

Siamak Vossoughi

THE VINE

Mr. and Mrs. Karimi came to their son's school in the evening. The school was beginning a new sexual education program, to start in sixth grade instead of seventh grade. The school had invited the sixth-grade parents to come and meet the sex ed teacher and ask her any questions they had.

The school was next to a swimming pool that Mr. Karimi used to visit in the mornings. He had not gone since the photos of Abu Ghraib had come out. Mrs. Karimi knew that the reason was the locker room, being naked there, but she could not say it, although they had been married nineteen years.

There was a small part of her that felt bad about thinking, now you know how it is for women. Now you know how it is for our bodies. She felt bad about it because she thought her anger should be one hundred percent directed at the American army for debasing the bodies of Arab men like that. And she knew what they must have done to women if they would do that to men.

"You should start going to the pool again," she said. "It is good for your back."

"I prefer walking in the evenings."

"Walking is not the same."

"I like it. I like to be outside."

"What about in the winter? It will be too cold."

"I don't mind."

At the pool he had some American friends. They would not think about why he did not come anymore, he thought.

When the photos had come out, it had looked to Mr. Karimi like Americans did not know what to do with their own bodies. Instead of admitting that they did not know, they wanted to make others look like they did not know, so that it would look like they *did* know. It was very obvious to him.

He had felt embarrassed to have his son and daughter see the photos. He had felt like they were seeing him. Now they were going to learn about their son's sexual education at school. Okay. It must be good, Mr. Karimi thought. It must be good if it involved education.

In the classroom, they were approached by a man whose daughter was in their son's class.

"Isn't this terrible?" the man said.

Mr. and Mrs. Karimi smiled.

“Sixth grade is too young for this,” the man said.

Mr. and Mrs. Karimi smiled again. They did not know if it was terrible or not.

“Why did he come and say that to us?” Mr. Karimi asked.

“He thinks that because we are Middle Eastern, we will be angry about sexual education.”

Mr. Karimi laughed. “Does he think we are the Taliban?”

“I guess tonight he does,” Mrs. Karimi said.

It was funny. It was funny that the man wanted them to be angry about sexual education when it was the lack of sexual education that made Mr. Karimi feel so lost in America. It was the Americans’ lack of knowing that when you make a man debase himself, you do not become a master of sex.

Mr. Karimi had not even wanted to be naked in front of his wife when he had first seen the photos. She had felt sorry for him then. He would become quiet sometimes, and she knew he was thinking of those men.

Someday, she thought, he would come out of it understanding something about women. But he was not there yet. First he had to go back to the pool.

They needed sexual education themselves, she thought. They needed a sexual education that would allow her to say to her husband, *I know why you do not go back to the pool. We are just people. We can talk about these things.*

But he had been quiet out of respect for the way those men would have been quiet. None of those men would have women they could go back and tell it to.

They must know, he thought. He would look at Americans and think that they must know that this was something inside themselves. Perhaps his son’s sex education teacher would be able to say something about it.

She was a small white woman, and as soon as she spoke, it was clear that she had faced many fathers like the man who had approached them. Mrs. Karimi thought that she could be her friend. They would sit together and talk for hours about men and how much they could not say and what they could do about that. She liked the woman’s pace. Not just her speaking pace, but the pace of her mind. It was pace that had made it hard for her to make friendships with American women she’d met. They were trying to get to everything at once, and she’d wanted to say, you’ll get to everything if you get to one thing whole.

The woman said that she came from a family that did not talk about sex. She said that it was still uncomfortable to talk to her mother and father about it. That made Mr. Karimi feel more comfortable. Mr. Karimi looked at the man

who had approached them. He sat rigidly. Did the man know that there was an entirely different set of circumstances under which they could have met? A set of circumstances that were the last thing Mr. Karimi saw at night before he went to sleep. He would look at the clock, and he would feel thankful for time because he imagined time had disappeared in that prison.

And now leaders in America went around saying that they would get to the bottom of it. It was a kind of show. And the people went along. And sometimes it looked to him like they wanted both: They wanted the photos, and they wanted to be the ones to get to the bottom of them, too.

What was there to get to the bottom of anyway? This is how you see us, he thought. My goal is not to see anybody the way you see us.

And he knew that he should not stay away from the pool and its locker room. He knew that part of his goal should include going back some time.

He listened again to the sex ed teacher, and he could see that she, too, was trying. She was trying to make sex into something that a person would not hate in himself, and would not hate in anybody else either. He *wanted* to be able to talk to his son about sex. He had not talked to his son about the photos. He was used to talking to him about issues he had answers for.

When the teacher finished, she invited questions. The man who had approached them earlier stood up. "My daughter is eleven years old," he said. "She still plays with dolls. I don't understand how this can be the right age for talking about these things."

As she watched him, Mrs. Karimi felt sure that his daughter did not play with dolls. The girl he wanted her to be played with dolls.

The teacher spoke of studies that had shown the benefits of starting the class earlier. She spoke calmly and evenly.

The man did not seem to hear. "How do we *know* that we are not exposing them to something they wouldn't be thinking about otherwise? Do we *know* that?"

Mr. Karimi saw the pain on the man's face, and he felt upset with himself for seeing it because now he had seen what they did with their pain. They did not hold it. It came out. He wished that he did not find something relatable in the man.

The teacher was quiet. She had to take her time with the question because it was only a hair's breadth away from ridiculous. She spoke even more calmly and evenly.

Mr. Karimi knew that on the way home his wife would be angry about the man. He wanted to be angry with her. He did not want to feel sorry for the man. But it was the closest he had come to seeing an American man with some-

thing on his face that said, *I don't know what to do with the truth of our bodies.* He needed it because in those photos of the men in Abu Ghraib, the soldiers had something on their faces that said, *I know exactly what to do with the truth of our bodies. It is this. It is to relieve myself of the question.*

He wondered if there was something he could say that would even things out, that would balance his wife's anger at the man and his sorrowful ridiculousness, and he saw that it was only through the boy he had been, the boy he had felt himself to be when he had seen those photos, that he could understand. The photos returned them to boyhood because none of them had known what bodies were and what to do with them when they were boys, and it had seemed like the soldiers wanted to take them back there again. And it had been a way to say that the work they had done to know and to understand and even honor their bodies didn't count. It didn't count as work because they didn't count as men. And he simply couldn't believe that anybody who had done that work would look at it like it didn't count.

He raised his hand to speak, and, as he did, he saw the man smile because he believed that a Middle Eastern man would support him. In that moment Mr. Karimi felt that the smile was the same as something that had been in those photos—something that said, *I already know you, and I know you because what is inside you is static. It is static and old and it has no kind of struggle resembling a vine twisting around itself and growing toward the sky.* The vine in question grew along the fence in the backyard of their house. For a few years now, Mr. Karimi had looked at it as a way to remember how he was trying to be. And he knew that he had to ask his question not only for *himself*, but for the boy. The boy twisted and grew like a vine every day. It would be too much for Mr. Karimi if somebody were to say his son did not have a struggle, a struggle worth respecting, because sometimes the struggle looked for all the world to him like the vine.

The teacher saw him.

"Yes?"

"Will you teach them not to laugh at bodies?"

The teacher looked at Mr. Karimi, and then at his wife. She looked proud.

"Yes," she said. "We will absolutely teach them not to laugh at bodies."

