fringe on my headscarf, a habit my mother always urged me to break, as Hajj Ali explained that no harm would come to paper, books, or the art of writing; that earthquakes would occur in the south, but would be mild; and that there would be battles great enough to tinge the Caspian Sea red with blood.

Hajj Ali waved the almanac at the crowd, which is what he did when the prediction he was about to read was alarming. His assistant, who was holding an oil lamp, jumped to move out of his way.

'Perhaps the worst thing of all is that there will be large and inexplicable lapses in moral behaviour this year,' he read, 'lapses that can only be explained by the influence of the comet.'

A low murmur came from the crowd as people began discussing the lapses they had already witnessed in the first days of the New Year. 'She took more than her share of water from the well . . .' I heard Zaynab say. She was Gholam's wife, and never had a good word to say about anyone.

Hajj Ali finally arrived at the subject that concerned my

future. 'On the topic of marriages, the year ahead is mixed,' he said. 'The almanac says nothing about those that take place in the next few months, but those contracted later this year will be full of passion and strife.'

I looked anxiously at my mother, since I expected to be married at that time, now that I was already fourteen. Her eyes were troubled, and I could see she did not like what she had heard.

Hajj Ali turned to the last page in the almanac, looked up, and paused, the better to capture the crowd's attention. 'This final prophecy is about the behaviour of women, and it is the most disquieting of all,' he said. 'Throughout the year, the women of Iran will fail to be acquiescent.'

'When are they ever?' I heard Gholam say, and laughter bubbled around him.

My father smiled at my mother, and she brightened from within, for he loved her just the way she was. People always used to say that he treated her as tenderly as if she were a second wife.

'Women will suffer from their own perverse behaviour,' Hajj Ali warned. 'Many will bear the curse of sterility, and those who succeed in giving birth will wail in unusual pain.'

My eyes met Goli's, and I saw my own fear reflected in hers. Goli was worried about childbirth, while I was troubled by the thought of a disorderly union. I prayed that the comet would shoot across the firmament and leave us undisturbed.

Seeing me shiver, my father wrapped a lamb's wool blanket over my shoulders, and my mother took one of my

hands between hers and rubbed it to warm me. From where I stood in the centre of my village, I was surrounded by the familiar sights of home. Not far away was our small mosque, its dome sparkling with tile; the hammam where I bathed every week, steamy inside and dappled with light; and the scarred wooden stalls for the tiny market that sprang up on Thursdays, where villagers traded fruit, vegetables, medicines, carpets, and tools. A path led away from the public buildings and passed between a cluster of mud-brick homes that sheltered all two hundred souls of the village, and it ended at the foot of the mountain and the rutted paths where my goats roamed for food. All these sights filled me with comfort, so that when my mother squeezed my hand to see how I was feeling, I squeezed back. But then I pulled my hand away, because I didn't want to seem like a child.

'Baba,' I whispered to my father in a small voice. 'What if Hajj Ali's predictions about marriage come true?'

My father couldn't hide the concern in his eyes, but his voice was firm. 'Your husband will pave your path with rose petals,' he replied. 'If at any time he fails to treat you with honour . . .'

He paused for a moment, and his dark eyes looked fierce, as if what he might do were too terrible to imagine. He started to say something, but then stopped himself.

'. . . you can always come back to us,' he finished.

Shame and blame would follow a wife who returned to her parents, but my father didn't seem to care. His kind eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled at me.

Hajj Ali concluded the meeting with a brief prayer. Some

of the villagers broke off into family groups to discuss the predictions, while others started walking back to their homes. Goli looked as if she wanted to talk, but her husband told her it was time to go home. She whispered that her feet ached from the weight in her belly and said goodnight.

My parents and I walked home on the single mud lane that pierced the village. All the dwellings were huddled together on either side for warmth and protection. I knew the path so well I could have walked it blind and turned at just the right moment to reach our house, the last one before our village gave way to sand and scrub. My father pushed open the carved wooden door with his shoulders, and we entered our one-room home. Its walls were made of packed mud and straw brightened with white plaster, which my mother kept sparkling clean. A small door led to an enclosed courtyard where we enjoyed the sun without being seen by other eyes.

My mother and I removed our headscarves and placed them on hooks near the door, slipping off our shoes at the same time. I shook out my hair, which reached my waist. For good luck, I touched the curved ibex horns that glowed on a low stand near the door. My father had felled the ibex on one of our Friday afternoon walks. Ever since that day, the horns had held a position of pride in our household, and my father's friends often praised him for being as nimble as an ibex.

My father and I sat together on the red and brown carpet I had knotted when I was ten. His eyes closed for a moment, and I thought he looked especially tired.

'Are we walking tomorrow?' I asked.

His eyes flew open. 'Of course, my little one,' he replied.

He had to work in the fields in the morning, but he insisted he wouldn't miss our walk together for anything other than God's command. 'For you shall soon be a busy bride,' he said, and his voice broke.

I looked away, for I couldn't imagine leaving him.

My mother threw dried dung in the stove to boil water for tea. 'Here's a surprise,' she said, bringing us a plate of fresh chickpea biscuits. They were fragrant with the essence of roses.

'May your hands never ache!' my father said.

They were my favourite biscuits, and I ate far too many of them. Before long, I became tired and spread out my bedroll near the door, as I always did. I fell asleep to the sound of my parents talking, which reminded me of the cooing of doves, and I think I even saw my father take my mother in his arms and kiss her.

The next afternoon, I stood in our doorway and watched for my baba as the other men streamed back from the fields. I always liked to pour his tea for him before he walked in the door. My mother was crouched over the stove, baking bread for our evening meal.

When he didn't arrive, I went back into the house, cracked some walnuts and put them in a small bowl, and placed the irises I had gathered into a jug with water. Then I went out to look again, for I was eager to begin our walk. Where was he? Many of the other men had returned from the fields and were probably washing off the day's dust in their courtyards.