

Faribâ Vafi is from Tabriz in the northwest of Iran, where she was born in 1962. She is a housewife and has two children. Her first story, "You're at Peace Now, Father" (*Râhat shodi pedar*), was published in 1988 in the journal *Âdineh*. Several of her stories have been published in various literary journals in Iran, and in collections of short stories by contemporary Iranian writers. She has prepared a collection of her stories called *At the Back of the Stage* (*Dar `omq-e sahneh*), which will soon be published. The story presented here is part of a trilogy of stories tracing the experience of several characters in an Iranian prison, including the story "Read to Me" ("*Barâm be-khvun*") published in the journal *Shetâb* in 1993. The controversial topic of these stories has made it difficult for Ms. Vafi to find publishers in Iran willing to assume the possible consequences of publication.

The story presented here, "The Flight of the Sun" ("*Farâr-e âftâb*," published in *Simorgh*, no. 52, Mission Viejo, CA, September 1994 pp. 28-29), depicts the pangs of conscience of a guard in a woman's prison in contemporary Iran when she is ordered to lash one of the inmates.

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## The Flight of the Sun

Fariba Vafi

It was the first time, after working there for three months, that Mrs. Amini was whipping a convict. The inmates had wrapped themselves in their chadors and were sitting around the courtyard, getting ready to watch the show. There was a blanket spread out in the middle of the courtyard and an inmate, with her big fat body, was lying flat on it, gasping for breath. Tahereh's kid was screaming, and Madam Qiyasi was yelling at Tahereh, "Shut him up! The little bastard..."

Until Mrs. Amini felt the wooden handle of the whip, she imagined that she could get out of doing the deed if she wanted to. But she had been unable to avoid it and now, in disbelief, she stared at the whip in her hand and felt that she no longer knew who she was.

The prison guard was impatient: "Ma'am, carry out the sentence!"

It was a few hours before noon. It was hot and Mrs. Amini's hands had broken out in a sweat. She took a few steps forward and looked at the inmate. Madam Qiyasi said, "Do it, Ma'am."

Mrs. Amini raised the whip and brought down the first blow. The whip made a dull crack in her ears. When she struck the second blow, the color had left her cheeks and her knees trembled visibly. Before she finished striking the third blow, Madam Qiyasi

rushed towards her, snatched the whip roughly from her hands and, frothing at the mouth, said, "Ma'am, the way you are whipping, the prisoner's underwear won't even flinch."

She raised the whip, snapped it in the air and struck the next blow. This time the whip cracked sharply. The lashes rained down one after another. The inmate groaned, "Awwwh!..." Madam Qiyasi gave her a fierce kick in the side: "Spare me your Awwwhs."

The inmate's groaning stopped. Madam Qiyasi whipped her harder. Mrs. Amini did not stay until all the lashes were inflicted. She came back to the office and drank a glass of water, but did not feel any better. She squeezed her throat with her fingers. Madam Qiyasi came into the office. Her face was sweaty. She looked at Mrs. Amini contemptuously.

"You're fresh out of school. You think one shouldn't do such things. You still have a lot to learn about this crowd. You have to beat these animals. I've been working here for fifteen years and I know these people better than they know themselves. These are wanton women who stuff their mouths with a big wad of chewing gum, a morsel of bread and some vegetables... They barely even notice it when they're whipped.... They leave the prison, go about their illegal activities and return again to prison. You just have to get used to it. Jail is no place to let your guard down. If you turn your head for an instant, they'll pull a fast one on you."

The rough manly voice of Madam Qiyasi was giving her a headache. She looked at her; her eyes seemed to be dimmer and the infected pimples on her face appeared to have broken open. She wanted to avoid seeing her mouth and the oozing white froth around its corners, but every time she looked at her mouth, she swallowed her saliva. She wanted to get out. She felt that she could no longer breathe. Suddenly, she exhaled: "It's too hot..."

Madam Qiyasi looked at her, annoyed: "Next time, you'll do the whipping. Got it?"

The next time came very soon. Maryam was to be released but had forty lashes coming to her. Mrs. Amini was coming from guard duty and stood behind the ward, not wanting to come in. The cats were wriggling through the garbage behind the prison ward, and the air was filled with the peculiar heavy odor of the

prison.

A male inmate was sitting in the shade, weaving a belt and murmuring to himself under his breath. Mrs. Amini sat down, staring at the high wall of the prison. She tried to imagine the other side of the wall. She knew that they had recently planted flowers in the square on the other side of the wall—what kind of flowers were they? "I'll go there tomorrow and see," she thought, but the thought did not make her happy at all. The prison director's words echoed in her ear: "A jail keeper himself is a prisoner—a prisoner with responsibility."

The voices of the female inmates could be heard from the prison courtyard. She did not want to move. "Maryam must have been brought back from the prison doctor's office by now. I wish the doctor had said that Maryam could not endure a whipping. I've got to go in."

But she did not budge. She felt tired. She wanted to think about something nice, something outside the prison walls. It was almost evening—the sunlight was creeping along the prison wall. The fact that she had been assigned to whip Maryam gave her no peace. She remembered the first day when the guard brought Maryam to the ward. The inmates had gathered around her. Afaq the Junkie contemptuously said, "I bet she had an illicit affair..."

Robab the Procureess swung her heavy frame in front of Maryam and wiped the saliva off her chops: "Yes, it must have been. She's quite a dish...."

Sorayya, a long-term inmate of the ward, winked at her and softly said, "How many men did you do it with, dear?"

Maryam just stared ahead dumbfounded. All of a sudden she hid her terrified face in her worn chador and began crying like a baby.

Mrs. Amini sat there in silent dejection. Madam Qiyasi was watching her out of the corner of her eye and yelling at the inmates who had gathered behind the glass door of the office. When the prison official came in, accompanied by an assistant holding the whip and the punishment report form, Maryam hurried forward and lay down on the blanket spread out in the middle of the courtyard. Madam Qiyasi shot after her like lightning, grabbed her arm and made her get up.

"Hold on just a minute... What's all this you're wearing?"

Maryam lost her wits and began to stutter.... Mrs. Amini took her face in both hands and bit her lip. Her cheeks were burning. Madam Qiyasi triumphantly dragged Maryam to the office, like someone who had just made an important discovery, and said in a loud voice dripping with sarcasm: "Well, well, well! Who's taught you to wear all these clothes in this heat?"

Maryam was crying: "Ma'am, I'm guilty."

Madam Qiyasi fell upon Maryam, punching and kicking her. Everyone was glued to their spots by Maryam's earsplitting cries.

"You're guilty...and you're full of shit."

Maryam took off all of her clothes. Mrs. Amini was standing in the corner, feeling cold.

Madam Qiyasi said, "Get down on all fours!" She grabbed the whip from the prison employee's hand and gave it to Mrs. Amini. "Whip her like a jail keeper, Ma'am. If you spoil these inmates, they'll fill the whole world up with little bastards."

The inmates were standing behind the glass door of the office, straining their necks out of curiosity and whispering to one another. The prison guard was standing outside; the prison employee, while quieting the inmates, was staring at Maryam's delicate body, all crumpled up and quivering in her chador. Mrs. Amini closed her eyes and struck her. Madam Qiyasi piped up: "Whip her harder."

Mrs. Amini swung harder. The voices of the inmates, who had begun rhythmically counting out the blows, made the image of a long deserted tunnel appear before her eyes. She was moving forward in this dark corridor and, in a state of nervous agitation, whipping the inmate. For an instant the brightness outside the tunnel struck her eyes and she saw the sun entangled in the barbed wires surrounding the prison. It was as if the sun was trying to escape.

Maryam wailed: "It's killing me, sister...Awwwww!...it's killing me."

Mrs. Amini was whipping her. The swift, rhythmic back-and-forth movement of the whip had made her giddy. Her head swam with sounds.

A voice said, "It's done!"

Her fingers numb, she gave the whip back to the prison employee and signed the report. She went out of the office. She stood at the top of the stairs of the yard and looked around like someone unfamiliar with the place. She was dizzy. She immediately went back to the office, took her purse down from the closet and left the ward, paying no attention to Madam Qiyasi's threatening inquiries and the amazed stares of the inmates. When she made it beyond the prison walls, she saw the sun, freed from the barbed wires, drowning the newly-planted flowers of the square in light.