

Sheikha Hlewa
The Gate to the Body

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For two weeks she's been listening through the peeling wall to the argument between her mother and father over whether to send her to boarding school. She can't catch most of the details, or understand why they are even discussing it. Not a word has been said about the virtues of the nuns and their role in girls' education. The conversation focuses solely on her and her body: how much of it other people will see, how they will see it, and what consequences that will have.

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When the argument becomes heated, they start to whisper, when they talk about the reason she has to be sent to boarding school.

Her father claims they have reached the size that attracts the looks of the truck drivers passing in the morning on the road running next to the village, while her mother says they are hardly noticeable behind her bra. Even when she takes it off and throws it on the nearest chair, you can hardly see them. She has not gotten used to the garment that traps her body, and she deftly slips it out from under her school blouse and breathes in relief.

But her father swears he saw with his own eyes a truck slowing down and the driver's eyes following the girl hurrying to the bus stop. A sleepy and lecherous driver. If it weren't for the morning mist, you could have seen him drooling.

"Have you no fear of God? Do you want somebody to seduce our daughter? When we're not looking, one of them will grab her and something terrible will happen!"

The size of her breasts and their roundness.

Her mother tells her in a harsh whisper to conceal their growth to soothe her father's wrath.

Meanwhile, she resists all of his attempts to send her daughter away from home to a school meant for orphans and the downtrodden.

“What will people say about us? That we can’t raise our own daughter? What is she, an orphan?”

She doesn’t think about the boarding school very much. She doesn’t know a lot about it anyway. She has heard it is strict and harsh, but she is more disturbed by her parents’ talking about a part of her body. Until now she hasn’t been that concerned with it. Certainly, she never thought of it as an obstacle or something to drool over.

Once, she asked her best friend, “Did your father ever think of sending you to boarding school?”

“Why?”

“How big are your breasts? I mean, what is your bra size?”

“What’s wrong with you? Are you nuts? First boarding school, then my bra size? What’s the connection?”

“I don’t know. I think my father thinks there’s a connection.”

If she hadn’t burst out laughing hysterically at that moment, their precious friendship might have been ruined.

She spends many weeks trying to find the logical basis or equation between the sizes and development of teenage girls, and their refinement.

She spends more time than usual in front of the mirror, stroking her body more than usual. She focuses on her breasts and wonders what they can be compared to.

What comes to her mind makes her laugh. She imagines her aunt picking tomatoes from the family garden and sorting them into three containers: big, medium, and small.

The nun will arrange us, all of the new students, in a line, and sort us like tomatoes, she laughs to herself. I’ll be with the medium ones, probably. I don’t know.

Butheina is the only girl in her class who lives at a boarding school. After her parents died and her brothers’ wives didn’t want her, she was sent to live away from home. She continues to go to regular school in the morning, and in the afternoon she goes back to the boarding school. Her white school blouse is big on her. It is hard to tell whether she went to the boarding school because of the size of her breasts or because of the tragedy.

She doesn’t talk or smile much. That’s how she is, everyone says, and it has nothing to do with her nightly prison.

One morning the tragedy came full circle. Butheina disappeared. The girls said she ran away with a truck driver who delivered supplies to the nuns’ boarding school.

He seduced her, they explained, and she went with him.

She told her mother the news. The silence that fell over her home was the first sign of her victory.

Her father closed the gate leading to boarding school forever.

A different gate opened to her.

The gate to the body.

Her body.

About Sheikha Hlewa

Sheikha Hlewa was born in 1968 in an unrecognized Bedouin village near Haifa. An author, poet, and educator, today she lives in Jaffa. She has an MA in Arabic and Islam from Tel Aviv University and is an instructor and curriculum developer. Her short stories have been translated into many languages and published in journals and websites in the Arab world and Israel. She has published four books (in Arabic): *Outside of the Seasons I Learned How to Fly*, poetry (Jordan, 2015); *Ladies of Darkness*, short stories (Jordan, 2015); *The Windows Are Broken Books*, short stories (Jordan, 2016); *Invitation No. C345*, short stories (Italy, 2018).

