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Stranger Than Fiction

Imagine your next gyno exam. Then imagine it being done outside, in front of hundreds of people. Gayle Forman witnesses South Africa's public virginity tests.

On a brisk, sunny winter's morning in the South African village of Tshelimnyama, I watch as 17-year old Pumla Majola strips out of her jeans and sweatshirt, and puts on a traditional Zulu outfit of a short purple skirt and beaded necklace. Breasts bared, she marches onto a soccer field and joins hundreds of other girls, some as young as 6. Pumla waits in the U-shaped line, and when her turn comes, she kicks off her panties before lying down on woven mats and opening her legs. An older woman dressed in a bright skirt and turban peers into Pumla's vagina, spreading the lips with her fingers. After about 10 seconds of pawing around, the woman slaps her on the thighs, and Pumla jumps up as the women around her ululate and dance. One of them puts a purple stamp with the examiner's name on it over Pumla's breast and hands her a certificate that says "Pumla has been found to be a virgin."

All of the girls have gathered for the same purpose: to offer proof of their virginity. The aunties, as the testers are called, look for wear and tear, as well as a mystical "eye" (some say they really see the image of an eye in the vaginas of virgins, but others say it's just the intact hymen). A hundred years ago, Pumla's probe would've been a pre-nuptial test to determine her lobola, or dowry — a virgin bride might command 11 cows, whereas

a non-virgin might score only 10. Over the past decade, this ritual has been enjoying a renaissance of sorts: Experts say tens of thousands of girls are regularly undergoing these exams, some as often as twice a month. Many are forced by their parents or peer pressure to do it, but plenty of others go voluntarily. In the province of KwaZulu-Natal, where the exams are most prevalent, you can visit a school, church or soccer field on any weekend and watch girls get their privates inspected. The exams have become so popular that radio stations now advertise them.

But this is no longer about counting cows. In KwaZulu-Natal, AIDS is out of control. One in four teen girls in this region is infected with HIV, and expensive drug therapies are not available in South Africa. Promoting virginity to this extreme is viewed by many as a last-ditch effort to combat a modern plague by harnessing old traditions. "We have girls of 12, 13 sleeping around," tester Nokulunga Majola (no relation to Pumla) tells me. "That's why AIDS is escalating. Girls have boyfriends at school. They have sugar daddies. Our teens don't know what love is. These tests are to make girls think: 'What would my mother say?' Our girls must know that they should not be the play-ground for the boys."

To us, a public groping to prove you're pure may

sound horrifying, but when I ask Pumla if the tests are embarrassing, she is surprised at the question. “No, I like them,” she says. “I go because I want to. It makes me feel good when I pass.”

She likes them? It’s true they have long been part of Zulu culture, but I certainly didn’t expect that nearly all of the test-takers would be so gung ho. “I like the tests because boys treat you like a queen when you’re a virgin,” says Mbal, 17.

“They’re fun,” adds 11-year-old Carole. Well, maybe they find it fun because after the inspections, they all eat ice cream, and sing and dance together. Later the aunties give lessons on fending off boys and waiting to have sex. Then they pray and dance some more. It all starts to look a little Lilith Fair-like and empowering. The aunties definitely push the girl-power theme, and point out one benefit of the tests I haven’t even considered: They can uncover sexual abuse, which is rampant in South Africa.

But the women don’t talk about how such tests can actually invite sexual abuse. Even though many girls think their certificate is some magical force field against horny guys, in reality, the rituals put girls in a dangerous catch-22. Failing can mean public shame, as “Thembeke” finds out. Instead of getting the playful slap, the aunties unleash a stream of abuse at her. Thembeke looks like she will cry, and quickly runs away. Now that she’s labeled as used, some men in her community may see her as fair game. But ironically, passing the tests can put girls at even greater risk. “These are done in the presence of men, in the presence of rapists,” says Dumisile Nala, a social worker with Childline, a South African organization that helps abused kids. “Now that they know you are a virgin, they will come after you. It puts children a greater risk for HIV.” That’s because

there is a myth floating around that having sex with a virgin will cure you of AIDS. And even men who don’t subscribe to this belief see virgins as safe, disease-free lays.

Sine, a beautiful 12-year-old with almond eyes and long lashes, has clearly run into some trouble because of her virginity. “Sometimes I feel embarrassed by the tests. It’s in front of so many people. And it’s your private parts,” she says, keeping her arms crossed and her eyes cast downward. “And then boys want you more when you’re a virgin. They think you are clean and try to have sex with you.” Sine wouldn’t give me details, but she did say that she always gets home before dark in order to steer clear of the local guys.

There are similar virginity tests for the testosterone set — apparently you can spot a sexually inexperienced boy by the indentation of his knees, the stream of his urine and the look of his foreskin. But those exams are far less common, and Dumisile, the social worker, hasn’t even heard of any. It’s a sexual double standard as old as time.

The tests also send contradictory messages. “In schools, we tell girls, ‘Your body is your body. No one can touch it,’” says Futhi Zikalala, the provincial manager for the Commission on Gender Equality. “But then they take these invasive tests and the whole idea of self-control in contradicted.”

The girls do get to hear about saying no to boys, but considering how astronomical the rape rate is — the University of South Africa estimates that as many as half of all women there will be raped in their lifetimes — saying no isn’t doing them a whole lot of good.

The only time I get to hear these girls’ views has

been in front of their peers, parents, and aunts. I wonder how many shudder at having their vaginas inspected, and feel violated but don't articulate it. "No one here teaches girls to defend their rights," Futhi points out. "They are raised in families with violence, attend schools where there's no gender equality and go to churches that treat women as second class. If a girl grows up in a family where rights are not an issue, when she sees her friends going for the test, she will go and say she likes it."

This is not to say that this cultural tradition is entirely bad — or that all young South African women are voiceless. There are plenty of teenagers who'd sooner swallow nails than open their legs for the aunts. Of course, you won't meet these girls at a test. You're more likely to meet them, say, speaking at a conference on girl power, which is where I come across 16-year-old Precious Sibisi. "I hate those tests. I hate those old women who give them," she says emphatically. "Men have become monsters, raping girls. Why should we have the tests? I will never go to one. If I'm a virgin, I'm a virgin. That's my business." I want to cheer Precious on as she continues her tirade. And I can't help feeling that if there were a ritual to teach girls to be outspoken instead of chaste, and one to teach boys to respect girls, it would do so much more than these odd exams to conquer AIDS.