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## **The Chronicles of a Young Egyptian *Sharmouta***

Leila N.

*These chronicles are being published anonymously – not out of my own personal shame or regret. A big part of me would like to put my name on this as a further step of publicly (re)claiming my sexuality and my body. But that is not the nature of how shame works. Shame has many layers and purposes. And its purpose and operation are communal. I carry not just my own shame, but also the shame of others. This anonymity is for their sake – for my family and friends. Therefore, all the names have been changed.*

I was 5 years old when I found something erotic about how my temperature was taken anally. I recall, in private, using the thermometer once to touch my vagina. I didn't understand anything about sex, I didn't have any words to identify or articulate eroticism at this time. But by five, I definitely did know that I should only touch myself in private. That there was something shameful about what I was doing.

At 8, I had my first kiss. I lived in New York at the time, and a girl in my third grade class had come over for a playdate. Browsing through some magazines, we decided we wanted to try imitating the pictures of people kissing that were found. We made out, and of course we locked the door. We never talked about it again afterwards.

That same year my parents decided they wanted to move back to Egypt.

At 9, I was living in Cairo permanently. I had just started a new school. I thought I was cool because I was moving from the United States. But I was not cool. It was a year after 9/11; tensions were high, and whatever Americanness I had reeked through every word I spoke and everything I did. I would quickly try to unlearn it all.

I had a crush on a boy in my class. He was cute, but shy. I was not shy. I made sure he knew I liked him. I told his friends to tell him, and I left a note in his bag. He found my actions *eib*<sup>1</sup> and asked me to stop. I was bringing him shame, he said, as well as to myself.

For my following birthday, my aunt sent me a book on puberty from the U.S. It described the different changes girls typically go through; there was a comic on how breasts transform and look like, and a visual guide on how to insert a tampon or use a pad. I brought it to school to show it to my friends. We knew we had to peruse it in secret because it was *eib* to look at pictures of boobs and vaginas. Some of the girls didn't know we were going to start bleeding every month; one friend cried when she found out. As we all still had a lot of questions, a few told their mothers, who called my mother to yell at her. In turn, my mother yelled at me.

A few months later, I got my first period. I was in fifth grade and we were at Nana's<sup>2</sup> for Eid el Adha celebrations. I had just woken up from a nap and went to the bathroom to find blood in my underwear. I called for my parents. My dad came in and was excited to see this blood. I had become a woman,

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<sup>1</sup> Arabic word that closely translate into "shameful," though there is no English equivalent that captures the social weight of *eib*.

<sup>2</sup> One of the many endearing Egyptian words for grandmother.

apparently. Nana loves to tell this story every Eid and is convinced it was her cooking that brought on my first period.

At school, I told the girls that I had gotten it. They asked me if it hurt. We had religion class that day, but the girls told me I wasn't allowed to attend because I was *negsa*, or impure, and it's *haram* – a sin. So I spent the class sitting outside the classroom. Afterwards, Mr. Youssef, the religion teacher, asked me why I had missed class, and I told him that I was on my period so I was not allowed to attend. He said that it wasn't true and that I was always welcome to the class. Of course, he made sure to remind me to I wouldn't be welcome whenever we went to the school mosque. That was, indeed, *haram*.

That same year, a few friends and I were planning on auditioning for the school Talent Show. We learned a choreography to a Britney Spears song under the watchful eye of a friend who taught it to us. The day before the auditions, I received a call that informed me that they did not want to audition anymore because they thought the movements were too sexy and, therefore, *eib*. I was pissed, so I said, "*tayeb mashi*."<sup>3</sup> Bye!" and hung up. The next day, I went to school to find out that the girls had told the whole class that I had hung up on them because I wanted to perform this dance and, as revenge, had also shared with the boys that I had gotten my period that year. Suddenly, everything about me was *eib*, and everyone from the class gave me the silent treatment for the rest of the academic year.

A year later, I was regularly making out with my classmate, Sara. Whenever we were at someone's apartment, we would find a way to get away from the rest of the girls so we could do it. She had the softest lips and the first time our tongues touched, it caught me off guard. It was an excitement that was foreign to me – and one I didn't want to stop feeling. We were always tempted to go a bit further. To touch one another. We always stopped ourselves before we got under each other's clothes. That was our limit. That was our own personal line of *eib*.

I don't remember how or why we stopped making out. We never talked about it, to the point that I thought I had made it all up because I couldn't talk to anyone about it, least of all to her.

But I couldn't have imagined the feeling of our tongues touching that first time.

By the time I turned 12, my breasts had grown quite a bit. And suddenly so, too, had my teachers' attention to my body.

Following my return to school after the summer break, Mr. Youssef, my fifth grade religion teacher wanted to let me know that I looked like I had "grown up quite a bit" and was "looking good." He had cornered me on the stairs. On another day, I was about to head out of the classroom for the break, when a teacher kindly pointed out that I had left my jacket behind. Coincidentally, I was wearing a sleeveless top.

Sometime into the year, my white male expat teacher, Mr. Peter, asked me to stay after class because he needed to talk to me. Apparently, some of the boys (and their mothers) had collectively complained

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<sup>3</sup> "Ok, fine."

to him about the way I dressed. He explained, for instance, that my tops were a bit too short and that one could see my stomach and back, especially when I bent over. He then proceeded to ask me why it was I was dressing this way. *Are you trying to get the boys' attention? Are you trying to prove something? Is there maybe something you are trying to compensate for?* Since he had studied a bit of psychoanalysis, he thought it was his place to "help me."

That same teacher, Mr. Peter, shamed my classmate and complained about her parents when she came to school with a *higab* on for the first time a few weeks later.

I was 13 when I wanted to play a game called "Seven Minutes in Heaven." The game involved two people being randomly selected to be in a private place together for seven minutes and doing whatever they wanted. I suggested a small group of us play it. We were two girls and two boys. Bassem got my name, as I had hoped, and it was decided that Bassem and I would go first. So we went to a not-so-hidden part of school and sat next to each other. We probably spent six and half minutes waiting around nervously. Then Bassem kissed me, and in the same breath shoved his hand inside my bra. It was all over very quickly. When it was the other couple's turn, the girl said she didn't want to go through with it anymore.

Bassem and I didn't kiss again, but we often chatted on MSN about the kiss. He once asked me if I ever touched myself. I said I did. He then asked me to do it while we were chatting and then tell him how it felt. I told him to do the same.

I don't recall how or when exactly it started. But it was like a chorus of people calling me *sharmouta*<sup>4</sup> when I entered the classroom, in the middle of class, as I left school, as I walked down the street next to school. I was well aware that a few of my classmates (and their mothers) were displeased with me – how I dressed, how I acted, what I said. But we had entered uncharted territory.

Once, during a class debate, I expressed an opinion that was apparently not respectable. One classmate was so angry that he stood up in the middle of class and yelled at me: "You don't belong here! You are not real Egyptian or a real Muslim!"

In the moment, I just laughed at how angry he'd gotten. But what he said had struck a nerve. Everything I did was associated with my respectability as a girl, and my acceptability as an Egyptian and a Muslim. His outburst touched on my own insecurities, my own sense of not belonging. But I was Egyptian, I was Muslim. Wasn't I?

At 14, I had a new boyfriend named Marwan. My mom had heard about my new boyfriend and lovingly tried to explain to me why I should be careful about what I did with him physically. *You don't want to be like a used sock or a used piece of chewing gum.*

Shortly after, I gave my first blowjob. My sister was having a birthday party at home. There were dozens of people over, but I had planned this in advance. I wanted to have my new boyfriend in my bedroom,

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<sup>4</sup> English equivalent: Slut/Bitch/Whore

on my bed. My mom always kept the keys to our bedrooms hidden, but she was out of town and I searched her room high and low to find those keys so that I could lock us in. When I finally found them, I brought him into my room, locked the door, and we finally got fully naked in front of each other. His cum tasted disgusting.

Mr. Peter almost caught us making out in a hidden doorway in school. We had heard someone coming so we paused. He found us standing awkwardly and purposelessly and began to freak out. He “accused” us of hooking up at school and asserted that this was unacceptable, “reminding” us that we were in Egypt. Naturally, we denied everything. He hadn’t seen anything. He had no proof. He insisted that we were lying and said we were going to get an official reprimand on our school records. Then he left.

The next day, we had a substitute teacher (a white, female expat teacher), who knew and liked me, and during the break she asked me if I had heard about the couple that was caught making out. Apparently it was a hot topic of discussion in the teachers’ lounge, with everyone taking sides about whether they should be punished or not. They didn’t know the names of the students, she said. So I, of course, pretended to be oblivious. She shared her thoughts on Egypt being so repressive when it came to intimacy, and that our private, international school should be a refuge for these couples to be able to be together.

So there I was. The object of debate between one expat trying to save my culture, and the other trying to save me from it. And all the while, I was wondering where my new hookup spot would be.

The girls’ bathroom. It was perfect because it was close by – it wasn’t actually perfect, but it would have to do. We were in two different classes, so we would text each other and organize dates in a bathroom stall. We typically planned to meet during religion class because the teachers didn’t seem to notice that we were away for a while. I was adamant that we meet in the girls’ bathroom; it was my protection strategy. For some reason, it felt safer than hooking up in the boys’ bathroom. Maybe I thought I could blame it on the guy coming into the girls’ bathroom if we were caught? I do not know. It was the illusion of being safe(r) and it was all I needed to get down on my knees in the bathroom stall and suck him off. It took us a few hookups to find ways to be subtle and not make a mess. The first time, he came on my skirt, so I had to wash it off, then walked back to class with a huge water stain. Another time, he came all over the bathroom floor, so we had to clean that, too. Eventually we got the hang of either making sure he grabbed a tissue in time, or me swallowing, depending on my mood.

Marwan and I were on and off. The relationship was shitty, but the sex was good. Even though we were broken up, we were still hooking up. One weekend, we were away at a friend’s house by the beach. Marwan and I were having a hard time finding a private place to be alone. We were desperate to get our hands on one another. One morning, a group of us were lying around the room sleeping. He and I were next to one another, sharing a bed with another two people. We woke up and kept staring at each other. We slowly and quietly put our hands in each other’s pants, and began masturbating one another. I loved finally having his fingers inside of me. We came at the same time. We were extremely quiet and tried to be as still as possible throughout. It turned out, though, that someone wasn’t actually asleep, and heard us. It was a popular rumor back at school, which I, of course, denied.

After Marwan and I were completely over, things changed. He started getting violent with me. He would wrestle and pin me to the ground. He would push me up against walls and hold me there so tightly that he left bruises on my arms. He did this publicly, in the middle of school. He loved leaving bruises on me and then pointing them out later, like he owned me. Sometimes, he genuinely thought he was being playful. Like the only way he could be physically close to me was by pushing up against me. Other times, it was meant to just be painful because I fought back, hard. And then at times, it was both playful and painful, and I would find myself suddenly turned on as he was on top of me pinning me to the ground.

Despite my many protests and pleas for people to come to my defense, no one intervened. His mishandlings went on until I had a new boyfriend. That was when Marwan felt he had to “hand over” my body. Not to me – but to this new guy. I was 16.

At 17, Marwan had become the bad boy of the class. He was a bully, not just to me, but to many people. So when I started dating Hassan, the class’s most “respectable” and well-behaved boy, people at school commented that I was dating in extremes.

Hassan and I first hooked up on the rooftop of my building. I had taken him up to show him the view from up there. But I really wanted the view to segue into getting on top of him on the very public yet very private rooftop. The rooftop was absolutely filthy, having accumulated lots of trash over the years, and left our clothes in a mess. But it was a perfect hookup spot. The next time, I brought a blanket and stored it up there.

One weekend, my family was going to be away for a night and I was going to have the apartment completely to myself. I told Hassan to come over. Hassan and I had hooked up in numerous different places: school, the movie theater, an abandoned public garden, bathroom stalls, elevators, and of course, the rooftop. And there was something erotic about the risk of these public places – at first. But after countless times of almost getting caught, nothing and no place was as sexy as the safety of being able to do whatever we wanted behind closed doors. The day he came over to my empty apartment, we were so turned on by the privacy that we hooked up everywhere. I came in my bedroom, in the TV room, in the living room, in the kitchen, in the hallways, on the couch, on the bed, on the floor, on the table. We had all this space and we were not going to waste any inch of it – except, of course, my mother’s room; that would have been too shameless.

One month, my period was late. My knowledge of sexual health and reproduction was pretty limited, and I was convinced I was pregnant. I got so anxious I decided I had to take a pregnancy test. Did they sell pregnancy tests in Egypt? Would they allow me, a girl in high school, to buy one? Would I be arrested? Would I need to show proof of marriage? I didn’t know. All I knew was that my period was late and I had to get my hands on a test. I borrowed clothes from my mother’s closet, and put on her heels, makeup, and a ring that could pass as a *debla*, or wedding band. I went to the pharmacy, speaking the most American English I could manage. I was finally using my partial “otherness” to my advantage. I don’t know if I fooled them, but they sold me the test. I walked out of the pharmacy and ran into Hassan’s car, who had driven me. I was so scared of getting caught, but relieved to finally have that

test. The obvious question is why didn't Hassan, whose male privilege would have provided him with additional layers of protection, just go in and buy this test? It turned out he was more ashamed than I was scared.

After one of our regular hookups on the rooftop, Hassan told me that he sometimes felt guilty about what we were doing, that we were doing something *haram*. I told him that I did not want to hook up with him if he felt it was wrong. He then quickly took it back and started kissing and undressing me again for round two. Later on, when we would fight about my sexual history, he would accuse me of corrupting him, calling me *sharmouta*. But the hookups continued.

After a huge fight, likely the end of our relationship, I asked Hassan to take me home. We were parked in front of my building and I was about to leave when he insisted we go up to the rooftop. I said I didn't want to hook up; I was extremely mad and hurt. He said he just wanted us to talk, and promised it wasn't about hooking up. A part of me didn't believe him. But I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. We went up and sat there for a while, talking intermittently. He then came in to kiss me. I moved my head away and said I didn't want to. "If only you had said that to other guys you hooked up with before," was his response. I was furious. But I sat there. He came in to kiss me again and, again, I said I didn't want to. He kept kissing and touching me despite my protests. Eventually he was laying on top of me, and it was like I had left my body. I just lay there motionless as he did what he pleased, trying to remove myself from the situation without moving or making a sound. Then it was over. The next day, I confronted him and told him that what he did wasn't okay, that I hadn't consented. He was hurt that I would accuse him of this, and said that if I had really wanted him stop, I would have left.

We broke up soon after.

## Epilogue

*I struggled to write this. I struggled to remember all these experiences. Some of them I laughed at and enjoyed reminiscing about. Others caught me off guard and brought back memories of pain that I've tried to bury.*

*I didn't feel entitled to share this. I regularly asked myself and my friends why the fuck I thought any of this was worth sharing. Another example, they reminded me, of how we do not feel entitled to the space that is required to tell our stories, to document them.*

*These chronicles are a statement that my experiences and body deserve to be heard and recorded. They are a glimpse into my sexual life as a young girl growing up in Egypt, as it inevitably intersects with and relates to the very personal politics of desire, belonging and resistance. It tells a story of the inherent threat a girl kissing, touching, licking and sucking poses to the boys around her, and in turn, to the structures that seek to repress her. It also tells the story of just how much power a person's sexuality and desires yield over maintaining or challenging structures, no matter how micro; how pleasure can shake identities and challenge beliefs; and how this threat of desire is met with violence at every turn, however subtle or overt.*