

Title: Flushed

It took years. Ten years. To talk about it.

Guilt.

I thought I was being punished for being a bad Muslim. That all the pain, all the blood, and the heaviness on my chest was the direct result of me spreading my legs before a sacred marriage.

*God don't like ugly.**Disobedience.*

"I know this from experience, don't lose your virginity to someone you like," my friend cautioned like a ghetto shaman, before placing three generic condoms she'd gotten for free from Planned Parenthood in the middle of my palm. "Take these. You might need em' one day."

I wasn't going to need them, I thought. I was a good girl. I wasn't like her. In the streets, hopping from dick to dick. I was waiting until marriage like the good book ordered...

He and I started making out. A little booty rubbing. His dick would get hard when I'd accidentally brushed against the crotch of his gray sweatpants. My furry cooch would be soaked. We were young. It was summer, and we'd hang out in shady parks and in vacant lots after midnight. Sometimes my friend would come with her boyfriend. We'd take turns using the backseat of my beat-up Hyundai for sessions.

One night, my friend offered to drive. Her boyfriend was in the passenger seat blasting Young Joc on the radio. He and I got the backseat. I had had a particularly bad day. Mom was trying to control me. College was trying to fail me. My debit card had just been declined for lack of sufficient funds.

My friend adjusted the rearview mirror, and we caught eyes. She raised her brows, grinned, and pulled the stick into drive. Along Woodward, we drove through the ghettos with no destination. No cares in sight. The windows were down. The city air smelled like gasoline, hot asphalt, and freshly cut grass as it ran through the folds of my hijab. He leaned in and kissed me on my cheek then laid his head in my lap. I caressed his ear gently as the other hand stuck out of the window allowing the wind to pass through my fingers.

Lust.

An Aquarius, he was more observant than talkative. Sensitive and naïve and calm. A sense of humor and an odd laugh. He had one dimple on his left cheek and a pointy nose that used to poke out of a huge black hoodie which he thought was so cool. He played basketball and football at an inner-city school. Grew up in a bad neighborhood, but had both parents. His family was dysfunctional, but they tried hard to hide it, and save face for the Islamic community they lived in.

I, on the other hand, came from a single-family household. Mom was married more times than I can remember. I was hardheaded, a dreamer, and a go-getter. I didn't trust people.

I trusted him, though. He wasn't like the douchebags Mom brought home.

He was different.

My life was sporadic. He brought normalcy.

And I allowed my guard to slip.

On one chilly morning, we drove around until about three. "Let's go to your place," I said.

He shook his head. "My sisters are home tonight. Babysitting."

"Oh," I huffed. I didn't want the night/morning to end. Plus, I couldn't go back home because it was super late. I wasn't in the mood to hear Mom's mouth.

"Well, if you want, we could go half-half on a room?" I suggested.

He sniffed. "Yeah. We can do that."

Motel 6 was down the street. We pulled up into the lot then entered the lobby like two little shits. The once white tiling was a dingy eggshell color, there was an off-brand pop machine across from two attached waiting room chairs. A door that read 'Employees Only' faced us and next to that was a thick plated glass window. Behind that, sitting on a stool, was a black woman with a weave bun sitting on top of her head, watching television.

"How much?" he asked her.

"64.99 plus tax." The girl wouldn't take her eyes from the old movie, then she said, "I.D.s"

He looked at me for approval. I nodded. Tired.

We placed our cards under the barrier that protected the worker from late night crazies.

She finally looked at us, narrowing her wide-set eyes. Her fat lips were pursed as she attempted to match our faces to the bad state ID photos. "You gotta' be 21 to rent here." She flung them back under the glass and went back to watching the flick.

Another motel was off the freeway. Super shady, but not the shadiest. He went into the lobby for about ten minutes. My stomach was queasy, things were jumping around.

He returned to the car with two door keys.

Reality hit.

Inside the room smelled like old cigarettes and moth balls. Usually, I'd have complained, but I was silent. Still wrapped in the web of my own thoughts. The door shut. I jumped, surprised at how hard it slammed. It had to have woken up the prostitutes and pimps residing in the next couple of rooms. He locked the bottom lock then slid the top chain through its track.

We were alone.

He took off his shoes, hoodie, then pants and slipped under the blankets like a serpent. I removed my shoes then turned the TV on. I sat at the edge of the bed.

"Want me to turn off the lights?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I got it."

The volume was low. Fast paced clips of the item they were selling flashed in quick bursts. Bright colored boxes reading 'buy now' and 'while quantities last' blinked. A 1-800 number in bold was stamped at the bottom.

"Act now," the presenter said and pointed at me. "Before it's too late!"

Only the glare from an infomercial illuminated his brown face when I looked back at him. He took my arm and pulled me in. There was no way out.

He wanted something from me. Like the other men. Just like Mom said.

Looking me up and down, he laughed. "Why do you have all those clothes on?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Cold."

"Well, let me warm you up," he said. "Body heat transfers better with skin to skin contact."

He lifted my shirt over my head, careful not to pull off my scarf. Instead of letting it hang in front, I tied it like a turban wanting to maintain some sort of modesty, even though it had been tossed out the window a long time ago. He unbuckled my pants next. I laid on my back and he slid them down over my knees then to my ankles. One leg at a time, those came completely off, too. The only flimsy protection I had left were cotton undies and a sports bra from Walmart.

I'd never felt safe around a man. Never had a chance to. Daddy was a liar. Was always in and out of some young girls' bed instead of spending time with his own kids. The other men I'd been around were Mom's biannual husbands, if they were lucky. Some never lasted even two years. A 'revolving door marriage' I called it. One in. One out.

He hugged me. It felt foreign but right. The fine hairs on the back of my neck stood upright as he dug his face into my neck.

A hug turned into a kiss. Then a kiss turned into neck bites. Dry humping. My bra came off.

"Let me put the tip in," he said breathlessly into my ear.

"No," I exclaimed, pushing him away but not protesting. Still trying to hang onto an inkling of my beliefs.

"Come on, just the tip," he said. "I want you."

He kissed me again, this time with tongue. Our tongues thrashed against one another wildly as I pressed my body into his. I bit his lip. He pinned me down and kissed all the way down my chest and stopped at my nipple. When his teeth glided over my areola, I lost my shit.

Complete control dissolved. My faith had completely deserted me. Or, perhaps, I'd deserted it.

"Fine, but you've gotta' wear a condom," I told him.

He reached into his wallet on the shoddy nightstand and pulled out a Magnum.

I was a fat girl, not as fat as I am now, but still fat. He kept missing my vagina and trying to stick it in the flap of my stomach. After a few failed attempts to locate the X, I gently led the way.

He didn't even make it all the way in before he came. He tried to pretend he didn't, but instantly became flaccid. I didn't feel anything.

Without exaggeration, the entire ordeal was three minutes, tops. He rolled over and fell asleep. I laid there confused. I'd tossed my religion away for that? Three minutes???

Sleep evaded me. I couldn't handle his soft snore. The haunting whir of the air conditioner. Or my own thoughts of indecency. I finally put all my clothes on and stood by the door. I flicked on the lights and cleared my throat. One of his eyes squinted open. "What's going on?"

I pointed to the clock. "I'm ready to go."

I met up with him a few times over the next few weeks. I'd sneak into his parents place late at night but we hadn't done anything. One early morning, his sisters were all asleep and I wiggled through the side door and darted to his room. We ate cold BBQ chicken and watched old VHS movies. We started making out again once the lights were out. He suggested I get on top. This time he did it right. I felt all of it—every uncomfortable poke—and though painful at times, I liked it.

"Relax," he whispered after he flipped me on my back.

How could I relax? I was losing my virginity to a Muslim boy that I wasn't married to. I was going to be dubbed a bonafide hoe if my indecencies were discovered. And if Mom found out, she'd drop kick me. Or worse, disown me.

The cherry was popped. The deed was done. He asked if I was okay. I was not, but said I was. I didn't want to talk about it.

I felt like I'd betrayed someone. Something. God was looking at me. And he wasn't pleased.

The next morning, I felt like shit. A second agonizing period. I wore a hoodie all day and stayed locked up in my room. I could've sworn Mom knew what I'd done. God probably told her. Had that shit on tape and played it for her. Jezebel was stamped on my forehead. I pulled the hoodie down a little more to cover my face.

She knew something. "Everything alright?" she asked when I came down for a meal.

I nodded vigorously. "Everything's great."

She could never, ever find out.

I was so ashamed; I stopped talking to him immediately.

Several weeks passed before he finally called. "What's up?" he asked.

"Nothin'," I said.

"Oh." Pause. "You mad at me or something?"

"Nope."

After a joke, he never waited for people to process it and laugh. He'd always laugh before the punchline was done. He'd made one. I don't remember exactly what he said, but I know it made me smile.

We were back cool again.

Mom and I fell out not too long after that. I took what little shit I owned and left. She was trying to control me. That's why she could never keep a man; she didn't know how to let go.

He was there for me, during my transition from teenhood to adulthood. He even helped me move into my new place on campus all the way up on the 14th floor. He'd come over and we'd cuddle and watch movies. And have sex. So much sex. A lot of the times, he'd spend the night. His parents were getting suspicious because his big mouthed siblings. His father told him it was wrong for a Muslim to fornicate, that he knew better, but he'd lie and say that he wasn't doing anything.

Then I started to feel bad. Mom wasn't hovering over me telling me that I was a bad girl, but I knew the rules. And I was breaking them.

On one particular night, I laid beside him on a futon mattress and cried, silently. He pulled me close and wiped my tears away. "What's wrong?"

I pulled the blanket up to cover myself. I felt nasty and exposed. "What we're doing is wrong. It's not right."

He kissed my forehead. "I know."

The push of sexual desire versus the pull of religion took its toll. I'd have nights where I'd cry because I felt disgusting. He'd cry, too, because his father wanted him to be a good Muslim man. And, together, we were failing miserably.

But we chose not to stop, and things only got worse.

We always used condoms, but one time it broke without my knowledge.

Out of breath, I said, "It felt different this time."

Also out of breath, he admitted, "It broke."

"What broke?"

"The condom."

I hit him in the chest. "Are you fuckin' serious?"

"Hey," he said. "I pulled out."

"Pulled out?" I jumped up. "People still get pregnant 'pulling out'. Don't ever do that shit again. I have enough shit on my roster. I don't need a baby."

Afraid, I went to Planned Parenthood and bought Plan B. Just in case that one little sperm found its way. I was a senior in college. My grades were just picking back up. I had no family support, no money, or job.

It was finals week and my period had been weird. For the first time in my life, I was spotting. Never had that happened before. It was brownish and thick. After six weeks of that, I started cramping. I didn't

have insurance, but I was in pain. I decided that after my last class exam, I was going to go to the emergency room and somehow figure out how to foot the bill.

I walked four blocks through the city streets, thinking they were going to tell me my ailment was stress related, and send me home with instructions to relax. Drink water. Some shit like that.

Entering the automatic double doors, I signed in at the security desk. I sat in the lobby with the druggies that fell and hit their elbows on the sidewalk and the ones who got into a fistfight and had gashes on their foreheads. I waited until my name was called. A brown-skinned girl with long braids and red nails weighed me, took my vitals, and asked me what I was in for. I told her I was spotting. She clicked the keys on the computer and then placed an identification bracelet on my wrist. Afterwards, I was taken to a small room. It was cold. Depressing. I hated hospitals and counted down the minutes until I was discharged.

The doctor came in and asked the normal questions.

"I'm spotting and cramping," I told him.

"Any chance of pregnancy?"

I responded quickly and with surety. "No."

"Put this on." He handed me a gown. "Someone will come take you for tests."

The tests seemed never-ending. First, they took blood. Then sent me back to the room. Next, they took me for an ultrasound. Then sent me back to the room. I sat there for a while wondering what was going on. Finally, a nurse came in and told me to lay back. She said she needed to insert a catheter. I was young. I didn't ask why. I laid back and opened my legs. She told me to relax. It was so cold. She tried to make small talk with me to get my mind off what she was doing, but it didn't work. I thought it was the most uncomfortable thing that I'd go through, having a tube stuck in me...

After the catheter was in, a medical assistant took me to get another ultrasound.

Maybe I was dying. Still, I was too scared to ask.

I laid down on a hard, steel exam table, catheter still dangling between my legs. The tech repeated the steps and squirted that goopy liquid on my abdomen. She pressed the apparatus into my stomach and massaged it around. I'm usually ticklish and would giggle, but this was no laughing matter. I felt like a piece of raw meat. Deadened.

The tech pressed the apparatus further into my belly fat and stayed in one spot. She studied the monitor, I was still like a plank of wood. Inhuman.

The tech said nothing to me as another girl came and rolled me into the discharge room.

Something was wrong.

The doc came in with some papers. He didn't even sit down.

"You're pregnant," he said without emotion.

"Excuse me?" I smiled an ugly smile. "Not possible."

“You’re seven weeks pregnant.” He laid the discharge papers near my leg.

“This is a mistake,” I pleaded. “I’m in school.”

It was like he wasn’t even listening to me. “You’re at high-risk for miscarriage since your spotting and cramping.”

I clutched my forehead. “I can’t have a baby.” The last word trailed off.

“Here’s some information about your options.” He motioned to the papers. “You’re discharged.”

And just like that, I was nineteen and pregnant.

A fuckin’ statistic. My life. Over. God was punishing me for opening my legs. Because I wasn’t a good Muslim girl, he got me. He got me good.

Numb.

Even when she popped the catheter out. I didn’t flinch. An empty shell. No contents. Substance. I ruined everything.

Shame.

I got dressed and stood outside the double doors of the emergency room. I saw nothing. I heard nothing. Life around me paused.

I called him. Wanting something. Comfort, perhaps. Reassurance.

“I’m at the hospital,” I said quietly. “They say I’m pregnant.”

For a long time, he didn’t say anything. Then broke the silence. “Oh.”

Hot tears rolled down my cheek. “That’s all you have to say is ‘oh’? Fuck you.”

There’s a large chunk of time that I can’t remember from this ordeal. I’ve learned that trauma can make you forget a lot of things.

He’d just started college. I was finishing. Still spotting and cramping. What if the baby died inside of me? What if it came out fucked up? I couldn’t take care of a baby. I never even wanted children. How the fuck did this happen?

I didn’t research it. I didn’t talk to anyone. I had no idea what I was doing. Completely on autopilot.

I called around to different clinics. One quoted me \$300 for an early term abortion. They told me that I had to think it over for forty-eight hours before making an actual appointment. You know, just in case I changed my mind. I wasn’t going to, but it was protocol.

I went back to my dorm and read all the pamphlets they gave me.

On my mattress, I laid on my side, gazing out the window at the people walking on campus with their perfect little college lives. I rubbed my stomach. Tears. “I’m so, so sorry.” I told it. “But I can’t. I can’t be a mom. I don’t know how to be.”

I can't. I can't. I can't. I can't. I can't. I can't. I can't. I can't. I can't. I can't. I can't.

I repeated that over and over and over until I drifted off.

The appointment was set. He gave me \$100, and I had some money left over from my refund check. He came with me. We didn't talk the whole drive. He said nothing, didn't even try to talk me out of it. I signed in. He looked ill. I felt ill. We were both afraid.

When they called me back, he didn't hug me, reassure me. He left, and I didn't know where he went.

The ladies were nice. They tried to make me feel as comfortable as they could, given the situation. They made me sign papers. Lots of them. I signed without hesitation.

"You will vomit," she warned, handing me a vial of white pills. "And you will cramp. Take these exactly as directed. Any questions."

I shook my head. "No."

I lived with three roommates. None of them knew. The cramps started that very night. Gut-wrenching cramps that I'd never experienced before. I burst into the bathroom and laid my head over the toilet seat. Dry-heaving at first. I couldn't breathe. I vomited. My eyes watered. I sweated profusely. Death loomed over that bathroom. I just knew it. Sitting there in pain, mouth tasting like acid, I thought about him. How he was just at home, probably chilling, while I clung onto life on the floor.

My roommate knocked. "You alright?"

"I'm good. Everything is good," I yelled.

Mom and I had gotten on better terms before I knew I was pregnant. Just my luck, she was having a procedure done the very next day, and I was her designated driver because my older sister had to work. I picked her up, like a walker, half dead. Pretending. Living a fucked-up façade of a good daughter. A holy daughter. I wanted to tell her, confess. But she'd be ashamed. Ashamed that I didn't learn from her mistakes. I'd hold onto my own burden. No need to put that heaviness on her.

The nurses took her in. I assured her the procedure would go smoothly and that I'd see her in a few. I started cramping again. Bad. I could barely sit in my seat. Sweat poured down my neck.

My great aunt arrived. "Are you ok?" She held a look of concern.

"I'm fine." I waved.

She smiled.

"I'm just gonna' go to the bathroom. Be right back," I said.

Only by the grace of God was I able to stumble to the bathroom. I guessed he liked me still, a little.

I sat on the toilet and hung onto the sink with one hand and with the other, the silver, handicapped bar. It was a single stall so no one could hear my cries and prayers muffled by those four white walls. I

imagined my uterus falling out. Tears for the pain. Tears for the shame. Tears for Mom and aunt who had no idea what was occurring in the same building as them. Tears for being a bad Muslim. One who deserved every ounce of pain for booting the fetus and not giving it a chance.

Mom had two abortions. One was forced when she was 15. She had my sister not too long after. Then, she got pregnant again. Aborted that one on her own accord. A few years later, she was pregnant with me. She didn't want me because she hated my father. It's okay. I hated him, too. She told me that I was to be given up for adoption right after birth. My grandma named me because Mom didn't want to. For some reason, the doctors fell in love with me. They said I was a pretty baby. God intervened. And I was kept. When I was a few months old, Mom tried to give me away again. Gave me to my fuck of a father and he took me to his ex-wife's house.

"The momma don't want her," he said. "I'm taking her to the hospital."

"Don't punish the baby," she said. "It's not her fault she's here. You two made that decision. Take her back to her mother."

I guessed Daddy did because I was never in foster care.

When I looked down between my legs all I saw was deep crimson. Blood had seeped through my underwear and pants. My eyes rolled back as I began to shiver in disgust. I was going to bleed out and die, and I thought that maybe that wasn't such a bad thing...

I couldn't just sit there all day. Without looking in the toilet bowl, I flushed whatever came out of me. I cleaned the best way I could and pulled myself up using the sink. Every movement depleted my energy. I washed my hands of the blood. How ironic that it reminded me of a murder scene.

I glanced up at the mirror and saw myself. The dark circles forming under my eyes, the dry, cracked lips, the curve in my spine, I hurt so bad that I couldn't even stand straight. I just needed to make it to the car. Drive to Target and get some fresh underwear and pants.

Everything was in slow motion. I was hyperaware of the hustling staff and patients moving back and forth. I stood in front of my aunt. She stared.

"I just started my period and bled right through my clothes." I gave a nervous chuckle. "I've got to go get some pants. Could you wait here for mom? I'll be right back."

She nodded.

My legs were giving out. But I needed to get to the car. I don't remember how I got there. But I remember driving and barely keeping control. I was having what felt like contractions. I found a Target and almost fell out the car door. I wobbled to the entrance. All eyes on me—the sickly woman, clutching her stomach. *Pants and underwear. Pants and Underwear. Pants and underwear.* I made it past the theft detectors and I knew that I couldn't walk anymore. I saw one of those motorized carts and sat down. I used the cart to drive around Target and although still in pain, it was much relief.

The next day, I was still very sick. Every time I took a pill, the contractions would come and more blood. I couldn't take it anymore, being alone. Being so embarrassed that I couldn't tell anyone. I finally broke

down and confessed to my friend. She invited me over. We didn't talk about it. Just being in the company of someone gave me comfort. I was a little less alone.

The contractions came on so strong as I held my stomach and rushed to the bathroom. They didn't have a door, so I closed the plastic curtain. I didn't push. Something came out and hit the water with a *thunk*.

Over.

I didn't want to see it. I didn't want that image in my head. I reached back and flushed.

I flushed it down the toilet.

I flushed my baby down the toilet.

The next week I went to my follow-up appointment, alone. They put me on a bed and made me spread my legs. The doctor turned on a vacuum-like apparatus. It was loud and frightening. Just when I thought I was done with being a piece of raw meat, he suctioned me out.

"All done," he said, turning off the machine and patting my knee.

The nurse took me to this room with comfortable chairs lined up on each side. Several African-American women were sitting in these chairs with blankets on their legs and heating pads on their stomachs, chatting casually like they had just got their nails done.

"Sit here," the nurse said. "Would you like some tea? It'll help settle your stomach."

I nodded. "Yes, please."

I got under the blanket and placed the heating pad on my stomach like the others. A huge wall-mounted TV played some ratchet daytime talk-show. The nurse brought the tea with a smile and placed it in my hands. "Let me know if you need anything."

"The staff is so nice here," one girl with a long ponytail said to another girl with false lashes.

"Yeah, every time I come up in here I get good service," Lashes blinked rapidly and took a sip from her Styrofoam cup.

Ponytail took the words right out of my head. "How many times?"

"Oh girl, this is like my third one." She said matter-of-factly, "I had two. Then I had my daughter. This is the third."

Another girl joined the conversation. "This is my second."

I sank further into my seat. And took a gulp of tea.

I was never, ever coming back again. Ever.