

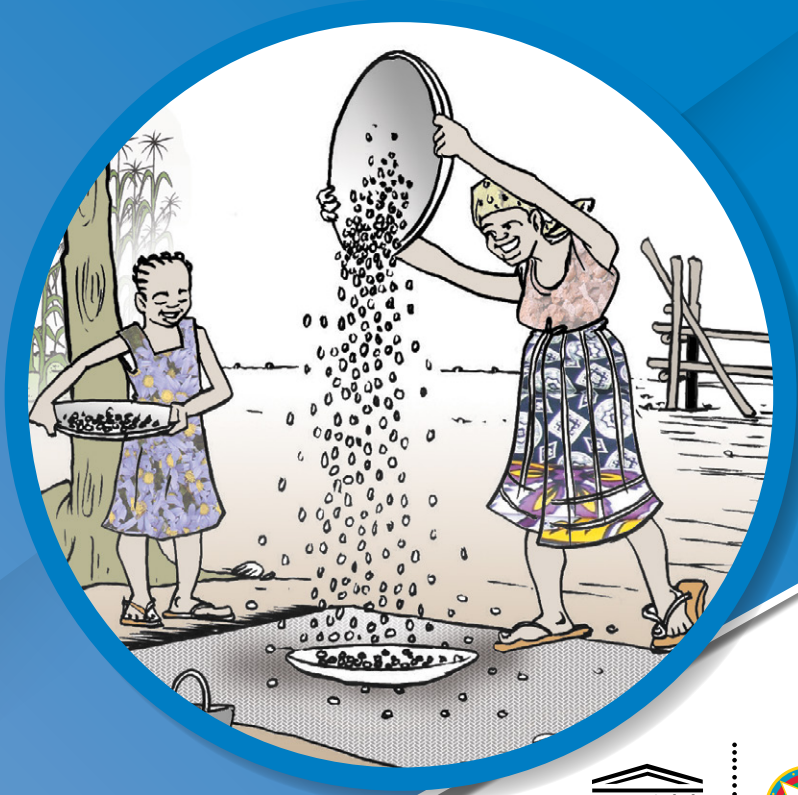


Ministry of Education

13 - 14
YEARS

Approved
By
K.I.C.D

Aunt Martha



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



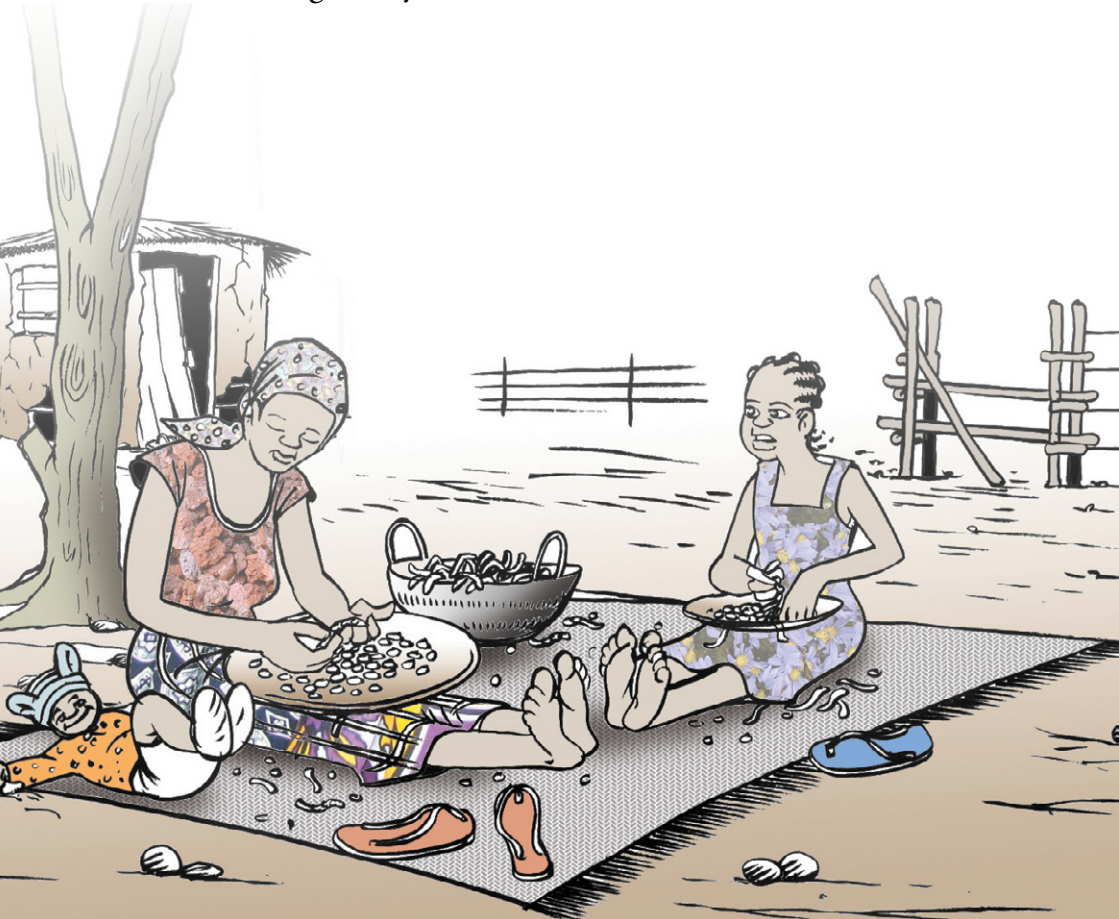
Government of
Azerbaijan

Aunt Martha

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The silent thoughts

Agnes and her mother were sitting outside, shelling beans. They were both quiet. Agnes' mother, Mary, was thinking about what she had to say to daughter and how she would say it. Agnes was thinking about what had happened at school that day. She wanted to tell her mum, but young people her age did not talk to their mums about such things. They talked to each other. Still...



‘Agnes, I want to talk to you,’ her mother’s voice broke into her thoughts. ‘I want to tell you some things that have happened in our family, to help you understand about our ways. Your father and I have talked about this and we think you are old enough now to know and learn from these stories of how it was and how it should be.’

Agnes was shaken out of her thoughts and wondered what was coming. ‘What is it mother?’

‘I don’t know how to begin. You are now growing up. You are almost 13 years and many things happen when you are that age. You experience changes in your body, you have new feelings, new desires, new interests. It is a confusing time in a young person’s life. Always remember, it is normal for girls to feel attracted to boys and boys to girls, and if you feel sad, confused or unhappy about how your body looks or how you feel about yourself, it is good to talk to an adult you trust. At such times friends may not be the best people to talk to, because sometimes they don’t give the correct information to answer your questions. In the past our people used to get girls married off at your age because they thought that these things can be properly taken care of. They thought that finding husbands for young girls at that time was a good thing, and that those desires had a place in the marriage. But those early marriages carried their own problems and nowadays we try not to do that. And that carries its own problems too.’ She sighed and smiled at Agnes’s shocked look. ‘I...’

‘Mother!’ Agnes’ voice was sharp and high with tension. ‘Mother, you and Father haven’t...haven’t decided I should get married have you? Not now, not yet...I...’

Now it was Mary's turn to interrupt her stunned daughter. 'No, no Agnes! Nothing like that. Not at all!' she took Agnes's hand and smiled. 'I'm sorry, I started out saying all this in a clumsy way. Let me start again. Let me tell you about Aunt Martha.'



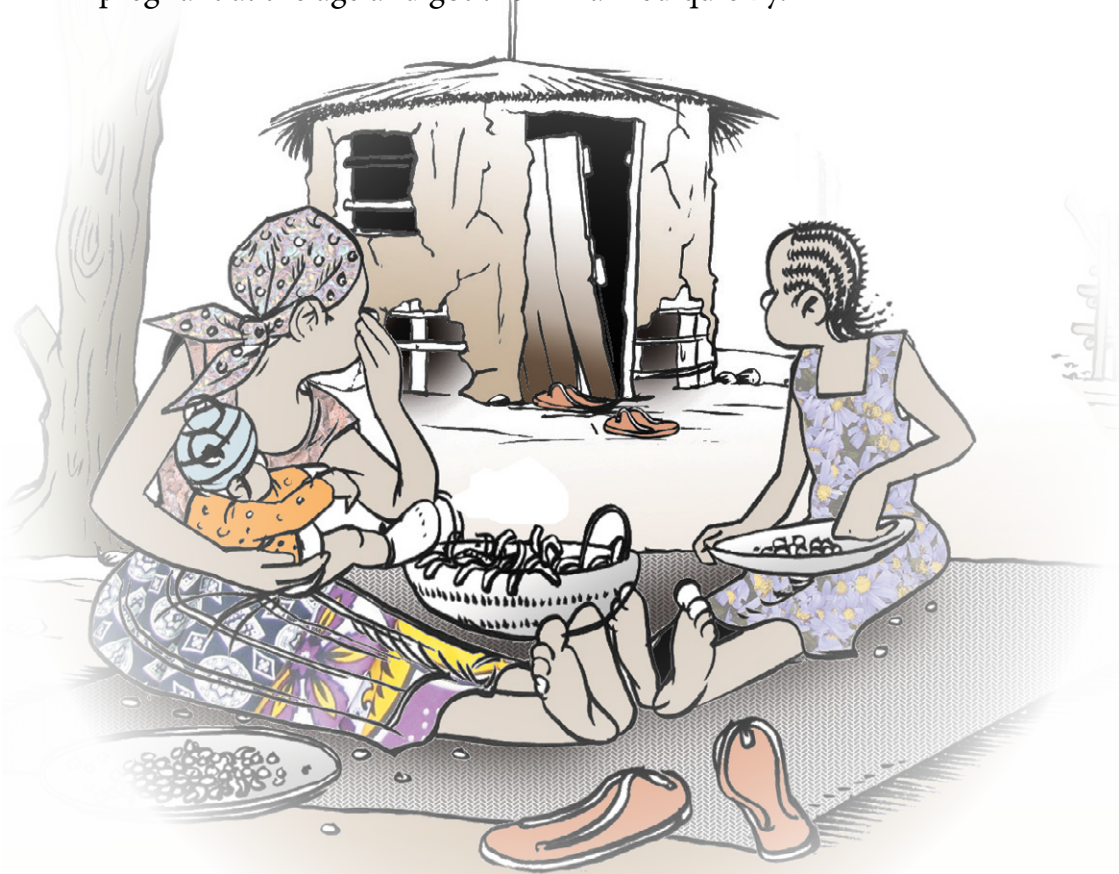
The tragedy

Aunt Martha? She lived with us...well near us until...' Agnes stopped. She could not complete the sentence. Aunt Martha had died just a few months ago and Agnes knew it still hurt her mother. She looked towards at Aunt Martha's smaller shed-like shack. 'I miss her, mother. Even though she smelt bad. But you told me that it was because she was ill, didn't you? What was she suffering from mother? Could they not give her medicine? You told me not to ask too many questions when I was little, and so I never did while she was here, but now she is gone.'

'No, they could not make her better. Or rather, we did not have the money to help her do that. We just had enough to keep her and you and Sam. I wish we could have done more.' Mary stopped. 'But that is not the bit I want to tell you about today, Agnes. I want to talk to you about something else. Did you know that your Aunt Martha was married off very young? She was 13. The same age as you are now.'

‘Why mother? Why was she married off so early? What about school?’

Mary sighed. ‘It was our tradition in those days. Like I said, young girls who turned 13 and 14 had their periods were considered ready for marriage, their parents knew that was possible to become pregnant at the age and got them married quickly.’



‘School was not so important in those days’, Mary continued. ‘Keeping girls pure and clean was far more important. It still is Agnes. I would like to think that, whatever your feelings, you would not act on them and instead you would consider having healthy relationships with boys that

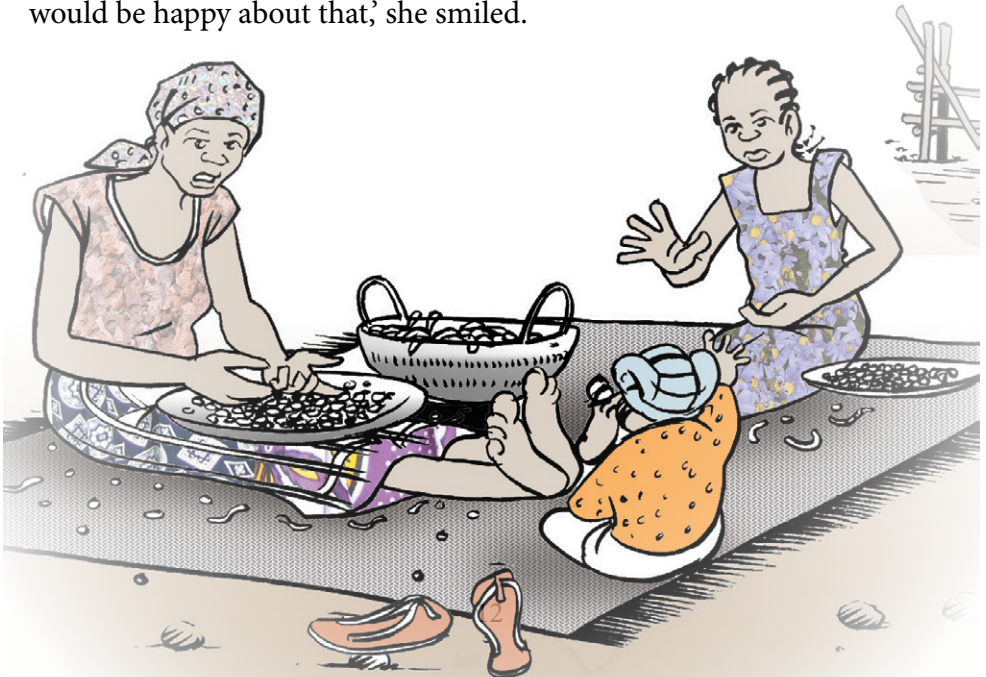
do not involve engaging in sexual activities. It can be dangerous.'

Agnes waited, sensing her mother was finding it hard to tell her what she wanted to say. 'What happened to Aunt Martha mother?' she prompted, trying to help her mother.

'She got pregnant, Agnes, and she was only 14 when she had Sam.'

'Sam!' exclaimed Agnes surprised. Sam looked up from the mud hearing his name. 'So what happened to the baby? To Sam? Where is my cousin?'

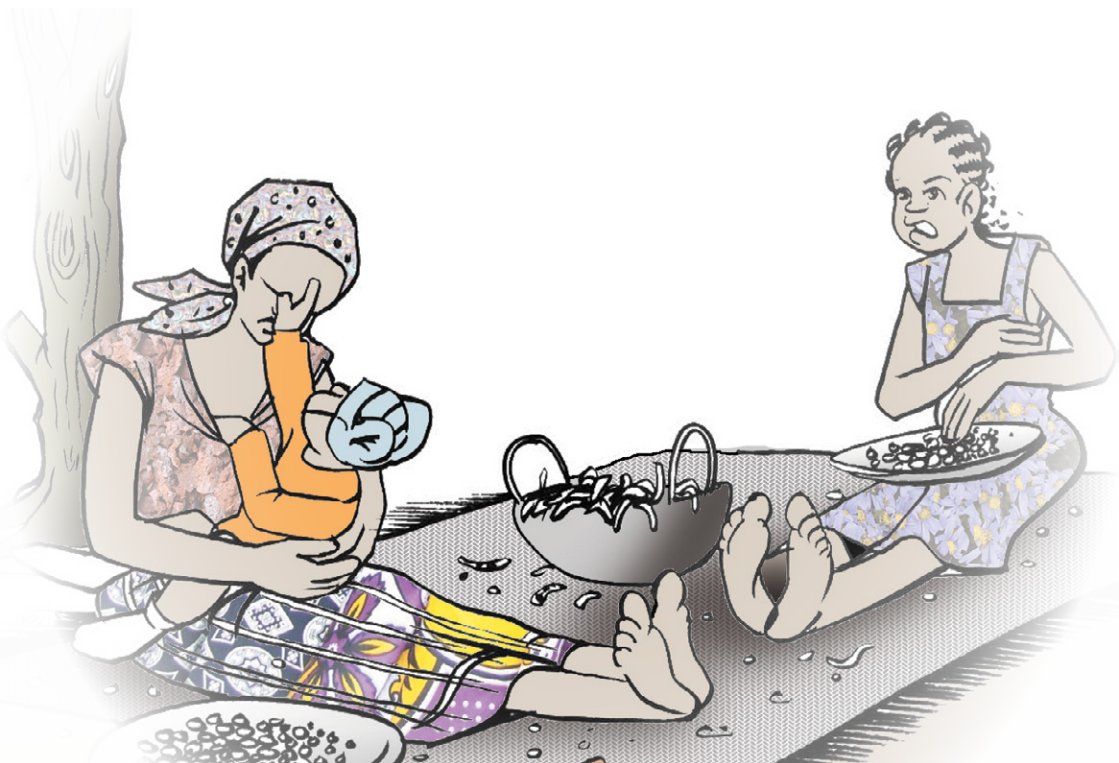
'Oh Agnes. Aunt Martha was too young for childbirth. Her body was not yet ready for child birth. Aunt Martha was feeling weak all the time and she got malaria, because when young girls get pregnant their immune system becomes weak. It was too much for the poor baby and for Martha. The baby could not survive and Aunt Martha had so much difficulty when she gave birth. Besides...', she paused as if she wanted to stop herself saying something, saying more than was necessary. 'That is why we decided to call your brother by the same name. Aunt Martha's Sam was lost, but we have another Sam to remind us of him. Aunt Martha would be happy about that,' she smiled.



‘When she was 9, Aunt Martha stopped going to school. She was very bright, Agnes. If she had been able to go she would have done something with her life.’

‘Why?’ interrupted Agnes, ‘you went to school and to college. Why did Aunt Martha not go?’

‘She...she fell ill. Don’t interrupt Agnes,’ her mother was suddenly impatient, ‘let me finish telling you what I have to tell you.’ Agnes was quiet. She realised she had somehow upset her mother but she wanted to know. She got up silently and took Sam on her lap. The shelling was completed and she wanted to cuddle him. ‘She guided me, she comforted me, she protected me. I miss her so much!’ Agnes waited. She knew this was hard for her mother. She gave her Sam to cuddle to comfort her. Her mother smiled down at the baby.



‘I remember well,’ Agnes said softly after a while, ‘she was always there for me too. When I felt sad or worried or just wanted to be somewhere I could think, I went to find Aunt Martha. What happened then mother?’

‘When she lost the baby, everything went wrong. She was unhappy and sad, her husband used to beat her and then he left her.’ Her voice broke and she choked back her tears.

‘Because the baby died!’ Agnes could not help herself. ‘But that was not Aunt Martha’s fault!’ she burst out. ‘He should have been supporting her.’

‘It was not so simple...’ her mother’s voice trailed off and she was silent too. Agnes waited. Whatever did her mother mean? Beating a woman was never okay. Never! Her mother had taught her that and now she seemed to be indicating something different.

Agnes glanced at her mother absentmindedly stroking Sam’s head. Her mother seemed to be trying to decide something. ‘Agnes, I am going to tell you everything,’ she said suddenly.

Female Genital Mutilation

You see, Aunt Martha's story starts with the time when we were young. Aunt Martha was 9 years old and I was 8 years old. Some women came to our hut and our mother told Martha that it was time she went with the women to follow the ways of our culture and traditions. The women explained to Martha that she would belong to the group of young girls who would soon become young women of the tribe.'

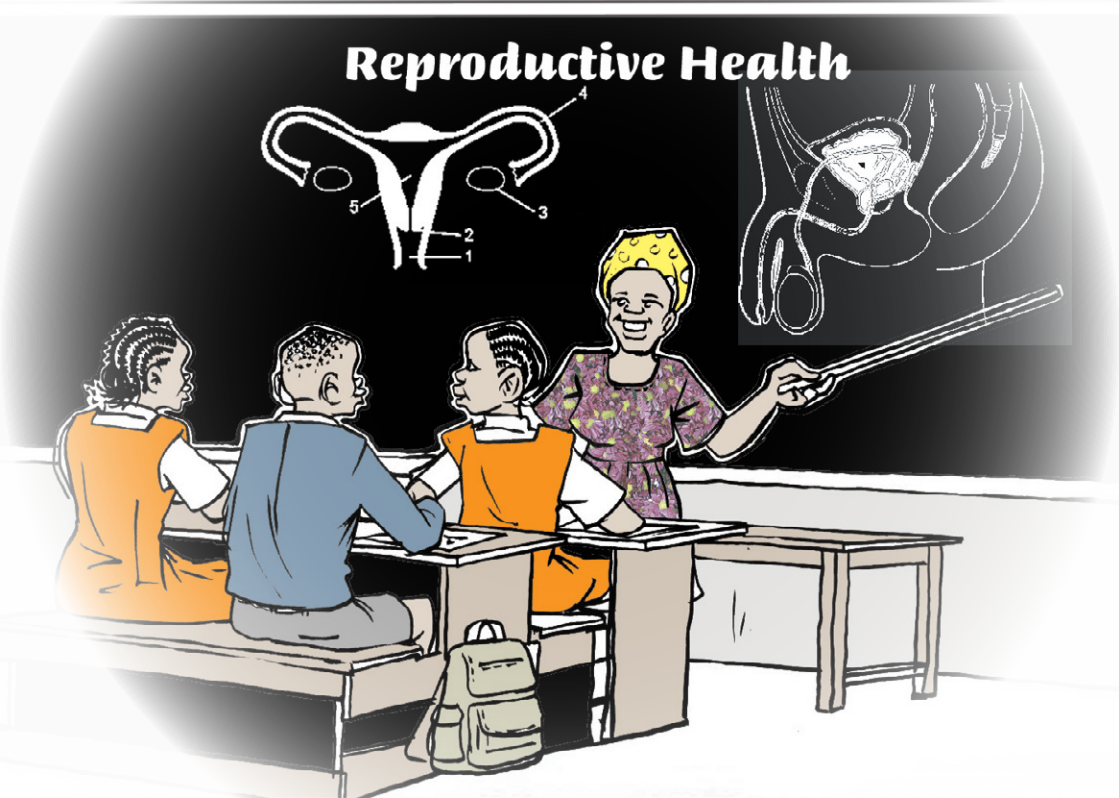
'But what did they mean?' asked Agnes.

'They said they would make a small cut in the female genital area/in the area where she peed from, and in future that would keep Martha clean and stop her from being spoilt and running after boys. That way Martha would keep the family honour by remaining a virgin and make her future husband happy. Every young girl went through this. Your grandmother did too.'

Agnes was bursting to ask more, but all she said was, 'What happened then?'

‘She came back after a few days but she was walking very slowly and in pain. She told me they had cut her with something sharp and then there was a lot of blood. The women looked after the cut part but it was still hurting. My mother was worried for her. She was not getting better.’ Her mother’s voice was heavy with sadness.

‘What went wrong?’ Agnes prompted gently.



‘You know these things can lead to infections and Martha’s cut was not getting better. She was looking very weak and she had lost a lot of blood. She found it difficult to go to the toilet to pee. She was cold all the time and she was looking very sad. She didn’t go to school for many days, and then she finally stopped trying to go to school altogether. It hurt too

much to sit all day or to walk or to go to pee. Her sore healed slowly but there was a lot of damage to the area around the cut part.’

‘Even at home, and even when she was in pain, Aunt Martha tried to help your grandmother with the cooking and the cleaning, but she was always wanting to know about what I was doing at school and about my friends. She looked sad and depressed every time I told her about what I was doing at school. I felt bad going when she could not, but she wanted me to go. “You can bring school to me” she would say gently. She was an amazing person, Agnes. No one could have had a better sister,’ she said wiping away the tears that had suddenly run down her cheeks. Now it was Agnes who took her hand.

‘Poor Aunt Martha,’ said Agnes.

‘Yes, Aunt Martha suffered a lot after the cutting. The cutting and the stitching back made having the baby very hard for her. Harder than it already is for women. And after the baby was born she got a condition called a fistula, due to the struggles she had trying to push the baby out,’ explained Agnes’ mother.

Agnes asked, ‘What is a fistula?’

‘A fistula is a condition that occurs when very young girls, whose bodies are not ready for childbirth, have to push too hard and struggle to give birth to babies. You have learnt in Science where the vagina is and where the bladder is?’ Agnes nodded.

Well, when a woman is too young and has had genital cutting and gets pregnant very young, she will have trouble pushing out the baby. Because of all the pushing and the baby pressing against the vagina and the bladder, a hole is formed between the vagina and the bladder. Soon the fluids between the two areas, including urine, start leaking continuously and uncontrollably causing a very bad smell from the person.’



‘Oh my God! Is that why Aunt Martha used to smell?’ Agnes asked. ‘I know you told me off once for asking about it when I was little and I wondered why she did not have a bath.’

‘Yes, poor Aunt Martha suffered for many years after that. We tried to get her to live with us but she would not. She thought she would make it harder for us to have a normal life if she was with us. But we wanted to care for her.’ Her mother looked at the worn slippers. ‘She was my sister,’ she said softly, ‘the best sister ever. I miss her terribly. Who cared about

some stupid smell. She was clean and pure and kind and wonderful on the inside. She stopped my mother from cutting me after she suffered so much. She talked and tried to persuade my mother not to let me go through what she had gone through. She must have been about 12 then and it was not easy for a child to speak out at that age’.

Agnes moved closer to her mother to put a hand on her arm. ‘She made me promise not to do it to my own daughter if the time came in the future,’ Agnes’ mother said. ‘And she reminded me of my promise when you were born, and again when you were 8 years old. I didn’t need reminding though. I had seen enough of what it did to her life to not want it in your life. I would rather trust you to keep yourself pure and clean and not need dangerous cutting and stitching to do so. I know it’s hard, but I think you can control your feelings when you are teenager.’



Her mother continued, 'But that is our culture and tradition. We sometimes have ideas that are meant to keep us safe, but they end up harming us. Cutting and stitching girls up is not the way to keep them pure and clean. Both boys and girls need to learn how to do that in other ways. They need to learn how to control their feelings. And that is why I wanted to talk to you about our culture and tradition that makes us a community. We look after our own family when they are sick. Sometimes the community helps too. It is important. I want to explain to you. Some of our ways and traditions are very important for us to hold on to. Like working together, looking after our own, acting as one united people.'

'Other ways, like genital cutting for girls, are just rules that have been passed on through the years. These are mistaken for religious rules but they are not. Our girls only need to know the ways that will help them to stay safe and clean and have good relationships when the right time comes. There are other ways to teach girls how to remain pure until they are old enough to have good and lasting relationships.'

Agnes sat up surprised. Gosh, could her mother look into her mind? She had been worrying about how George, her boyfriend, was hinting that now they were old enough to do more than hold hands. She loved George and sometimes she felt it would be nice, just to see and find out. All her friends were doing it. They all seemed fine. But the Science classes talked about diseases such as STIs, HIV and AIDS and what if she got pregnant? She thought of Aunt Martha and shuddered.

'You are very quiet Agnes', her mother said. 'What are you thinking?'

Now it was Agnes' turn to make a decision. She did not yet feel safe to ask about herself directly but... 'What about you and father?' Agnes asked.

'Yes sure! Your father and I knew each other at school. We knew each other for a long time before we got married. We knew that we could still love each other and have a good and positive friendship without sex.'

Agnes looked at her mother. She had not expected her to be so frank. Her mother smiled. 'Am I shocking you Agnes?' she asked. 'In my day we did not talk to our mothers. We found out what we could and what we thought was the right information from friends, Some of us were lucky enough to have older sisters like Martha, but a lot of us didn't know anything Agnes. We believed everything that we were told.'



Standing out

Did you get teased mother, by the “cool” girls? Did they not call you a “baby”?’

‘Yes, they did Agnes, they did, but we tried to ignore them. And it did not last, the teasing. They were the ones who got pregnant and they had to drop out of school. It was too difficult for some of them to stay at school even after they had a baby. They lost their chance of a good education and a good life afterwards.’

‘Like Aunt Martha?’ Agnes asked.

‘Yes like her,’ her mother replied, ‘but also not like her. Aunt Martha was a victim of a bad tradition. Her husband could have supported her, but he chose to go away and leave her. She, however, dealt with her life with dignity and with grace. She stopped me from suffering like her and she made me promise never to let you suffer, and to tell you about sex and

things when you were old enough. She made me keep those slippers of hers at the door to make sure I did not forget.’

Agnes stared at the slippers. She never knew they had a meaning. She just thought her mother could not bear to throw them away because they were Aunt Martha’s. Her mother watched her, and then she spoke gently, putting Sam down and walking with Agnes towards the slippers.



‘You know Agnes’, she said, ‘positive relationships do not have to be about having sex. Your father respected me and I respected him. When we had problems we talked to each other, we did not shout at each other. We both

knew that it was as important to listen as it was to say things to each other. Men and women are different in many ways, but the key is to respect those differences. Of course we had arguments, but it was not about one person losing and the other one winning by pressuring the other. It was about trust and compromise for both and coming to an understanding, not about getting your opinion understood by hitting the other person either.'

Agnes nodded. She knew now what she had to do about George. She put her feet into Aunt Martha's slippers. 'I will be a credit to her and to you mother,' she said seriously, 'I promise even when it is hard.'

Aunt Martha'

This is a story for pupils/students at what we call 'level 2' (ages 13-14). It deals with the issues of negative traditional practices on girls and the resulting medical problems, and with early marriage and early pregnancy and making the right choices. The story features a sensitive conversation between a mother and daughter, Agnes. The daughter learns about her aunt who has passed away, about empathy and about good relationships. Agnes' father is supportive and a positive male role model, although he remains in the background. Aunt Martha's story helps Agnes to make the right choices in her own life.