

Shackled

Best of Fiction

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I scrubbed the clothes against the rock until Mama's words were gone from my mind. I still could not wrap my mind around the idea of marriage, even if it is my duty. With the clothes draped across the barren limbs, I waited for the wind to dry them before I headed back.

I gathered the hem of my skirt and stepped into the river, permitting the water to freely flow over my legs. I touched the jade teardrop that hung in the hollow of my neck and wished for Baba's wisdom.

I wished Baba would come and swing me around in his arms high above the ground and tell me I was still a little girl and that the world was full of God's surprises. Feeling the heat of the Cambodian sun, I yearned to be the long-haired princess in the old townswoman's story, saved by the handsome farmer and not by some cousin who proposes out of obligation. I ran my hand down the length of my hair and pulled it into a braid. I shook my head. Whatever thirteen-year-old still believed in fairy tales was not a woman.

The air thick and heavy from the heat, I decided to go back early instead of staying and letting the clothes finish. Hoisting the worn basket onto my hip, I started the trek back home and decided to confront Mama. I would tell her no. I decided I would tell her I will marry after I was sixteen, giving me three more years. Even if she became angry and forced her hot hand on my face, I promised myself that I would stand my ground.

As I continued on the dirt road, I started to hum one of mine and Baba's favorite tunes.

*Sleep, my darling, sleep.
Don't cry, my baby.
Your rice with honey is already prepared.*

*Don't cry, my love,
I'll hold you in my arms.
When you grow up
You'll go to school,
You'll gather knowledge,
You'll learn.
One day, my love,
It will help you.*

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I took my time and walked carefully around the occasional rock and stick on the powdered dirt road. I stopped to watch the bird sit high in the tree and to pick at a stray weed at the edge of the path. Twice, along the walk, I readjusted my sleeves and rolled them to my elbows. My long, skinny legs turned a caramelized brown in the baking sun after I tucked the skirt's hem in my waistband. I embraced the heat like a familiar guest.

I paused at the road's edge, where the overgrown road met the city shacks. I shifted the basket of clothes to my other hip and readjusted my clothes. All the once-exposed skin was carefully concealed under thick layers of fabric. I adjusted the scarf wrapped around my head, then approached the city.

The men that sat outside their shacks whistled and hollered as I walked past. I quickened my pace to a brisk walk, but it only attracted more calls.

The Town Tiger stood as my steps brought me closer towards his crumbled shack. At eighty with a full head of black hair and sexual energy, the town bestowed the aggressive name in an attempt to make all women aware of the man.

One quick glance at him brought to mind the last count of girls who had been seen with the Town Tiger that disappeared afterward: he was up to seven. The legend was that he would find a young girl and claim her as his prey. The Town Tiger would hoard her into his shack for an entire night and do whatever he wanted to her. The next morning, he took her and disposed of her. I thought the name suited him well. The man seemed repulsive. All women, and most men, avoided him. I passed him only to cut short the walk home.

"My darling, Chaya." He stood shakily with his arms wide. "Come, sit. Pour a man some tea as his dying wish."

Although I kept walking, I shouted back, "I would rather die!"

"One day you will come to me," he responded as he squatted back onto his wooden stool.

Two left turns and straight past the market, I slowed as I saw my blue tarp come into view. Draped over metal sheets and old gasoline cans, this shack had been the home Baba built for Mama and me long ago. I loosened the grip on the basket, looking around for my sisters and the neighboring children. Normally involved in football, there were no games outside today. Setting the basket by the drying line, I noticed two dolls lying in the open field. Instead of screams that filled the drifting winds, the harsh slap of plastic and the hum of the neighbor were the only noise that hung in the air. I held onto the necklace as I lifted the tarp door and went inside our shack home.

“Chaya, I can see your eyes,” Baba said. “Close them.”

I threw my hands over my eyes as a shield, even though I still could see the light piercing through. I could not hold my giggles.

“What is it? What is the gift?”

“Ok, you can open.”

I opened my eyes to Baba’s large hands. As they unfolded, a jade stone shaped like a teardrop rolled slightly in the center of his palm. I grabbed his wrist and rose from my bottom to my knees for a better look.

Baba lifted the jewel; a black string dangled from the top point. “Baba,” was all I could say. The shine of the jewel showed a creamy mixture of light and dark greens. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

“Remember this whenever you are fearful, my girl.” The heavy necklace nestled perfectly in the hollow of my neck. Baba coughed loudly off to the side, but I sat and held my necklace.

“Chaya,” he gasped as he crawled back over to me. “I will leave very soon. You need to be brave for both you and Mama. Thirteen, you are a grown woman now. Whatever Mama says, you look at that necklace and think of me. Understand?”

“What are you saying, Baba?”

Baba put a finger to my lips then dropped his hand to the teardrop that nestled in my neck.

“My glorious girl, this is your future. Follow your brave heart.”

“But Baba,” I started, but before I finished my sentence, Baba shushed me as Mama lifted the blue tarp door.

As I stood in the doorway, I locked eyes with the unfamiliar guest sitting in the center of the floor of our house. As tradition held, I fell to my knees in a welcome bow towards the guest.

“Welcome,” I mumbled into the ground. While I waited to be released from my crouched position, I was taken aback by the stench that filled the room. Not only was the man unfamiliar, but the scent clung to him the way the air clings to a carcass. His clothes smelled pungent, as if they had been on his back for years. Although Mama had no money left from Baba’s death, she still found ways for us children to have soap.

“Thank you.” The deep voice bubbled in the man’s throat as if it struggled to get out of his mouth. “Come, sit next to me.”

The smell of red curry, boiled fish, and fresh rice began to wash over me as I stood and stepped over the blankets spread underneath the large man. I took in his large face. The skin under his chin and eyes hung

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unnaturally. His pudgy lips sat offset to his nose, but what I could not pull my eyes from were the black holes for eyes. The man's thick arms bulged from a stained turquoise shirt. The dark rings under his arms, I observed, must have been the source of the rancid smell perfuming our small shack. Unblinking, the man sat fixated in my direction. I rubbed my necklace between my fingers and looked at Mama. She kept her back to me as she scooped food into bowls.

“What a beautiful necklace for such a beautiful girl,” he said. The murky liquidness of his voice made me want to run. I watched as his head tilted to the left, eyes wide, waiting for my response.

“It was a gift,” I said louder than I meant, “from my Baba.”

He looked around, then lifted the blanket, pretending to peek underneath.

“Where is this Baba? I do not see one here,” he mocked, as he grabbed the cup of tea from Mama. The man raised his eyebrows when I did not respond. Instead, I stood to help Mama.

“Sit, Chaya. I will finish.” Mama flapped her hands and grabbed the filled plates. With my back to the door, I returned to where I was sitting, but propped my feet underneath me. After the bowls were arranged, Mama adjusted the scarf around my face. She had pulled the scarf back slightly, my hairline exposed to the sweating man.

Mama walked back to the food but spoke to the man with laughter. “My Chaya is one of modest intentions, always covered outside the home.”

“I know what is right,” I spoke as I fixed my covering. I could feel the tension between the man and Mama. The hair on my neck stood as I followed his gaze.

“My name is Narith.” He nodded then plunged his hand into the bowl of curry rice. “I have traveled,” he muffled, “from Phnom Phen. I have heard much about you.”

Rice pellets freed themselves from the corner of his mouth and fell onto the blanket sewn by Aunt Wahila. I wanted to shout at him to pick it up. Instead, I looked away in disgust.

“Your mother tells me you are fourteen, yes?”

“Thirteen,” I said as I studied the mud-caked wall.

His attention caught; I heard his chewing cease. Narith's head turned to Mama, then back on me. With my head still directed towards the wall, my eyes glanced at his face and noticed the upturn of his misshapen lips. His charred eyes had taken on an oily gloss.

“Chaya, you are a living jewel.” He used the back of his hand to wipe off the rice stuck to the corner of his chin. A handful had accumulated around his folded, bulging legs. “Just like the beautiful one

dangling around your thin neck.”

Mama had sat at the corner of the blanket just a foot away from the two of us. With a cup between her palms, I could see the frustration in her eyes.

“Chaya, Mr. Narith has come to ask a favor of you.” I slowed my breathing. Narith pushed the food towards me, a signal that I could begin my eating. My stomach dropped. I had a feeling I knew what would come next from his dirty, contorted mouth.

“You are rare, Chaya,” he started, “you are very beautiful at such a young age.”

I placed my hands on the ground, balling up parts of the blanket into my fist. Baba’s voice screamed in my mind to run, but I needed to hear the words first.

“I have heard about your beauty from miles away, and I had to come see it for myself.” He grabbed a boiled slice of fish and ripped the head off. He tossed the head into his mouth and crunched. I heard the loud pop of the fish eye before he continued, “Look at your mother, poor with no money to buy you food—I have offered her food and a sturdy home with four wood walls. A home much better than this, but only if you agree to give me your hand in marriage.”

With my hands thick of blanket, I shot Mama a look of betrayal. Tears welled in my eyes.

“Again,” I shouted at her, “you know what I want!”

“I will not be burdened with a daughter who refuses to do her duty!” Mama stood and went to the food. Mama filled the second plate of curry rice for Narith. Tears streamed down my face. I opened my mouth to beg for Mama to reconsider, but the rigidness of her back and the sharpness of her hands gathering more food told me that her mind had already made up.

Narith reached across the space and lifted a porky hand to catch a tear that fell from my eye.

“Don’t you touch me!” I swatted his hand from my face. “You will never know what it is like to have someone like me.”

With that, I hiked the blanket underneath the food high over my head and sent hot food soaring over Narith.

I shot out through the plastic door and ran faster than any of the football boys I had seen in the field. As I pumped my arms and pounded my feet into the dirt, I heard the heavy huffs of Narith. I turned to see him, covered in red and brown foods, following closely behind.

Knowing the town, I knew I could lose him in the sea of shacks. I turned right at the market and heard Narith yell to someone to stop the

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girl in the purple scarf. Although I no longer heard his raging breaths, I knew he was still close behind. I ran straight ahead. I felt every heartbeat and each inhale. My muscles strained, and I was slowing. As I rounded the corner, someone grabbed my waist and pulled me inside a shack.

Thrown against a fluffy pillow, I landed softly.

“Chaya.” I looked into the Town Tiger’s eyes. I kicked, but when I tried to scream his hand pressed hard across my mouth. “Stop. He will hear you. Be quiet, and they will go away.”

The Town Tiger released his hand and pressed his finger to his lips. “Quiet, now.”

With wide eyes, I watched as the Town Tiger backed away from me.

He stepped out into the street and covered the hole with a tin sheet. I pushed into the corner of the home as I heard the stool scoot against the dirt outside. Around me, the world fell quiet. As I tried to steady the rhythm of my breathing, I held onto the smooth stone around my neck.

Faint at first, I heard two sets of pounding footsteps. Narith’s distinctive voice rumbled through the makeshift walls.

“You, old man, have you seen a girl in a purple scarf run past here?”

“Narith, let him be.” I covered my mouth, shocked to hear my Mama’s voice ring through the metal. “Stay away from him. Even Chaya wouldn’t run here. I know where she went.”

The footsteps fell quick, but the Town Tiger left me alone for a while before removing the tin door.

“They have left.” He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. I sat against the wall keeping my knees close to my chest.

With his back to me, the Town Tiger rummaged through a wooden box before pulling out a small candle and matchbox. He began a pot of tea inside so I would not have to go outside. I gave my best attempt at a warm smile.

“Do you know,” he started, “that you are the first visitor I have had in three years?”

Surprised, I shifted closer to the kettle but still held onto Baba’s necklace as if it could protect me. Now that the sun had settled, the chill of the Cambodian night had cooled the shack. I had begun to shiver.

“I can come off scary, yes?” The firelight danced across his face. I shook my head in agreement. “I am nicknamed the Lion Monkey?”

“Town Tiger,” I corrected. He furrowed his brow. I grabbed the kettle just as it began to scream and poured tea for him and me.

The Town Tiger began to chuckle as he blew into the steaming

cup. "I thought you would rather die than pour tea for an old man."

I smirked. I grabbed my cup and began blowing on it as well. "Since it was your dying wish, does that mean you will die tonight?"

The Town Tiger shook his head and let the laughter fall from his lips. He said no and set his tea down.

"That man will be back."

"How do you know?"

The Town Tiger looked at the door and made a tsking noise. "I've seen him around many times. He comes for young girls and takes them away. Sends them to brothels," the Town Tiger's voice broke. "You can sleep over there, in the corner, for tonight, but in the morning, I will send you to my friend. He is in the countryside. That bad man will be back for you, so we need to get you out."

I sat in silence and gave my brain the time to process what had happened. The Town Tiger sipped his tea, simply enjoying the company of a person in his home since the last girl.

"I want to ask you a question," I said. He nodded but kept his eyes on the ground. "What is your name?"

The Town Tiger stopped mid-sip and set his tea on the floor. The hard line of the Town Tiger's jaw lessened. He blinked twice before the corners of his mouth shifted into a smile. I wondered if he had ever been asked.

"Boran, after my grandfather." His face relaxed. I finished the tea in the bottom of my cup and smiled. I nodded as he turned and crawled to the opposite side of the shack.

With his back to me, Boran covered himself with a tarp and began to sleep. I quietly placed my cup down and eyed the tin door. I grasped the teardrop necklace tightly between my fingers and contemplated my escape.

Baba bent down so he was on his hands and knees.

"Chaya." He grinned. "No more clues."

I giggled as I ran around him in circles. He continued to chase me as I squealed. Baba grunted then reared back on his knees and pounded his chest.

"Monkey, you're a monkey, Baba!" Baba rolled onto his back and was engulfed by a puff of dust.

"My turn, Baba, my turn!" Crouched low, I dug my hands into the powdered dirt and bared my teeth. With a loud roar, I charged towards Baba pushing away at the earth below my fingertips.

As I lunged in the air, I swung my arms and opened my mouth wide. Baba rolled to the side, causing me to fall hard on the ground.

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I turned to meet the wide-eyed gaze of Baba, who had propped himself up on his forearms. The edges of his jaw had become rigid.

“Baba, tigers attack. You were supposed to let me jump on you,” I said as I brushed off my chest.

“Vicious and scary, tigers can be dangerous. But, you need to understand something, my daughter. If you protect them, tigers will always protect you. Remember that.”

The rise and fall of the blanket told me Boran had fallen into a deep sleep. I remembered what Baba had said about tigers. I released my tight grip on the necklace.

“Thank you, Boran,” I whispered into the night.