

PRAISE FOR *WE THE INTERWOVEN*

“The stories in *We the Interwoven* feel like the warmest welcome into someone's home. The hospitality of each and every writer is characterized through the detail, love, attention, and effort they put into crafting these beautiful, powerful stories; it was like a feast, and by the end of my reading, I was so full. The writers give you the kindness of their culture, but also the truth of their trauma. There is pain and healing, war and peace, fighting and resting; there is something for everyone here. The writers capture the complexities of the entire human experience through the depths of the bicultural journey. I am in awe of these stories, and I feel honored to be witness to them. Thank you, writers of *We the Interwoven*, for giving your reader a home and a family.”

—Amal Kassir, Syrian American poet and storytelling activist

“The essays compiled in this book are a testament to the conjuring, soothing, and subversive power of words, and the essential service of memory to the public good. These writers ask the reader to look more closely at oft-overlooked objects and consider their true significance: a document is more than just a piece of paper; a meal more than just food on a plate; a wall both the seal of a house, but also a barricade of oppression. Individually, these are beautiful personal stories of migration and transformation. Together, they are an essential text of contemporary history and geopolitics that everyone should be so lucky to read.”

—Lauren Markham, author of *The Far Away Brothers*

“These stories grabbed me from the first page, and each feels like a return to a particular urgent moment: home as it was, and as it receded. Honestly narrated, viscerally remembered, beautifully rendered, they are created by artists who understand both the storytelling traditions of home and the West. The result is something powerful, important, and effortlessly moving.”

—Dina Nayeri, author of *The Ungrateful Refugee* and *Refuge*

“*We the Interwoven* was monumental in opening doors in my writing journey. It wasn’t only about writing some stories, it was about those stories and my identity receiving validation. It was about having my platform amplified so others like me could hear those stories. The impact of being in the first bicultural anthology cannot be overstated, from providing a direct path to getting my first full-length publishing deal with the University of Iowa Press to connecting me with literary contemporaries exploring what it means to be a BIPOC creative in America. It is an experience I will always champion. A shining example of a process that puts in the work and scooches the chairs free for people like me to have their seat at the table.”

—Chuy Renteria, author of the forthcoming *We Heard It When We Were Young* from the University of Iowa Press

“Due to climate change, wars, oppression, and human rights abuse on a wide scale, we are witnessing millions of people fleeing their homelands, perhaps never to return. Capturing the tragedy and sorrow of life in exile is vital in recording history. This is the power of narrative storytelling—so that we never forget, so that we continue to remember, so that no one can ever say, in one hundred years’ time, that it did not happen.”

—Janine di Giovanni, author of *The Morning They Came for Us: Dispatches from Syria*; Senior Fellow, Yale University

Published by the Iowa Writers' House
www.iowawritershouse.com

The Bicultural Iowa Writers' Fellowship program
and *We the Interwoven* were funded in part by an
Art Project Grant from the Iowa Arts Council and
the National Endowment for the Arts.

First Edition

Copyright © 2020 Iowa Writers' House

Designed by Skylar Alexander

ISBN 978-1-7324206-3-2

WE THE MAYAN NOVEMBER

AN ANTHOLOGY OF
BICULTURAL IOWA

VOLUME 3

EYAD SAID, HIBBAH JARMAKANI, SHALINI JASTI
VANESSA "CUEPONICIHUATL" ESPINOZA
DHUHA TAWIL, GEORGE KHAL, SALMA SALAMA

editors
ALISHA JEDDELOH & ANDREA WILSON

CONTENTS

Foreword by Andrea Wilson	xi
Acknowledgments	xv

EYAD SAID

Artist Statement	1
The Polite Guest: A Syrian Father's Story	3
الضيف المدؤب: حكاية أب سوري	42
<i>Translated into Arabic by Eyad Said</i>	
Modern Syria: A Timeline	85

HIBBAH JARMAKANI

Artist Statement	91
The White Gate	93
البوابة البيضاء	
<i>Translated into Arabic by Asma Ben Romdhane</i>	103

SHALINI JASTI

Artist Statement	115
Mother Tongue	117
మాతృ భాష	127
<i>Translated into Telugu by Peddababu</i>	

VANESSA "CUEPONICIHUATL" ESPINOZA

Artist Statement	145
More Than a Piece of Paper	147
Más que un pedazo de papel	159
<i>Translated into Spanish by Vanessa "CueponiCihuatl" Espinoza</i>	

DHUHA TAWIL

Artist Statement	173
Uncovering My Truth	175
الكشف عن حقيقتي	186
<i>Translated into Arabic by Asma Ben Romdhane</i>	

GEORGE KHAL

Artist Statement	201
Under the New Crescent Moon	203
تحت الهلال الجديد	214
<i>Translated into Arabic by Asma Ben Romdhane</i>	

SALMA SALAMA

Artist Statement	227
The Hole in the Wall	229
<i>In collaboration with Cecile Goding, Eman Mohamed, and Lubab Eltayeb Elmikashfi</i>	
الفتحة داخل الجدار	247
<i>Translated into Arabic by Asma Ben Romdhane</i>	
Glossaries	269
Bios	291
Resources	299

FOREWORD

WHAT IS THE STORY of America? For over three centuries, the dominant narrative of our country has been one of opportunity. American founding ideals were tied to manifest destiny and rugged individualism, the belief that Western expansion was a fated mission, and that a successful future is only as close as a man's willingness to work hard enough to reach out and grab it. We call it the American Dream. Two hundred and forty-four years later, we are asking ourselves, is this true? Is it true now, and was it true then? Is a healthy, stable future still attainable for all, and is hard work enough to get there?

The accomplishments of this nation are undeniable. Since our founding, we have been a beacon for democracy, becoming a world leader and eventually an economic and political superpower. We were the first to put a man on the moon and our dollar is the de facto global currency. We've led in innovation with an American spirit known for creativity, tenacity, and finding a way. We are a country made up of immigrants and those whose families both survived and thrived in this new land, a story we remember through the words written on the Statue of Liberty:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Yet beneath the surface of our polished American tale has lurked another one, that of uprisings and protests against an American system that does not fully embody her ideals for everyone. From the Boston Tea Party in the 1700s to abolitionism in the 1800s, from the women's suffrage movement to the Civil Rights movement, the story of America is also one of dissent, protest, and unrest. During the making of this book, and with a global pandemic as the background, we have once again found ourselves experiencing a surge of opposition movements. In these, we hear something different—the rising voices of people speaking out that the classic story of American bootstrapped success has not been their experience.

How do we arrive at an ultimate understanding of the America we live in? One that includes the stories of those who have found success and those who are struggling, the stories of the newcomers and of those whose families have been here for generations? How do we sing the songs of the hopeful while listening to the cries of the hopeless? When voices of dissent rise, how do we integrate those perspectives into our collective understanding, our dinner conversations, our history books, our classroom discussions, and our political landscapes? Whose stories tell the truth of America? If the answer to that question is “all of our stories,” then our greatest tool for building a healthy future may be to listen, especially to the voices of Americans whose experiences are less known but equally important.

I have always believed in the power of story. In 2015, I founded the Iowa Writers’ House (IWH) to bring people together by providing them a place to gather, share their truths, and pen the narratives of their hearts. In 2017, after hundreds of people had come through our doors, it became clear we were missing some of the most important stories by America’s newest residents. *We the Interwoven* was an idea, a vision to find storytellers who could help us “listen” to what it means to be a new American living in the heart of our country. In response to that desire, the first writing residency for bicultural writers in the heartland was created: the Bicultural Iowa Writers’ Fellowship (BIWF). This book marks our third edition and the completion of the third year of the fellowship.

When we began this project, we were simply hopeful that the stories would find an audience. The results have been so much greater and speak for themselves in the lives of those we have published. The writers of *We the Interwoven* have risen up to be agents of change. They’ve become university press authors, immigration reform activists, diplomatic envoy nominees, and featured speakers at literary conferences. They’ve integrated their stories and experiences as BIWF fellows into their work as family counselors, doctors, mathematicians, arts and culture educators, librarians, students, and teachers. They are as American as they come in that they are all unique, each with a different history and life experience, but collectively trying to find their way in a world that is full of both

opportunity and obstacles, a world that has welcomed their stories with open arms.

As the editor of the *We the Interwoven* series, guiding these writers' journeys has solidified my belief that story is an empowerment tool and a psychological springboard into a healthier future for all of us. When people are able to access the power of narrative for a purpose and are given a platform that allows these stories to take hold in the collective psyche, the arc of their future changes, as does our collective future. As Iowa high schools, colleges, and universities have begun to adopt our anthologies into their diversity curriculums and communities have used them to facilitate difficult conversations on race and immigration, we have seen this change begin to take effect at an exponential level.

This year, the voices we bring to you share perspectives that have rarely been seen in publication. Unique to volume 3 are writers from the same cultural background but of different generations, offering a fascinating parallel and insight into migration and the diasporic experience over time. From Syria, **Eyad Said** tells the story of a father trying to explain to his children that he was born in a country they can no longer visit, of grandparents they can no longer see and hug, but of an Iowa home he is grateful for. **Hibbah Jarmakani** writes of being a young woman whose parents moved from Syria to Iowa before she was born to build a new life, but then the terror of 9/11 strikes and soon the FBI is at her doorstep. **George Khal** shares a beautifully haunting letter to his deceased Palestinian parents describing his path from the homeland to Cairo to Iowa, and eventually of finding love. **Dhuha Tawil** was the first Muslim woman to don the hijab in her Iowa school before embarking on a journey exploring religious liberties and beliefs.

For the first time in the series, we share a story of a woman who fled political persecution in Sudan and Egypt—**Salma Salama** left Sudan as a famed radio host, coming to Iowa with almost nothing and finding neighbors and kindness in the heartland. **Shalini Jasti** writes of being a young woman whose family arrived from India and the pressure felt by many immigrant children to speak English while remaining connected to the mother tongue. Lastly, **Vanessa “CueponiCihuatl” Espinoza** offers the tale of an undocumented

woman from Mexico as she becomes a legal resident, exploring her complicated relationship with her official American documents.

These stories are the experiences of seven individuals sharing both their sorrows and their joys, and they offer a window into a collective of voices that merit our listening. Our newest residents have much to teach us about the American experience, and with Iowa as the setting, the dimensionality of the heartland begins to shine. Through these stories, we may be able to find threads that help us weave a more authentic representation of modern American life, bringing us closer to her ideals of liberty and justice for all.

ANDREA WILSON

Founder, Iowa Writers' House

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ALL OF US INVOLVED with the Bicultural Iowa Writers' Fellowship (BIWF) and *We the Interwoven* offer our gratitude to those who celebrate our vision for a more understanding and connected world:

To previous fellows Antonia Rivera, Ajla Dizdarević, Sarah Elgatian, Hieu Pham, Rana Hewezi, Anthony Mielke, Dawson Davenport, Chuy Renteria, Melissa Palma, and Sadagat Aliyeva for continuing to be ambassadors of our program.

To those who have helped champion this book as an educational tool at state and regional levels, including the Iowa Library Association and the Iowa Historical Society.

To the UI International Writing Program for their support of our fellowship program and our vision to publish new voices.

To all who assisted with translation and helped us honor native languages.

To Maggie Conroy and Hugh Ferrer for giving their time and talent to the fellowship, and to Lauren Arzbaecher and Shania Schmidt for giving our program their administrative skills and energy.

To the Iowa Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts for helping to make this program possible.

To our families and loved ones who supported us in bringing this book into the world.

To the Iowa Writers' House community for believing in our dream to champion marginalized voices and to publish books that represent a globalizing world.



EYAD SAID

ARTIST STATEMENT

*I WAS BORN in Damascus, Syria, and lived there until I was thirty years old, when I traveled to the United States to study mathematics. I spent twenty years in the Syrian public education system, where I was never asked about my opinions. I was never taught how to write critically or how to debate or defend a nonscientific point of view. I didn't even know students in other parts of the world learned these skills until an English professor at school where I work told me that he was using a book called *The End of Policing*, by Alex S. Vitale, to teach his writing class. This came as a complete shock to me. It was not the topic itself that surprised me; it was the fact that students were expected to read the book and write essays to express opinions that might be different than the author's or the professor's!*

I believe that the education system in any country aims to create good and productive citizens. What each regime defines as a good and productive citizen, though, can vary wildly. Under a dictatorship like in Syria, a good citizen is one who agrees with the government without argument. It can be dangerous to express any countering opinions, because free voices scare tyrannies. So, while I never had an issue explaining a math problem or talking about a scientific theory, I always struggled with expressing my opinions. My friends used to describe my approach in arguing as a very mathematical one.

After I moved to the States with my wife and baby daughter, part of me wanted to tell everyone about the tragedies taking place in my country, but I found that I was not able to wrap my mind around all that had happened. I thought that was because the details were far more complicated than my ability to keep track of them. When I was accepted to the Bicultural Iowa Writers' Fellowship, I thought I would take the opportunity to organize these details and tell these stories, starting with our own. It was then that I discovered there was a mental barrier, another part of me that did not want to remember and was blocking my attempts to relive what I witnessed.

I am writing to untangle all of these memories, to try to heal that part of me as I explore my past and learn to express my opinions. I also want to celebrate the people we've met on our road to happiness and to share every act of kindness, big or small, they showed and the mark they left on our lives. Some left me with intriguing questions, some with regret; most importantly, some helped us go on through dark times. Finally, I want this essay to be a message of hope to everyone who reads it: Happiness can be found. Don't give up looking for it.



THE POLITE GUEST: A SYRIAN FATHER'S STORY

EYAD SAID

PART ONE

DAMASCUS, SYRIA: THE GOOD LIFE

TO BEGIN TO understand where I came from, you need to meet my family, and what better place to meet them than the kitchen?

I grew up in Damascus, Syria. I moved three times in that city. And in all of those places, most of my memories have to do with the kitchen in one way or another. The divine smell of my mother's cooking would lead me there to steal a bite. Or I would go there simply to hang out with her. Later, I would go to share with her a *finjan* of Turkish coffee and a cigarette behind my father's back.

My mom always began cooking by sautéing onions and garlic. Whenever I tried to speak to her before it was time to eat, she'd say, "I need to finish preparing lunch. Your dad will arrive soon tired and hungry."

Lunch is the main meal in Syria, the center of our day. It was always assumed that our family of four would gather around the kitchen table to eat together. My mom, a perfectionist, would cook at least two main courses to satisfy the picky eaters. "Your dad doesn't like white sauce. Your sister can't eat tomato paste," she would say, defeated yet matter-of-factly. Rice and bread were common denominators, though.

"Wait until your father sits at the table before you start," she would say while still standing in the kitchen.

"But I'm hungry, Mom!"

"I said wait."

"Fine!" But I would sneak some bites anyway—I couldn't help it. I've always been a foodie.

I was always the first to sit. I scanned what was on the table and picked my seat to be close to the foods I liked the most. My dad sat

down next, after he changed out of his work clothes. He was already looking forward to his nap on the couch after the meal. Then Mom would sit. She never sat before he did, ever.

“Sarah! Food is getting cold!” Mom would call my sister, who was always the last to the table. I think I got most of the food-loving genes when I was inside my mother, so when my sister was born four years later, she did not have as many. Strong, smart, and quiet, she kept a lot to herself—a trait all four of us share that we have never acknowledged in one another.

My dad is not necessarily the patriarchal type, but my mom definitely is. “A ship can never have two captains,” she explained once. I am not sure she enjoyed being the traditional second in command, but she excelled at it. I was not raised as a kitchen helper, nor was my sister. Instead Mom did everything herself, from getting the dishes out to putting the leftovers away. She even took the seeds out of watermelon, piece by piece, before serving it. She pitted olives for us as well until she developed neck and back problems. The kitchen was her center of gravity. She could usually be found there cooking, making coffee, smoking, or maybe all three. I can still see her sitting quietly in the white and blue room with her Turkish coffee cup, a small woman with silky black hair tied back in a bun or ponytail, lighting a Gitanes cigarette while something delicious cooks on the stove.

My family was not the best at expressing feelings or making small talk. Conversations were expected to be started by my father, but he was not the talkative type, especially when he was tired after work. I was the noisy one at the table, a relentless jokester. I would never dare to tease my dad, so instead Mom was the easy target of my silly, immature jokes about how she was shorter than me or about her obsession with cleaning.

“Your tongue has disowned you. Stop teasing your mother.” My father always used this expression to say that even my tongue disapproved of the things I made it say. Mom did not mind, though. She knew my jokes came from a good place. My sister would just give me an eye roll.

But no matter what we said or did not say at the table, we all loved the perfect Damascene food, with the exact right combination of herbs and spices every time.

It was a little annoying, and yet funny, to see how defensive Damascene families like mine could get about their recipes. In this unholy kitchen war, the main opposition was Aleppo, one of the largest cities in Syria and the center of industry. In a country where no one was allowed to think too much for themselves, food was a battle people felt they could fight and win. I visited Aleppo a couple of times, and I had to admit they have great taste in their recipes. They tend to use hot red pepper in almost everything, though, and I did not appreciate that when I was young. So I was always on Team Damascus.

“Add cumin to stuffed *kousa*,” Mom would argue with her sister in Aleppo.

“*Molokhia* is cooked with cubed beef, not any other meat,” I would tell my non-Damascene friends.

If food is the first way to understand the Syrian culture, then our holidays are the second. For those who want a window into life in Syria, Ramadan is the perfect example. For an entire month, Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. No food, no water, and no cursing, dammit! No fighting or arguing or other bad deeds. The idea is to build character and learn how to be a good human even when feeling starved and exhausted. It is also a month of charity and giving. When fasting for the majority of the day, you know how the poor and needy feel.

Ramadan was also marked by how much more households spent on food. I know it sounds odd and defies the purpose of the holy month, but it's true. Restaurants offered dine-in deals and packages to have *iftar* at sunset. Dessert shops and street-food vendors were open almost twenty hours a day to meet the increased demand. Families would invite each other to *iftar* or even for *suhoor* before sunrise.

Some of my favorite memories are of this time of year. My mom's uncle did not have children of his own, so he treated my mom and her seven brothers and sisters as his own kids after their father, my grandpa, died. He would invite the whole family to the same restaurant with the same menu once every Ramadan. It was so predictable that it was funny, but although many family members complained about this routine, they never missed the loud, boisterous gathering.

During the last week of Ramadan, cash also flowed into clothing businesses, especially for kids. The shopping scene in the last week of Ramadan was astonishing. It was as if a football stadium poured all the spectators into one street. Eid al-Fitr was approaching, the holiday for breaking the fast, and children needed to look sharp as they played on the swing sets and carousels that popped up everywhere on Eid. From a religious point of view, the holiday is a celebration of all the good deeds, sacrifices, and charity performed during the holy month of giving. But it is also a huge social event. It is the Islamic equivalent to Christmas, when kids dress nicely, grown-ups hand the kiddos some cash, families gather, desserts flow through the streets, and almost everybody gets a three-day break.

Late-night shopping was the name of the game during Ramadan. Parents wanted to avoid shopping while fasting, so they would drag sleepy, cranky kids to fitting rooms. My family owned a kidswear shop in Sha'alan, one of the busiest neighborhoods for shopping. During that last crazy week of Ramadan, shoppers continued to show up even after midnight, and the night before Eid, we worked until sunrise. We then ate breakfast together, a traditional Syrian chickpea or fava bean salad with diced tomatoes, white onion, garlic, lemon juice, cumin, and parsley. As we scooped up the salad with bites of pita bread, we joked about the long night.

A typical Eid morning for Syrian Muslims starts with a special prayer in the mosques. Neighborhood families meet there and invite one another over for coffee and desserts. Kids suddenly get better at mental math trying to calculate their potential monetary gains, and the marathon of visits officially commences.

Eid lasts three days, after which life goes back to normal. Well, for almost seventy days. There is another Eid in the Islamic calendar, Eid al-Adha. It is the celebration after Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. And the cycle of late-night shopping–morning prayers–dessert repeats. There is one difference though. *Adha* in Arabic originates from the word *odhia*, meaning sacrifice, and the Eid al-Adha sacrifice is the lamb. Just like turkey on Thanksgiving, lamb symbolizes Eid. Traditionally lamb is the preferred protein because its fatty and tender texture suits the Syrian cuisine. Those who can afford to buy a whole lamb keep a small portion for their household

and donate the rest to those who can't. My mom would roast a leg of lamb on the first day of Eid using the portion we kept. She cooked it in a tomato sauce with herbs and served it with rice, maybe with green salad as well. The aroma would fill the whole house.



I spent my childhood in apartment homes. Syria is the size of North Dakota but with thirty times the population. People had to build up vertically to fit. I shared a bedroom with my sister because the other room was occupied by my grandmother. Dad became the provider for his family at the age of twenty when his father passed away, so his mother lived with him after he married. I grew up not questioning why *Teitei* lived with us. It was simply a fact.

She loved me unconditionally. She would secretly give me most of her monthly pension money. It was not a lot, but in that time and at that age, it meant I could hang out with my friends in coffee shops playing cards or backgammon every night. I would try to refuse at first, but the temptation to accept the money was too strong. She was of a generation that preferred boys over girls, so my sister was not showered with extra monthly allowance.

We were not super close, my sister and I. Four years apart can be a big age gap between siblings, especially in a family that didn't share feelings. But we had our moments. She covered for me when she saw me smoking. She knew about the girls I dated and never told my conservative parents about. Now I realize she always had my back, kept my little secrets but never told me hers. I don't blame her. The expectations in a conservative family differ vastly between boys and girls. The margin of error was pretty wide for boys but razor thin for girls. I could go out anytime I wanted, spend the whole night out, and be back just before sunrise without seeing much more than a frown. Dating was not allowed for either of us. But I knew that even if I was caught, I would get "the talk" while she would probably be grounded. I don't think Sarah knew about my extra untaxed granny money, but she figured out quickly I was the favored grandson.

In 2005, when I was twenty-three years old, my grandmother became very sick, and after about six months, she passed away. Our home suddenly felt much quieter, too quiet maybe. There was no more impatient yelling or cranking up the TV, or even the sound of her walker as she moved from her bedroom to the living room. A couple of years after her death, my dad decided to trade city life for the comfort of the suburbs. He sold our big apartment and bought a mid-sized villa with a backyard and a pool. My room had a view of the pool, and I even got my own car since the new place was about forty-five minutes away from downtown Damascus.

Life was good in Syria back then, especially for the twenty-five-year-old me. I had a master's degree in banking and finance, spoke good English and French, had a well-paying job, and did not have to pay rent or any other bills except my phone.

I was also deeply in love.

I met Afraa in 2005 when my family opened the clothing shop. She used to work at the brand headquarters and was sent to help us set up the shop. She was so good at her job that my family ended up offering her a permanent position in the shop. I was blown away by her strong personality, her maturity, and her wit, not to mention her beautiful curly hair and kind brown eyes. She always had a positive attitude and looked happy, with a contagious smile that brightened the place.

Her first day on the job, I was busy with a coworker unpacking a shipment when she arrived, so later that day, sweaty and rough, I approached her to introduce myself. I tried to think of a funny line but could not come up with anything as I stretched out my hand, so I said, "Hello, I am the smartest guy in the world, nice to meet you." She admitted later that she hated me on the spot.

Thankfully, her big heart allowed her to look beyond this first impression, and we quickly became friends. We went to shows, plays, and movies together. And the more time we spent together, the more I was drawn to her, until one day I decided it was time. I made her a mixed CD that was basically the soundtrack of *City of Angels* and labeled it *To the Angel I have been blessed to meet*. I was nervous; I felt out of my league. But the smile on her face when I gave it to her sent me over the clouds.

Our favorite place to go was the old city. There was nothing more romantic than walking through the narrow lanes of this ancient city that had seen empires and kingdoms come and go, had seen them loving her, fighting for her, and dying for her. “The ‘Pearl of the East,’ the pride of Syria, the fabled Garden of Eden, the home of princes and genii of the Arabian Nights, the oldest metropolis on Earth,” Mark Twain once described it. Later I would learn that the Apostle Paul preached in these streets, and there was a church that honored him.

Afraa and I would meet in Bab Tuma, one of the seven historic gates to the old city. The thick walls that once enclosed the city were destroyed, but the gates remain as landmarks. We would walk by the old gate that is now placed in the center of a traffic circle and an aged stone building as we entered the old city and started down the first lane. As the lanes grew narrower, the houses shared roofs. High windows looked down on couples holding hands, students running, young men and women getting ready for their shifts in the restaurants and coffee shops that filled the old city, and the elderly owners of the few old workshops for mosaic collectibles playing backgammon outside their shops. These windows were where neighbors must have shared dishes and rumours, where girls hid behind curtains waiting for lovers to pass by and glance up.

The lanes form a complex network that has been described by many as Aladdin’s lanes. In these lanes Afraa and I celebrated birthdays and shared frustrations. In these coffee shops we ate hot cheese-filled croissants, a Syrian take on the French pastry that would probably have driven the old invaders crazy. In these small restaurants we broke many fasts. In small shops scattered all over the place, we bought hacked movies and music albums, we looked at overpriced souvenirs, we admired crafts and arts we could not afford, and we found great books for half the price of most bookshops. I don’t get attached to places usually; it is the people I miss when I leave a place. But the old city is an exception to the rule. It is where our love story bloomed.

Ours was not an easy love story, though. We come from two different sects that historically had no shared love. The Sunnis are the majority of Syrians and the largest denomination of Islam. The Alawites, on the other hand, are a minority. In Syria, the conflict is a political rather than religious one.

For more than four decades, Syria has been under the reigns of the Assad family. Hafez, the first Assad to become president, ruled from 1971 to 2000, followed by his son Bashar. The Assad family are Alawites. They have used religious leaders to imply that Sunnis want Alawites dead and that the only way for Alawites to survive is to stay in power. Historically, the Ottoman Empire, which ruled what is now Syria, self-identified as Sunni. The Ottomans suppressed Alawites and tried to convert them to Sunni Islam several times, but they failed. During the French occupation of Syria, the French convinced Alawites they needed protection from the Sunni majority while convincing Sunnis that they needed to distance themselves from the backward mountain Alawites. This dirty game to deepen the gap between the two groups resulted in Sunnis looking down on Alawites.

Everything changed after Hafez al-Assad became the minister of defense in 1966. He recruited Alawite officers and led a coup in 1971. He succeeded, and after becoming the new president, most of the army and intelligence ranks became filled with Alawites. The Assads knew how to deploy the tension between the two sects to their advantage. By tightening their grip on security and elevating Alawite officers, they hit a lot of birds with one stone. Sunnis felt that their impression of Alawites as a power-seeking minority had always been right. On the other hand, Alawites saw the fear in Sunnis' eyes and interpreted it as hate.

So this was the situation our love was trying to grow in. Both of our families were reluctant to see our relationship blossom, as all families are when they witness a Romeo-and-Juliet love story. They kept warning us, "If you marry outside your sect, you will die sick." Of course, it rhymed better in Arabic, but it was still a terrible thing for us to hear. We did not listen. We were young and in love.

By that time, Syria had been ruled by the Al-Ba'ath, or Ba'ath, party and the Assads for forty years. Corruption was so deeply rooted in daily life that many Syrians referred to the country as the Assads' Farm. Corruption flourishes in dictatorships, so the regime tightened its grip on the presidency and as a result no one dared to run against the Assads. Referendums were held instead of elections because there was never any opposition against the president. These

referendums had one question only: *Do you accept that the president continues for another term?* He would win by a landslide because it was all fake. I remember walking with Mom and Dad on a rainy day so they could cast their vote in one of these referendums, because no one wanted to risk the wrath of the intelligence forces if word got out that you did not vote. I was probably eight or nine years old. Hafez was president at the time. I walked into the voting center and watched my parents check “yes” under the eye of an officer, no private room or secret vote or anything of the sort. They had to pretend they were happy and proud to participate in this glorious opportunity of democracy. I grew up fearing the word *Mukhabarat* (intelligence forces). People used to code name them “Branch 999.” They had unlimited authority to detain whomever they deemed an enemy of the ruling party.

I was somehow protected from these stories until I went to college. It was there I witnessed how brutal the Mukhabarat could be. I met a guy whose dad was a low-level officer in the Ba’ath party. He told me that he had once gotten into a fight with a random guy on the street in a fit of road rage. He said that he got the man’s license plate and sent it to his contacts in the Mukhabarat, who “hosted this guy for coffee,” a euphemism used by Syrians to refer to being detained and tortured by the authorities. He was so proud as he told me that story, unaware I was shocked with disgust and fear.

In 2004, the Kurds in the northeastern corner of Syria tried to riot against the tyranny that stripped them from basic rights like ID cards. The riot was quickly silenced, and news outlets portrayed the events as soccer fans protesting the outcome of a match. Of course, we Damascenes had no idea of the truth; we bought the official version of the story because we did not know another version existed. But one day a guy appeared on campus and started reading aloud from what looked like international newspapers about the alleged soccer riots as a way to point out to college students that they needed to investigate the story further. We did not have time to understand his message, though, because within thirty minutes, a station wagon stormed onto campus, and a bold man with a black beard emerged. He was wearing camouflage army pants and a tight white shirt that showed heavily muscled arms, and he somehow

knew where to go immediately. He ran to the young man with the newspaper who stood there maybe defiantly, maybe struck with fear, never moving until the officer grabbed him by the neck and the back of the pants and tossed him into the trunk of that station wagon like a sack of sweet potatoes. All the while he cursed him with the most vulgar words I had ever heard, and I have a foul mouth myself. I felt like I was watching a terrible action movie where the bad guys looked classically bad, it was all so surreal. No one made a move or uttered a word until the car drove away, and we did not discuss it afterward. We never saw that young man again.

In 2007, a referendum was held for the unholy son Bashar, and as usual, he won by a landslide against no one. Celebrations were enforced in all major intersections in Damascus, the capital, as we were driving home at night after visiting my uncle. My dad was driving, my mom was sitting next to him, and my sister and I were sitting in the back. A major road was blocked for celebrations, traffic funneled into a narrow one-way lane. Then we noticed another reason for the crazy traffic—a car was driving in the opposite direction. All the other cars squeezed together to yield to it, no horns, no objections, no cursing, which was suspicious to anyone who had ever driven in Damascus. We then saw that it was an Opel Omega, a car almost exclusively used by intelligence officers. The driver was using high beams, a clear power move to signify that he couldn't care less what other drivers thought. I waited until his car was side by side with ours, rolled down my window, and yelled, "If you decide to drive against the traffic, at least use low beams!"

As his escorts immediately jumped to their guns, my mom had the fastest mom's reaction I ever witnessed: "Forgive him please, he is a fool!"

There was a moment of silence. The guy looked at me with an evil grin, then said, "I will forgive you this time for the sake of your old parents, you brat." I was twenty-five years old, and I had believed I was doing the right thing. I was not being a brat. But I was naive. I could have easily been detained that day, and worse, my parents and sister could have paid the price for my uncalculated move. My parents did not blame me for what I did and for humiliating my mom, but they did tell me to be more realistic picking my battles.

When the Arab Spring started as a revolution in Tunisia at the end of 2010, I watched the crowds on TV in awe. People could revolt against their government? The concept seemed so foreign to me, like the French Revolution. Then it was Egypt's turn, and the sight of millions in the streets chanting "The people want the regime down" awakened millions more to the possibility of people actually getting their rights. Many Syrians began to dream of gathering in the Umayyad Square in Damascus, chanting for their rights.

However, it turned out that the totalitarian Syrian regime was not one you could have a chant-off with. It was the type of regime that, when finding a mouse in the kitchen corner, would burn the whole neighborhood down while raping every woman, killing every child, and torturing every man there.

When the protests started, a lot of Syrians had high hopes that the young president would listen to the people. We were ready to forget his family's long history of corruption, oppression, and cruelty. We were ready to forget how he became president himself after the death of his father, how the constitution was changed in a quarter of an hour to fit him. He was thirty-four at the time, and the constitutional minimum age requirement for presidency was forty. The parliament took a quick vote to lower the age requirement. We ignored the clear facts that he was still benefiting from the same regime his father prepared for him. We wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt because he was young. Because he was an optometrist who graduated from school in England. Because he and his wife attended the theater and opera, ate dinner in the same restaurants we went to, shopped in the same neighborhoods we shopped in, things his father never did. The son worked hard to present himself as a progressive leader, not the feared demigod his father was. But our hopes were misplaced, as we soon found. The motto of the Assad army since day one of the revolution has been "Assad, or we burn down the country." And they did, they still do, and definitely will continue to do until every Syrian submits to Assad's reign.



Afraa and I married in 2010 after dating for five years. Our families agreed to our marriage after we both insisted. The pleasant

surprise was that we both got along very well with our in-laws. I played backgammon for hours with Afraa's dad every time I visited, and Afraa and my mom hit it off instantly.

Our wedding was about six months before the protests started in Syria. We lived in an apartment my dad bought for us. Afraa was an elementary teacher in a nearby public school, while I was a math teacher in an international school that was part of a collection of schools in many countries, mostly in the Middle East. The one in Damascus was owned by Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, one of the pillars of corruption in Syria and consequently one of the richest and most powerful figures. He owned and operated a wide array of businesses, from real-estate development to banking as well as a mobile phone network. Most of the teachers were Assad supporters who raced to show their absolute loyalty to the regime. Those of us who were not on their side had to stay silent not only to keep our jobs but to stay away from the claws of the Mukhabarat. Every day after I came home, I would turn on the TV to Al Jazeera or BBC or CNN or any station other than the Syrian public one so I could watch the videos sent by protesters and activists showing how they were attacked, detained, or even killed on the spot by Assad's forces. And the next day, I went to work wearing a poker face.

I was slowly suffocating. Knowing how the regime operated, I did not dare show one emotion or say one word. I feared not only for myself but also for my wife, my old parents, and my sister and her child. Almost all protesters masked their faces, but the intelligence always seemed to discover their identities, and we heard countless stories about brave young men and women being detained and killed in prisons for participating in the protests.

Mustafa, a close friend of mine, was studying in the math graduate program at Louisiana State University. When he came back to Damascus to visit his family, he suggested I apply to the PhD program at LSU because of my love for math and because I hated working in that school.

It was not an easy decision to leave the only place we'd ever known as home, but in the end it was not that hard, either. The violence was quickly escalating, and several massacres had already been committed by Assad's forces. Damascus, the capital city,

became a fortress of the regime. Checkpoints were everywhere, with armed soldiers stationed at every intersection. They searched cars, they checked IDs, they detained anyone they suspected. They had complete authority to even kill on sight, assassination style. They did not kill on sight in Damascus in order to ensure the image presented in the capital was that they were in control and they were the protectors. But the videos surfacing from other parts of Syria were surreal. In the age of social media, the regime had no chance of controlling people's access to these videos and images, so their answer was they were all doctored by the enemies of Syria, a lie all too easily swallowed by most Assad supporters.

Travel between cities was hard and in many cases impossible. The clashes between the rebel forces (the Free Syrian Army) and Assad's forces were almost everywhere outside Damascus. This led to an astronomical rise in prices of most items. Furthermore, diesel became scarce because it was used by tanks. In Syria most middle to lower class families used diesel for heating, so they switched to electricity to keep warm. But generating electricity also requires fuel, so we started getting electricity on a schedule. However, the neighborhoods where high government officials resided saw no electricity rationing. Some people believed that, although electricity was in greater demand, the real reason for rationing was to show Syrians what Assad could take from them if they didn't get in line. Water was next, and some neighborhoods could only get water in their taps once a week, some even less—yet another tool to force the raging crowds to submit.

In Syria, once a couple marry, it is assumed they will try to have children immediately. When we found out Afraa was pregnant shortly after the wedding, we could not believe it. It was one of the happiest days of our lives. And when later we knew the baby was going to be a girl, we started dreaming about our new life with her. We made a list of names, Afraa started shopping, and relatives who had girls donated some of their items.

That was only one month into the revolution. But as the situation escalated, we started to worry. Was this the world we wanted our daughter to live in? What about our families' prophecy that "if you marry out of your sect, you die sick"? Would our daughter carry the burden of her parents' intersect marriage? The gap between the two sects was getting wider very fast.

On September 6, 2011, Afraa woke me up early. “I think it is time,” she said.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God! Okay, let’s get you ready. I’ll call the doctor. Do you need help getting dressed?” I was disoriented and a little frantic.

“Wait,” she said. “I need to wash the dishes in the sink first.”

My eyes opened wide in astonishment.

“Your mom will come later to help us. Do you want her to see the pile in the kitchen?” she scolded.

I was completely speechless. Afraa and Mom got along perfectly well, but apparently I did not understand the complexity of the relation between a wife and a mother-in-law. I watched her washing those dishes in disbelief as I gathered the insurance papers and the first change of clothes for the baby. We were not completely ready because our daughter decided to join us a couple of weeks earlier than anticipated.

We drove to the hospital in the early hours of a Tuesday morning. After hours of labor, her doctor told us that she would need a C-section. One hour later I held the baby, our baby, on my arms. I could not believe it. The feeling was indescribable. This little angel was ours to love, to take care of and to watch her grow.

We had to decide on a name, and our short list had Judy first. But out of nowhere, we began to consider Joury. Afraa claims that she suggested it first, but I disagree. And since I am the one writing this story, I will claim the name.

Joury is a rose, typically red, but it also comes in white and pink. Its unique fragrance is used in perfumes. Because it is usually grown in Damascus, Syrians in other cities know it as the Damascene Joury, and the scientific name is *Rosa Damascena*. It is even edible, and the petals can be used in herbal tea.

Looking at our baby, we knew she was Joury. There is no name that would be more fitting for her.

We decided to let fate take its course. I only applied to LSU. I did not want to go to a school where I knew no one. In Baton Rouge, Mustafa could help us land on our feet. “If it is meant to happen,” we told each other, “let it be at LSU.”

We started working on our papers to apply for a student visa. I got an acceptance letter from LSU and a tuition waiver, but no scholarship. Mustafa told me that I could still get a position as a teacher's assistant, but I might have to wait until my first semester ended. It was a gamble, but I took it. We booked an embassy interview in Beirut, Lebanon, because the U.S. embassy in Syria had closed after the protests started. On the day of our visa interview, I was asked in the embassy whether I wanted to have the interview in Arabic or English. I picked English, thinking that would increase our chances.

"What are you traveling to the States for?" the American consul asked. She looked firm and it made me nervous. I answered in short sentences.

"I am going to get a PhD in mathematics."

"What university are you joining?"

"Louisiana State University, ma'am. Here are my I-20 form and acceptance letter."

"How will you pay for your studies and living expenses?"

"I have funds in—"

"Prove it to me. I cannot find any bank statements in your visa application," she interrupted impatiently.

"Here, I have extra copies." I showed her our family's bank statements, grateful I had come prepared.

She examined every form and took our fingerprints.

"I will grant you a student visa, but I need some more papers first. I will email you what I need. Once you send them and I confirm receipt, I will stamp your passports," she said.

It was happening! We left with mixed feelings that day. We were excited to have a chance at life in a safer place, but we also started missing our families immediately.



Our families did not try to talk us out of traveling. We all accepted that the Syrian crisis would get worse and that there was no solution in the near future. My family members, never ones to

share their feelings, only discussed how we were going to handle the first months in Louisiana. And with Afraa's family in another city, we could only talk on the phone about our plans in vague detail. It felt odd to try to discuss the details during a phone call, especially because in normal times we would just drive there to spend a weekend.

One evening about a week before we left, some friends called and asked me to meet them to say goodbye. I got dressed and was about to head out when a loud boom shook the windows. Afraa immediately jumped, shouting, "You are not going anywhere!"

A couple of minutes later, there was another explosion, and then another and another. We gathered in the living room, Afraa, baby Joury, and I. We had no idea what was going on. At first we thought it was a bombed car. But after more explosions followed, we were not sure. The sounds were so loud that we worried the window glass would break all over us, and we both covered Joury with our bodies as she lay in the center of the living room away from any window. I texted my friends that I was not going to make it and asked if they'd heard about anything going on near my place. No one had a clue. Later we found out that the Assad army had mounted a cannon on a hill near our apartment and was shelling a nearby neighborhood that was famous for hosting anti-Assad demonstrations. The shelling lasted for about thirty minutes, with around ten missiles shot. I was glad we would soon be getting away from all that, then immediately felt selfish and silenced those thoughts.

My mom helped us decide what to take with us and what to put into storage. We had to leave most of our books to save space and weight. Mustafa told me to bring as many spices as we could because they were much cheaper in Syria than in the U.S. So we packed lots of ground pepper, allspice, nutmeg, cinnamon, sumac, cloves, and mixed spices, as well as pans to help reduce our expenses. When we finished, my mom was on the verge of breaking down, so she went to our bedroom to take a quick nap. After a while, she came out looking a little better, and we hauled our bags to my parents' place, where we would spend our last night.

Then the fateful day arrived: August 15, 2012. We sat in my parents' living room at 2 a.m. waiting for the cab that would take us across the Syrian border to Beirut. The Damascus airport was surrounded by military forces and constant clashes, so we had to book our flight from Lebanon. We had spent the whole night trying to call Afraa's family in Dair Shmaiel to say goodbye. "Let's try again," I kept saying. "Maybe it will ring this time." But neither landlines nor cell phones could reach them, and we could not travel there either because of the dangerous road conditions. My mom was visibly nervous, my dad pale. It was obvious they were hoping that the cab would not make it in time. We made meaningless conversation:

"Should I take my Syrian ID with me?"

"No, leave it here. All you need is your passport and your university papers."

"Oh great, my watch battery died."

"Here, take my watch. Give me yours." My dad handed me his watch. Looking back, I think he wanted to keep something of mine and give me something of his. He feared it would be years before we could meet again.

Around 2:15, the cab driver pulled up. That is the moment that haunts me to this day. As I carried our bags to the cab, my mom was sobbing, asking us to take care of ourselves and of each other. My dad was trying to calm her until I hugged him, and then all the strength he was saving for this moment was lost. My dad, my mountain, who had only cried when I was a month old and had a relentless fever for days, was crying over me again. What had I done?

"We will be back soon," I promised. But my parents knew better.

During the two-hour drive to Beirut, Afraa and I held hands in silence. We both had one question that we didn't dare to speak, the same question we've asked ourselves every day since that night, the same question we still can't say out loud: Will we ever see our families again?

PART TWO

BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA: THE ONE PERCENT

WE ARRIVED at the airport three or four hours early. We boarded the first plane for a three-hour flight to Switzerland, followed by a short layover and a nine-hour flight to Washington, DC. Joury was eleven months old and did surprisingly well with the toys we brought in our carry-on. Afraa was quiet for most of the flight. I could feel her torment that she did not get to say goodbye to her family. I did not know what to say to make her feel better, and I was still shaken by my family's farewell, so I too was silent for the majority of the flight. We could not sleep or eat.

We made it to DC and joined a huge line for the TSA interview. "Make sure to smile," Mustafa had told me. "They have the authority to send you back if they do not like you." The interview was quick, so I guess the officer liked us after all, though his serious face did not reveal any emotion. With only an hour before our final flight to New Orleans, I decided to find a phone so I could let my parents know we made it to the States and ask if they could reach Afraa's family. I found a pay phone that only took quarters, but of course I had none, and the nearby Subway wouldn't break some dollar bills for me. In a last-ditch effort, I ran to a help desk where the lady was nice enough to let me make a quick call to my parents for free even though it was international.

I ran back to help Afraa with Joury and our carry-ons, and we raced to the gate, making it just in time. But as they announced that we were ready to take off and we should remain seated, the horrid odor of fresh baby poop filled the air. I looked at Afraa, whose eyes clearly said, "You go." The flight attendant tried to stop me at first, but then she smelled it too and said, "Please make it quick," as Joury started to wail.

It was the fastest diaper change I ever made, and when the attendant saw I was done, she announced, "We have a super dad on board!" Some passengers gave an encouraging cheer. But Joury was still upset. We thought she might be hungry, so Afraa decided to nurse her. That had a magical effect, calming her for the entire flight. Some passengers even congratulated us on our parenting

skills and made small talk as we exited the plane, asking if we had a stressful connection, how long our flight was, and so on. I am normally not a small-talk person, but I needed something to divert my attention from the stress. We were about to start a new life from scratch. Was I prepared? Could I take care of my family and get a PhD? What about the gamble I'd taken? Could I secure a paying job on campus? How soon? So many questions were popping in my head at the same time.

It was around 10 p.m. in New Orleans, and we were barely able to keep our eyes open. I got our bags and looked around for Mustafa, but he was nowhere to be seen. Long story short, I did not have a working phone, but I managed to find some Wi-Fi at a coffee shop to message Mustafa on Facebook. He thought we were coming the next day! To this day I like to tease him by telling the story about how he forgot to pick us up. This is my ultimate revenge on my buddy—I am writing this story for all of you to read.



We were exhausted when we got to Mustafa's apartment and all we wanted was to settle down. It took us around a week before we found a cheap apartment near the main LSU campus. It was a two-bedroom in a complex that had seen better days. The kitchen was tiny with old cabinets, door frames were broken, and the cords of the living room fan were taped to the ceiling and wall. We made a list of what we wanted fixed, and we bought some basic furniture with the few dollars that we were able to bring with us: a sectional sofa, a queen bed and a dresser, and a crib for Journey. What a start for a new life!

After cleaning the apartment, we began unpacking. As Afraa was sorting the first bag, she took out a pan and found a note inside it.

"Look what I found!" she called to me. On the white paper in blue ink, it said "Hug and kiss each other" in my mother's handwriting.

Next to the spices we found another one. "We miss you. Do you miss us?" Afraa put her hand on my arm, knowing how much it hurt to find these notes.

“Be happy” said a third note hidden between clothes.

More unpacking, more notes. We could not read them all at once. We were both fighting tears. It turned out Mom did not go to our bedroom to nap but instead to write and hide the notes. What must she have thought as she scrambled to write these quick notes behind a closed door? What must she have felt packing her son’s bags, knowing that might be the last time she would see him? What suffering did I cause this sweet and loving mother when I decided to leave?

We slowly started adjusting. The fall semester was only a few days away and I had to get ready fast. I was offered a TA position by the math department within two weeks, which was a great relief. It was not much, but at least it was enough to pay the rent and put food on the table.

My fellow graduate students were generally friendly, but they soon learned that I came with a big bag of issues. While most of them were in their mid-twenties, single, and able to live off the scholarship LSU had to offer, I was in my mid-thirties, married with a one-year-old daughter, and trying to make ends meet for the three of us on less than \$25,000 a year. I was also deeply traumatized by the daily dose of news I read about Syria. I did not blame them for keeping their distance, especially because I did not make it easy for them.

In the beginning, I would steer any conversation to the Syrian conflict and ask for their opinion. I had assumed that everyone had heard about the horrific situation by then, but as they struggled to come up with an answer about an issue taking place on the other side of the world, I realized my assumption was obviously wrong. So I taught myself to stop making unnecessary noise about my country. When someone asked where I was from, I answered “Syria” and waited for their response, which was usually something like “Cool.” My stomach would turn as I wanted to scream, “No, it is not cool. People are dying there every minute.” But I convinced myself that for most Americans, what was happening in my country was a political fight, not a humanitarian tragedy, and nobody wanted to listen to boring, politically motivated conversations. Sometimes I got a response along the lines of “I’m sorry for what is happening in

your country.” I would thank that person but would not continue the conversation. I silenced my feelings and only shared them with Mustafa.



Facebook became my addiction. Because of the large-scale destruction, most news agencies withdrew from almost all cities except Damascus, where they had to make do with the official government story. In their absence, activists on the ground started reporting the crimes of the Assad army, and the news groups that formed on Facebook quickly became the only source of honest information. I had to create a fake Facebook profile to protect my parents because the checkpoints in Syria started searching people’s phones for social media activity. I could not risk having my parents on my profile. I had one account to follow the news and another for my parents and relatives.

Our communication with our families all took place online via Skype, WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook Messenger, ToTok, Telegram, and VoIP. Every now and then an app would stop working in Syria and we would switch to another, where I would be reminded to not speak up online because “they” (the Mukhabarat) would find out, and when they did, there was no telling how they would retaliate. “They might take your father,” Mom would say. “Please be careful.”

Whenever we talked, I would ask Mom how she was doing. “We are fine. Everything is fine,” she would answer. She was following an unwritten rule: Do not let a faraway loved one worry over something they cannot control. But I worried anyway. I had a thousand reasons to worry. What if they were hurt by one of the random mortar shells that rained on Damascus occasionally? What if a Mukhabarat officer paid them a visit regarding their traitor son?

One day, I called Mom on WhatsApp and got an error message. This usually happens if the other side does not have an Internet connection. I tried Dad and Sarah and got the same message. I figured they were running an errand or on the way to or from visiting my grandma from my mom’s side. I waited a couple of hours, then tried again, only to get the same message. I started to worry, so I made an actual phone call. This time my mom’s phone rang, and she answered.

“Hey Mom, are you all right? What’s wrong?”

“Why are you making an international call? This will cost you a lot,” she responded.

I explained that I was worried because I had been trying to reach them and no one answered. She gave me a generic excuse—they were out running errands, then they visited her mom, then their Wi-Fi was down. I had no option but to believe her.

The next day I called her again. “Where are you, Mom?”

“Well, we just got back from the hospital,” she confessed. “Now I can tell you everything.” It turned out my sister had surgery and they decided not to tell me until after they were home so I would not worry.

The same scenario happened again later. My dad had heart issues and some dementia episodes and I was not told. My mom had a major neck surgery and they kept it a secret. They cared for the feelings of their son who was living in safety thousands of miles away when they were the ones under pressure. I made a fuss every time it happened, and later I would sit down and analyze the situation like the mathematician I am. What could I have done to help? I didn’t have enough money to even last to the end of the month. Did they really need to consider my feelings? Could they afford to? Did they have the emotional capacity to keep me feeling useful while dealing with all their problems?

I felt absolutely useless, a burden even. The Syrian pound was losing value at a disastrous speed. Money was becoming tight for them, but they would still send us some money to help out every summer when my nine-month scholarship stopped until the fall. “Kids are a lifetime burden,” my dad would joke before sending me the Western Union receipts. A burden. I was safe but they were not, and I was costing them money I knew they could use. Not only that, but I felt like a burden to my family that I dragged with me—Afraa gave up her career and her family so I could study what I wanted, but in return all I could offer her was a life well below the poverty line. Joury was growing up without grandparents or relatives; her only connection to family in Syria was through smartphone screens. Layers and layers of guilt and despair. More feelings to bottle and

keep hidden from everyone. *I have to stay strong and look strong, I told myself. My family depends on me; I am the only breadwinner. They will not see me breaking. My parents cannot handle any bad news if I break.* My uncle told me on the phone, “Listen, your mom and dad *need* you to succeed. It is the only thing that will make it up for losing you.” I had to push every day to keep going. *I cannot break. I will not break.*

In December 2012, Scud ballistic missiles were used for the first time against the rebel fighters. These old Soviet missiles had next to zero accuracy, and we watched the images coming from northern Syria in horror. Each missile can flatten twenty houses to the ground. They were not even aimed at the rebel fighters. They were aimed randomly toward the northwestern region where the fighters were. Hundreds of civilians were killed.

On August 20, 2013, I got the first notification in the evening hours. There were rumors that the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons. Again. They had used them previously on a small scale, killing twenty to thirty people at a time. Those incidents passed undetected. This time was different, though. The first report talked about a dozen deaths, then twenty, then a hundred, then more. Photos of men, women, and children in basements and in the streets, pale as snow with dead eyes, were pouring onto social media. Governments opposed, politicians shouted, a punishment was promised, red lines were crossed, debates ensued, decisions were made, and after a week, nothing happened. Syrians started preparing for the next massacre, the next date. The future only meant more killing. “The dates will read like obituaries,” Amal Kassir, a Syrian American poet, once said.

But after the quick outrage, many Syrians realized that the international reaction was merely against the use of chemical weapons, not against the fact that Assad had killed half a million civilians over the course of the war. I imagined a scenario where the leaders of the modern world held a big meeting with Assad. “Do not, and we repeat, do not attempt to kill your people again with the big guns. It is annoying and embarrassing, and we have to pretend we care. Killing in secret has always shown amazing results.”

Nobody cared about what was happening in Syria. This was the age of thinking positively, focusing on the task at hand and the things you could change. Nobody could change the Syrian scenario, so they ignored it.

“Dates will read like obituaries.” Sure enough, after hundreds of thousands of casualties, the human mind is unable to process the death of each individual, and we started looking at the numbers as an abstract concept. The first leaked images outraged us, but they were also gradually killing us from the inside. Some Syrians realized that quickly and decided to stop watching to keep their sanity. Others did not. Those have seen more than a human mind can handle. Now there is a hole in our souls. Part of us is numb forever because of what we witnessed.

Our first Fourth of July was in 2013. It rained hard on us, because of course it would in Louisiana. The rain stopped before the fireworks, though, and we sat on the levee of the Mississippi River with thousands of people around us, Jory on my shoulders and Afraa next to me. The loud fireworks sounded exactly like the shelling we heard back in Syria that night when we hid in our living room, listening to the nearby neighborhood being shelled for hosting a demonstration. Our minds turned the cheers of the crowds around us to cries of agony and pain, cries for help. We cuddled, two hurt souls in the night, tears running silently across our cheeks.



Through Mustafa, we met another Syrian family. Nabil was a second-generation Syrian American who'd spent most of his life in Louisiana. His wife, Nadia, was a Syrian American who, like us, immigrated to the States as an adult. We became close friends. The Syrian crisis is so complex and has become so politicized that any suggested way out of the crisis would seem to cause harm. But as time passed, our families became much closer, to the point where we could speak more freely about our views.

“Assad is a criminal. We agree on that, right?” Nabil asked one day. I don't quite remember how the topic started, but I remember he had the look of someone who has something to say that he knows the other side won't like.

“Of course! I am waiting for the ‘but,’ though,” I said.

“Well, here it comes. Do you think the revolution was organic?”

I was shocked. I had heard the same argument from Assad supporters, who accused the imperialist West, specifically America, of faking a revolution to unsettle Syria by funding demonstrations that start peacefully and gradually become violent to the point where the army has to intervene to restore peace.

“Look, I understand how this country operates. America did the same thing to many countries in Latin America. It did the same in Iraq. Why do you think Syria is different?” Nabil said.

I thought Syria was different because I was there! I had friends who dared to participate in demonstrations and who defected from the Syrian army because they witnessed the random shelling of villages. I had students who moved to Damascus from other cities where they had witnessed the regime’s brutality.

“Nabil, you are giving America too much credit for being able to pull off this plan,” I said.

I did not argue much that night. But I knew that was not the end of it. About a month later, our families gathered for a barbeque in a park. The topic came up again when Nabil suggested that Syrians should just accept Assad.

“The revolution is done, it’s over. They fought a good fight. But it’s time to move on.”

I felt my heart racing. “What? Just forgive and forget? Millions are killed, displaced, detained, tortured, and missing.”

“That is exactly why it needs to stop. It is easy for you to live here in the States and claim the revolution should go on.”

“I can say the same thing about you. Isn’t it also easy to ask those who lost loved ones, were displaced or tortured, or saw their houses destroyed by Assad to just forget and forgive and move on?”

I remember telling him later, after we agreed to disagree, that I needed to do more to at least raise awareness. He looked straight into my eyes and said, “You do realize we Arab Americans are the one percent here, right?” His belief was that, in a perfect world, we couldn’t hope for more than one percent of the attention in the United States because Arab Americans make up only one percent of the total population.

His words resonated with an implicit sense of responsibility I felt as a guest in the U.S., a representative of a culture that many have hated and distrusted since 9/11. My behavior not only affected me, but it would be generalized as the behavior of any Arab American or Muslim, so I had to be extra careful with whatever I said or did. Although Nabil's statement was about not wasting energy trying to draw attention as Arab Americans, I understood it as a part of that responsibility.

From my first day in the States, I worked hard to behave as the polite guest. I never broke a single rule or was rude or mean to anyone. I always wore a smile even when I was breaking inside. I wanted to be seen as the grateful, positive guy who never complained. *Do not ask for attention*, I told myself. *This country took you and your family, y'all safe and getting paid. Do not ask for more. You don't get to save everyone.*

This notion of the polite guest was the manual I lived by. Mustafa used to argue when I called myself a guest or a foreigner. "You have been here for a while now. You understand the culture, you abide by the laws, you pay your taxes, you participate in the scientific research here. You are a couple of forms away from becoming a permanent resident," he would say.

"Well, even when I become a resident, I will still be a guest technically," was my answer.



The truth was, I did not have the luxury to dig deeper to find the difference between a guest and a resident. I had other problems to figure out, like how to survive off just the scholarship since neither Afraa nor myself were eligible to work. We maxed out all our credit cards as soon as we got them. We were slowly but surely heading into a financial disaster.

At the same time, we were feeling disconnected from our families and relatives back home. We did not want Joury to feel that disconnection, and we wanted her to have a bigger family to help make up for the absence of extended family members. Afraa and I

both grew up with cousins, uncles, and aunts surrounding us. My family used to go to my grandma's house almost every weekend, and everyone would be there. Afraa's aunts and uncles lived right next door, and she always had someone to play with. Joury's only friends were kids in the same apartment complex whose parents were also graduate students. Friends with expiration dates. And her cousins? She might never see them in her childhood. Although we did not dare to say it aloud, we started considering the possibility that it would be many years before we got to introduce Joury to her Syrian family. So, we decided to give Joury a sibling. A brother or sister to grow up with, to be best friends with, to spend her childhood with, to help and depend on.

Our son was born in November 2013, when Joury was two years old. This time, I was with Afraa in the operating room during her C-section. And after a very long hour, I had the baby in my arms. This magical moment does not get old. Whether you have two kids or ten, the first time you hold a baby who has just been born, it changes you. Your heart becomes bigger with love to fit this new baby right next to his siblings.

Again, we worked through a list of names. We wanted a name that would be suitable for both cultures, Syrian and American. Adam was our final choice, and it is pronounced exactly the same in both Arabic and English.

"When a baby is born, his share of money tags along," Syrians say to ease the minds of expecting parents. It means God will take care of the expenses. I always found that saying to be silly, especially for families with a lot of kids. Did they really think God would send them extra money for their kids? I was being a mathematician. I had many nervous conversations with myself, thinking, *Here are the coming extra expenses, here is what you make. You are in the red, buddy.* But I cannot deny that in Adam's case we somehow were able to manage, at least the first two or three years. And the added responsibility fortified my place in the margins of the math department at LSU. I could not even afford to go to lunch with my colleagues, and I did not feel like sharing this fact with them. Instead our social life revolved around Mustafa, Nabil and Nadia, and two other families where the husbands were Arab graduate students.

But you can't escape who you are. When you are hurt, everything reminds you of your pain. You breathe your pain. You live it. Following the news became part of my daily routine. I spent more time on Facebook than doing anything else. I always feared what I might find, but I had to look. I'd get depressed researching the news posts, but they were all I had to know who died, where, and how. Was another town shelled? Were more civilians detained? I didn't know unless I looked it up. My Facebook feed was a long list of heartbreaking stories and bloody images, so much blood it painted the screen red.

One day, I was sitting in the graduate student lounge using one of the computers when another graduate student passed by. Brad was a typical young white man from Louisiana with his Southern hospitality and friendliness. He saw that I was on Facebook and innocently asked, "Hey Eyad, what's hot on Facebook right now?" I think he expected me to show him a funny meme or maybe an interesting math video. I silently showed him a video of a bombing. It was a passive-aggressive move he did not deserve, to be honest. He apologized politely and moved on to his papers.

Soon enough, it became clear that the crisis not only was not getting any better, it was getting worse so fast no one could quite fathom how. As if the half million casualties and the destruction of many cities and the hundreds of thousands of political detainees were not enough, Russia and Iran became militarily involved. Both countries wanted to defend their ally, Assad. Hezbollah, a terrorist group supported by Iran, also sent hundreds of fighters from Lebanon to Syria. Then ISIS appeared in northeastern Syria. Other countries decided to be part of the game, either supporting a side for their own agenda or letting their borders open so whoever wanted to enter Syria to fight could do so and become another country's problem. International coalitions to fight ISIS also organized attacks. Syria was suddenly full of non-Syrians.

Civilians were being killed everywhere by Assad thugs, by his Russian and Iranian allies, by ISIS, or by the coalition that was attacking ISIS. It got so messy and complicated and heartbreaking and outrageous that everyone was in complete shock. Can you imagine the United States full of fighters of four or five different

nationalities killing American civilians with the aid of the government? We could not imagine it either, until it happened.

This is when the Syrian refugee crisis peaked. There was no safe place in Syria; all the safe places were being destroyed. Think about the options. If you do not support the regime, you risk being detained and tortured. If you run away to the rebel-held territories, you risk being bombed by Assad and his allies. Don't even think of looking for another place to hide, because the black hole of ISIS is growing fast. The waves of the Mediterranean Sea are your only option for running. Remember, though, the journey is dangerous. Many have tried and ended up dead on the shores. You have seen the heart-wrenching photo of Alan, the Syrian boy who drowned and washed up on the sands of the Turkish shore. You tell yourself this won't happen to you. You will be careful and you will check the boat and the life jacket before you agree to go. But what you don't know is that Alan's photo went viral because his body actually washed up on the shore. So many other boats capsize farther out at the sea, where the bodies stay, unwitnessed. You realize soon that the smugglers won't allow you to check anything, and you have to pay upfront. Now, if the smuggler is not lying and if you are lucky enough to survive the little boat and the storms, you get to Greece, then walk to other European countries. Wait, do you have a heavy coat? No? Too bad, you might freeze to death.

But why not get a visa and do things the "right" way? Because the governments of the world realized the huge scale of the disaster would make everyone run to their embassies. They figured if they unofficially banned Syrians from visas, they would have to get to Europe the hard way. They understood that not everyone would take the risk, and of those, not everyone would make it, and of those who made it, not everyone would arrive in their country. A crash course in applied probability and statistics.

I tried inviting my parents to visit. I asked LSU to send an official invitation letter and they did. My parents went to the interview with all the documents that prove they had a family business to return to—in other words, they were not refugees seeking asylum. Their visa application was rejected on sight without even going over their documents.

I watched as my people were described as a threat swarming Europe. I read governors' statements refusing to welcome Syrian refugees to their states because it was too risky. On Facebook, I read a hundred comments echoing this sentiment. "Refugees are not welcome in Louisiana," one comment would read. "We should take care of our homeless veterans. The money should be spent on schools and roads," another would say. "Refugees are a threat to the state." The common denominator of all comments was, "Send them away. Send them back!"

More days passed, and with them more massacres and more capsized boats but with less international attention—back to one percent. Syria remained out of the mainstream media until 2015, when we were in the news again for all the wrong reasons. It was the U.S. presidential campaign, and Donald Trump was promising a complete shutdown of Muslims entering the country. His promise was based on the refugee crisis, specifically coming from Syria. A major plank of his campaign was entirely based on the suffering of others. Refugees were a bargaining chip. Now not only did I feel we did not matter, I knew we were not wanted. The cheering crowds at Trump's rallies made that clear. But I could not go back. I had made my position against the killer regime very clear online and would probably be detained on sight. And in Syria, detainment never means a fair trial. It means torture. It means death. My parents made it clear to me that I should never attempt to come back without some major changes occurring in the political situation.

I felt trapped and paranoid. What if this random white guy walking next to me figures out that I am a Syrian Muslim immigrant? The triangle of danger! I generally check out as white until I open my mouth and my accent gives me away. News about Muslims being attacked nationwide started to surface. Should we stay at home? Or should we try to blend in? I was driving myself crazy every time I had to step out of the apartment. How could I keep my family safe? The Syrian passport was a curse that would follow us wherever we go. No country would take us, and we were not wanted here. I was terrified.

One of the professors in the math department asked me how I felt about what he described as the craziness on TV. I told him that I felt unwelcome and unwanted. His eyes watered a little as

he apologized sincerely that LSU did not make me feel welcome and safe. I immediately tried to explain that LSU had nothing to do with the way I felt, that the source of my feelings was strictly the politicians and their cheering crowds. But it was too late. I hated myself for making that man feel bad, especially because he had always been a father figure to most graduate students in the department. After that, I decided to wear my fake smile all the time. Nobody had to feel bad for me. I would not allow it.

I walked into the mailroom the next day and saw Josh, a fellow graduate student from Florida, making copies. Josh and I shared an office for a couple of years before I moved into a smaller office for myself. He was a tall, thin guy with clear blue eyes, and he had a great rapport with almost everyone in the department. We never discussed politics or anything even close to it; I was not even sure he knew where I came from. We both had thick beards at the time, but that day, his face was clean-shaven.

“Hey man! Where did the beard go?” I said, a little disappointed.

“Oh, hi Eyad! I shaved it last night.”

“What? I thought we were beard bros!” I said, exaggerating my tongue-in-cheek disappointment. Everyone had to believe I am happy. But he saw right through my act.

He looked me in the eye. “Listen, I love you, Eyad. I am really glad you are here. Please ignore what Trump said the other day,” he said, referring to the Muslim ban.

I did not see that coming. I had my mask on, and I tried so hard to keep the smile, but I failed. I tried to say “Thank you, man, you have nothing to worry about. I am fine. It will pass,” but I could not make it past “thank.” The words stuck in my throat, and for the first time since I arrived in the States, I cried. In public. In the middle of the mailroom at work. I tried to stop but could not, so I rested my head on the huge mail organizer and let go of all the hurt.

I was so embarrassed. A six-foot, 290-pound grown man with a messy beard crying in public. Josh tried to console me. He told me how privileged he was, being a white Christian male in the States, and how he always looked for opportunities to use his privilege to help others. All I could think of was the scene that I made. But Josh had said exactly what I needed to hear, exactly when I needed

to hear it. It was a magic combination, and it had a magic effect. I did not need to articulate my feelings. He clearly could see that I was hurt. I also felt better releasing all that pressure. And after that, I felt that I was not alone anymore, at least not in the math department.

I did avoid Josh for a while, though. Understandable, right? It was awkward even for beard bros.

In fact, I isolated myself even more. I decided to focus on my family first, PhD second, so social life was not really factored in. Mustafa graduated and moved to another state. Our other Arab friends also either graduated or were getting ready to graduate.

Joury and Adam were growing fast. Adam spent time in a mothers-go-out program and then in a Head Start program. Meanwhile, Joury loved her school, the Baton Rouge Center for Visual and Performing Arts. She got to be the star of a Pete the Cat play when she was a pre-K student. When the show started and Joury walked on stage with her curly hair, her red Converse shoes, and Pete the Cat makeup, I looked to Afraa with a wide smile only to see her crying tears of joy. That afternoon was the reason I was willing to bottle all pressure inside. Seeing that my family was happy made it worth everything I might go through.

I was heading into the final year of my PhD program, the year where I had to finish working on my project, prepare for my defense, and write my dissertation. It was also the year when our financial instability finally caught up with us. I got some tutoring jobs on campus, but they were nowhere enough to steady our sinking ship. The only place I could turn to was the Islamic Center of Baton Rouge. I filled out a financial aid application feeling like the burden I posed was now leveling up to affect not just my family but also the community I lived in. For months, I kept the financial stress hidden from everyone, including Afraa. I could not tell her how deep our problems were. I did not want her to worry about something she could not change, not to mention that I was the one who had gotten us here to begin with. I didn't realize I was repeating old patterns, doing the exact same thing my parents did, hiding problems in a misguided attempt to protect my loved ones.

The longer I kept it hidden, the harder it became to tell her the truth. I became distant, and I isolated myself even more. I was not there for her, and I became impatient with the kids. I could feel her frustration with me. She thought it was the pressure of graduation. I blamed myself for lying, and I also blamed myself for getting us in this mess. There were moments when I wished I would go to sleep and never wake up, but the thought of Afraa and the kids becoming suddenly self-dependent scared me back into reality. I cannot break. I will not break.

Afraa could no longer accept my isolation. This was clearly hurting our marriage. So when she pressed me on my behavior, I confessed. She took a minute to process, and then she asked me how and when I was planning to pay the center back. I said I did not know. I could not even plan our monthly budget. Not to mention the imam asked me to pass on the help when I could. She did forgive me eventually, but I knew how she felt. I would have felt the same way had she kept something that serious from me.

I defended in mid-June 2018 on what happened to be the last day of Ramadan that year. Afraa called my mom immediately upon finishing. She started to congratulate me, but soon she began sobbing, telling us how happy she was, how she was praying for God to help and guide us, how badly she missed us, how grateful she was to Afraa for supporting me. I wanted to tell her how much I missed them, how I would not have made it without their prayers and support. But all I was able to say was some gibberish because the words were stuck in my throat.

The graduation ceremony was streamed online, which meant my parents could watch me walk. Journey and Adam were over the clouds to see me walk in full graduation attire. "Daddy! Daddy!" They waved from their seats, and I waved back. I took in Afraa's contagious smile, how happy she was for me, for us. I thought of everything she had done so that we could all be here and now. I blew a kiss, and she blew one back. We made it this far. We would find happiness yet.

PART THREE

CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA: THE GOOD LIFE 2.0

“WE ARE GOING to Peter Rabbit!” Adam yelled excitedly.

“Buddy, it’s called Cedar Rapids,” I corrected him, laughing.

I’d accepted a job offer as an assistant professor of mathematics at Mount Mercy University in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I was excited for the move. The people I met during the job interview were all friendly and welcoming. The school was small, so it would give me a chance to connect with the students and appreciate the history of the campus. I was also attracted to the mission of Mount Mercy, including its message of compassion and focus on five critical concerns: care for the Earth, immigration, nonviolence, racism, and women. I must have applied to more than a hundred schools, but Mount Mercy’s mission stood out to me and I was thrilled to be offered the job.

I started researching Iowa, a state I’d never heard about. Afraa was a little indifferent. For her, any job in any place would be an upgrade compared to the disastrous financial crisis that we were going through. However, I was pleasantly surprised by what I found about Cedar Rapids, namely that it is home to the Mother Mosque, the oldest standing purpose-built mosque in the United States. Although I was not very religious, the fact that Muslims had chosen this city in this state to build their one of the first mosques felt like a sign. Maybe we would find happiness there.

As moving day approached, the apartment grew emptier and emptier to the point we had nowhere to sleep but on a borrowed air mattress. So Nabil and Nadia invited us to spend the last couple of nights with them. The kids loved it. They did not seem to understand this was goodbye. As we watched them play, we were happy to see them having fun. At the same time, we feared the moment they realized it might be years before they saw each other again. But when the day came, the kids handled it better than Afraa and I. We were in tears again. How many goodbyes would we have to endure?

After a couple of nights on the road, we arrived in Cedar Rapids. We had looked online for apartments when we were still in

Louisiana and picked one in the Linn-Mar school district, which was not only close to Mount Mercy but was also known for its great schools. Contrary to when we first arrived in Louisiana in 2012, this time we had no money to spare for furniture. We were heavily in debt, and it would take us some time to get on our feet.

A neighbor in the complex came over to say hello, a sweet older woman who lived in the same building. She was from Sudan and had heard us speak Arabic, so she thought she'd introduce herself. She told us everything we needed to know—that Iowa was a great state, especially for families. That the people were polite, friendly, and welcoming. That Cedar Rapids, and Iowa in general, was a safe place. But she did warn us that it got boring in the winter. She gave us a plate of hot Sudanese *zalabia* dusted with confectioner sugar. They looked similar to Louisiana's famous beignets! It felt like a continuum of some kind, a reminder that although our life in Louisiana was not easy, we had great moments and met wonderful people, and now Iowa would have both sides as well. We were sure to have rough moments, but the *zalabia* time is always around the corner.

Just like when we arrived in Louisiana, we settled in our apartment a couple of weeks before the semester started. I would teach four courses my first semester, Joury would start second grade, and Adam was enrolled in a part-time pre-K program. Joury was seven and Adam was five. We already had started teaching Joury to write and read some Arabic, and they spoke over the phone with their grandparents and uncles and aunts, though they had never met them in person. But we dreaded the time when we had to tell them what was happening in Syria. How can you possibly tell a child that they came from a place of war and tragedy? Where a whole generation was raised learning vocabularies like *missile*, *siege*, *displacement*, *hunger*, *fear*, and *hate*, where words like *school*, *full*, *safe*, *happy*, and *love* have no meaning? Afraa experimented once with telling Joury a story about an imaginary kingdom with a bad king who took his people's money and food for himself. The people of the kingdom gathered to ask for their rights, and the king sent his soldiers to kill them. Afraa had to stop because Joury was becoming upset, and Afraa did not have it in her to tell her that the story was real. So we decided to wait.

But we worried the kids would lose touch with their Syrian heritage. Adam liked to say, “I was born in Louisiana. I am Louisianan.”

“But you are also Syrian, right?” his mom or I would ask.

“No, I have never been there.”

But then both kids would ask, “Why can’t we visit Syria sometime? A lot of our friends travel during the summer. Maybe we can go as well.”

I would tell them it cost a whole lot to go there, that it was very far, and that we had plans for them during the summer. These answers would not fully convince them, but they would at least forget about it for a while.

Then one day Joury came home from third grade and asked, “What’s going on in Syria? Why are there Syrian refugees?”

My heart sank. It turned out her class was reading a book about refugees—who they are, what they face to get to a safe place, and what refugee camps look like. The book mentioned that the latest refugee surge came from Syria as a result of the war.

Afraa and I sat down with the kids at the dining table.

“So, Joury, remember the story Mom told once about the kingdom with a bad king?” I asked. “Well, the story of Syria is similar.”

We told them about Assad. We told them how the people of Syria rose against him and how he attacked them mercilessly. We told them it had become complicated and many other countries were fighting there as well.

Joury and Adam paused for a minute, trying to process everything. Then Joury asked, “When is it going to end, Dad?”

“I don’t know, baby. It started in 2011.”

“I know, I read that.” She paused again, then asked, “Daddy, is this why we’re here?”

I looked at Afraa, then back at Joury. “Yes, that’s part of it.”

“Will the war reach America?” Adam asked.

“I don’t think so, buddy.”

“Can we leave before it becomes dangerous here?”

“Don’t worry, we’re safe here,” I said, but I couldn’t help wondering how many kids had asked the exact same question as the bombs rained down and what answers their parents had to give them.



After our conversation, the kids stopped asking to visit Syria, but I haven’t stopped dreaming of taking them there one day. To show them where I grew up, where I went to school, where I worked in the clothing shop, how I met their mom there. Afraa wants to take them to her village to show them the fig tree, apple tree, and walnut tree she climbed as a kid, picking and eating their fruits and nuts. We want to show them the lanes of the old city where we walked and talked for hours. I also want to show them the old stone building next to Bab Tuma, not because of my memories there, but because of something I learned in Iowa. I was telling a group of friends how old Damascus was, and one answered that it had been mentioned in the Bible in the story of Paul. We looked it up and discovered that the old building is the Chapel of Saint Paul, with the same window he was lowered from in his escape. I felt so ignorant that day. Yes, I am a Muslim, but I should know the rich history of my city.

The longer we must wait to return to Syria, the less likely we are to be able to show our children these places. Everything is changing fast. Most of the countryside has been completely destroyed, the people displaced. Fear has become the culture. Everyone is afraid, afraid they can’t make it to the end of the month, afraid they can’t find cooking gas or heating diesel, afraid the Syrian pound will lose even more value and basic goods will become even more expensive, afraid to even complain about all this because they will be labeled terrorists and enemies of the state. Afraid no one is going to stop Assad, who has a ready excuse to kill—fighting terrorism. It breaks my heart to see how the Syrian people’s options and dreams have narrowed to one focus: survival. For me, survival is paying down debt and getting some points on my credit score, or doing quick mileage math before filling my car so it will last me until payday and feeling smart when it does.

How can one word, survival, have two immensely different meanings in different places? Did I earn *my* survival? As fate had it, I came from a privileged family, I had access to good schools, my dad could afford extra English classes when I was a kid, the same English classes that helped in my visa interview. So many things helped me to apply at the exact right time before all embassies, not just American ones, closed their doors in the face of Syrians. So, did I earn it?

Every time I call my parents, they still say, “We are fine.” But I find it harder and harder to believe. On a recent phone call, Mom mentioned that she no longer called her brothers and sisters every day like she had for the past thirty-five years, because “everyone is depressed.” I knew she also meant herself when she said that.

My little family in Iowa, on the other hand, is doing better. We are still battling the debt we accumulated during the Louisiana days, building a new life from scratch yet again. But we are able to enjoy what Iowa has to offer, simple joys like sledding during the winter and kayaking in the summer. We’ve made friends. The kids are enjoying their time at school. They are growing so fast. Adam is turning into a mini me in some ways, a jokester whose jokes are mostly directed at his parents. Joury is becoming a compassionate, analytical thinker. She came home from school one day and announced, “I am a Democrat!” I could not help but laugh. We sat her at the dining table of important talks and asked what this was about.

“My friend told me that the president killed a guy from another country and almost started a war. She told me that Democrats don’t like the president, so I am a Democrat.” She was referring to the U.S. strike that killed Iran’s Qasem Soleimani.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I said. “That is not how I would define Democrats myself, but I see where you’re coming from. Let me explain what happened. The president ordered the military to kill this guy without talking to the rest of the government.”

“That is wrong!” she said enthusiastically.

“He was a very bad guy, though. Remember when we told you how many countries were also involved in the destruction taking place in Syria? This guy was one of the really bad guys fighting there.”

She paused for a second, then said, “I still believe the president should have asked. It was still a mistake.”

For the record, I hated Soleimani with a passion. I was happy to hear of his death. But I was so proud of her answer. She did not let her emotions cloud her judgment, and that gives me hope for the future of Syria. Perhaps the future is a generation who survived not only the tragedy but the deformation of the society. A generation not afraid to say no and stand up to injustice. For now, Assad is staying and the bullies of the world are getting their way. In a generation or two, another cycle of uprising and violent response will likely spin. But until then, Journey and Adam will be raised strong and compassionate.

We walk them to the school bus, we take them to dance and soccer classes, we hike, we swim, we talk, we argue, we read, we do homework, we sell Girl Scout cookies in the freezing weather, we paint, we make crafts, we watch movies. We do everything to give them a normal life, to expand their minds and widen the scope of their options.

We set the dinner table next to the small kitchen. The kids sit first and begin eating their salads. I sit next, not because I am patriarchal, but because I am still a foodie who can't wait to eat. I am already looking forward to a quick nap after the meal, but I am now a kitchen helper, and cleanup comes first.



The blue table is still there, in the square kitchen where Mom sits with a cigarette, quietly sipping her coffee, cooking for picky eaters. I hope that I will sit there one day with all of them to eat together again. To tell Sarah how much I love her, how much she means to me, how much I regret not being there for her like she always was there for me. To thank Dad for making me the person I am today, and for all the support he selflessly provided me even when the times were very difficult for him. And to show Mom I still have the notes she tucked in our suitcases, to tell her how her love and prayers helped us, and how much I've missed sitting quietly with her, drinking Turkish coffee and smoking a cigarette in the kitchen.

الضيف المؤدب: حكاية أب سوري

EYAD SAID

ترجمت إلى العربية من قبل المؤلف

القسم الأول

دمشق، سوريا: الحياة السعيدة

كي أحكي قصتي، يجب أن تقابلوا عائلتي، وهل من مكان أفضل لهذا اللقاء من المطبخ؟

ولدت وكبرت في دمشق، عاصمة سوريا. تنقلت ثلاث مرات خلال فترة حياتي هناك، وفي كل بيت كان للمطبخ القسم الأكبر من ذكرياتي. رائحة طبخ أمي كانت تأخذني للمطبخ لأسرق لقمة. أحيانا كنت أتجه للمطبخ كي أقضي بعض الوقت معها. وبعد أن كبرت، كنت أنسل لأشرب معها فنجان قهوة وسيجارة بدون علم أبي.

معظم أحاديثنا أنا وأمّي كانت تبدأ بـ ”خليني خلص طبخ الغدا، هلاً بيوصل أبوك تعبان وبدو ياكل“ مع صوت ورائحة تقليّة البصل والثوم.

الغداء هو الوجبة الرئيسية في سوريا وأهم وقت للعائلة. كنا دائماً نجتمع على طاولة الطعام. أمّي التي طول عمرها لم تقبل بأقل من الكمال بالنسبة لبيتها، كانت تطبخ طبختين على الأقل كي ترضي الأذواق الصعبة. ”أبوك ما بيحب الصوص الأبيض، وأختك ما بتحب طبخات البندورة“ كنت أسمع لهجة استسلام مع رضاً بالواقع في حديثها. ولكن على الأقل، كان الأرز والخبز يرضي الجميع.

”استنى يقعد أبوك قبل ما تقعد“

”بس والله جوعان أُمي!“

”انتظر“

”حاضر حاضر“ وأنتظر أن يغيب نظرها عني لأسرق لقمةً أخرى.

كنت دائماً أول من يجلس على الطاولة. عيوني تمسح أنواع الأكل قبل أن أقرر المكان الأفضل والأقرب للطبخات الأقرب لقلبي. عادةً يجلس أبي بعدي بعد أن يغير ملابسه، وكل ما يريده عندها أن ”يتغذى ويتمدى“، أي يأخذ قيلولةً بعد الغداء. ثم تأخذ أُمي مكانها، لم أرها يوماً تجلس قبل أبي.

”سارة، تعالي هلا الأكل بيبرد“ أختي سارة كانت دائماً آخر الجالسين. أعتقد أنه عندما كنت أنا في بطن أُمي كانت جينات حب الطعام معظمها من حصتي، عندما ولدت أختي بعدي بأربع سنوات، لم يبق لها الكثير من هذه الجينات. أختي قوية الشخصية، ذكية، وكلامها قليل، ولم تكن تشارك أفكارها وأحاسيسها معنا، الحقيقة أن كل أفراد عائلتنا لديهم نفس العادة بطريقة أو بأخرى.

أبي لم يكن الرجل الشرقي ”سي السيد“ بشكل كامل، بينما أُمي كانت تؤمن بأن للقارب قبطاناً واحداً. لا أعرف إذا كانت مقتنعة ومستمتعة بدور مساعد القبطان، لكن الحق يقال، كانت ممتازة بتأدية الدور. بالتالي أنا ما رببت كمساعد مطبخ، ولا حتى أختي، لم يطلب مني أحد أن أغسل الصحون أو أرجع الطعام إلى البراد. كانت ماما تتولى كل المهام. كانت حتى تعطينا البطيخ بعد أن تنقي كل قطعة من البزر الأسود، كانت تفصص الزيتون قبل أن تعبأه بالمرطبات. اضطرت لاحقاً أن توقف هذه العادات بعد أن تسببت بأوجاع لها في الظهر والرقبة. كان عندي إحساس أن المطبخ هو مركز توازنها. معظم وقتها كانت تقضيه هناك. تطبخ، تغلي قهوة، تدخن، وأحياناً كل ما سبق بنفس الوقت. باستطاعتي أن أتخيلها على كرسي المطبخ الأبيض والأزرق مع فنجان القهوة وطبخة على النار، بجسمها الناعم وشعرها الحريري الأسود المربوط، تشعل سيجارة جيتان بهدوء.

أحاديثنا على طاولة الطعام كانت محدودة، بانتظار أبي ليبدأ الحديث، ولكن أبي كان متعباً من العمل غالباً. لذلك كنت أنا أتحمّل مسؤولية تغيير الجو أثناء الأكل بالمزاح والنكت. طبعاً لم يكن عندي الجرأة لأوجه مزاحي لأبي، بالتالي كانت أمي ضحية مزحاتي السخيفة، كنت أعيرها بقصرها أو بهوسها بالطبخ والتنظيف.

”أنت لسانك متبري منك، اترك أمك بحالها“ أبي كان يعتبر لساني معترضاً على مزاحي السخيف لدرجة أن يرغب بالتبرء مني. كان أبي يحاول جاهداً أن يسكتني مع أن أمي لم تعتب يوماً على نكتي، كانت تعرف مقدار حبي لها. أختي بالمقابل كانت تعطيني نظرات جانبية معبرة عن عدم استمتاعها بحس الدعابة خاصتي.

لحسن الحظ، لم يمنعنا شيء عن الاستمتاع بوصفات أمي الدمشقية المطبوخة على الأصول تماماً.

الناس التي عاشت في سوريا أو تعرف عن سوريا تعرف بالتأكيد اعتزاز الدمشقيين بوصفات مطبخهم. اعتزاز مزعج ولكن مسلّ بنفس الوقت، خصوصاً عندما يحتدم الصراع مع مطبخ مدينة حلب، أحد أكبر المدن السورية ومركز الصناعة في سوريا.

في سوريا، التفكير خارج أطر معينة مرسومة مسبقاً ممنوع ومحارب، لذلك برأيي كان الطبخ بالنسبة للشعب السوري هو معركة من المسموح التفكير بها وخوضها وحتى الانتصار فيها. أنا زرت حلب أكثر من مرة، وأعترف أن وصفاتهم عظيمة، ولكن رغبتهم العارمة بإضافة الفلفل الحار لأي شيء يؤكل جعل ولائي لفريق مطبخ دمشق. خصوصي عندما كنت صغيراً.

”الكوسا المحشية بدها كمون“ كنت أسمع أمي تقول لأختها بحلب.

”الملوخية بتنطبخ بلحم العجل حصراً“ كنت أقول لأصدقائي الغير دمشقيين.

إذا كان المطبخ أول خطوة تجاه فهم المجتمع السوري، فالعطل والمناسبات قد تكون الخطوة التالية. ورمضان مثال ممتاز. طوال شهر كامل يصوم

المسلمون من طلوع الشمس حتى غروبها. لا طعام، لا شراب ولا حتى شتائم. لا نقاش أو جدال أو أفعال سيئة. الحكمة هي بناء شخصية قوية وقادرة على اتخاذ القرارات الصحيحة حتى أثناء التعب والجوع. رمضان أيضاً شهر العطاء، الجوع يساعدك أن تحس بالآخرين وخصوصاً الفقراء منهم.

من علامات قدوم رمضان في سوريا، ازدياد صرف العائلات على الأطعمة والأشربة. مع أن هذا منافٍ للحكمة من رمضان، للأسف هذا ما يحدث. تقدم المطاعم عروصاً للإفطار. محلات الحلويات والوجبات السريعة تعمل تقريباً طوال اليوم لتلبية الطلب المتزايد. والعائلات والأقارب يجتمعون مع بعض للإفطار أو حتى للسحور.

تحمل أيام رمضان ذكريات كثيرة. منها دعوة عم أمي السنوية. عم أمي لم يرزق بأي أولاد، لذلك كان يعامل أمي وأخواتها السبعة، أخوالي وعمومي، كأنهم أولاده بعد أن توفي جدي. كل رمضان كان يدعو الجميع إلى الإفطار في المطعم ذاته والطعام ذاته. كان شباب العائلة يعقدون المراهنات على يوم الدعوة، ومع أن بعض أفراد العائلة كانوا يشتركون من روتين الدعوة وتوقيتها ومكانها المتتابعين كل سنة، لم يفوت أحد هذا الاجتماع الصاخب.

في آخر أسبوع من رمضان، محلات الألبسة وخصوصاً ألبسة الأطفال تشهد إقبالاً كبيراً. مشهد التسوق بأخر أسبوع مشهد مذهل. كأن جمهور مباراة كرة قدم تجمع في شارع واحد. والسبب معروف طبعاً، عيد الفطر اقترّب، والأطفال يجب أن يرتدوا أحسن الثياب وهم يلعبون مع رفقاتهم على المراجيح التي تنتشر في كل الشوارع بشكل كبير. من وجهة نظر دينية، عيد الفطر هو احتفال بكل الأعمال الصالحة خلال شهر رمضان. ولكن عيد الفطر ليس فقط مناسبة دينية، هو أيضاً مناسبة اجتماعية مهمة، يمكن تشبيه عيد الفطر اجتماعياً بفترة أعياد الميلاد ورأس السنة في الولايات المتحدة. الكل يرتدي أحسن الملابس، الكبار يعطون الأطفال مبالغ مالية صغيرة، العائلات تزور أقاربها وأصدقائها وجيرانها، الحلويات في كل مكان، والكل تقريباً يعطل لمدة ثلاثة أيام.

التسوق الليلي كان أكثر شيء يميز أواخر رمضان. معظم الأهالي كانوا يتحاشون التسوق خلال النهار والصيام لذلك تراهم يجرون أولادهم الناعسين والمتعبين ليلاً إلى غرف تغيير الملابس في المحلات. كانت عائلتنا تمتلك محلاً لألبسة الأطفال في حي الشعلان، أحد أهم أحياء التسوق في دمشق وأكثرها ازدحاماً في رمضان. خلال الأسبوع الأخير الجنوبي، كنا نستمر باستقبال الزبائن حتى ساعات متأخرة من بعد منتصف الليل، وفي ليلة العيد، كنا نبقي حتى الصباح لتناول الفطور معاً. فول مدمس بالتتبيلة الدمشقية، ثوم وبصل أخضر وعصير ليمون وبعض الكمون والبقدونس. تمزج وتبادل الطرف عن الزبائن الذين مروا الليلة الماضية بينما نغمس الخبز الدافئ الطازج في صحن الفول.

صباح العيد التقليدي يبدأ بصلاة العيد في المساجد. سكان الأحياء يتوجهون لمسجد الحي، يلتقون بجيرانهم بعد الصلاة ويدعونهم لزيارتهم ومشاركتهم حلويات العيد مع القهوة. صباح العيد يصبح الأطفال فجأة خبراء حساب رياضيات وهم يحسبون كمية العيدية المالية القادمة. ثم يبدأ سباق الزيارات.

يستمر العيد لثلاثة أيام، تعود بعده الحياة لطبيعتها لمدة سبعين يوماً تقريباً. لأن هناك عيداً آخر هو عيد الأضحى بعد الحج إلى مكة. عندها تعود حلقة التسوق الليلي وصلاة العيد في الصباح وتناول الحلويات إلى الدوران مع اختلاف واحد بسيط. الأضحى، أصل كلمة الأضحى، في عيد الأضحى هي الأغنام. كان لحم الأغنام في سوريا هو اللحم المفضل بسبب طراوته ومناسبته للوصفات السورية. من يستطيع أن يتبرع بثمن خروف يشتري خروفاً ويوزع لحمه على المحتاجين، وكانت العادة أن يبقى لعائلته قطعة صغيرة. كان أبي يبقي لنا قطعة من لحم الفخذ، تطبخها أمي أول أيام عيد الأضحى مع مرق أحمر وأرز لتعقب الرائحة المذهلة في أرجاء المنزل.

قضيت طفولتي في دمشق في شقق سكنية. سوريا بحجم ولاية نورث داكوتا في الولايات المتحدة، ولكن بعدد سكان يساوي تقريباً ثلاثين ضعفاً. لذلك كان السوريون مضطرين للسكن بشكل عمودي وليس أفقي. كنت أشارك غرفتي مع أختي في منزلنا الذي يحوي ثلاث غرف نوم. الغرفة الثالثة كانت

لجدتي التي سكنت مع أبي منذ أصبح أبي هو الراعي لها بعد وفاة جدي. تزوج أبي ووهبتي أُمي الحياة وكبرت ولم يخطر ببالي أن أسأل لماذا تيتي، جدي باللهجة الدمشقية، تعيش معنا.

كانت جدي تحبني حباً بلا شروط. وعندما كبرت، كانت تعطيني سراً معظم راتبها التقاعدي. لم يكن المبلغ كبيراً أبداً ولكنه كان كافياً لأخرج مع أصدقائي إلى المقهى ونلعب الطاولة أو الشدة. كنت أحاول الرفض ولكن إغراء المال كان قوياً وكنت أقبل بسرور. جدي كانت من جيل يفضل الصبيان على البنات، لذلك أختي لم تحظ بنفس الزيادة على مصروفها.

لم تكن علاقتنا أنا وأختي قوية جداً، ربما بحكم فرق العمر، ولكن أحد الأسباب بالتأكيد هو عدم مشاركتنا لأحاسيسنا وأفكارنا كعائلة. كنا نحب بعضنا طبعاً وكانت دائماً تحميني وتخبي أسراري. لم تخبر أحداً عندما عرفت أنني أدخن، أو عندما تعرفت على البنات اللاتي كنت أواعدهن بدون علم أهلي المتحفظين. لم تخبرني أسرارها ولا ألومها. الممنوعات والمسموحات في العائلات المحافظة في دمشق تختلف بين الصبيان والبنات. هامش الحرية الممنوح للصبي أعرض بكثير من ذلك الممنوح للفتاة والذي قد يكون بعرض شفرة أو سكين. المواعدة والاختلاط لم يكونا مسموحين في عائلتنا ولكنني كنت أعلم أنه حتى لو عرف أهلي فإن العقاب لن تتجاوز نقاشاً وتعهداً مني، أما بالنسبة لها فالعاقبة ستبدأ بعدم الخروج من البيت لفترة. لا أعتقد أن أختي كانت تعرف بالإعانات الشهرية من جدي، ولكنها كانت حتماً تعرف أنني الحفيد المفضل، حتى لو لم يكن ذلك علنياً.

في عام ٢٠٠٥، كان عمري ثلاثة وعشرين عاماً. مرضت جدي مرضاً شديداً استمر حوالي ستة شهور. توفيت بعدها. وأصبح المنزل هادئاً فجأة، أهدأ من اللازم ربما. أصبح صوت التلفاز أخف، ولم نعد بحاجة إلى الكلام بصوت عالٍ كي نسمعنا، حتى صوت دواليب جهاز المشي اختفى بعدما كانت تستخدمه بين غرفتها وغرفة الجلوس.

بعد بضع سنوات من وفاتها، قرر أبي أن يستغني عن حياة المدينة الملائمة لعمله، بالحياة في الضواحي. باع شقتنا الكبيرة والقريبة من مركز دمشق

واشترى بيتاً متوسط الحجم من طابقين مع حديقة صغيرة وحوض سباحة. اشترى لي أيضاً سيارة صغيرة لأن البيت الجديد كان يبعد مسافة تعادل تقريباً قيادة لمدة خمساً وأربعين دقيقة عن مركز مدينة دمشق.

كانت الحياة حلوة بالنسبة لي في ذلك الوقت، كان عمري خمسةً وعشرين عاماً، حصلت على درجة ماجستير التمويل والمصارف، أتحث انكليزية وفرنسية جيدة، ولدي عمل جيد براتب ممتاز. لم أكن أدفع أجار سكن أو فواتير غير فاتورة هاتفية الخليوي.

كنت أيضاً غارقاً في الحب.

التقيت عفراء عام ٢٠٠٥ عندما حول أبي محل الشعلان إلى محل ألبسة أطفال. كانت عفراء تعمل لصالح المركز الرئيسي لماركة الملابس. أتت عفراء لتساعدنا بتحضير المحل للافتتاح وبدأ العمل، كانت ماهرة جداً ومنظمة لدرجة أن عائلتي عرضت عليها عملاً دائماً معنا. سحرتني شخصيتها القوية وذكاؤها، بالإضافة لابتسامتها التي تضيء المكان وشعرها المجدد الكثيف كهالة حول رأسها.

عندما أتت ليومها الأول، كنت مشغولاً بترتيب بعض الملابس مع زميل. عندما انتهيت، كنت متعباً وغارقاً في عرقي ولكنني أردت أن أعرفها بنفسني، بدأت بالمشي نحوها وأنا أفكر بطريقة ذكية وطريفة أقدم بها نفسي. وصلت لها وكنت ما زلت أفكر. مددت يدي وما زلت أفكر. لم أجد شيئاً أقوله سوى: "مرحباً، أنا أذكرى واحد بالعالم". عفراء اعترفت لاحقاً بأنها كرهتني فوراً.

لحسن الحظ، طيبة قلبها سمحت لها بأن تتناسى انطباعها الأول عني. أصبحنا أصدقاء بسرعة، شاهدنا مسرحيات وأفلاماً مع بعض. وكنت كلما أمضيت وقتاً أطول معها، أعجب بها أكثر وأكثر. حتى جاء اليوم الذي قررت به أن الوقت قد حان. سجلت أغاني فيلم "مدينة الملائكة" City of Angels على CD وأعطيتها إياه ذات صباح. كتبت على الغلاف: "إلى الملاك الذي أهدتني إياه السماء". كنت متوتراً جداً. شعرت بأنني بالغت في طموحي وبأنها لن تقبل بي، ولكن ابتسامتها جعلتني أطيح فوق الغيوم.

كانت مدينة دمشق القديمة أحب مكان إلينا. لا شيء يعادل رومانسية المشي في الحارات الضيقة لهذه المدينة العريقة التي شهدت ممالك وامبراطوريات تأتي وتذهب. شهدتهم يحبونها، يقاتلون من أجلها، ويموتون كرمى لها. ”لؤلؤة الشرق. فخر سوريا وجنة عدن. بلد الأمراء وجن ليالي القصص العربية وأقدم عاصمة مأهولة“. هكذا وصفها مارك توين. لاحقاً عرفت أيضاً القديس بولس مشى في هذه الأزقة ذاتها وأن هناك كنيسة تحمل اسمه.

كنا نلتقي قريباً من باب توما، أحد أبواب المدينة السبعة التاريخية. لم يبق من الأسوار السميكة التي كانت تحمي المدينة إلا هذه الأبواب التي ظلت كعالم تاريخية. باب توما على سبيل المثال أصبح مركز ساحة مرورية. كنا نمشي بجانب الباب وبجانب بناء حجري عتيق باتجاه المدينة القديمة. نمشي بأول زقاق، وسرعان ما تصبح الأزقة أضيق وأضيق. تتشارك البيوت هناك الأسطح. النوافذ العالية ترى كل شيء. ترى المحبين وهم يمشون يداً بيد، ترى طلاب المدارس يهرولون إلى صفوفهم، ترى شباباً وشاباتٍ متجهين إلى عملهم في المطاعم والمقاهي التي انتشرت بين الأزقة، وترى الشيوخ أصحاب ورشات الموزاييك يلعبون الطاولة على أبواب محلاتهم. عبر هذه الشبائيك تبادل الجيران أطباق الطعام مع الشائعات عن باقي الجيران، خلف ستائرنا اختبأت شباب بانظار نظرة من حبيب في الزقاق.

تتقاطع الحارات مشكلة شبكة معقدة كأزقة علاء الدين في القصة المشهورة. في هذه الأزقة احتفلنا أنا وعفراء بأعيادنا وتشاركنا الهموم. في المقاهي هناك تناولنا الكرواسان الساخن بالجنين، الذي كان على الأغلب ليثير جنون المستعمر الفرنسي لو رآه، في تلك المطاعم أفطرننا بعد غروب شمس العديد من الرمضانات، وفي المحلات الصغيرة المبعثرة هنا وهناك اشترينا أفلاماً وألبومات غنائية مقرصنة، نظرنا إلى التذكارات الغالية وأعجبنا بمصنوعات يدوية لم نستطع شراءها، ووجدنا كتباً قيمة بنصف أسعار المكتبات. أنا لا أتعلق بالأمكن عادة. أنا أشتاق للأشخاص لأنهم هم من يصنعون ذكريات تلك الأماكن، ولكن المدينة القديمة استثناء لتلك القاعدة. هناك أينعت قصتنا.

قصتنا لم تكن قصة سهلة على الإطلاق. نحن من طائفتين مختلفتين. طائفتان لم يكن بينهما حب ضائع. السُّنة هم الغالبية في سوريا وأكبر الطوائف الإسلامية، أما العلويون فهم أقلية في سوريا. ولكن الخلاف بينهما في سوريا خلاف سياسي بالدرجة الأولى وليس دينياً.

منذ أكثر من أربعة عقود وسوريا محكومة من عائلة الأسد. حافظ، أول رجل من العائلة ليحكم سوريا كرئيس، تولى المنصب من عام ١٩٧١ إلى عام ٢٠٠٠، عندما توفي ليخلفه ابنه بشار. عائلة الأسد علويون. استخدموا رجال الدين في طائفتهم كي يزرعوا رسالته مفادها أن السنة يريدون قتل جميع العلويين وأن السبيل الوحيد للبقاء أحياء هو تمسكهم بكرسي الرئاسة مهما كان الثمن. تاريخياً، كان الامبراطورية العثمانية تتبنى الإسلام السني، وحاولت في أكثر من مناسبة إجبار العلويين على التحول للمذهب السني. لاحقاً وأثناء الاستعمار الفرنسي لسوريا، أقنعت الحكومة الفرنسية آنذاك العلويين أنهم بحاجة لحماية من الغالبية السنية وذلك بإعطائهم استقلالاً عن باقي السوريين، وفي نفس الوقت أقنعت الغالبية السنية بترك ما أسمتهم الرجعيين العلويين في الجبال الذين يريدون استقلالاً عن السنة. ساهمت هذه اللعبة الاستعمارية القذرة بتعميق الفجوة الموجودة بين الطائفتين، وبخلق نظرة فوقية من السنة على العلويين وشعور بالتهديد الدائم من بطش السنة بالعلويين نتيجة رغبتهم بالاستقلال.

ولكن كل هذا تغير عندما أصبح حافظ الأسد وزيراً للدفاع عام ١٩٦٦. بدأ حافظ الأسد بتجنيد المزيد من العلويين وترقية الضباط العلويين حتى قام بانقلاب على السلطة عام ١٩٧١. أصبح بعدها رئيساً لسوريا وأحكم قبضة العلويين على الجيش والأجهزة الأمنية. عرفت عائلة الأسد كيف توظف التوتر بين الطائفتين لصالحها. استطاعوا ضرب أكثر من عصفور بحجر واحد عبر إعطاء العلويين مقاليد حكم الجيش والأمن. شعر السنيون بأن انطباعهم الأول عن العلويين كان صحيحاً وأنهم بالفعل رجعيون لا يهتمون لأي سوري غيرهم، في المقابل، رأى العلويون الخوف في عيون السنة وفسروه بكرامية وحقد يستدعي المزيد من إحكام القبضة على الأمن.

هذه كانت أجواء قصة حبنا. لم تكن عائلتنا متحمستين لارتباطنا شأنهم شأن أي عائلة تشهد قصة حب من طراز روميو وجولييت. كانوا قلقين علينا، وظلوا يحذروننا قائلين: "يللي بيتجوز من غير ملتو بيموت بعلتو" بمعنى أن من يتزوج من طائفة أخرى سيسقم ويموت. كنا يانعين ومفعمين بالحب فلم نلق بالاً لكلماتهم.

كانت سوريا في ذلك الوقت قد أمضت أربعة عقود تحت حكم حزب البعث. كان الفساد قد استشرى في كل مفاصل الدولة وفي الحياة اليومية للسوريين لدرجة أنهم باتوا يسمون سوريا مزرعة الأسد. الفساد ينتعش تحت حكم الديكتاتورية، لذلك شدد آل الأسد قبضتهم الأمنية أكثر وأكثر. لم يجرؤ أحد على الترشح ضدهم. وجرت العادة أن تجري الحكومة استفتاءً عن موافقة الشعب أن يجدد الرئيس منصبه لولاية أخرى بحكم عدم وجود منافس انتخابي. طبعاً كان ينجح كل مرة لأن هذه الاستفتاءات كانت كلها كذبة كبيرة.

أذكر حين كنت في الثامنة أو التاسعة من عمري أنني مشيت مع أبي وأمي في يوم ماظر ليديا بصوتيهما خلال إحدى تلك الاستفتاءات لأن الجميع مراقب، وإن لم تدل بصوتك فإنك تخاطر بإشعال غضب الأجهزة الأمنية. دخلنا المركز الانتخابي حيث استقبلنا رجل أمن أعطى أهلي الاستفتاء لتجديد منصب حافظ الأسد وطلب منهما تعبئته أمامه. التصويت السري لم يكن متاحاً طبعاً. اضطر أهلي للتظاهر بالسعادة لمشاركتهم في هذا الكرنفال الديمقراطي الذي يعبر عن إرادة الشعوب. نشأت خائفاً من قول كلمة المخبرات، الأجهزة الأمنية. ولم أكن وحدي، الكثيرون حولي كانوا يسمونهم "الفرع تسعة تسعة تسعة". كانت لدى عناصر المخبرات صلاحيات غير محدودة لاعتقال أي شخص يعتبرونه عدواً للحزب الحاكم.

كنت محمياً من هذه القصص والأحداث حتى أصبحت طالباً في الجامعة. هناك شهدت أول مثال عن بطش المخبرات. التقيت بشاب هو ابن موظف صغير في حزب البعث. أخبرني مرة كيف استطاع الانتقام من رجل تلاسن معه بسبب خلاف حدث في الشارع، ما يسمى بغضب القيادة أو الطريق. أخذ رقم سيارته وأعطاه لأحد معارفه في المخبرات ل"يضيفوه فنجان قهوة" هذا

مصطلح سوري آخر للدلالة على الاعتقال والتعذيب. كان فخوراً جداً بما فعلت وكنت أستمتع وأنا أشعر بالصدمة والقرف.

في عام ٢٠٠٤، حاول الأكراد في شمال شرق سوريا الانتفاضة ضد نظام الطاغية الذي حرمهم أبسط حقوقهم كحمل هويات شخصية. تم قمع الانتفاضة بسرعة وتناقلت وسائل الإعلام المحلية خبر الانتفاضة على أنه شغب جماهير مباراة كرة قدم. طبعاً كنا في دمشق غير عارفين بمجريات الأمور ولم نناقش ما حدث لأنه ببساطة لم تصلنا أي معلومات من أي مصادر تحكي القصة الحقيقية. بعد بضعة أيام ظهر شاب في الجامعة، لم أكن قد رأيت من قبل، جلس وأخذ يقرأ بصوت عالٍ أجزاء من تقارير إخبارية يبدو أنها من مصادر عالمية تحكي عن القصة الحكومية المزعومة، يبدو أنه أرادنا أن نبحث بأنفسنا عن القصة الحقيقية. ولكن لم يسعفنا الوقت بفهم رسالته. خلال ثلاثين دقيقة على الأكثر، ظهرت سيارة بيجو ستيشن بيضاء بسرعة البرق. نزل منها رجل أصلع ملتج له لحية سوداء. كان يرتدي بنطالاً عسكرياً مموهاً وقميصاً أبيض ضيقاً يظهر عضلات ذراعيه الموشومة. عرف هذا الرجل مباشرة أين يتجه. مشى بخطوات كبيرة سريعة تجاه الشاب الذي تسمر في مكانه، هل كان خائفاً أم متحدياً؟ لا أعرف. وصل الرجل إليه و أمسكه من رقبته ومن ظهره باستخدام حلقة الحزام في بنطاله وحمله كما يحمل كيساً من البطاطا باتجاه صندوق سيارته وهو يشتمه بأقذع سباب سمعته. شعرت بأنني أشاهد فيلماً قتالياً حيث يبدو الأشرار كما نتخيلهم. لم يتحرك أحد من من شهدوا الواقعة حتى ذهبت السيارة البيضاء كما أتت. لم يجرؤ أحدنا على نقاش ما حصل أبداً. ولم نر ذلك الشاب مجدداً.

في عام ٢٠٠٧، كان هناك استفتاء آخر. هذه المرة كان لبشار الابن. وكالعادة، انتصر بدون منافس، حرفياً. فرضت الاحتفالات على أرجاء العاصمة دمشق. كنا عائدين ليلتها من زيارة عمي. كان أبي يقود السيارة وأمي تجلس بجانبه، وأنا وسارة في المقعد الخلفي. وجدنا أن الطريق الرئيسي باتجاه منزلنا مغلق بسبب أحد الاحتفالات وأن الشرطة يحولون السير إلى شارع فرعي ضيق باتجاه واحد. كان الزحام خانقاً لأن هذا الطريق لم يكن مصمماً ليستوعب هذه الكمية من السيارات المتدفقة في وقت واحد. خلال دقائق، عرفنا سبباً آخر للازدحام، كان هناك سيارة تقود بالاتجاه المعاكس. وكانت

جميع السيارات تبتعد محاولة إفساح المجال. بدون أي نقاش أو شتائم أو حتى تزمير. وهذا شيء غريب جداً في دمشق. سرعان ما عرفنا السبب. كانت سيارة من طراز أوبل أوميغا الألماني. هذه السيارة كانت شبه حصرية لضباط المخابرات. كان السائق يستخدم الضوء العالي الذي أبهر بصر أبي وهو يحاول أن يجد فسحة لسيارته على جانب الطريق كي يدع ذلك الضابط يمر. بالنسبة لي، كان استخدام الضوء العالي رسالة واضحة للجميع، أنا لا أكثرث لباقي الناس في الطريق. لم استطع الاحتمال. انتظرت حتى صارت السيارتان متوازيتين، فتحت شباكي وقلت بصوت عالٍ ”إذا بك تخالف عالأقل وطى ضوك“ أي لا تستخدم الضوء العالي على أقل تقدير. مالم أنتبه إليه أن السائق لم يكن وحيداً، كان معه عدة عناصر وضعوا أيديهم على أسلحتهم فور سماعي. في هذه اللحظة شهدت أسرع ردة فعل من أمي التي مدت رأسها مباشرة لتصرخ ”مشان الله سامحو هاد أهبل“ بعد لحظة صمت. نظر الضابط إلي بابتسامة شريرة وقال : ”رح سامحك هالمرة كرمال أهلك الكبار يا ولد“. لأخذ العلم، كان عمري خمسة وعشرين عاماً وقتها. لم أكن ولداً. كنت مؤمناً أن ما فعلته هو شيء صحيح. ولكنني كنت غرّاً. كان من الممكن أن اعتقل يومها، أو أن تتم إهانة أهلي بسبب حركتي غير المحسوبة. كانت رحلة العودة إلى المنزل صامتة، لم يلمني أهلي حينها لما تسببت به من إذلال لأمي، ولكنهم طلبوا مني أن أكون واقعياً أكثر باختيار معاركي.

عندما بدأ الربيع العربي في تونس عام ٢٠١٠، شاهدت الجماهير التونسية على التلفاز بانبهار. كنت أسأل نفسي، هل تستطيع الشعوب حقاً أن تثور على حكوماتها؟ بدا لي المفهوم غريباً وأجنيباً نوعاً ما، كالثورة الفرنسية مثلاً. ثم حان دور مصر، وسمعت الملايين تهتف ”الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام“. أيقظت هذه المشاهد ملايين أخرى طالما حلموا بانتزاع حقوقهم. كثير من السوريين بدأ يحلم بالتجمع في ساحة الأمويين في دمشق ليغنوا ويطالبوا بحقوقهم.

طبعاً صدمنا لاحقاً لمعرفة أن هذا النظام القمعي لا يمكن جره لمسابقة غناء. كان هذا النظام من النوع الذي إذا وجد فأراً في المطبخ، على استعداد أن يحرق الحي بأكمله بعد اغتصاب جميع النساء وقتل جميع الأطفال وتعذيب جميع الرجال.

عندما بدأت المظاهرات في سوريا، كان لدى الكثيرين مننا آمال معقودة على الرئيس الشاب بشار. كثيرون، وأنا منهم، كان على استعداد أن يتناسى تاريخ عائلته الحافل بالفساد والقمع والوحشية. كنا على استعداد أن نتناسى كيف أصبح هو نفسه رئيساً بعد موت والده، وكيف تغير الدستور السوري خلال ربع ساعة حرفياً ليعدل السن الأدنى لمرشح الرئاسة ليشمله. تجاهلنا الحقائق الواضحة التي تشير استفادته من نفس منظومة الفساد التي أسسها والده. كنا نرغب بإعطائه فرصة لأنه كان طبيباً شاباً درس في بريطانيا. لأنه وزوجته كانا يحضران نفس المسرحيات والعروض والأفلام التي كنا نذهب إليها. كانا يأكلان في نفس المطاعم و يتسوقان في نفس الأحياء. بشار سعى جاهداً ليسوق نفسه على أنه الرئيس الشاب المتطور وليس القائد المرعب كوالده. ولكننا اكتشفنا أن آمالنا كانت معقودة على الشخص الخاطئ، وأن شعار جيش الأسد منذ أول يوم من الثورة كان: ”الأسد أو نحرق البلد“. هذا ما فعلوه، أحرقوا البلد، وسيستمررون حتى خضوع كل سوري لحكم الأسد.

تزوجنا أنا وعفراء في عام ٢٠١٠ بعد أن توعدنا لخمس سنوات. عائلتنا وافقتنا بعد إصرارنا. وكانت المفاجأة السارة أن كل واحد منا أصبح على علاقة ممتازة مع أهل الآخر. كنت ألعب الطاولة لساعات مع عمي كلما زرتهم في منزلهم في محافظة حماة، وعفراء أصبحت صديقة لأمي.

كان زفافنا قبل ستة أشهر تقريباً من بدء المظاهرات في سوريا. سكنا في شقة متوسطة اشتراها لنا أبي. عملت عفراء كمعلمة للصفوف الابتدائية في مدرسة حكومية قريبة من بيتنا، بينما كنت أنا معلماً للرياضيات في مدرسة دولية خاصة كانت جزءاً من سلسلة مدارس في الشرق الأوسط. كان الفرع السوري مملوكاً لرامي مخلوف، ابن خالة الرئيس بشار، وأحد أعمدة الفساد في سوريا إن لم يكن أكبرهم وأغناهم وأكثرهم نفوذاً. كان متحكماً بالعديد من مفاصل الاقتصاد السوري من تعهدات البناء إلى شركات الاتصالات الخليوية. كانت الغالبية العظمى من المدرسين هناك من الموالين للأسد، وكانوا يتسابقون لإظهار ولائهم المطلق للنظام. أما الأقلية التي لم تشاركهم رأيهم اضطرت أن تبقى صامتة. لم يكن الحفاظ على العمل هو مهمهم الأول، وإنما البقاء بعيداً عن أذرع المخابرات.

كنت لا أطيع الانتظار حتى ينتهي وقت العمل لأعود إلى المنزل و أشغل التلفاز باحثاً عن عن أخبار الثورة. أقلب بين محطات الجزيرة و الـ BBC أو الـ CNN أو أي مصدر للأخبار إلا المصادر الحكومية السورية. كنت أرى التسجيلات التي يرسلها الناشطون عن قمع نظام الأسد للمظاهرات واعتقال المتظاهرين بل وحتى قتلهم. ثم أعود للعمل في اليوم التالي بوجه جامد.

كنت أشعر بأنني أختنق كل يوم. ولكن مشاهدتي لطريقة عمل النظام جعلتني مضطراً لأن أكون على أقصى درجات الحذر. لم أكن قلقاً على سلامتي وحسب، بل وعلى سلامة عفرأء، وأهلي الكبار في السن، وأختي وابنها. كنا دائماً نسمع قصصاً عن نجاح المخابرات بالكشف عن شخصيات المتظاهرين حتى من كانوا يرتدون أقنعة أثناء المظاهرات. تروي هذه القصص كيف تم اعتقال هؤلاء الشبان والشابات الشجعان، وكيف أعيدت جثث بعضهم إلى أهاليهم وعليها آثار التعذيب.

مصطفى، أحد أصدقائي المقربين والذي تعرفت عليه عندما كنا طلاباً في جامعة دمشق، كان في ذلك الوقت في لوزيانا كطالب دكتوراه. اجتمعنا أثناء زيارته لدمشق واقترح علي أن أسافر إلى الولايات المتحدة لأحصل على شهادة دكتوراه في الرياضيات بسبب حبي لهذا العلم، وبسبب ما شاهدته من كراهيتي لمكان عملي.

لم يكن اتخاذ هذا القرار سهلاً. سوريا هي بلدي وبيتي. ولكن في نفس الوقت، لم يكن القرار بذلك الصعوبة. كان العنف يتصاعد بسرعة، وقوات الأسد ترتكب العديد من المذابح بشكل دوري. تحولت دمشق إلى ثكنة للنظام. دوريات الجيش والأمن في كل مكان عند كل تقاطع طرق. كانوا يفتشون السيارات، يتفحصون الهويات، ويعتقلون أي شخص يشتبهون به. كانت عندهم الصلاحية أن يعدموا المشتبهين فوراً، وقد فعلوا ذلك في مدن أخرى. ولكنهم كانوا يحرصون على الحفاظ على صورتهم كمسيطرين و حامين. ولكن الفيديوهات المسربة من من بقاع أخرى في سوريا كانت جنونية. في عصر الـ social media لم يكن للنظام أي فرصة بالسيطرة على ما لدى الشعب من وسائل لنقل الحقائق، لذلك اعتمد أظام النظام على الكذب واتهموا دولاً عدوة لسوريا بفركة هذه الفيديوهات. كذبة صدقها مناصرو النظام بسهولة.

أصبح السفر بين المحافظات والمدن في تلك الفترة صعباً جداً إن لم يكن مستحيلًا بسبب الاشتباكات المسلحة بين جيش النظام وبين مسلحي الثوار أو الجيش السوري الحر. تسبب ذلك في غلاء جنوبي للأسعار لمعظم المشتريات لتعذر نقلها. ومما زاد الوضع سوءاً صعوبة الحصول على وقود الديزل لأن دبابات الجيش كانت تستخدمه. في سوريا تعتمد الطبقة الوسطى على الديزل لأغراض التدفئة. لذلك اضطرت معظم العائلات إلى الاعتماد على الكهرباء ليقفوا منازلهم دافئة خلال الشتاء. المشكلة هنا أن توليد الكهرباء يحتاج إلى وقود أيضاً. سرعان ما أصبحت الكهرباء مقننة، وصارت البيوت تحصل عليها وفق جدول زمني لكل حي. لاحظ الجميع أن الكهرباء لم تنقطع عن أحياء معينة راقية يسكن فيها كبار ضباط الجيش ومسؤولو النظام. كان التفسير الذي توصل اليه الكثيرون له هو أن تقنين الكهرباء لم يكن بسبب الطلب الكثيف عليها فحسب، وإنما كردعٍ للسوريين و كرسالة مفادها أن الأسد سيحرمهم من أي شيء إن لم يقفوا في الطابور مع المؤيدين. بعد الكهرباء، كان دور الماء. أحياء كثيرة لم تعد ترى نقطة في الصنابير إلا مرة في الأسبوع. كانت تلك أداة أخرى لإخضاع السوريين.

كان العرف الاجتماعي في سوريا أن الخطوة الطبيعية والمتوقعة بعد الزواج مباشرة هي الإنجاب. عندما عرفنا أن عفرأ أصبحت حاملاً بعد زواجنا بفترة قصيرة، لم نستطع أن نصدق، كنا سعيدين جداً. وعندما أخبرتنا الطبيبة لاحقاً أنها فتاة بدأنا نحلم بحياتنا الجديدة معها. وضعنا قائمة بالأسماء، بدأنا نشترى ونحضر لقدمها، من كان لديه بناتٌ من أقاربنا شاركنا بعض المستلزمات كالملابس كما هي العادة في سوريا.

كان ذلك خلال الشهر الأول من الثورة. بعد أن تصاعدت حدة الموقف، بدأنا بالقلق. هل هذا هو العالم الذي نريد لطفلتنا أن تعيش فيه؟ ماذا عن نبوءة عائلتيينا؟ ”يللي بيتجوز من غير ملتو بيموت بعلتو“؟ هل سيكون قدر ابنتنا أن تتحمل تبعات زواج أهلها؟ هل ستحمل لعنة الفجوة بين الطائفتين التي كانت تكبر بانتظام؟

في اليوم السادس من أيلول عام ٢٠١١، أيقظتني عفرأ باكراً. ”كأنو صار الوقت“ قالت لي بتوتر.

“يا رب! يا الله هساعدك. حروح اتصل بدكتورتك. بدك مساعدة تلبسي؟” كنت لا أزال تحت تأثير النوم، والتوتر أيضاً.

“استنى” ردت بحزم “لازم أجلي الصحون بالمطبخ أول”

فتحت عيني إلى أقصى اتساع بدهشة، لم استطع الفهم.

قالت بنفس الحزم مفسرة: “أمك أكيد حتجي تساعدنا بعدين، بدك ياهها تشوف هالمنظر بالمطبخ؟”

لم أجد كلمات تساعدني على التعبير. عفراء وأمي كانتا على علاقة جيدة جداً. ولكن يبدو أنني لم أفهم تعقيد علاقة الزوجة بأم زوجها.

لم أصدق عيني عندما شاهدتها تتحامل على نفسها لتغسل الأطباق بينما بدأت أجمع أوراق التأمين الصحي وملابس الطفلة. لم نكن مستعدين تماماً لأن ابنتنا قررت المجيء إلى عالمنا قبل أسبوعين من ما كنا نتوقع.

ذهبنا إلى المستشفى في ساعات الصباح الأولى من يوم الثلاثاء. بعد ساعات طويلة من المخاض، أخبرتنا طبيبتها أن العملية القيصرية ضرورية. خلال ساعة، كانت أحمل ابنتي، ابنتنا، على ذراعي. لا توجد كلمات يمكن أن تصف ذلك الشعور. هذا الملاك الصغير لنا، سنجبها ونعتني بها ونشاهدها تكبر.

كان لا بد من الاتفاق على اسم الطفلة. في البداية، كنا متفقين أن نسميها جودي. ولكن فجأة وبدون مقدمات، برز اسم جوري إلى المقدمة. عفراء تقول أن الاسم كان فكرتها. ولكن باعتباري من يكتب هذه القصة، سأقول إنها كانت فكري وتصديقوني.

الجوري، كثير من السوريين يسمونها الجوري الدمشقي، هي وردة تزرع في دمشق، مشهورة بلونها الأحمر بالذات مع أنها تنبت بالوان أخرى. رائحتها عطرة مميزة تستخدم في صناعة العطور. ولبتلاتها طعم رائع.

طفلتنا هي جوري، ليس هناك اسم يناسبها أكثر من هذا.

قررنا أن نترك القدر يرسم لنا رحلتنا. تقدمت بطلب تسجيل لجامعة واحدة فقط هي LSU. لم أرغب أن أذهب إلى مدينة لا أعرف فيها أحداً. مصطفى يسكن ويدرس في مدينة باتون روج، ويمكنه أن يساعدنا في مرحلة الاستقرار. "إذا النا نصيب منطع" وهكذا اتفقنا.

بدأنا نحضر أوراقنا للسفارة. حصلت على قبول من الجامعة بسرعة مع إعفاء من الرسوم السنوية. ولكن دون أي منحة. أخبرني مصطفى أنه من المحتمل أن أحصل على عمل كمساعد مدرس في قسم الرياضيات في الفصل الدراسي الثاني، مما يعني أنه يجب أن أؤمن مصاريف الفصل الدراسي الأول. كانت هذه مخاطرةً ولكننا قررنا أن نتحملها. حددنا موعداً لمقابلة السفارة في بيروت بحكم أن السفارة في دمشق كانت قد أغلقت. سئلت يوم المقابلة إن كنت أفضل أن تكون المقابلة باللغة العربية أو الانجليزية، اخترت الانجليزية متوقعاً أن ذلك سيزيد من فرص القبول.

عندما حان دورنا للقاء القنصل، كانت في انتظارنا امرأة صارمة الوجه، ما جعلني أشعر بالتوتر.

"لماذا ترغب بالسفر إلى الولايات المتحدة؟" سألتني بحزم.

توتري جعلني أرد بجمل قصيرة "أنا ذاهب لأدرس الرياضيات وأحصل على شهادة دكتوراه"

"أي جامعة ستنتسب إليها؟" - "Louisiana State University يا سيدي" أعطيتها رسالة القبول مع ورقة الـ I-20.

"كيف ستتحمل مصاريف السكن والمعيشة؟" - "لدي نقود في حس..."

قاطعتني بنفاذ صبر "أثبت لي ذلك. لا أرى أي كشوف مصرفية في طلبك"

كنت متأكداً أنني أرفقت كشوفاً من حسابات عائلتي بطلبي. لحسن الحظ كنت مستعداً وكان معي نسخ إضافية. مددت يدي وأعطيتها الكشوف. عاينت كل شيء بدقة ثم أخذت بصماتنا.

”سأعطيك فيزا طالب بعد أن ترسل لي المزيد من الثبوتيات. سأرسل لك ما أحتاحه.“ قالت بنفس الحزم.

تم الأمر! وفي نفس اللحظة، شعرنا سوية، عفراء وأنا، بمشاعر مختلطة. كنا متحمسين للفرصة الثمينة، لبدء حياة أخرى في مكان أفضل وأكثر أماناً. ولكننا شعرنا فوراً بالاشتياق لأهلنا وكأنا قد سافرنا فعلاً.

لم يحاول أحد من عائلتنا ثنينا عن السفر. كان الجميع موافقاً ضمناً أن المأساة السورية ستسوء أكثر وأكثر، ولم يكن هناك أي حل في الأفق. أهلي لم يكونوا بارعين بالتعبير عن مشاعرهم بطبعهم. لذلك كان نقاشنا فقط عن كيفية تأمين معيشتنا في الأشهر الأولى. أما عائلة عفراء فقد كان الوصول إليهم متعذراً، وبدا من الغريب نوعاً ما أن نناقش موضوعاً كهذا على الهاتف خاصة أننا كنا عادة نمضي بعض عطل نهاية الأسبوع هناك.

قبل أسبوع تقريباً من موعد السفر، اتصل أصدقائي بي وطلبوا أن نسهر سويةً في المقهى المعتاد على سبيل الوداع. حضرت نفسي للذهاب وكنت على وشك الخروج عندما... بوووووم... انفجار هز النوافذ.

قفزت عفراء وقالت فوراً ”والله مالك رايح“. قررت الانتظار لحظات، بوووم، انفجار آخر، ثم آخر وآخر. تجمعنا في وسط غرفة الجلوس، عفراء، جوري وأنا. لم يكن لدينا أي فكرة عن سبب الأصوات. استبعدنا أنها انفجارات أو تفجيرات بسبب التكرار. كانت الأصوات عالية وقريبة وزجاج النوافذ يهتز أكثر وأكثر. غطينا جوري بأجسادنا واتصلت أسأل أصدقائي إن كان لديهم علمٌ بما يحصل. نفس الجواب. لا علم لهم. علمنا لاحقاً أن جيش الأسد نصب مدفعاً على تلة قريبة من بيتنا لقصف حي مجاور مشهورٍ باستضافة المظاهرات في شوارعه. استمر القصف حوالي النصف ساعة، بمجموع عشر ضربات مدفع. شعرت بقليل من الرضا أننا سنغادر ونترك هذه المخاطر وراءنا، ولكنني أحسست فوراً بأنانية هذا الشعور فكبتته.

ساعدتنا أمي قبل السفر بتوضيب حقائبنا، نصحننا مصطفى بإحضار ما يمكننا شراؤه من البهارات لأنها أرخص وأفضل نكهة، لذا وضعنا العديد

من علب الفلفل الأسود، البهارات المشكّلة، جوزة الطيب، القرفة، السماق، القرنفل وبعض أواني الطبخ لتخفيف نفقات الفترة الأولى. اضطررنا أن نترك معظم كتبنا وراءنا لتخفيف وزن الحقائق. عندما شارفنا على الانتهاء، كانت أمي على وشك الانهيار. كانت متعبة جسدياً ونفسياً. طلبت أن تدخل غرفتنا لتنام قليلاً وترتاح. أغلقت الباب ورائها وخرجت بعد فترة قصيرة. كانت تبدو أفضل. أخذنا الحقائق إلى منزل أهلي حيث قررنا أن نقضي ليلتنا الأخيرة.

الخامس عشر من آب عام ٢٠١٢. كان ذلك اليوم الموعود. كنا جميعنا جالسين في صالة منزل أهلي وكانت الساعة الثانية صباحاً. كنا بانتظار سيارة الأجرة التي ستأخذنا إلى مطار بيروت. لم يكن الوصول إلى مطار دمشق ممكناً بسبب الأعمال العسكرية حوله، لذا كانت طائرتنا ستقلع من مطار بيروت. أمضينا الليلة كاملة محاولين الاتصال بأهل عفرأ في دير شميل. "خلينا نجرب كل شوي، مابتعرفي، يمكن يعلق هالمرة" ولكن كانت جميع الاتصالات مقطوعةً يومها ناهيك عن السفر بحد ذاته والذي كان مستحيلًا.

أمي كانت متوترة بشكلٍ ظاهر، وكان وجه أبي شاحباً. كانوا يتمنون سرّاً أن لا يصل سائق السيارة. قضينا الدقائق الأخيرة نتبادل أحاديث غير ذات معنى.

"آخذ هويتي معي؟" سألت أبي الذي أجاب "شو بدك فيها؟ أهم شي جوازك ووراق الجامعة"

نظرت إلى ساعة يدي "هفف، بطارية ساعتني خلصت"

مد أبي يده بساعة يده "عطيني ساعتك وخود ساعتني" لم أفكر بالموضوع يومها. ولكن لاحقاً، أحسست أنه أراد شيئاً مني وأعطاني شيئاً منه. هل كان يخشى أن لا نلتقي ثانيةً لسنوات؟

حوالي الساعة الثانية والربع صباحاً، وصل السائق. سترافقني هذه اللحظة منا حبيبت. بدأت بحمل الحقائق إلى السيارة، وبدأت أمي تبكي وهي تطلب منا أن نعتني ببعضنا البعض. كان أبي يحاول تهدئتها حتى وصلت إليه لأعانقه، عندها، خارت كل قواه التي كان يدخرها لهذه اللحظة. أبي، الرجل القوي، الذي لم أراه يذرف دمعاً أبداً إلا عندما كنت رضيعاً ومريضاً بحمي قوية

استمرت لأيام، كان يبكي مجدداً. ما الذي فعلته بعائلتي؟

”حزرج قريباً، وعد“ ولكن أهلي كانوا يعرفون ما لم أكن أعرفه.

خلال الساعتين اللتان بقينا فيهما في السيارة باتجاه بيروت، كنا صامتين ونحن نمسك بأيدي بعضنا. وفي أذهاننا سؤال لم نجرؤ على التلفظ به. نفس السؤال الذي يراودنا كل يوم، حتى اليوم، هل سنرى أهلنا يوماً ما؟

القسم الثاني

باتون روج، لوزيانا: واحد في المئة

وصلنا مطار بيروت حوالي ثلاث ساعات قبل موعد السفر. الجزء الأول من رحلتنا كان باتجاه سويسرا واستغرق حوالي الثلاث ساعات. بعد توقف قصير تابعنا إلى واشنطن العاصمة، هذه المرة لمدة تسع ساعات. كان عمر جوري آنذاك أحد عشر شهراً. قضت جوري هذا الجزء من الرحلة بشكل جيد واستمتعت بالألعاب التي أحضرناها معنا على متن الطائرة. كانت عفراء صامتة معظم الوقت. شعرت بما يعتريها من حزن بسبب عدم استطاعتها توديع أهلها ولم أعرف كيف أواسيها. كنت أنا نفسي متأثراً من وداع عائلتي لذا التزمت الصمت أنا الآخر. لم نستطع النوم أو الأكل أيضاً.

وصلنا واشنطن العاصمة ووقفنا في الصف الطويل لإجراء المقابلة مع ضابط أمن المطار. ”أهم شي تبتسم“ هذه كانت نصيحة مصطفى. ”الضابط عندو صلاحية يرجعك إذا ما حبك“. كانت المقابلة سريعة. أعتقد أن الضابط أحبنا رغم أن ملامح وجهه الحازمة لم تش بذلك على الإطلاق. كانت لدينا حوالي ساعة من الوقت قبل أن تقلع طائرنا الأخيرة إلى نيو أورليانز. قررت أن أبحث عن هاتف لأطمئن أهلي أننا وصلنا وأطلب منهم أن يحاولوا الاتصال بأهل عفراء مجدداً. وجدت هاتفاً عمومياً ولكن لم يكن معي أي عملة معدنية، ولم يقبل متاجر Subway الملاصق أن يبدل لي بعض الدولارات الورقية بأربع. نظرت حولي في يأس لأجد مكتب خدمات للمسافرين. كانت السيدة العاملة هناك لطيفة جداً أعطتني سماعة الهاتف لديها لأتصل بأهلي بالمجان.

ركضت عائداً إلى عفراء وجوري. وأسرعنا إلى طائرتنا الأخيرة ووصلنا قبل دقائق من الإقلاع. ولكن ما أن أعلن الطيار استعداده للإقلاع حتى شممنا رائحة مرعبة قادمة من جوري. نظرت إلى عفراء. كانت نظراتها واضحة من دون الحاجة إلى أي كلمة ”روح أنت وغيرلها“. قفزت حاملاً جوري. حاولت المضيفة أن توقفني ولكن الرائحة كانت ظاهرة فقالت ”أرجوك أسرع“ وهنا بدأت جوري بالبكاء. كان ذلك اسرع تغيير حفاظ قمت به في حياتي. حتى أن المضيفة أعلنت على الملأ ”لدينا اب خارق على الطائرة“ وهلل لي بعض المسافرين. ولكن جوري كانت ما تزال تبكي. ربما كانت جائعة؟ أرضعتها عفراء وكان لذلك أثر كالسحر. هدأت جوري طوال فترة الرحلة.

هنأنا بعض الركاب وأطروا على مواهبنا كأهل بينما كنا خارجين من الطائرة. سألونا إن كانت رحلتنا طويلة وشاقة. لا أحب هذه النوعية من الأحاديث القصيرة عامّةً ولكنني كنت بحاجةٍ لأي حديث يشتم انتباهي عن الأفكار التي بدأت تعصف بي. كنا على وشك بدء حياة جديدة من الصفر. هل أنا مستعد؟ هل حقاً أستطيع العناية بعائلتي والنجاح في برنامج الدكتوراه في آن واحد؟ وماذا عن المخاطرة غير المحسوبة التي قررت أن اتخذها؟ هل سأحصل على عمل يدر مبلغاً كافياً ضمن الجامعة؟ ومتى؟ كانت الأسئلة تنبثق برأسي بشكل متواصل.

كانت الساعة حوالي العاشرة مساءً في نيو أورليانز وكنا بالكاد قادرين على إبقاء أعيننا مفتوحة بعكس جوري التي نامت طوال الرحلة. بحثت عن مصطفى في كل مكان من المطار ولم أجده. لم يكن معي هاتف طبعاً. دخلت إلى مقهى لأستعمل الانترنت وأرسلت له رسالة على الـ Facebook. وكان رده أنه نسي أن موعد وصولنا كان اليوم. كان يظن أن طائرتنا ستصل اليوم التالي. مازلت حتى اليوم أذكره بهذه القصة. والآن حان موعد انتقامي من صديقي العزيز. لقد كتبت القصة كي تقرأوها جميعكم.

وصلنا إلى شقة مصطفى ونحن في غاية الإرهاق. بقينا عنده حوالي الأسبوع بينما كنا نبحث عن شقة حتى وجدنا واحدة رخيصة قريبة من الجامعة. شقة قديمة فيها غرفتنا نوم. كان المطبخ صغيراً جداً، خزائنه أكل الدهر عليها وشرب. إطارات أبواب الغرف مكسورة. أسلاك المروحة في غرفة الجلوس

ملصقة إلى الحائط. كتبنا قائمةً بما نريد من أصحاب الشقة تصليحه واشترينا بعض المفروشات بالمبلغ الصغير الذي استطعنا إحضاره معنا. أريكة وسريراً ومهداً لجوري. يالها من بداية لحياتنا الجديدة.

بعد تنظيف الشقة. بدأنا بفتح الحقائق لترتيب أغراضنا. بعد أن فتحت عفراء الحقيبة الأولى وجدت ورقة صغيرة.

”تعا شوف شو لقيت“ نادتنى. على الورقة البيضاء وبقلم أزرق، قرأت العبارة التالية ”عانقوا وبوسوا بعض“ هذا خط أمي!

بين علب البهارات، وجدنا ورقة أخرى ”نحننا اشتقنا لكون، انتو اشتقتولنا؟“ وضعت عفراء يدها حول ذراعي عارفة كم أمتني قراءة هذه الأوراق. ”انبسطو“ أي كونوا مسرورين. على الورقة الثالثة المطوية بين الثياب.

وفي كل حقيبة، كنا نجد المزيد من هذه الأوراق. لم نستطع قراءتها جميعها. كنا نغالب دموعنا. أمي لم تدخل غرفتنا لتنام و ترتاح من تعب توضيب الحقائق. كانت في الداخل تكتب هذه الأوراق وتخفيها على عجل كي لا نراها. أي أفكار دارت في رأسها وهي تكتب بسرعة خلف الباب المغلق؟ أي أحاسيس انتابتها وهي توضح أغراض ابنها عالمةً أن هذه قد تكون فرصتها الأخيرة لتراه؟ أي عذاب تسببت به لهذه الأم الحنونة عندما قررت ان ارحل؟

بدأنا مرحلة التأقلم على حياتنا الجديدة ببطء. كان الفصل الدراسي على وشك البدء وكان لا بد لي من الاستعداد بسرعة. لحسن الحظ، عرض علي منصب مساعد مدرس بعد أسبوعين فقط من بدء الدوام. لم يكن الراتب جيداً أبداً ولكنه كان كافياً لدفع أجرة الشقة وشراء بعض الحاجيات.

كان زملائي في الدراسة ودودين في المجمل ولكنهم أدركوا بسرعة أنني قادم ومحمل بالهموم. بينما كان معظمهم في العشرينات من عمرهم، عازبين وقادرين على العيش بالراتب الضئيل الذي توفره الجامعة. كنت أنا في الثلاثين من عمري، متزوجاً ولدي طفلة عمرها سنة. وعلي أن أتدبر أمري براتب طالب عازب. كنت أيضاً بحالة صدمة دائمة بسبب جرعة الأخبار اليومية القادمة من سوريا. لم ألم زملائي الذين آثروا ترك مسافة بيني وبينهم. خصوصاً أنني لم أجعل الأمر سهلاً عليهم.

في البداية، كنت بطريقة أو بأخرى، قادراً على تحويل مجرى أي حديث باتجاه الوضع السوري الراهن لأسألهم عن رأيهم. كنت أفترض أن الجميع قد سمع بما كان يجري في بلدي. ولكن كان ارتباكهم وهم يبحثون عن جوابٍ يرضيني حول مشكلة تحدث في الطرف الآخر من الكوكب بالنسبة لهم كافياً لي لأعرف خطأ افتراضي. لذلك عودت نفسي أن أتوقف عن ”الضجيج“ الغير ضروري حول بلدي. وعندما كنت أواجه بسؤال ”من أين أتيت؟“ كنت أقول سوريا وأصمت منتظراً الجواب المعهود ”cool“. كانت معدتي تتقلص عندما أسمع هذا الجواب. كل مرة كنت أرغب بالصراخ ”لأمو cool. الناس عم يموت هنيك كل دقيقة“ ولكن كنت أصمت. أقنعت نفسي أن الأمريكيين يرون ما يحدث في بلدي كخلاف سياسي وليس كمأساة إنسانية. وأنهم غير راغبين بالاستماع إلى حديث سياسي ممل. أحياناً كنت أفاجئ بجواب من قبيل ”يؤسفني ما يحدث في بلدك“ عندها أشكر ذلك الشخص بأدب من غير أن أتابع الحديث. قررت أن أكبت مشاعري وأن اشاركها مع مصطفى فقط.

أصبح تصفح الـ Facebook إدماني. كانت معظم وكالات الأنباء قد سحبت طواقمها من سوريا لخطورة الوضع في معظم أرجاء البلد باستثناء مكاتبهم في دمشق حيث الرواية الوحيدة المتوفرة للأحداث هي رواية النظام السوري. اضطر الناشطون لاستخدام وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي كمنصات لمشاركة جرائم النظام السوري. اضطررت حينها أن أحصل على حسابي Facebook. واحد حقيقي أتابع عليه الأخبار، والآخر مزيف لحماية عائلتي وأهلي. كانت نقاط التفتيش في ذلك الوقت قد بدأت بتفتيش الهواتف المحمولة أيضاً ولم أستطع أن أخاطر بوجود أي فرد من عائلتي على الحساب الذي أتابع عبره أخبار بلدي.

تواصلنا مع أهلنا كان يتم عبر برامج وتطبيقات تستخدم الانترنت ك Skype و WhatsApp وغيرها الكثير. وكان أهلي دائمياً المطالبة لي بأخذ الحذر فيما أقوله أو أكتبه على حساباتي. لأن المخابرات قد تكتشف ذلك وعندها قد يحدث مالا تحمد عقباه. ”يمكن ياخذو أبوك، مشان الله انتبه“ هكذا كانت أمي تذكركني.

كلما أسألهم عن حالهم تقول أُمي ”نحننا مناح. كل شي تمام“. كانت تتبع قانوناً غير مكتوب: لا تجعل شخصاً مقرباً لك، خاصةً إذا كان بعيداً عنك، يشعر بالقلق بسبب مشكلة لا يستطيع حلها. كنت أعرف أن هذا ما تفعله لذا كنت دائم القلق عليهم. كان لدي ألف سبب كي أقلق. ماذا لو أصيب أحدهم بقذيفة طائشة من القذائف التي كانت تتطاير فوق دمشق؟ ماذا لو اكتشف أحد عناصر المخابرات ما يقوله ابنهم الخائن المسافر على شبكات التواصل؟

حاولت الاتصال بأُمي في أحد الأيام بلا جدوى. كان هذا يحدث عادة إن كان الاتصال بشبكة الإنترنت متعذراً هناك. جربت الاتصال بسارة أو بأبي بلا طائل. خطر لي أنهم خارج المنزل لسبب ما. ربما يشترتون بعض الحاجيات أو يزورون جدتي لأُمي. حاولت الاتصال مجدداً بعد عدة ساعات. نفس النتيجة. بدأت أشعر بالقلق. اتصلت دولياً. وعندما ردت أُمي هذه المرة عاجلتها بالسؤال ”ماما، أنتو مناح؟ شو في؟“ لتسألني بدورها ”ليش عم تتصل دولي؟ هيك بتتكلف كثير“ شرحت لها سبب قلقي. فطمأنتني بعذر غير مقنع. أنهم كانوا يقضون بعض الحاجيات ثم زاروا جدتي ثم عادوا ليجدوا شبكة الإنترنت معطلة. لم يكن لدي أي خيار إلا تصديقها.

اتصلت بها في اليوم التالي. ”أُمي. وينكون؟“

ردت وقالت ”هلاً رجعنا من المشفى وصار فيني احكيلك“

قالت لي أن سارة خضعت لعملية جراحية وقرروا عدم إخباري قبل العودة إلى المنزل.

نفس السيناريو حدث لاحقاً. أي تعرض لمشاكل صحية في قلبه أثرت على ذاكرته. ولم يخبروني. أُمي خضعت لعملية جراحية خطيرة في عمودها الفقري وأبقوا الموضوع سراً عني. كانوا يراعون مشاعر ابنهم الذي يعيش بأمان وهو بعيد عنهم آلاف الأميال بينما هم يعيشون تحت الخطر والضغوطات. كنت أغضب كل مرة بعد أن أكتشف مشاكلهم التي خبئوها عني. ولكن عندما أفكر لاحقاً وأحلل الموضوع بروية دارس الرياضيات أعرف لم فعلوا هذا. ما

الذي كان بإمكانه فعله؟ لم يكن معي في أي لحظة نقود تكفيني حتى نهاية الشهر. هل يحق لي مطالبتهم بالتفكير بي وهم وسط هذه المشاكل؟ هل يستطيعون؟ هل كان لديهم وقت وبأل رائق كي يساعدوني أن أشعر بفائدي وقدرتي على مساعدتهم؟

كنت أشعر أنني عديم الفائدة، بل وحتى عبء عليهم. كانت الليرة السورية تفقد قيمتها بسرعة كارثية. كانت أوضاعهم المادية تسوء بنفس السرعة. ومع ذلك كان أبي يرسل لنا بعض المال في الصيف عندما يتوقف راتبتي. كان يقول مازحاً "هم الولاد للممات" أي أن تربية الأولاد هم لا ينتهي حتى الموت. أنا عبء على أهلي. أنا عبء حتى على عائلتي التي ورطتها معي. عفراء تخلت عن عملها وأهلها كي تساعدني بتحقيق حلمي وماذا قدمت لها بالمقابل؟ حياة تحت خط الفقر. جوري كانت تكبر بدون أجداد أو أقارب. رابطها الوحيد بعائلتها في سوريا هو عبر شاشات الهواتف المحمولة. كنت أرزح تحت طبقات متراكمة من الذنب. وكنت أخبئ هذه المشاعر عن الجميع. يجب أن أكون قوياً وأن أبدو قوياً. هكذا كنت أحدث نفسي. الكل يعتمد علي. أنا صاحب مصدر الدخل الوحيد هنا حالياً. لن أنهار. أهلي لن يتحملوا أن يسمعو خبراً سيئاً عني. لن أنهار.

كنت مرة أحدث خالي وقال لي "اسمع. أبوك وأمك محتاجين يشوفوك ناجح. هاد الشئ الوحيد يلبي ممكن يعوض غيابك" كان لابد لي من التحمل. لا أستطيع أن أنهار. لن أنهار.

في شهر كانون الأول من عام ٢٠١٢، استخدم جيش الأسد صواريخ سكود لأول مرة ضد الثوار. هذه الصواريخ العتيقة السوفيتية الصنع لم تكن تتميز بأدق دقة بالتصويب. كان المشاهد القادمة من الشمال السوري تصيبنني بالهلع. كل صاروخ كان قادراً على تسوية عشرين منزلاً بالأرض. لم يصوبوا حتى على تجمعات المقاتلين. كانت الصواريخ تضرب عشوائياً شمال غرب سوريا حيث يتوزع المقاتلون. مئات المدنيين قتلوا بسبب هذه الصواريخ.

يوم ٢٠ آب من عام ٢٠١٣. تلقيت أول إشعار على هاتفي. كانت هناك إشاعات أن النظام قد استخدم الأسلحة الكيميائية المحرمة مجدداً. لم تكن تلك المرة

الأولى. استخدموها سابقاً على نطاق ضيق ومرت تلك المرات بدون مشاكل دولية للنظام. هذه المرة كانت مختلفة. تحدثت التقارير بداية عن بعض الضحايا، ثم العشرات، ثم المئات! ثم بدأت تنهال الصور الرهيبة. رجال، نساء، أطفال، بعضهم في أقبية الأبنية، بعضهم في الشوارع. كلهم شاحبون كالثلج وعيونهم ميتة.

اعتضت حكومات العالم. صرخ السياسيون. توعد الجميع بعقوبات لأن النظام تجاوز خطوطاً حمراء. بدأت النقاشات. اتخذت القرارات. وبعد أسبوع. لم يحدث شيء. بدأ السوريون بالاستعداد للسمع عن المجزرة القادمة، بالتاريخ القادم. كان المستقبل يعني الموت ولا شيء سواه.

كما قالت أمل قصير الشاعرة السورية الأمريكية "التواريخ ستتحول إلى نعوات" واعدروني لترجمتي الركيكة.

بعد هذا الغضب السريع استوعب السوريون أن سبب الغضب كان حصراً لاستخدام الأسلحة الكيميائية وليس لأن الأسد قد قتل نصف مليون شخص. تخيلت زعماء العالم قد عقدوا اجتماعاً مع بشار الأسد. "أبدأ، أبدأ، لا نقتل شعبك أبداً، باستخدام أسلحة الكبار. هذا يخرجنا ويحتم علينا التظاهر بأننا نكترث. القتل بصمت يعطي نتائج مبهرة. التزم به"

لا أحد يعبأ بما يحدث هناك في سوريا. هذا عصر التفكير الإيجابي، عصر التركيز على المشاكل التي يمكنك حلها وتجاهل تلك المستعصية. السيناريو السوري مستعصٍ، لذا يتجاهله الجميع. معادلة منطقية بسيطة.

بعد مئات آلاف الضحايا، لا يظل العقل البشري قادراً على استيعاب مقتل كل شخصٍ على حده. وتتحوّل الأرقام إلى مفهوم مجرد. صور المجازر الأولى أغضبتنا ولكنها كانت أيضاً تقتلنا من الداخل ببطء وثقة. بعض السوريين استوعبوا هذا سريعاً وتوقفوا عن مشاهدة الصور للحفاظ على عقولهم. هناك آخرون استمروا بالنظر حتى تشكلت فجوة في أرواحهم تسببت بخدرٍ من قسوة ما شاهدوه. كنا من النوع الأخير.

في الرابع من تموز عام ٢٠١٣، اتجهنا إلى ضفة نهر المسيسيبى لمشاركة الشعب

الأمريكي احتفالات الاستقلال. هطل المطر بغزارة كعادته في هذه الولاية. لحسن الحظ توقف المطر قبل إطلاق الألعاب النارية. جلسنا مع الآلاف حولنا للمشاهدة وكانت جوري جالسة على كنفني. صوت الألعاب النارية كان مطابقاً لصوت القصف الذي سمعناه في تلك الليلة قبل أسبوع من سفرنا. عقلنا الباطن حول أصوات المحتفلين حولنا وهم يهللون إلى أصوات صراخ تطلب المساعدة تحت الانفجارات. التصقنا ببعض ودموعنا تجري بصمت.

تعرفنا من خلال مصطفى على عائلة سورية أخرى تقطن باتون روج. نبيل سوري أمريكي من الجيل الثاني في لويزيانا. زوجته ناديا هاجرت إلى الولايات المتحدة عندما تزوجت نبيل. أصبحنا أصدقاء. ولكن بسبب التعقيد الكبير للشأن السوري، لم يكن من السهل اقتراح أي حل بدون ضحايا. مع مرور الوقت، أصبحت عائلتنا مقربتين بشكل يجعلنا مرتاحين لنقاش آرائنا.

لا أذكر بالضبط كيف بدأنا النقاش ذلك اليوم ولكن نبيل قال لي "الأسد مجرم، نحن متفقون على هذا أليس كذلك؟" كان ينظر إلي عالماً أن ما سيقوله لن يعجبني. "متفقين أكيداً! ليش عم تسأل؟"

"هل نشأت الثورة برأيك بطريقة محلية وخالية من تدخل الأيدي الخارجية؟"

صعقت لسؤاله. وجهة النظر هذه مطابقة لمزاعم النظام ومؤيديه الذين يتهمون الغرب الإمبريالي وخصوصاً الولايات المتحدة بافتعال ثورة في سوريا لإضعافها عبر تمويل مظاهرات تبدأ بشكل سلمي وتستخدم العنف تدريجياً لجر الجيش إلى مواجهات معهم.

كانت الصدمة واضحة على وجهي لذلك قرر أن يشرح وجهة نظره "إسمعني إياد. أنا أعرف سياسات هذا البلد. الولايات المتحدة فعلت نفس الشيء حرفياً في العديد من دول أمريكا اللاتينية وفي العراق أيضاً. ما الذي يجعل سوريا مختلفة؟"

سوريا مختلفة لأنني كنت هناك! لدي أصدقاء شاركوا في المظاهرات، وآخرون انشقوا عن جيش النظام لرفضهم القصف العشوائي على القرى والمدن التي

تؤوي معارضين للنظام. التقيت بطلابٍ انتقلوا إلى دمشق بعد تدمير مدنهم
وحكوا لي عن همجية ووحشية جنود النظام.

قلت له ”نبيل. أنت عم تعطي أميركا أكبر من حجمها بكتير. أميركا مو قادرة
تخطط بهالشكل هاد“

لم نكمل النقاش يومها ولكنني كنت أعرف بأن هذه ليست نهاية الحديث.
بعد حوالي الشهر اجتمعنا مجدداً في أحد الحدائق وبطريقة ما برز الموضوع
السوري للعلن. كان رأي نبيل أن الثورة يجب أن تتوقف وأن السوريين يجب
أن يقروا بالهزيمة ويقبلوا الأسد كرئيس. ”الثورة انتهت. فلنقل أنهم قاتلوا
بشجاعة ولكنه الوقت للاعتراف بالهزيمة“ شعرت بضربات قلبي تتسارع.
”هيك؟ ينسو ويسامحو بهالبساطة؟ الملايين إما ماتت أو تشردت أو تعذبت يا
نبيل“

”من السهل عليك أن تطالب باستمرار الثورة وأنت آمن هنا“

”فيني واجهك بنفس المنطق يا نبيل. من السهل عليك تطالب السوريين
ينسو ويسامحو وأنت ما صرلك شي من الأسد“

”هذا هو السبب لوجوب توقف الثورة. المزيد سيموتون ويتعذبون مع
استمرار الثورة“

قررنا يومها أن نتفق أن لا نتفق. قلت له أن يجب علي على الأقل أن أساهم
بنشر أخبار الوضع السوري ضمن المجتمع الأمريكي. عندها نظر مباشرة في
عيني وقال ”أنت تعرف أن نسبة العرب الأمريكيين هنا لا تتجاوز الواحد
في المئة، أليس كذلك؟ “ كانت وجهة نظره أننا لو كنا في نعيش على كوكب
مثالي فإننا لن نأمل بأن نحظى بأكثر من واحدٍ في المئة من انتباه الغالبية من
السكان هنا. نفس نسبة التمثيل السكاني.

كلماته أحدثت صدًى في نفسي لسببٍ مختلفٍ تماماً. منذ اليوم الأول لوصولي
هنا وأنا أشعر بمسؤولياتي كضيفٍ آتٍ من ثقافةٍ وخلفيةٍ كرهها الكثيرون سراً
وعلانيةً منذ أحداث الحادي عشر من أيلول. كنت أعلم أن تصرفاتي هنا لن

تنعكس علي وحدي وإفما سىتم تعمىمها على أي سورى أو عربى أو مسلم. لذا يجب أن أكون فى غاية الحذر قبل أن أتصرف أو أقول أي شىء. مع أن رأى نبىل كان توفير جهد بلا طائل، مشكلتى كانت أنني كونت علاقة مسؤولة مع هذا الرقم، واحد فى المئة. منذ أول يوم لى فى الولايات المتحدة، عملت جاهداً أن أكون الضيف المؤدب الخلق الذى لا يخالف أي قانون ولا يخطئ بأي تصرف مع أي أحد. عودت وجهى على الابتسام أمام الجميع حتى عندما أضعف. أردت أن تكون صورتى هنا هى صورة الشخص الإيجابى الممتن لوجوده هنا. لا تطالب بالاهتمام. كنت أقول لىفسى. هذه البلاد احتوتك مع عائلتك، أنتم آمنون هنا وتحصلون على راتب. لا تطالب بالمزيد. لا يمكنك إنقاذ الجميع.

كان مفهوم الضيف المؤدب هو القانون الذى أسير عليه. مصطفى كان غير راضٍ عندما أقول أنني ضيف. ”صرك فترة منبحة هون إباد. صرت تفهم الثقافة بهالبلد. أنت ملتزم بالقوانين وبتدفع ضرائبك وحتى بتساهم بالبحث العلمى. صفيانلك كم ورقة وتوقيع وبتصير مقيم“ كان ردى عادة ”حتى لو صرت مقيم، عملياً أنا لساتنى ضيف“

ولكن الحقيقة كانت أنه لم يكن لدى سعة الوقت والترف النفسى لأجد الفوارق بين الضيف والمقيم. كان لدى مشاكل أهم وأكبر. كيف أعتنى بعائلتى بالراتب الضئىل الذى أحصل عليه؟ كنا نستخدم أي بطاقة ائتمانية فور الحصول عليها وكنا متجهين بخطى حثيثة نحو كارثة مالية ولم يكن بمقدورى التوقف.

فى ذاك الوقت، كنا نشعر بأننا افتقدنا وجود عائلة كبيرة. ولم نرد لجورى أن تشعر ذات الشعور. أردنا أن يكون لها عائلة أكبر مما كان لديها ليعوض ربما إحساس فقد الأقارب الذين ربينا بينهم أنا وعفراء. كنت أذهب مع عائلتى وأنا طفل لمنزل جدتى كل أسبوع و ألتقى بكل أقاربنى هناك. أعمام عفراء وعماتنا كانوا يسكنون المنزل الملاصق لمنزلها وكان لديها أقارب تلعب معهم كل الوقت. بينما كان معظم أصدقاء جورى اطفالاً يسكنون فى نفس العمارة، لطلاب دراساتٍ مثلى يدرسون خارج بلدانهم بعيداً عن أهالىهم. كنت أسمى

هؤلاء الأطفال أصدقاء مع تاريخ انتهاء صلاحية. أما بالنسبة لأولاد عمومته وأحوالها فرمما لن تتاح لها الفرصة أن تلتقيهم وهي ما تزال طفلة. وعلى الرغم أننا لم نجرؤ على قول ذلك صراحةً فيما بيننا، بدأنا نستعد نفسياً لاحتمال أن تمضي العديد من السنوات قبل أن نتمكن من لقاء أقاربنا. لذا قررنا أن نعطي جوري أخصاً أو أختاً لتمضي طفولتها لاعبةً معه أو معها. لتكبر عارفةً أن هناك من تستطيع الاعتماد عليه ويستطيع الاعتماد عليها.

ولد ابننا في تشرين الثاني عام ٢٠١٣. جوري كان عمرها سنتين وقتها. سمح لي بالدخول مع عفراء لغرفة العمليات. وبعد ساعة طويلة جداً كان ابني، ابننا، على ذراعي. لا توجد كلمات تصف هذا الشعور، مجدداً. هذه اللحظة السحرية لا تشيخ ولا تقدم ولا تصبح مملة. سواء حملت طفلاً واحداً أو عشر أطفال! عندما تحمل الطفل الجديد لأول مرة تتغير بنفس اللحظة وتشعر بذلك التغيير. يصبح قلبك أكبر كي يتسع للوafd الجديد.

وكما المرة السابقة، وضعنا قائمة بالأسماء. أردنا اسماً يناسب كلتا اللغتين والثقافتين. وكان اسم آدم هو اختيارنا النهائي فهو يلفظ بنفس الطريقة تماماً.

”بيجي الولد وبتجي رزقتو معو“ مقولة يقولها السوريون لتخفيف الشعور بالهم والقلق عند الأهل. تعني العبارة أن المولود هبة من الله وأن الله سيساعد الأهل بتدبر نفقاته. لا أنكر أنني أجد هذه المقولة سطحية خصوصاً في حالة الكثير من الأطفال. هل حقاً يظنون أن الله سيرسل المزيد من النقود لتحمل مصاريف الأطفال؟ كنت أفكر وأحلل كطالب الرياضيات الذي أكون عليه داخل الجامعة. أصبحت حرفياً أحادث نفسي. ”هي مصاريفك الجاية وهي راتبك جنب بعض. وضعك صعب يا معلم“ ولكن الصراحة أنه في حالة آدم، لا أنكر أننا بطريقة أو بأخرى تدبرنا أمورنا، على الأقل في السنوات الثلاث الأولى. ولكن المسؤولية الإضافية دفعتني أن أكون على أقصى الهامش في قسم الرياضيات في LSU وبين باقي الطلاب. لم يكن بإمكانني حتى الذهاب مع زملائي الطلاب لتناول الغداء. لم أكن أستطيع تحمل أي كلفة إضافية. ولم أرغب أن أشارك هذه المعلومة مع أي أحد. لذا تركزت حياتنا الاجتماعية على اللقاء مع نبيل وناديا ومع بعض عائلات الطلاب العرب ومع مصطفى.

ولكن لا يمكنك الهروب من نفسك. عندما تكون مصاباً فإن أي شيء سيذكرك بألمك. تتنفس ألمك وتعيشه وتتعايش معه. أصبحت متابعة الأخبار على ال Facebook أكبر جزءٍ من حياتي اليومية. كنت دائماً أخشى من ما يمكن أن أراه ولكن كان لابد لي من النظر. كانت الأخبار تصيبني بالاكنتئاب ولكنها كانت مصدرى الوحيد لمعرفة من مات وكيف. هل قصفت مدناً جديدة؟ هل اعتقل المزيد؟ يجب أن أقرأ كي أعرف. كان حسابي على ال Facebook سلسلة من الأخبار الدموية حتى لتشعر أن الدم سيسيل خارجاً من الشاشة.

في أحد الأيام كنت جالساً في مكتب لطلاب الدراسات في القسم أستخدم أحد الحواسيب لأتابع الأخبار على حسابي على Facebook عندما مر جانبي براد. براد كان أحد الطلاب في القسم. هو أمريكي أبيض من لوزيانا، يمكنك تمييز ذلك فوراً بدمائة أخلاقه وأدبه. لمح أنني أتصفح الموقع الأزرق فسألني بلطف وبراءة "ما الجديد على Facebook يا إياد؟" يبدو أنه كان يتوقع أن أعرض فيلماً طريفاً أو حقيقة رياضية مثيرة للاهتمام. لم أجب، وعضاً عن ذلك أزحت نفسي بعيداً عن الشاشة لأريه خبراً عن قصف جديد. كانت حركة لثيمة مني ولم يكن يستحقها بصراحة. اعتذر بأدبه المعهود وذهب صامتاً ليكمل عمله.

بدا واضحاً أن الأمور لم تكن تتحسن أبداً وإنما تسوء بسرعة تتجاوز مقدرة أي أحد على المتابعة والفهم. وكأن قتل نصف مليون وتدمير مدن واعتقال مئات الآلاف من المدنيين لم يكن كافياً. إيران وروسيا تدخلتا عسكرياً لصالح النظام. بالإضافة لحزب الله الإرهابي المدعوم من إيران والذي أرسل العديد من جنوده إلى الأراضي السورية. تلى ذلك ظهور تنظيم داعش الإرهابي شمال شرق سوريا. ثم تتالى تدخل دول أخرى في الحرب الدائرة. بعضهم لصالح النظام بشكل مباشر. بعضهم لتنفيذ مصالح معينة. وبعضهم الآخر فتح حدوده للسماح لمن يريد الذهاب لسوريا للقتال هناك. تم تشكيل تحالفات دولية لقتال داعش. وفجأة أصبحت بلدي سوريا مليئةً بغير السوريين.

كان المدنيون يقتلون في كل مكان. من قوات الأسد. من جنود حلفائه الروس والإيرانيين. من داعش. من التحالف الذي يحارب داعش. كانت الفوضى تعم جميع الأرجاء. وترك تعقيد الموضوع ووحشيته الجميع في حالة صدمة. هل

يمكنك تخيل بلدك مليئة بمقاتلين من أربع أو خمس جنسياتٍ على الأقل يستهدفون المدنيين بمساعدة حكومتك؟ لم نتخيل يوماً أن يحدث هذا، حتى حدث.

في هذه الأثناء تفاقمت أزمة اللاجئين. لم يعد هناك مكان آمن في سوريا. لا توجد خيارات إن لم تكن مؤيداً للأسد. إن بقيت فأنت تخاطر بأن تعتقل وتعذب. إن ذهبت لأماكن سيطرة المعارضة فأنت تخاطر بأن تموت تحت القصف. لا تبحث عن مكان آخر لأن باقي الأمكنة تحت سيطرة داعش. أمواج المتوسط هي مآلك الأخير. تذكر، إنها رحلة خطيرة. العديد حاولوا وانتهت أجسامهم جثثاً هامدة على الشواطئ. هل تذكر الصورة المأساوية للطفل آلان السوري الذي غرق ووجدوا جسده الضئيل على الشاطئ في تركيا؟ قد تحاول إقناع نفسك أن هذا لن يحدث لك وأنت ستكون حذراً وستتفحص القارب وسترة النجاة قبل الرحلة. ولكن ما لم يخطر ببالك أن صورة آلان أصبح حديث الجميع لأن جسده وصل للشواطئ. العديد من القوارب غرقت في منتصف البحر بعيدة عن الشواطئ ولم ير أحد جثث الضحايا.

سرعان ما تدرك أن المهربين لن يسمحوا لك بتفحص أي شيء. كما أن الدفع يسبق الرحلة. إذا كان المهرب صادقاً وكنت محظوظاً لتنجو من أمواج البحر في قاربك المطاطي الصغير ستصل إلى اليونان، ثم ستمشي باتجاه وسط أوروبا. هل أحضرت معطفاً ثقيلاً؟ لم تفعل؟ قد تتجمد من البرد على طريقك.

فلنبدأ من جديد من البداية. لماذا لا تطرق أبواب السفارات وتساfer بالطريقة الآمنة السليمة؟ لأن حكومات العالم أدركت بعد أن شاهدت حجم المأساة أن العديد سيطرق أبواب سفاراتها. لقد عرفوا أنهم إذا أوقفوا إعطاء فيزا السفر للسوريين ولو بشكل غير رسمي، فإن الهاربين سيضطرون للمقدوم بالطرق الصعبة. وسيرفض البعض هذا الخيار. أما الذين سيخاطرون فبعضهم لن ينجو من الرحلة. أما من نجا، فسيتفرون على بلدان مختلفة وليس بالضرورة أن يصلوا لبلدهم هم. هذا تطبيق عملي لدروس الإحصاء والاحتمالات.

حاولت دعوة أهلي لزيارتنا. طلبت من الجامعة أن ترسل رسالة دعوة رسمية لهم ولبوا لي طلبي. ذهب أهلي مع رسالة الدعوة وباقي الأوراق التي تثبت أن لديهم أعمالاً في دمشق وسوف يعودون بعد الزيارة. أي أنهم لن يتقدموا بطلب لجوء. ولكن طلبهم قوبل بالرفض بدون حتى مراجعة وثائقهم.

شاهدت كيف تم وصف أبناء بلدي بأنهم وباء يجتاح أوروبا. قرأت تصريحات حكام الولايات الراضية لاستقبال اللاجئين بسبب الخطورة الكامنة في ذلك. مئات التعليقات هللت لهذه القرارات. تعليقات من قبيل ”لا نرحب باللاجئين هنا“ أو ”يجب أن نعتني بجنودنا أولاً. هذه النقود يجب أن تكون من نصيب المدارس والطرق“ بعضهم كان أكثر صراحة ”أعيدوهم. أرسلوهم من حيث جاؤوا“

تمر أيام أكثر، ترتكب مجازر أكثر، وتغرق قوارب أكثر. ولكن الاهتمام بقصتنا يتضاءل ويتضاءل حتى يصل لنقطة الواحد في المئة. بقيت سوريا خارج دائرة الاهتمام الشعبي حتى عام ٢٠١٥ عندما عادت لمركز الاهتمام ولكن لأسباب خاطئة. كان ذلك عام الانتخابات الرئاسية، وكان دونالد ترامب يرسل الوعدو يمنة ويسرة عن إغلاق حدود بلاده في وجه جميع المسلمين. ذاك الوعد كان مستمداً من أزمة اللاجئين، السوريين خصوصاً. جزء كبير من حملته الانتخابية كان مرتكزاً على معاناة الآخرين. كنت سابقاً أشعر أننا غير مهمين. ولكن في ذلك الوقت شعرت بأنني غير مرحب بي. هتافات ناخبه جعلت الأمور واضحة. ولكن ماذا بإمكانني أن أفعل؟ لا أستطيع العودة الآن. لقد جعلت موقفني واضحاً من النظام المجرم الذي يدمر بلدي. على الأغلب سيتم اعتقالني حال وصولي. والاعتقال في سوريا لا يعني محاكمة عادلة أبداً. إنه يعني التعذيب وربما الموت. أهلي أنفسهم رفضوا فكرة عودتي بشكل قاطع قبل أن تحدث تغييرات جذرية هناك.

شعرت بأنني محتجز. ماذا لو عرف هذا الشاب الأبيض الماشي بجانبني أنني مهاجر، بل ومسلم، بل وسوري تحديداً؟ أنا في مركز مثلث الخطر! في العادة، يظن من يراني أنني أبيض، طبعاً تزول كل الشكوك حال أن أبدأ بالكلام وتفضحني لهجتي. كانت أخبار الاعتداء على المسلمين تظهر في كل مكان. هل نبقى في المنزل؟ هل نحاول الاندماج أكثر؟ كنت أقود نفسي إلى الجنون كل

مرة أخرج بها من الشقة. كيف أبقني عائلتي آمنة؟ إن جواز السفر السوري كان بمثابة لعنةٍ تلاحقنا أينما قررنا الذهاب. ليس هناك بلدان تستقبلنا وهذا البلد غير راغبٍ بنا.

سألني بروفيسور من القسم عن شعوري تجاه ما وصفه بالجنون على شاشات التلفاز. أخبرته بأي أشعر كشخصٍ غير مرحبٍ وغير مرغوبٍ به. لمعت عيناه بدمعةٍ استطاع إبقاءها حيث هي واعتذر مني بصدقٍ إن كانت الجامعة قد ساهمت بهذا الشعور ولم تساعدني على الإحساس بالأمان. حاولت أن أشرح له أن الجامعة لا ذنب لها بما شعرت وإنما هو ترامب وجماهير أنصاره. ولكن الأوان كان قد فات. كرهت نفسي لما تسببت به من إزعاج لبروفيسور كنا نحبّه نحن الطلاب ونحترمه كأنه من أهلنا. بعد ذلك، قررت أن أزرع ابتسامَةً كاذبَةً على وجهي طوال الوقت. لن أسمح لأحد أن يشعر بالأسف من أجلي. لن أسمح بذلك أبداً.

في اليوم التالي، دخلت إلى غرفة البريد في القسم حيث آلات التصوير والطباعة وخزائن البريد. وجدت جوشوا هناك. هو طالب دراسات عليا من فلوريدا وزميل لي في القسم. كنا قد تشاركنا مكتباً سابقاً قبل أن أحصل على مكتب صغير لي وحدي. شابٌّ طويل نحيل، له عيون زرقاء صافية. كان على علاقة ممتازة بالجميع في القسم. لم نناقش أي مواضيع سياسية مسبقاً ولم أكن حتى متأكداً أنه يعرف أنني سوري. كان كلانا ذوي لحية كثيفة. ولكن عندما رأيته ذلك اليوم، كان حليق الوجه.

شعرت بخيبة أمل طفيفة ”جوش! أين ذهبت اللحية؟“

”أهلاً إياد. لقد حلقته البارحة“

لن أسمح لأحد أن يشعر بالسوء من أجلي. بالغت في إظهار خيبة أمني الطريفة ”ماذا؟ كنت أظن أننا شركاء باللحى“

حاولت جاهداً أن أريه أنني سعيد ومرتاح. ولكنه عرف وأحس. نظر في عيني وقال ”أسمع. أنا أحبك وسعيد جداً أنك هنا. أرجوك تجاهل ما قاله ترامب ذلك اليوم“ كان يقصد ما قاله عن منع دخول المسلمين.

تفاجأت بحديثه. كما قلت سابقاً، لم نناقش أي موضوع سياسي من قبل. كنت أرتدي قناع السعادة الكاذب. حاولت الإبقاء عليه جاهداً. حاولت أن أقول ”شكراً صديقي. ليس هناك أي داع للقلق. أنا جيد. هذه الأحداث ستمر“ هذا ما أردت قوله صدقاً. ولكنني لم استطع تجاوز كلمة شكراً. علقت الكلمات في حلقي ولم أستطع إخراجها. ولأول مرة منذ وصولي إلى الولايات المتحدة، بكيت. في مكان عام. في منتصف غرفة البريد في مكان عملي. حاولت أن أتوقف دون جدوى. وضعت رأسي على أحد الرفوف وتركت نفسي أنهار للحظة.

كم كنت محرجاً. شاب ضخيم بطول ست أقدام ووزن أقل من ثلاثمئة باوند بقليل ولحية كثيفة يبكي في مكان عام. حاول جوش تهدئتي. أخبرني كم كان يشعر بالامتيازات أو الـ privileges التي وهبته إياها الحياة كونه رجلاً أبيض مسيحياً في الغرب، وكيف أنه يحاول دائماً أن يستغل هذه الميزات لمساعدة الآخرين. ولكن كان جل ما أفكر به هو كيف وضعت نفسي في هذا الموقف المحرج وكيف أخرج منه. مافعله جوش هو أنه قال ما أحتاج سماعه تماماً في اللحظة التي كنت أحتاجها. كان لهذه التركيبة مفعول سحري. أظن أنه عرف أو أحس بالألم الذي انتابني. أعتز أنني شعرت بتحسّن كبير. شعرت أنني لست وحدي، على الأقل ليس في مكان عملي و دراستي في الجامعة. مع ذلك، قررت أن أتحدثي رؤيته لفترة. أنتم تفهمونني أليس كذلك؟ كان الموقف غريباً حتى بالنسبة لشركاء اللحى.

في الواقع، عزلت نفسي كلياً بعد هذا الموقف. قررت أن أركز كل تفكيري على عائلتي أولاً، ودراستي ثانياً. لذا كانت الحياة الاجتماعية في مكان منخفض على قائمة أولوياتي. كان مصطفى قد تخرج وانتقل إلى ولاية أخرى. وأصدقائنا العرب الآخرون إما تخرجوا أو قريبين من ذلك.

جوري وآدم كانوا يكبرون بسرعة. كان آدم يقضي نهاره في روضة و جوري تحب مدرستها. كانت Pete The Cat في نهاية العام الدراسي. عندما بدأ العرض مشيت جوري على المسرح بشعرها المجعد الكثيف كشعر أمها و حذائها الرياضي الأحمر كحذاء Pete والألوان على وجهها. نظرت إلى عفرأ بابتسامة عريضة فوجدتها ودموع الفرحة على وجهها. كانت تلك هي اللحظة

التي كبت كل الضغط داخلي من أجل الحصول عليها. رؤية عائلتي سعيدة جعلت كل شيء أهون وأسهل.

كنت على وشك البدء بالعام الأخير في برنامج دراستي. العام الذي يتوجب عليّ خلاله إنهاء العمل على مشروعني وأن أحضر للدفاع عن أطروحتي وأكتب الرسالة. كان ذلك العام أيضاً الوقت الذي تمكنت مشاكلنا المالية من اللحاق بنا بعد أن هربنا منها لوقت طويل. كنت أجد بين الحينة والأخرى بعض الطلاب الباحثين عن دروس خصوصية ولكن لم يكن ذلك كافياً أبداً لإنقاذ سفينتنا الغارقة. لم يكن هناك أي مكان ألجأ إليه سوى المركز الإسلامي في باتون روج. عبأت طلب مساعدة مالية وأنا أشعر أن كوني عبئاً لم يعد قاصراً على عائلتي. أنا الآن عبء على مجتمعي الذي أعيش ضمنه. ولمدة أشهر، أبقيت موضوع المساعدات المالية سراً عن الجميع، حتى عفراء. لم أستطع أن أخبرها عن حجم مشاكلنا. لم أرد لها أن تقلق حيال أمر لا يمكنها أن تتحكم به. ناهيك عن أنني أنا سبب كل هذه المشاكل. لم أدرك حينها أنني كنت أكرر نفس التصرفات التي عودني أهلي عليها. كنت أسوء الحكم بدافع الحب. ومع مرور الوقت، أصبح من الأصعب علي الاعتراف بالحقيقة. أصبحت نائياً إن جاز التعبير. عزلت نفسي أكثر وأكثر. أصبحت نافذ الصبر حتى مع الأطفال. كنت أحس بضيق عفراء من تصرفاتي. كانت تظن أنه ضغط التخرج. كنت ألوم نفسي طوال الوقت. ألوم نفسي لكذبي. ألوم نفسي لوقوعنا في هذه الورطة. كنت أتمنى أن أنام ولا أستيقظ. ولكن فكرة أن تضطر عفراء أن تعتني بالأطفال وحدها فجأة تصيبني بذعر يردني للواقع. لا أستطيع أن أنهار. لن أنهار.

ولكن بعد فترة لم تعد عفراء قادرة أن تتحمل عزلتي. كانت تصرفاتي تؤثر على زواجنا. شعرت بالضعف. لذا عندما سألتني مرة أخيرة عن سبب ما أنا به اعترفت بكل شيء. صممت برههً محاولةً استيعاب ما قلته. سألتني كيف أخطط لأرد المبلغ. لم يكن لدي أي جواب. لم يكن باستطاعتي تخطيط ميزانية شهر واحد. عدا عن أن الإمام طلب مني أن أمرر المساعدة لمن يستحقها عندما أستطيع عوضاً عن دفع المبلغ للمركز. سامحتني بطيبة قلبها ولكنني أحسست بما شعرت به. كنت سأشعر بإحساس مماثل لو أنها قررت أن تبقي موضوعاً جدياً كهذا سراً عني.

دافعت في منتصف شهر حزيران عام ٢٠١٨. صادف ذلك اليوم كونه آخر أيام رمضان ذلك العام. اتصلت عفراء بأمي فور انتهائي. بدأت أمني بتهنئتي ولكن سرعان ما أختلطت كلماتها بدموعها مشكلة جملةً طويلةً عن مقدار سعادتها، عن دعائها المتواصل لنا بالتوفيق، عن شوقها لنا وعن مدى امتنانها لعفراء لوقوفها بجانبني ودعمني طيلة هذه الفترة. أردت أن أخرجها كم اشتقت لهم وكم يعني لي دعمهم ومساعدتهم ولكن كلماتي خرجت من حلقي غير مفهومة.

بثت جامعتي حفل التخرج على الانترنت بشكلٍ مباشر فاستطاع أهلي مشاهدي. جوري وآدم كادوا أن يطيروا من الفرحة لرؤيتي بملابس التخرج. لوحوا لي ولوحت لهم. رأيت ابتسامة عفراء الساحرة وهي سعيدةً لي، سعيدةً لنا. فكرت بكل الحب الذي أغدقته علي لنكون هنا في هذه اللحظة. أرسلت لها قبلة في الهواء، تلقيتها وأرسلت واحدةً بالمقابل. سنصل للحياة السعيدة بكل تأكيد.

القسم الثالث

سيدار رابيدز، أيوا: الحياة السعيدة، النسخة الثانية

”سنذهب إلى بيت رابيت!“ صاح آدم بحماس. ضحكت وصححت له ”اسم المدينة سيدر رابيدز يا حبيبي“

كنت قد قبلت عرض عمل من جامعة Mount Mercy كبروفيسور مساعد في الرياضيات في مدينة سيدر رابيدز في ولاية أيوا. كنت متحمساً. كل من قابلتهم هناك كانوا ودودين للغاية. الجامعة صغيرة لذا ستكون فرصة لي لتشكيل روابط مع الطلاب والتعرف أكثر على تاريخ الجامعة. جذبتني رسالة الجامعة المتمثلة بخمس ركائز أساسية هي حماية الأرض، مساعدة المهاجرين، اللاعنّف، محاربة العنصرية ومناصرة المرأة. لا بد أنني قد قدمت أكثر من مئة طلب توظيف لمئة جامعة مختلفة. هذه الجامعة تميزت برسالتها وكنت متحمساً للبدء بالعمل.

بدأت أبحث عن معلومات أكثر عن الولاية التي لم أكن أعرف عنها أي شيء. بالنسبة لعفراء كان أي عرض عمل في أي مكان هو خطوة أفضل بالمقارنة

مع وضعنا الكارثي. ولكن ما أثار سروري ما وجدته من معلومات عن هذه المدينة. بالذات ما عرفته عن المسجد الأم. أقدم مسجد بني في الولايات المتحدة. وعلى الرغم أنني لم أكن متديناً إلا أن هذه الحقيقة أشعرتني بالارتياح. حقيقة أن المسلمين اختاروا هذه المدينة بالذات ليعمروا أول مسجد. شعرت بأن هذه إشارة لنا بأننا سنجد السعادة هنا.

مع اقتراب موعد السفر، بدأت شقتنا تصبح خالية بالتدريج حتى اللحظة التي لم يعد لدينا سرير ننام عليه. دعانا نبيل وناديا لقضاء آخر الأيام عندهم. فرح أطفالنا جداً بهذه الفرصة للعب مع أولادهم الذين كانوا من أعز أصدقائهم. لم يبد عليهم أنهم فهموا أن ذلك كان الوداع ولم نستطع شرح هذا لهم فتركناهم يستمتعون. ولكننا كنا متخوفين من اللحظة التي سيفهمون عندها أنهم لن يروا بعضهم لسنوات. عندما حان وقت السفر، تعامل الأطفال مع الموضوع بشكل أفضل بكثير منا نحن الكبار. كم مرة يجب أن نودع فيها أناساً أحببناهم منذ بداية هذه الرحلة؟

بعد بضع ليالٍ على الطريق، وصلنا إلى أيوا. كنا قد بحثنا قبل أن نصل عن شقةٍ ووجدنا واحدة في منطقة مدارس Linn-Mar القريبة من الجامعة التي سأعمل بها والمعروفة أيضاً بمدارسها الجيدة. ولكن خلافاً لبداية حياتنا في لويزيانا، لم يكن معنا هذه المرة أي مبلغ لشراء أي أثاث. كنا غارقين في الديون وعرفنا أننا بحاجة لوقت كي نستقر.

دقت الباب علينا جارتنا في السكن، امرأة مسنة لطيفة من السودان. يبدو أنها سمعتنا نتحدث بالعربية فجاءت ترحب بنا. أخبرتنا كل ما نود معرفته عن مكان سكننا الجديد. أخبرتنا أن أيوا ولاية آمنة وجيدة جداً، خاصةً للعائلات. حكمت لنا عن تهذيب الأهالي وتعاملهم الودود. ولكنها حذرتنا من الملل في فصل الشتاء القارس البرودة. ثم أحضرت لنا طبقاً ساخناً من حلوى الزلابية السودانية المغطاة بالسكر الناعم. كانت مفاجأة سارة لأنني اكتشفت أنها تشبه لحد بعيد حلوى الـ beignets المشهورة في لويزيانا. شعرت بنوع من الاستمرارية. كانت السنوات التي قضيناها في لويزيانا صعبةً للغاية ولكن كانت هناك العديد من اللحظات الجميلة التي سأذكرها والناس الرائعين الذين التقيت بهم. حلوى الزلابية كانت إشارة لي أن السنوات

القادمة قد تكون صعبة أيضاً ولكن من المحتم أن هناك لحظات زلاوية سعيدة، وهذه اللحظات قريبة كما جارتنا اللطيفة.

بدأنا بمرحلة الاستقرار قبل بدء الفصل الدراسي بأسبوعين تقريباً. كان جدول عملي مكوناً من أربعة صفوف. بالنسبة لجوري، كانت ستباشر المدرسة كطالبة في الصف الثاني، أما آدم فسيذهب إلى روضة بدوام جزئي. كنا قد بدأنا بتعليم جوري القراءة والكتابة بالعربية، أما عن المحادثة فكنا نشجعها أن تتحدث مع أقاربها على الهاتف. ولكننا تخوفنا من اللحظة التي سيعرف فيها أطفالنا عن ما يحدث في بلدهم الأم. كيف تشرح لطفل أن هناك مكاناً في هذا العالم مليء بالحرب والمآسي؟ فيه جيلاً كامل كبر مستخدماً كلمات كـ: القذيفة، الحصار، التهجير، الجوع، الخوف والكراهية؟ حيث كلمات كالـ: المدرسة، الشيع، الأمان، السعادة والحب لا معنى لها؟ حاولت عفراء مرةً أن تحكي لجوري حكاية تخيلية عن مملكة فيها ملك ظالم يسرق مال رعاياه وطعامهم لنفسه. حاول الناس في تلك المملكة أن يقفوا بوجه ذلك الملك فما كان منه إلا أن أرسل جنوده لقتلهم. اضطرت عفراء يومها أن لا تكمل القصة لأن جوري تأثرت جداً يومها. طبعاً لم تجرؤ عفراء أن تخبرها أن القصة حقيقية لذا قررنا الانتظار.

لم نكن نريد أن يفقد الأطفال إرثهم السوري. كان آدم يقول أحياناً "أنا ولدت في لوزيانا، إذناً أنا لوزياني!"

"ولكنك أيضاً سوري أليس كذلك؟" أحدنا كان يرد عليه. "لا، أنا لم أزر سوريا أبداً" يكون جوابه المفحم.

كانوا يسألوننا "لماذا لا نزر سوريا أبداً؟ الكثير من أصدقائنا في المدرسة يسافرون في الصيف. لم لا نفعل ذلك؟"

كنا نخبرهم أن الرحلة بعيدة جداً ومكلفة جداً وأننا قد خططنا لصيفٍ مسلٍ هنا. لم تكن هذه الأجوبة مقنعة لهم، ولكنها كانت كافية حتى ينسوا الموضوع لفترةٍ وجيزة.

في أحد الأيام عادت جوري من مدرستها لتسألنا "ما الذي يحدث في سوريا؟ لماذا هناك لاجئون سوريون؟" شعرت بقلبي يسقط أرضاً. علمت لاحقاً أن

معلمتها في الصف الثالث قد أحضرت كتاباً لتقرأه مع طلابها. كان موضوع الكتاب عن اللاجئين وفيه فصلٌ عن قصة طفلٍ سوريٍّ وعن رحلته من سوريا حتى أوروبا لطلب اللجوء هناك. ذكر الكتاب أن السبب في سوريا هو الحرب.

جلسنا أنا وعفراء مع جوري وادم حول طاولة العشاء. ”بتتذكر يا جوري القصة يللي حكتها ماما عن المملكة والملك الظالم؟ قصة سوريا بتشبهها كثير“

أخبرناهم عن الأسد وعن ثورة السوريين ضده وعن هجومه عليهم بلا رحمة. أخبرناهم أن بلداناً كثيرة تدخلت بالحرب هناك. صمنا لوهلة محاولين استيعاب هذا الكم من المعلومات. ثم سألتنا جوري ”متى ستنتهي هذه الحرب؟“

”لا أعرف، لقد بدأت عام ٢٠١١“ ردت قائلةً ”أعرف، قرأت هذا في الكتاب“

صممت مجدداً ثم سألت بحذر ”ألهدنا نحن هنا؟“ نظرنا إلى بعضنا أنا وعفراء ”نعم. هذا جزء من السبب“

حان دور آدم ”هل ستصل الحرب إلى أمريكا؟“ أجبته بسرعة وثقة ”لا أظن ذلك“

”هل يمكننا المغادرة إن أصبحنا في خطر؟“

”لا تقلق حبيبي. نحن بأمان هنا“ لم أستطع إلا أن أفكر بالأطفال الذين سألوا نفس السؤال وهم يشاهدون القنابل تتساقط حولهم. كيف جاوبهم أهلهم يا ترى؟

بعد هذه المحادثة، توقف الأطفال عن طلب زيارة سوريا. ولكنني ما زلت أحلم بأن أخذهم إلى هناك. لأريهم أين ولدت و كبرت. أي مدرسة ذهبت إليها. لأريهم متجر الملابس حيث قابلت أمهم لأول مرة. عفراء تريد أخذهم إلى قريتها لتريهم أشجار التين والتفاح والجوز التي كانت تتسلقها وتقطف ثمارها وهي صغيرة. أريد أن أحكي لهم كيف عرفت وأنا في أيوا أن المبنى الحجري القريب من باب توما ما هو إلا كنيسة القديس بولس.

كلما طال انتظارنا لزيارة سوريا كلما قل احتمال أن نتمكن من زيارة تلك الأماكن مع أطفالنا. كل شيء يتغير بسرعة رهيبة هناك. قسم كبير من الأرياف تدمر بشكل كامل وهاجر أهله. صار الخوف هو عنوان المرحلة. الكل خائف وإن لم يعترف. خائفون أن لا يجدوا ما يقتاتوه قبل نهاية الشهر. خائفون أن لا يجدوا غاز طبخ أو وقود تدفئة. خائفون من انهيار سعر صرف الليرة أكثر وأكثر وغلاء الأسعار أكثر وأكثر. خائفون من مجرد الشكوى لأن هذا يجعلهم متهمين بالإرهاب وبأنهم أعداء للدولة. خائفون أن لا يستطيع أحد إيقاف الأسد عن قتل أي كان بحجته المعهودة، محاربة الإرهاب. أشعر بقلبي يتحطم حين أرى أن الهدف الوحيد للسوريين في حياتهم الآن هو النجاة. بالنسبة لي، النجاة هنا تعني أن أغلق بطاقة ائتمانية بعد أن أدفع ما عليها من دين. أن أزيد بعض النقاط على رصيدي الائتماني. أو أن أحسب كمية الأموال التي سأفودها لأشتري وقوداً للسيارة يكفيني قبل الراتب القادم، وأن أشعر بالذكاء حين تنجح حساباتي.

كيف يمكن لكلمة واحدة: النجاة أن يكون لها سياقٌ مختلف أشد الاختلاف بين مكانين؟ ماذا عن نجاتي أنا؟ هل أستحقها؟ أنا ولدت لعائلة مرتاحة مادياً، استطاع أبي أن يقدم لي تعليماً جيداً وأن يسجلني في صفوفٍ إضافية لتعليم الانجليزية التي ساعدتني في الحصول على الفيزا. كنت محظوظاً أن مصطفى أقنعني بالتقديم قبل أن تغلق السفارات أبوابها في وجه السوريين. إذًا، هل أستحق نجاتي؟

كل مرة أكلّم فيها أهلي يقولون "نحننا تمام" وأنا أجد تصديق هذا أصعب وأصعب كل مرة. قالت لي أمي مؤخراً أنها لم تعد تتصل بإخوانها وأخواتها يومياً لتطمئن عليهم كما كانت عاداتها منذ خمسةٍ وثلاثين عاماً لأن "كلهم مكتئبين" طبعاً فسرت هذا بأنها هي مكتئبة.

من جهة أخرى كانت عائلتنا الصغيرة في أيوا تتحسن. ما زلنا نصارع الدين الذي راكمناه في لويزيانا ونحن نبني حياة جديدة للمرة الثانية من الصفر. ولكن كنا نستمتع بما لدى أيوا لتقدمه من متع صغيرة. كالتزحلق على الثلج في الشتاء وركوب القوارب الصغيرة في البحيرات في الصيف. تعرفنا على أصدقاء جدد. استمتع الأطفال بوقتهم في المدرسة. نشاهدهم يكبرون و يتطورون. آدم يصبح نسخة مصغرة مني. المازح المستمر الذي يوجه سهام نكتته إلى عائلته

كما كنت أفعل مع أمي. جوري تصبح فتاة تحلل الأمور والمشاكل وتتعاطف مع الجميع. عادت يوماً من المدرسة لتعلن بثقة "أنا مع الديمقراطيين!" وجدت نفسي أضحك. جلسنا على طاولة العشاء والأحاديث الهامة. سألتها عن السبب ففاجأتني بالقول "أخبرتني صديقتي أن الرئيس قد قتل شخصاً وكاد أن يشعل حرباً. أخبرتني أن الديمقراطيين لا يحبون الرئيس. لذا أنا مع الديمقراطيين" كانت تقصد حادثة اغتيال قاسم سليمان.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa" تروي قليلاً. ليس هذا هو تعريف الديمقراطيين كما أفهمه ولكنني أستوعب لماذا قد تظنين ذلك" وبدأت أشرح لها "أمر الرئيس الجيش بقتل شخص بدون أن يسأل باقي أعضاء الحكومة عن رأيهم" صاحت بحماس "هذا خطأ" أجبتها "ولكن هذا الشخص شخص سيء للغاية. هل تذكرين عندما قلنا لك أن دولاً كثيرة تدخلت وحاربت في سوريا؟ هذا الشخص تسبب بأذى كبير في سوريا"

فكرت لدقيقة وأعلنت "ما زلت أظن أن قرار الرئيس خاطئ. كان عليه أن يتشاور مع الباقين"

لأخذ العلم. أنا أكره قاسم سليمان كما لو كان هو الطاعون. فرحت جداً لخبر مقتله. ولكنني كنت فرحاً وفخوراً بإجابتها. لم تدع جوري عاطفتها تقف في وجه محاكمتها العقلية. أعطاني هذا دفعة أمل للمستقبل. ربما خلاص سوريا سيأتي على يد جيل لم ينج من المأساة فحسب، وإنما نجا أيضاً من التشوه الذي أصاب المجتمع. جيل لا يخاف أن يقول لا للظلم. في الوقت الحالي، يبدو أن بشار الأسد ومنتصري العالم ينتصرون. أتوقع ثورة جديدة خلال جيل أو جيلين. وستدور عجلة العنف مجدداً. ولكن حتى ذلك الحين فإننا سنربي جوري وآدم كي يكونوا أقوىاء و متعاطفين مع الآخرين.

نمشي معهم إلى حافلة المدرسة. نأخذ جوري لدرس الرقص وآدم لتدريب كرة القدم. نتمشى في البراري، نسبح، نتكلم، ننتناقش، نقرأ، نكمل الواجبات المدرسية، نبيع حلوى فتيات الكشافة في البرد القارس، نرسم ونبتكر ونشاهد أفلاماً. نحاول قصارى جهدنا أن نعطيهم حياتاً طبيعية حرماناً منها لتوسيع مداركهم وخياراتهم في الحياة.

نجهز طاولة العشاء بجانب المطبخ الصغير. يجلس الأطفال أولاً. يبدوون بتناول صحن السلطة. أجلس بعدهم ليس لأني الرجل الشرقي "سي السيد" بل لأني ما زلت أستمتع بتناول الطعام ولا أستطيع مقاومته. أحلم بقبلولة بعد الطعام ولكن أقرر مساعدة عفراء بالتنظيف أولاً.

ولا تزال طاولة المطبخ الزرقاء هناك. تجلس أمي بهدوء لتشعل سيجارة وتشف بعض القهوة من فنجانها بينما تحضر الطعام لترضي جميع الأذواق الصعبة.

أمل أن أجلس معهم جميعاً يوماً ما. لأخبر أختي سارة كم أحبها، كم تعني لي، وكم أندم أنني لم أستطع الوقوف بجانبها كما وقفت هي بجانبني عندما كنا صغاراً. لأشكر أبي على كل ما فعله كي أكون من أنا اليوم، وعلى كل دعمه اللامحدود لي حتى عندما كانت الأوقات صعبة جداً عليه. ولأري أمي أنني لا أزال أحتفظ بورقاتها التي خبأتها في حقائبنا. لأخبرها كيف ساعدتنا دعواتها وصلواتها وحبها، ولأقول لها كم أشتاق أن أجلس معها لنشرب القهوة صامتين بينما ندخن في المطبخ.

أيوا

٢٠٢٠



MODERN SYRIA: A TIMELINE

EYAD SAID

1916 The Sykes–Picot Agreement, a secret treaty between the United Kingdom and France, is signed to define the spheres of influence and control after the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire. As a result, Syria is put under the control of France.

1920 After the French troops beat the forces of the Arab Kingdom of Syria in the Battle of Maysalun, France takes control of Syria. Under the French mandate, Syria is divided into six states: Damascus, Aleppo, Alawites, Jabal Druze, Sanjak of Alexandretta, and Lebanon; which later became the modern country of Lebanon.

1946 Following the fall of France in World War II, Syria gains its independence from France in 1940. But France does not withdraw its troops completely until April 1946.

1946–1963 This era is marked by political chaos, with many cabinets being changed, constitutions replaced, and coups performed.

1947 The Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party is founded in Syria based on the interests of Arab socialism and anti-imperialism, also called Ba’athism. It gains power in both Iraq and Syria.

1966 After the Ba’ath Party seized power in Syria in 1963, a radical regionalist movement within the party performs a coup d’état and splits from the Iraqi Ba’ath party to form a Syrian Ba’athism movement with ambitions of a Greater Syria in place of the traditional pan-Arabism originally promoted by Ba’athism. Hafez al-Assad is appointed as a minister of defense and his brother Rifaat as a commander of secret military forces.

1970 Hafez succeeds in performing another coup that he calls a “corrective movement” and becomes president.

1982 The Hama massacre occurs when the Syrian army led by General Rifaat al-Assad besieges the city of Hama for twenty-seven days to quell an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood. An estimated 10,000 to 25,000 Syrian citizens, mostly civilians, are killed.

2000 Hafez al-Assad dies. The Syrian parliament amends the constitution to reduce the mandatory age for presidential candidates from forty to thirty-four, allowing Hafez's son Bashar to become eligible for the nomination of the Ba'ath Party to become the next president. A referendum is held, and he wins unopposed, becoming president.

2011 In March, protesters march in Damascus and Aleppo demanding democratic reforms and the release of political prisoners, triggered by the arrest of a teenage boy and his friends a few days earlier in the city of Daraa for writing in graffiti, "It's your turn, doctor." Security forces retaliate by opening fire on the protesters. In July, a group of defected officers declare the establishment of the first organized oppositional military force. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is composed of defected Syrian Armed Forces personnel. The rebel army aims to remove Bashar al-Assad and his government from power. The Syrian forces begin the siege of the city of Homs following demonstrations there.

2012–2013 The Houla massacre (108 dead) is followed by the Al-Qubeir massacre (78 dead) and then the Bayda and Baniyas massacres (over 100 dead), all committed by Assad forces.

2013 In August, Assad forces use chemical weapons in the Ghouta region near Damascus, causing several hundreds casualties, many of whom are children. The siege of the city of Aleppo begins.

2014 In January, the FSA and other rebel forces attack ISIS forces that had previously seized power in rebel-controlled cities. Also, the Caesar Report is published after a six-month investigation, stating the systematic killing of more than 11,000 detainees in one region by the Assad security forces. The report includes thousands of images taken by a photographer under the code name Caesar, who worked with Syrian security agencies in just two locations in Damascus.

In May, the siege of Homs ends with the displacement of the civilians in rebel-held parts.

2015 Russia launches a series of airstrikes targeting both ISIS and FSA forces, signaling the official beginning of the Russian intervention. U.S. president Barack Obama announces his administration's intention to continue to support the Syrian opposition because Russia has joined the conflict. Iran sends forces to advise Assad and his army. Hezbollah, a terrorist group supported by Iran, begins the siege of the town of Madaya in the Damascus countryside. 42,000 civilians suffered from starvation and malnutrition.

2016 With the aid of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, Assad's army advances in the north and recaptures some regions. In late December, the siege of Aleppo is lifted to allow the evacuation and resulting displacement of the civilians from the former rebel-held parts. The siege is described as the longest in modern-day warfare. The International Committee of the Red Cross says that hundreds of civilians were killed during the siege due to shelling of residential areas by Assad forces.

2018 Another chemical attack is reported in the city of Douma in the Damascan countryside. Five hundred are reported injured and 70 killed.

2019 As of December, Syrian army forces supported by Russian forces still target Idlib in the northwest as the last rebel-area in the country where 3 million civilians, including 1 million children, are still trapped.

2020 Due largely to the targeting of Idlib in December 2019, nearly 900,000 are forced to flee in the first months of 2020. Most of them are women and children.

As of this writing in the spring of 2020, Assad's army and security forces are still at large, while his allies, Russia and Iran, are slowly taking control of what is left of Syria's crumbling economy as a paycheck for their help in keeping Assad in power. The currency

exchange rate for the Syrian pound has dropped so disastrously that the average monthly salary is equivalent to \$100 or less. Electricity and drinking water are on a schedule. Cooking gas, diesel, and even bread are under such extreme rationing that families need to wait more than two months for a propane tank and a year or more to get some diesel for heating. There does not seem to be any end to the conflict in sight.



HIBBAH JARMAKANI

ARTIST STATEMENT

I WAS BORN to proud Syrian parents, and their pride was instilled in me at a very young age. Even living in Iowa all my life, I found a way to mention I was Arab in every new conversation. I took my Arabic food to school for lunch every day and hung a giant Syrian flag over my bed in college. When I heard about people getting thrown off planes for speaking Arabic, I spoke it more loudly. I wrote poems, essays, and academic papers, all focusing on the plight of the Arab world at the hands of Western imperialism. At times I was told not to research particular topics; if I posted my poems on social media I was told to not be so political.

Somewhere along the way I started to come across this idea floating around that if you get to know someone of a certain background, then you will look at them and their culture with less fear, along the lines of “I have an Arab friend who’s very kind. He could never be a terrorist like those you see on TV.” This idea left an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. Why should someone have to get to know me first in order to treat me as a person? Why must I yield the political power of my identity so as to not shatter the illusion that humanity isn’t political?

When I visited Syria in 2017 and witnessed the death and destruction of war, I found myself able to answer these questions. Innocent people that no one ever even had the chance to get to know were being taken from this Earth prematurely not because of a humanitarian situation born overnight, but as a consequence of their bodies merely being seen as political objects. I discovered that politics are both what empower us and what destroy us. But for them to empower us, we return to this idea of knowing someone first and then deciding if they are worthy to be human enough.

After that trip to Syria, “Why must I” became “I mustn’t” wait for people to get to know me. I must share my story on my terms, because my body is a living, breathing vessel that is able to be a bridge between two distant lands. It is a story that is uniquely mine, yet it includes elements of Syria because Syria exists within me, as does America. I tell my story

not to stop other people's fear of me but to be the rope in the bridge that brings Syria to Iowa. And in this way, the world becomes smaller, not in a fearful manner, but one that respects the roots of every soul that finds its home spread between two lands.



THE WHITE GATE

HIBBAH JARMAKANI

IT IS THE EARLY 1980s in Syria, and if you were to look at the political landscape, you would encounter unrest in every major city. However, that is not the story we are following. Our story takes us to the small province of Al-Suwayda' to an even smaller village of about fifteen thousand people in southeast Syria named Salkhad. The roads leading to this village are rough and often impeded by the crossing of livestock. As you approach the village, you will find reddish-brown terrain that is reflective of the considerable volcanic activity that once existed here. Farmers have segmented the lands using boulders that have broken down into smaller rocks over the years, and within these segmented fields, you'll find patches of green displaying grapevines, almond trees, pistachio trees, and olive trees.

As the village draws nearer, your eyes will follow the cement and stone houses upward to a small mountain where the once formidable fortress of Salkhad sits. A rich history of varying occupants and shellings has reduced the fortress to the most iconic mound of stone and rubble within Salkhad. Now, if you are situated at the top of the fortress, you will see all of the village homes below bearing the signature red water tank on every roof. And if you look closer still, you will see families sitting on their rooftops enjoying *labneh* sandwiches and one of the many rounds of *maté* to be had, and children riding their bikes up and down the streets at surprisingly dangerous speeds. You'll hear the local watermelon seller over the megaphone with his latest catchy marketing slogan against the background of honking cars and motorcycles that every Syrian's ears have grown accustomed to.

As you travel from the highest point in Salkhad to the base of the mountain, you'll come across both relatives and strangers. However, no one is truly a stranger in Salkhad; if you do not know their first name, you know them by their family name, and regardless of your relationship, you will always invite them into your home for tea or a small cup of famously strong Arabic coffee.

Eventually you will see a roundabout, and you will know you have reached the *saHa*. Small shops line the streets of the *saHa* selling anything from falafel sandwiches to motorcycle parts. There, in this place, standing out against the landscape, is a white gate, paint flaking off its iron bars from years of wear and tear. Between the bars there is enough space for the onlooker to know that a stone house lies beyond the gate. It is beyond this gate that my story begins.

The white gate was the realization of my great-grandfather. A proud man who once walked the streets of Salkhad barefoot with barely enough money in his pocket to feed his family, he worked tirelessly to save fifteen gold coins and transform our *dar*, our family home, complete with its very own white gate. A gate is often understood to protect the inhabitants within it, and this one was no different. From the stones my great-grandfather first laid to the initials my uncle etched in those very same stones, each family member saw a piece of themselves within the white gate. Within its walls the essence of family was captured. It was the safe place they would retreat to after facing the often harsh realities of the world waiting outside.

Until one day the harsh realities of the world forced open the once formidable iron bars.

Tragedy struck within the walls of the white gate, a tragedy that shook the very foundation of the most fundamental unit within Arabic culture: the family. A sister, a daughter, a beloved member of the community was lost in a car accident. Though I would never meet my aunt, I would hear bits and pieces from different relatives throughout the years. “Your aunt would be the one to bring out a tray of fruit and start serving it to everyone,” they would say, or “She had the ability to take a room filled with sadness and turn it into laughter.” Bit by bit with these individual pieces I was able to complete the puzzle of her loss.

My aunt was the glue that held my father’s family together. Losing her left behind tattered pieces that I found easy to observe in my father. In every celebratory moment I searched his eyes and saw a solemn look. I saw a fold in his forehead that held years of grief. I saw that his eyes were also searching. Searching for his sister, the

person he needed to make those moments of happiness whole. The grief you feel from the loss of a family member never subsides. It is a shadow that follows you when the sun is burning bright and when the moon looms in the night.

As a child, I often imagined what thoughts haunted my father, especially when he would find himself looking at those ornate iron bars. I imagined he'd ponder how every corridor within the stone walls of the white gate held her laughter, thinking, *I can remember so clearly her iridescent eyes looking back at me as we ran around the courtyard exploring every nook of our home. When I walk the streets of Salkhad, I think back to us playing with our cousins on our bikes. She was my confidante, my most trusted companion in causing mischief, to my mother's dismay. I used to imagine our future children playing on the land she helped me plant with our father. Suddenly all of these memories, both imagined and real, were taken from me, just as she was.*

Of course these thoughts did not only exist in my father's mind; they permeated throughout the household. The home beyond the white gate had a river of sadness flowing through it. This river made it impossible to stand within the stone walls without drowning. The white gate that once served to protect the family needed to be forced open. The flowing river needed to rush past the gate and run its course until it came upon dry land. And so it was decided that 1982 would be the year my family moved to America.

Both my father and my mother were sure that they would one day return to their homeland. My mother was leaving behind her entire family; surely she would return to the only place that had ever been home. The place where she dressed in boyish clothing to protect against the heat and rode her donkey to the fields where she and her siblings worked long hours harvesting barley and chickpeas. The place where, on one of those blistering summer days, she ran into my father, who mistook her for a boy, a memory she reminds him of to this day. It was the place where she watched her mother create the most difficult delicacies in Syrian cuisine. The place where her father saved for months just to buy her a pair of jeans. And although my father was taking his parents and siblings with him, he was leaving the soil from which he had grown. But neither

my father nor my mother could not have predicted the horrific war that would scourge their homeland beginning in 2011.

In my culture, life and death are inextricably tied to one another. It is said that when one soul is lost, it lives on in the body of another. With the tragic loss of my aunt, I've come to interpret this belief differently. To me, her soul lives on within all of us, its beauty too much for one body to hold. Instead she carried us away from Syria, preventing me, a child yet to be born, from ever having to hear the booming sounds of warfare and the cries of mothers losing their children. It was this tragedy and the great sacrifice of my mother and father that led us beyond the white gate that could no longer keep us safe, to the countryside of Sioux City, Iowa, where we could begin fashioning our own version of that gate.



“So, what country are you originally from?” It was the third time I'd been asked that question in one week, and my five-year-old patience was wearing thin. I looked around and noticed that no one else got asked where they were from. What was it that made me so different? Then a boy asked me why my arms were so hairy. I looked down at my arms as if seeing them for the first time. The boy was right, they didn't look like the other children's arms.

I started to notice other differences after that. And if I didn't notice them, well, the other kids noticed them for me. One day it was the thickness of my eyebrows, the next day it was a new teacher stumbling over the foreign combination of letters that spelled out my name. At lunch it would be my classmates picking out the strong smell of spices from my homemade lunch and immediately recoiling. But as a five year old, I didn't care much for school anyway. Soon I would be walking toward my familiar driveway, clearly marked by two white fences at its entrance. I knew once I walked past that fence, I would be met with the smell of spices from my mother's cooking. I'd be joined by my siblings who had hairy arms like me, and that anxious feeling of being different would be drowned out by the Arabic newscaster on TV.

This wasn't the only time in my life I'd be asked where I was from. It was a question that persisted, particularly in my childhood. My family and I were the first Arabs to go to school in the small town of Hinton, Iowa, so people were of course curious. And although we did not live in Hinton, Sioux City did not have many Arab residents either, not that that would have made much difference since we lived twenty minutes out of town in the Iowa countryside. I believe this was deliberate on my family's part because our life in the country strongly resembled the life my parents had in Syria. Like my parents, I grew up planting with them and forming a strong attachment to them with every seed we buried in the soil. I'm sure in a small way this helped quiet the fears my parents had with regard to our developing identities, that we would lose our sense of Arabness. Would we care about our Syrian heritage? Would our future children speak the language?

This fear caused them to stress the *Arab* portion of *Arab American*. This meant that Arabic was the language of our home; for my parents, that was the key to maintaining our culture. In fact, on my first day of kindergarten, which also happened to be my first exposure to a room full of that many kids my age, I found myself speaking Arabic to my classmates and wondering why they were staring at me with a mixture of befuddlement and curiosity. I was just as confused as they were. Why did I speak one language at home and another at school? This is perhaps my earliest memory that I was not like the other kids at school.

As I grew older, certain patterns emerged, particularly on the day that all of my classmates dreaded and that I learned to dread a bit more: substitute teacher day. Whenever we had a substitute, I knew they would mispronounce my name. It became a sort of joke with my friends, where they'd knowingly look at me when the substitute was taking attendance. Then I'd suffer through the rest of the day with them calling me "Hi-buh" just as the substitute had instead of "Heh-buh." Back then I felt a sort of sympathy for the teacher, like it was somehow my fault my name was so difficult to pronounce. Then at the conclusion of the day, the teacher would ask me the same question, "So, what country are you originally from?" Similarly, when new students came to school, they wondered why I did not go to church and asked the same question again. As a child

I would often take these questions back home with me. I would wait until my father drove past those two little white fences and ask him, “Baba, what happens at church?”

In my early years I did not assume any animosity from people who asked me where I was from. It was often asked with genuine interest, and I felt happy—proud, even—to answer emphatically, “Syria!” I felt special being different. It was a simple equation for me at the time: Arab plus American equaled people asking questions about who I was. However, the way the question was asked started to shift after 9/11, and sometimes even the question itself changed. The most memorable of these new questions was, “Why do you believe in Allah and not God?” It was memorable because it signaled a shift in tone. Questions were framed more as accusations. For some there was no need to ask questions; they had already decided who I was. Yet, still I could walk up my driveway past that white fence and into the comforting aroma of freshly baked dough for my mother’s famously delicious *fatayer*.

One day I had feigned sickness so I could stay home with my mother. She had gone upstairs to shower, so I sat on the couch looking out of our big windows. I saw a black car coming up our driveway. It was unfamiliar to me, and its presence felt as if it were intruding on my day of fun with my mother. Two men wearing black suits and sunglasses emerged from the unknown vehicle, and all my eight-year-old self could think was, “Wow, they sure look like that agent from *Lilo and Stitch*.”

I hesitantly opened the door and was greeted by a booming voice. “Hi, miss, is your father home?” I took in the sight of the man asking the question and saw a badge with the letters *FBI*. He had a badge just like the agent in the movie! It was then I decided I should answer with a polite “No.” The agent then said, “Well, tell your father we were just strolling through the neighborhood.” He went on to say more, but his words became faint in my ears as I noticed he was carrying a hefty Manila folder with my father’s face on it. By the time I had closed the door all thoughts of Disney movies had vanished, leaving behind a child who was more skeptical of the world around her and a little less naive than when she had first opened the door.

The agents returned to our house that same summer after my family and I had left to visit Syria. Our neighbors informed us of their unscheduled visit and that they had entered our home in our absence. This was a groundbreaking moment in our family. It was a post-9/11 world we were living in, which was heartbreaking for a multitude of reasons. For my father it was heartbreaking as a parent to realize that he could not protect us from the growing anti-Arab sentiment. He could not protect us from a government that surveilled us and looked at us with suspicion. He could not offer us the same protections the white gate had once brought him; once again, the harsh realities of the world had forced their way into our home, this time in a new country that didn't fully accept us. I, however, had not yet had this realization. It was not until my freshman year of high school that I would revisit my memory of the FBI in a more critical manner.

That year I happened to be friends with some of the seniors. We had formed a dodgeball team, and each team made their own shirts. I didn't see the shirts until the night before. Mine happened to be the only orange one. The name of the team read "Airport Security." There I was, holding it in my hands and laughing. Clearly this was meant as a joke, right? But I couldn't shake the discomfort within me, or my reddening cheeks.

After the game I went home and spent the night thinking about how as a kid, I was the classmate who made hummus for my speech class before it became popular. I was the kid who was from a distant land my classmates had never heard of that took me away for the summers instead of going to the Iowa State Fair with them. I was the kid who could teach them bad words in a language they misunderstood as having lots of "khaa" sounds. And that same kid who was always proud to be different existed in a world where the government went twenty minutes out of their way just to check up on her father. People were calling me a terrorist. I was that orange shirt that stuck out like a sore thumb. I was the kid with hairy arms who grew into an adult and still had those same hairy arms.

These were all my realities, and I had to face them. I no longer wanted sympathy for having a name that was uncommon. I didn't want to apologize for the scent of a deliciously cooked meal by

my mother. I didn't want to be the subject of a joke laced with assumptions and stereotypes. I was determined to continue to look at the white fence at the beginning of my driveway as a symbol of comfort and home.

As a result, I realized I had to reinforce my wooden white fence. It needed a formidable iron like that of the white gate in Syria to protect me and my family from intrusions like that of the FBI. I began to pay more attention to the news that was always playing in the background of our home. The jingle of Al Mayadeen began to blend in with the regular sounds of home. This was when I started to understand that who I was, what I said, and what I did were always going to be scrutinized, whether in the public sphere or the privacy of my home.

So I fought back the only way I knew how, with the facts. I became heavily engaged in politics by first changing my major to international studies and then joining a slew of organizations geared toward political discourse and human rights. That way when the questions, the labels, and the attacks came, I knew how to disprove them. It was often a lonely venture since there were only a few thousand Arabs in Iowa, but it established a vested interest in politics that would completely shape the path my future would take. My education became an essential tool in building the iron framework of my own gate and ultimately constructing my political ideology, my burning desire to stand with social justice movements. I was no longer proud of who I was simply because others had taken a special interest in me. I was proud because Arab plus American equaled someone who knew how to overcome adversity. It was neither my parents' identity nor the identity the Western media tried to assign me. It was my own, and I was willing to protect it from any attack. My gate was growing in strength.



“So, what country are you originally from?” This question has never gone away, but my response to it has largely followed the trajectory of my self-identity.

After the war began in Syria, people continued to ask the question and I continued to answer, but yet again the way they asked shifted. When they heard the word Syria, their voices filled with empathy and their foreheads wrinkled with concern. I felt like a fraud for being on the receiving end of this visceral response. I was not the one waiting hours to fill a small tank of gas that would be my only source of survival for a rough winter. I was not one of the 250 lives lost in the massacre of Al-Suwayda by ISIS militants. I lived in a country that remained largely silent on this massacre. I lived in a country that was instrumental in creating the horrific situation in Syria by first creating false media narratives and later providing financial and tactical support to groups affiliated with or indistinguishable from ISIS. And in these moments when my fraudulence was so heavily concentrated, I felt almost as if I were no longer Syrian enough.

But you see, I am not Syrian, and I am not American. I am both, and yet I am neither. I am the tension that exists between the two. I complicate what might otherwise be a simple equation. America gave me the ability to be a critic by offering me safety within it, and Syria showed me what I am meant to criticize as a citizen of a country that has wreaked havoc in the place I am originally from. And Iowa? Iowa encompassed it all. The adversities I faced within it gave me the tools necessary to withstand them. To speak out for those not afforded protection and to protect my own identity from being grossly misunderstood. It gave me home beyond the white fence, and now as I prepare to leave Iowa to pursue a career in journalism, I am taken back to when my family opened the ancestral white gate and journeyed to a foreign land.

I imagine that had the gate remained closed, that had my family not come to America, the once simple walk to my university in Damascus would now be shadowed by a looming cloud of fear, not knowing where the next bomb would land, and if it missed me, then which of my friends were not as fortunate. I imagine I would have both mental and physical scars running deeper than the grave I had to bury my family members in. I imagine I would be splitting sheets of pita bread just to survive for the week. I imagine that I might have had to climb on an overcapacity boat in the middle of the night, and that I might have been marooned on an abandoned

island, not knowing if help would come or if I would freeze to death beside my brother, never to see the parents I was forced to leave behind. I might be one of those refugees dehumanized in the media and turned away from other countries. Instead, because of my parents' choice to move, I never experienced these moments. I was given the privilege of imagination, while many of my extended family members were living these realities. I was given a new white gate.

البوابة البيضاء

HIBBAH JARMAKANI

ترجمت إلى العربية من قبل أسماء بن رمضان

إنّها أوائل الثمانينات في سوريا، وإذا تمعّنت في الوضع السياسي، فستعترضك اضطرابات سياسية في أهمّ المدن. ومع ذلك، هذه ليست القصة التي نتابعها. تأخذنا قصتنا إلى محافظة السويداء الصغيرة و إلى قرية أصغر يبلغ عدد سكانها حوالي خمسة عشر ألف شخص في جنوب شرق سوريا تسمى "صلخد". الطرق المؤدية إلى هذه القرية وعرة، غالبا ما يعيقها عبور الماشية. عند اقترابك من القرية، ستجد أرض بنية ذات لون أحمر، تعكس النشاط البركاني الكبير الذي شهدته المنطقة من قبل. قام المزارعون بتقسيم الأراضي بكتل صخرية انكسرت بدورها إلى صخور أصغر على مرّ السنين، وضمن هذه الحقول المجزأة، ستجد مساحات خضراء تستعرض أشجار العنب، وأشجار اللوز، وأشجار الفستق، وأشجار الزيتون.

مع اقترابك من القرية، ستتابع عيونك البيوت الإسمنتية والحجرية صعودا إلى جبل صغير حيث تقع قلعة صلخد الرائعة. إن تواتر المحتلّين على هذه القلعة في صلخد و استهدافها بالقذائف أدّى إلى اختزال رمزيّتها إلى كوم من الحجارة والركام. إذا كنت موجودا الآن في الجزء العلوي من القلعة، فسترى جميع منازل القرية في الأسفل يعلوها خزّان الماء الأحمر المميّز على كل سطح. وإذا نظرت عن قرب، سترى عائلات تجلس على أسطح منازلها تستمتع بسندويشات اللبنة وإحدى زيارات الرفاق الكثيرة التي سيحظون بها، والأطفال الذين يركبون دراجاتهم صعودا ونزولا في الشوارع بسرعة كبيرة بشكل مدهش. ستسمع صوت بائع البطيخ المحليّ من مكبّر الصوت بأحد هتافاته الدعائية الجذابة و في خلفيته أصوات تزمير السيارات والدراجات النارية التي اعتادت عليها أدنيّ كلّ سوري.

عندما تسافر من أعلى نقطة في صلخد إلى سفح الجبل، ستصادف كل قريب وغريب. ولكن، ليس هناك شخص غريب حقًا في صلخد. إذا كنت لا تعرف اسمه الأول، فستعرفه باسم عائلته، وبغض النظر عن نوع العلاقة، فستدعوه حتماً إلى منزلك لشرب الشاي أو فنجان صغير من القهوة العربية القوية الشهيرة.

في النهاية سيعترضك محور دائري في الطريق، وستعرف حينها أنك وصلت إلى "ساها". تتصّف المتاجر الصغيرة في شوارع ساها، حيث يُباع كل شيء من سندويشات الفلافل إلى قطع غيار الدراجات النارية. هناك، في هذا المكان، تبرز من أمام المناظر الطبيعية بؤابة بيضاء، تقشّر الطلاء من قضبانها الحديدية من سنوات التآكل والتلف. هناك مساحة كافية بين القضبان ليعرف العابر أنّ هناك منزلاً حجرياً خلف البؤابة. تبدأ قصّتي من وراء هذه البؤابة.

كانت البؤابة البيضاء من إنجازات جدّي الأكبر. كان رجلاً ذو كبرياء، سار ذات مرّة في شوارع صلخد حافي القدمين، في جيبه بعض المال بالكاد يكفي لإطعام عائلته، عمل بلا كلل للآذار خمسة عشر قطعة ذهبية و يحوّل "دارنا"، منزل عائلتنا، كاملة ببؤابتها البيضاء الخاصة. غالباً ما يُفهم معنى البؤابة على أساس حماية السّكان في الدّاخل، وهذا لم يكن مختلفاً. بدءاً من الحجارة التي وضعها جدّي الأكبر وصولاً إلى الأحرف الأولى التي حفرها عمّي في تلك الأحجار نفسها، حيث رأى كل فرد من أفراد الأسرة قطعة من نفسه فيها.

كان جوهر الأسرة يأتي من داخل أسوارها. كان هذا المكان الآمن الذي يأوون إليه بعد مواجهة تحدّيات الحياة القاسية التي تنتظر في الخارج.

إلى أن جاء يوم، أجبرت فيه تحدّيات الحياة على كسر القضبان الحديدية التي كانت ذات مرّة منيعة. هزّت مأساةً جدران البؤابة البيضاء، وهي مأساة زلزلت أساس الوحدة الرئسيّة في التّقاليد العربيّة: ألا وهي الأسرة. فقدنا أختاً وابنة و واحدة من أفراد المجتمع التي يحبّها الجميع في حادث سيارة. بالرّغم من أنّني لم أقابل عمّتي أبداً، كنت أسمع أطراف الحديث من عدّة أقارب على مرّ السنين. كانوا يقولون: "كانت عمّتك هي التي تخرج صينيّة

من الفاكهة وتبدأ في تقديمها للجميع“ ، أو “كانت لديها القدرة على تحويل غرفة مليئة بأجواء الحزن إلى سعادة“. لقد تمكّنتُ شيئاً فشيئاً من إستيعاب وقع خسارتها من خلال هذه الشّهادات الفرديّة.

كانت عمّتي همزة الوصل الذي ربط عائلة أبي ببعضها. خسارتها تركت وراءها قطعاً مكسورة كان من السّهل عليّ أن أراها في عيني والدي. كنت أراقب عينيه في كلّ مناسبة احتفاليّة وكنت أرى الحزن في نظراته. رأيت طيّات على جبينه حملت سنوات من الكآبة. كما رأيت أنّ عيناه كانتا تبحثن أيضاً. تبحثن عن أخته، الشّخص الذي يحتاجه لجعل تلك اللّحظات من السعادة كاملة. الحزن الذي تشعر به جرّاء فقدان أحد أفراد الأسرة لا يمحي أبداً. إنه ظلّ يتبعك عندما تحرق الشمس السّاطعة وعندما يلوح القمر في اللّيل.

عندما كنت طفلة، كنت أتخيّل في كثير من الأحيان نوع الأفكار التي كانت تشغل بال والدي، خاصة عندما كان ينظر إلى تلك القضبان الحديدية المزخرفة. تخيلت أنه كان يفكر كثيراً كيف يمكن لكلّ ممّرٍ داخل الجدران الحجرية وراء البوّابة البيضاء أن يحتفظ بضحكتها و تصرّفاتها ، أستطيع أن أرى عينيه اللّامعتين تنظران إليّ بينما كنّا نركض حول الفناء لاستكشاف كل زاوية من بيتنا. عندما مشيت في شوارع صلخد ، تذكّرت لعبنا مع أبناء أعمامنا على درّاجاتنا. تذكّرت كيف كانت كامّة أسراري و رفيقتي الدائمة في إثارة الشّغب لإفزع والدي. تخيلت أطفالنا في المستقبل يلعبون على الأرض التي ساعدتني في زراعتها مع والدنا. فجأة كل هذه الذّكريات المُفترضة والحقيقية انتزعت منّي، مثلها تماماً.

طبعاً لم تكن هذه الأفكار موجودة في ذهن والدي فقط، بل كانت راسخة في أذهان جميع أفراد الأسرة. كان هناك نهر من الحزن يتدفّق عبر المنزل الواقع خلف البوّابة البيضاء. جعل هذا النّهر من المستحيل الوقوف داخل الجدران الحجرية دون الغرق. كانت البوّابة البيضاء التي حمت في السّابق الأسرة بحاجة إلى أن تُفتح بالعنوة. كان نهر الحزن المتدفّق بحاجة إلى الاندفاع عبر البوّابة وأخذ مجراه حتى يصل إلى أرض جافّة. وهكذا تقرر أنّ ١٩٨٢ سيكون العام الذي انتقلت فيه عائلتي إلى أمريكا.

كان كل من والدي ووالدي على يقين من أنهما سيعودان ذات يوم إلى وطنهما. كانت والدي قد تركت وراءها عائلتها بأكملها. ستعود بالتأكد إلى المكان الوحيد الذي كان في يوم ما منزلها. المكان الذي ارتدت فيه ملابس ذكورية لتقي نفسها من الحرارة وركبت حمارها إلى الحقول حيث عملت هي وإخوتها لساعات طويلة في حصاد الشعير والحمص. المكان الذي صادفت فيه والدي في أحد أيام الصيف الحارة جدًا حيث ظن أنها كانت صبيًا، وهي ذكرى مازلت تذكّره بها إلى يومنا هذا. كان المكان الذي شاهدت فيه والدتها تحضر أصعب الأطباق الشهية في المطبخ السوري. المكان الذي ادّخر فيه والدها لشهور حتى يشتري لها بنطلون جينز. وعلى الرغم من أن والدي أخذ والديه وإخوته معه، إلا أنه أيضا كان يغادر الأرض التي كبر فيها. ولكن لم يكن بوسع والدي ولا والدي أن يتنبأ بالحرب البشعة التي ستجتاح وطنهم بداية من عام ٢٠١١.

في ثقافتني، ترتبط الحياة والموت ببعضهما البعض بشكل لا يُنفصم. يقال إنه عند مفارقة روح لجسد ما، فإنها تعيش في جسد شخص آخر. مع الخسارة المأساوية لعمتني، فسرت هذا الاعتقاد بشكل مختلف. بالنسبة لي، إن روحها تعيش في داخلنا جميعًا، فجمالها أكبر مما يمكنه أن يسع جسدا واحدا. وبدلا من ذلك، نقلتنا بعيدا عن سوريا، ومنعتني، وأنا طفلة لم أولد بعد، من الاضطرار إلى سماع أصوات القنابل وصراخ الأمهات اللواتي فقدن أطفالهن. كانت هذه المأساة والتضحية العظيمة التي قدّمها كل من أمي وأبي هي التي قادتنا إلى ما وراء البوابة البيضاء التي لم تعد قادرة على الحفاظ على سلامتنا، إلى ريف مدينة "سيوكس" بولاية "آيوا"، حيث يمكننا البدء في تصميم نسختنا الخاصة من تلك البوابة.

"طيب، من أي بلد أنت في الأصل؟" كانت هذه المرة الثالثة في أسبوع واحد يطرح عليّ فيها نفس السؤال، وكان صبري، و قد كنت حينها أبلغ من العمر خمس سنوات. قد بدأ ينفذ. نظرت حولي ولاحظت أنه لم يُسأل أي شخص آخر غيري عن أصله. ما الذي جعلني مختلفة لهذا الحد؟ ثم سألني صبي لماذا كانت ذراعي مشعرتان كثيرا. نظرت إلى ذراعيّ وكأنني أراهما للمرة

الأولى. كان الصبي على حق، فهما لا تشبهان أذرع الأطفال الآخرين.

بدأت ألاحظ اختلافات أخرى بعد ذلك. وإذا لم ألاحظها أنا، فإن الأطفال الآخرين كانوا سيلاحظونها عوضاً عني. في يوم كان سمك حاجبي، في اليوم التالي كان هناك معلّم جديد يجد صعوبة في نطق إسمي بسبب مجموعة الحروف الأجنبية التي يتكوّن منها، في وقت الغداء سيبدأ زملائي في الصف في إشتتام رائحة التوابل القوية من غدائي المحضّر بالبيت و عندها سيبتعدون على الفور. ولكن عندما كان عمري خمس سنوات، لم أكن أهتمّ كثيراً بالمدرسة على أيّ حال. سرعان ما سأسير نحو ممري المألوف، المميّز بسياجين أبيضين عند مدخله. كنت أعرف أنه بمجرد مروري عبر ذلك السياج، ستعترضني رائحة التوابل من طبخ والدي. سوف ينضمّ إليّ إخوتي الذين كان لديهم أذرع مشعّرة مثلي، وسيضمحلّ ذلك الشعور بالقلق من الاختلاف بمجرد سماع صوت مذياع الأخبار العربي على شاشة التلفزيون.

لم تكن هذه هي المرة الوحيدة في حياتي التي يتم سؤالي فيها من أين أتيت. كان السؤال الذي تواصل، خاصّة في طفولتي. كنت أنا وعائلتي أول عرب يذهبون إلى المدرسة في بلدة "هينتون" الصغيرة في أيوا، لذلك كان الناس بالطبع فضوليين. وعلى الرّغم من أننا لم نكن نعيش في هينتون، إلا أنّ مدينة سيوكس سيتي لم يكن فيها أيضاً الكثير من السّكان العرب، لكنّ هذا لم يكن سيحدث فرقا كبيراً لأننا عشنا عشرين دقيقة خارج المدينة في ريف ولاية أيوا. أعتقد أنّ هذا كان متعمداً من طرف عائلتي لأنّ حياتنا في المدينة تشبه بشدّة الحياة التي عاشها والديّ في سوريا. مثل والديّ، كبرت وأنا أزرع معهما مكونة بذلك رابطاً قوياً بهما مع كلّ بذرة زرعتها في التّربة. أنا متأكّدة، و لو لحدّ ما، أنّ ذلك ساعد على تهدئة مخاوف والدي المتعلّقة بفقداننا إحساسنا بالعروبة خاصّة مع تطوّر تشكيل هويّتنا. هل سنحافظ على تراثنا السّوري؟ هل أطفالنا في المستقبل سيتحدّثون باللغة؟

هذا الخوف جعلهم يشدّدون على الجانب العربيّ للعرب الأمريكيّ. هذا يعني أنّ اللّغة العربية كانت لغة بيتنا. بالنسبة لوالديّ، كان هذا هو الحلّ للحفاظ على ثقافتنا. في الواقع، في أول يوم لي في روضة الأطفال، والذي تصادف أيضاً مع وضعي للمرّة الأولى في غرفة مليئة بعدد كبير من الأطفال في نفس

عمري، وجدت نفسي أتحدّث العربية مع زملائي وأتساءل لماذا كانوا يحدّثون بي بمزيج من الإزعاج والفضول. كنت محتارة بقدر حيرتهم. لماذا أتحدث لغة في البيت ولغة أخرى في المدرسة؟ ربّما كانت هذه أول ذكرى لي بأنني لم أكن مثل الأطفال الآخرين في المدرسة.

مع تقدّمي في السّن، ظهرت أمّاط معيّنة، خاصّة في اليوم الذي يخاف منه جميع زملائي في الصّف والذي أخاف منه أكثر بقليل: يوم المعلّم البديل. كان كلّما لدينا معلّم بديل، كنت أعلم أنه سيسيء نطق اسمي. لقد أصبح هذا نوعا من الدّعاية مع أصدقائي، حيث كانوا يتعمّدون النّظر إليّ بينما كان البديل يسجّل الحضور. فكنت أعاني لبقية اليوم وهم ينادونني ”هاي- باه“ كما ينطقها البديل عوضا عن ”هي- باه“. في ذلك الوقت كنت أشعر بنوع من التّعاطف مع المعلّم، كأنّها كانت غلطتي بطريقة ما أن يكون من الصّعب نطق اسمي. ثمّ في نهاية اليوم، كان المعلّم يسألني نفس السؤال، ”طيب، من أيّ بلد أنت في الأصل؟“. كذلك، عندما كان طلاب جدد يأتون إلى المدرسة، كانوا يتساءلون لماذا لم أذهب إلى الكنيسة ثمّ يسألونني السؤال المعهود مرة أخرى. عندما كنت طفلة، كنت غالبا ما أحمل هذه الأسئلة معي إلى البيت. كنت أنتظر حتى يمرّ والدي عبر هذين السّياحين الأبيضين الصّغيرين وأسأله: ”بابا، ماذا يحدث في الكنيسة؟“

في سنّواتي الأولى لم تظهر لي أيّ عداوة من هذا السؤال. غالبا ما كنت أسأل باهتمام حقيقي، وكنت أشعر بالسّعادة - بالفخر حتّى - و كنت أجيّب بشكل قاطع: ”سوريا!“ كنت أشعر بالتميّز لكوني مختلفة. كانت معادلة بسيطة بالنسبة لي في ذلك الوقت: عربيّة مع أمريكيّة تساوي الأسئلة التي يطرحها الناس حول هويّتي. ومع ذلك، بدأت الطريقة التي يُطرح بها هذا السؤال في التّغيير بعد ١١ سبتمبر، وفي بعض الأحيان، حتى السؤال نفسه تغيّر. كان واحد من أكثر هذه الأسئلة الجديدة التي لا تُنسى، ”لماذا تؤمنين بالله وليس بالرّب؟“ كان لا يُنسى لأنّ الثّرة قد تغيّرت. تمّ صياغة الأسئلة في شكل اتّهامات. بالنسبة للبعض لم يكن هناك حاجة لطرح الأسئلة. كانوا قد قرّروا من أكون. ومع ذلك، كان لا يزال بإمكانني التّوجّه نحو مدخلي عبر ذلك السّياح الأبيض و باتجاه الرّائحة المريحة للعجين الطّازج للفتائر الشّهيرة اللّذيذة لوالدي.

ذات يوم تظاهرت بالمرض حتى أمكّن من البقاء في المنزل مع والدي. كانت قد صعدت إلى الطابق العلوي للاستحمام، لذلك جلست على الأريكة أنظر من نوافذنا الكبيرة. رأيت سيّارة سوداء قادمة تقترب من مدخل بيتنا. لم يكن شيئاً مألوفاً بالنسبة لي، وشعرت بأنّ وجودها تطفّل على يومي الممتع مع والدي. خرج من السيارة المجهولة رجلان يرتديان بدلات سوداء ونظارات شمسية، وكان كل ما يمكن أن أفكر به في سنّ الثامنة من العمر هو ”واو، من المؤكّد أنهم يبدون مثل ذلك العميل من فيلم ليلو وستيتش“.

فتحتُ الباب بتردّد وإذا بصوت مزعج يخاطبني: ”مرحباً يا آنسة، هل والدك في البيت؟“ ألقىت نظرة على الرّجل الذي يطرح السّؤال ورأيت شارة مع الحروف ”آف، بي، آي“ (مكتب التّحقيق الفيدرالي). كان لديه شارة مثل العميل في الفيلم! قرّرت حينها أن أجيب بـ ”لا“ مهذّبة ثم قال العميل: ”حسنًا، أخبرني والدك أننا نقوم فقط بجولة في الحيّ“. كان يقول المزيد، لكنّ كلماته أصبحت خافتة في أذني عندما لاحظت أنه كان يحمل مجلداً ضخماً عليه وجه والدي. في الوقت الذي أغلقت فيه الباب، تلاشت كل صور أفلام ديزني، تاركة وراءها طفلة تشكّ أكثر في العالم من حولها وأقلّ سداجة ممّا كانت عليه عندما فتحت الباب لأول مرة.

عاد العملاء إلى منزلنا في نفس الصّيف بعد أن غادرت أنا وعائلتي لزيارة سوريا. أبلغنا جيراننا بزيارتهم الفجائية وأنهم دخلوا منزلنا في غيابنا. كانت هذه لحظة غير مسبوقّة في عائلتنا. كنّا نعيش في العالم الذي يلي أحداث الحادي عشر من سبتمبر، والذي كان يُفطر الفؤاد لعدّة أسباب. بالنسبة لوالدي كان من المُفجّع كوالد أن يُدرك أنه لا يستطيع أن يحمينا من المشاعر المُتفاقمة المعادية للعرب. لم يستطع حمايتنا من حكومة راقبتنا ونظرت إلينا بشكّ. ولم يستطع أن يقدّم لنا نفس الحماية التي وفّرتها له البوّابة البيضاء ذات مرة. مرّة أخرى، اقتحمت تحدّيات الحياة القاسية منزلنا، وهذه المرة في بلد جديد لم يتقبّلنا كلياً. ومع ذلك، لم أدرك حتى ذلك الحين ماذا يجري. لم أعد النّظر في حادثة الـ ”آف بي آي“ بطريقة أكثر انتقاداً حتّى سنتي الأولى في المدرسة الثّانوية.

صادف في ذلك العام أنّني كنت صديقة لبعض طلابّ آخر سنة. قمنا بتشكيل فريق كرة المراهقة، وصنع كل فريق قمصانه الخاصّة. لم أر القمصان حتى

الليلة السابقة. كان قميصي هو الوحيد بلون برتقالي. كان اسم الفريق يُقرأ "أمن المطارات". كنت هناك، أمسكه بين يدي وأضحك. من الواضح أنّ هذه كانت مزحة، أليس كذلك؟ لكنني لم أستطع التخلّص لا من الانزعاج الذي بداخلي أو من وجنتي المحمرّتين.

بعد المباراة، عدت إلى المنزل وقضيت الليل أفكر كيف عندما كنت طفلة، كنت الزميلة التي تصنع الحمص قبل أن يصبح شعيبا. كنت الطفلة التي جاءت من أرض بعيدة لم يسمع عنها زملائي في الصف قط، فأخذتني بعيدا في الصيف بدلا من الذهاب معهم إلى معرض ولاية أيوا. كنت الطفلة التي تستطيع أن تتعلمهم الكلمات البذيئة بلغة أساؤوا فهمها لأنها تحتوي على الكثير من حرف "الخاء". وهي نفس الطفلة التي كانت فخورة دائما بكونها مختلفة تنتمي إلى عالم حادت فيه الحكومة عن طريقها لعشرين دقيقة و ذلك فقط لتتفقد والدها. كان الناس ينادونني بالإرهابية. كنت ذلك القميص البرتقالي المكشوف مثل الإبهام الملتهب. لقد كنت تلك الطفلة ذات الذراعين المشعّرتين التي كبرت لتغدو امرأة لا يزال لديها نفس الذراعين المشعّرتين.

كانت هذه حقيقتي كاملة، وكان عليّ مواجهتها. لم أعد أرغب في تعاطف الناس لمجرد حملي لإسم غير شائع. لم أكن أرغب في الاعتذار عن رائحة وجبة لذيذة طبختها والدي. لم أكن أريد أن أكون موضوع مزحة تغطّيها الادعاءات والأحكام المسبقة. لقد عقدت العزم على مواصلة النّظر إلى السياج الأبيض في بداية ممرنا الخاص كرمز للطمأنينة و السكينة.

ونتيجة لذلك، أدركت أنه كان عليّ تقوية سياجي الخشبي الأبيض. كان بحاجة إلى حديد صلب مثل الذي في البوابة البيضاء في سوريا لحمائتي وعائلتي من الاختراقات مثل التي قامت بها الـ"آف بي آي". لقد أصبحت أهتمّ أكثر بالأخبار التي كانت تدور دائما حول منزلنا. مزجت نغمات الميادين بالأصوات المتداولة للبيت. حدث ذلك عندما بدأت أفهم أنّ، من أكون، وما أقوله، وما أفعله سيقع التّدقيق فيه دائما سواء في النّطاق العام أو في خصوصية بيتي.

لذا، قاومت بالطريقة الوحيدة التي أعرفها، وهي الحقائق. لقد أصبحت منخرطة بشدّة في السياسة بتغيير تخصصي أولا إلى دراسات دولية ثم الانضمام

إلى عدد كبير من المنظمات المهتمة بقضايا الخطاب السياسي وحقوق الإنسان. لذلك عند مواجهتي للأسئلة والادعاءات والتّهجمات، أصبحت قادرة على دحضها أو تفنيدها. غالبا ما كانت مجازفة منفردة حيث لم يكن هناك سوى بضعة آلاف من العرب في ولاية آيوا، لكنها أسست اهتماما راسخا في السياسة من شأنه أن يرسم المنحنى الذي سيأخذه طريقي مستقبلا. أصبح تعليمي أداة أساسية في بناء الإطار الحديدي لبوابتي و بالتالي بناء إيديولوجيتي السياسية، و رغبتني الملحة في الوقوف مع حركات العدالة الاجتماعية. لم أعد فخورة بالشخص الذي كنت لأن الآخرين اهتموا بي بشكل خاص. كنت فخورة لأن معادلة عربية مع أمريكية تساوي شخصا يعرف كيف يتغلب على المحن. لم تكن هوية والدي ولا الهوية التي حاولت وسائل الإعلام الغربية تحديدها لي. لقد كانت هويتي الخاصة، وكنت على استعداد لحمايتها من أي هجوم. كانت بوابتي تكبر بقوة.

”طيب من أي بلد أنت في الأصل؟“ هذا السؤال لم يختف أبدا ، ولكن اجابتي عليه تبعت إلى حد كبير مسار انتمائي الذاتي.

بعد اندلاع الحرب في سوريا، استمر الناس في طرح السؤال واستمررت في الإجابة، ولكن مرة أخرى تغيرت طريقة طرح السؤال. عندما سمعوا كلمة سوريا امتلأت أصواتهم بالتعاطف وتجدد جبينهم بالقلق. شعرت وكأنني محتالة لكوني الطرف المتلقي لهذا الردّ الحشوي. لم أكن الشخص الذي ينتظر ساعات لملاء خزان صغير من الغاز ليكون مصدر بقائي الوحيد في الشتاء القارس. لم أكن واحدة من بين مائتين وخمسين شخصا فقدوا في مذبحه السويداء على أيدي مقاتلي داعش. عشت في دولة بقيت صامتة طويلا على هذه المجزرة. لقد عشت في بلد كان له دور فعّال في خلق الوضع المروع في سوريا من خلال بثّ روايات إعلامية كاذبة أولا ثم توفير الدعم المالي والتكتيكي للمجموعات المنتسبة إلى داعش أو تلك التي لا يمكن تمييزها. وفي هذه اللحظات، عندما كان احتيالي يتوسّع بشكل كبير، شعرت بالكاد وكأنني لم أعد سورية بما فيه الكفاية.

لكن كما ترون، لست سورية ولست أمريكية. أنا كلاهما، ومع ذلك أنا لست كذلك. أنا التوتّر الموجود بين الاثنين. أعقد ما قد يكون معادلة بسيطة. لقد أعطتني أمريكا القدرة على أن أكون ناقدة من خلال إعطائي الأمان داخلها، وأظهرت لي سوريا ما عليّ انتقاده كمواطنة لدولة تسببت في الخراب في المكان الذي تعود أصولي إليه. وآيوا؟ شملت آيوا كلّ شيء. أعطتني الأدوات اللازمة لمواجهة المحن فيها. التحدث علانية عن أولئك الذين لا يملكون الحماية وحماية هويتي من سوء الفهم الفادح. أعطتني منزلا وراء السّياج الأبيض، والآن بينما أستعدّ لمغادرة آيوا لمتابعة مسيرتي في مجال الصحافة، عدت إلى الفترة التي فتحت فيها أسرتي بؤابة أسلافهم البيضاء وسافرت إلى أرض أجنبية.

أتخيّل لو بقيت البؤابة مغلقة، و لم تأت عائلتي إلى أمريكا، فإن المشي على الأقدام إلى جامعتي في دمشق كان سيكون الآن مظّلا بسحابة خوف تلوح في الأفق، دون دراية أين ستسقط القنبلة القادمة، وإذا أخطأتني، فأني من أصدقائي ستصيب. أتصوّر أنه كنت سأعاني من آثار جسديّة و نفسيّة أعمق من القبر الذي كان عليّ دفن أفراد عائلتي فيه. أتصوّر أنني كنت سأقسّم شرائح خبز البيت فقط لأعيش على مدار الأسبوع. أتصوّر أنني ربّما كنت قد اضطررت في حدود منتصف الليل أن أركب قاربا كان قد تجاوز طاقة استيعابه، و ربّما كان سيطفو بي في جزيرة مهجورة، ولا أعرف إن كانوا سيغيثوننا أو إذا كنت قد تجمّدت حتى الموت بجوار أخي، و ما عدت قادرة بالمرّة على رؤية والديّ اللذان اضطررت لتركهما ورائي. كنت قد أكون واحدة من هؤلاء اللاجئين الذين تمّ تجريدهم من إنسانيتهم في الإعلام و تمّ رفضهم من قبل دول أخرى. و عوضا عن ذلك، وبسبب اختيار والديّ للانتقال، لم أواجه هذه اللحظات أبدا. لقد مُنحت امتياز التّصوّر، في حين كان العديد من أفراد عائلتي الموسّعة يعيشون هذه الأوضاع. لقد أعطيت لي بؤابة بيضاء جديدة.



SHALINI JASTI

ARTIST STATEMENT

MY PARENTS ARE both immigrants from Andhra Pradesh, India. While they raised me to be their modest Indian daughter, naming me after the characteristic they wanted me to maintain, they have told me little about their lives in India, almost as if the past is a secret that I am not allowed to know. Though I receive glimpses of their childhoods through windows of beach visits on the coast of Chirala and memories of schoolyard games on dirt playgrounds, India itself is a shattered glass mosaic that rests in a foggy recess of my mind; it is a fantasy land that I have not been to, yet it represents half of who I am. My parents brought me with them to the United States when I was six months old. As we moved from Pennsylvania to Ohio, ending in Illinois, India became a distant memory, replaced with Midwestern suburbs, white faces, and American culture. Until sophomore year of college at the University of Iowa, I did not think about being Indian. I've always known I am Indian, but parts of me did not accept that I would always be Indian, almost as if one day, I would wake up and be someone else, would forget where I came from, and deny my origins.

I am no longer comfortable losing half my identity to people who have different ideas of who they want me to be. Yet, there is no clear path for me to take to begin reconciling my two identities now that I have come to the conclusion that I want both. I am a person caught between the cultures of South India and America. My only hope is that I can continue to take refuge within my own writing, language being the one link between my identities. Telugu slides from the tip of my tongue like silk or honey and English sticks to the roof of my mouth like peanut butter, but both share space on countless pages in my writing. As I can no longer pretend to be white, I cannot write in white either.

I believe that the stories I am told by my parents and the narrative I have created for myself are as truthful and insightful as they can be. But I don't want anyone to believe that this story is the story, the monolithic narrative of South Indian American women. I am one voice. I am compelled to write this essay from the deep desire to understand the parts of myself erased over years, reincarnated on the page to begin anew.



MOTHER TONGUE

SHALINI JASTI

I AM NESTLED in bed, the faint residue of summer play subsiding within me, giving into the whispers of sleep. My thick black hair fans out over the pillow, the smell of coconut oil seeping into my pillowcase and refusing to leave for decades to come. I can hear my mother's muffled footsteps against the carpet before I can see her. Her elongated shadow is distorted from the light cast from my bedside lamp. She creeps into my bedroom, her arms reaching out to me like the limbs of a boney tree. Her presence is overbearing. The scent of her lavender lotion and spices from cooking, a mix of orange garam masala and dark green coriander, clings to her clothes. It mingles with the crisp odor of wood from the old desk in my room in a sickly mixture of natural and unnatural aromas.

She jostles herself next to me in bed, dropping a book over our laps. I can feel the cold cover through the blankets, the glossy pages of a bear in a top hat and a girl with golden curly hair. My mother reaches across to the bedside table and sets the clock alarm for one minute. This is my nightly routine as a six-year-old, preparing for the literacy assessments starting in first grade. She starts the timer as soon as she turns the page.

“Goldilocks sat in Teeny Baby Bear’s small chair and began to bounce with glee,” I begin reading aloud. ““This chair isn’t just a little comfortable—””

A sharp pain shoots down my arm and I let out a small gasp. One slap to the shoulder. I look at my mother in shock.

“It’s pronounced ‘comfort-table,’” she hisses. The most dangerous element of my mother is her sharp tongue, coated in the slithering language of Telugu. It is filled with wit, anger, and spite. Despite the fact that I know kids at school pronounce *comfortable* differently, I continue with her pronunciation, playing her game, hoping only to reach the end of the story. My hands clutch the enticing pages,

frustrated at the guidelines that my mother dictates to gain power, forcing me into her literary box. I am perpetually trapped within her thick Indian accent, her misuse of extravagant English words to sound intelligent, and her long pauses of frustration as she attempts to wrap her Indian tongue around English words she does not know. I am confined to her traditions and her ideal of the subservient and quiet Indian girl. I must know English in order to be successful, but I must not know English well enough to develop a mind of my own, a mind that cannot be contained within Telugu. She cages me in the only way she can: through her limited understanding of English and her own drive for perfection and precision, the push of the Asian mentality rushing through her bones and taking me with her.

Despite the restrictions and pressure, my mouth waters with the words in this classic fairy tale. They fill my mouth with the sweet and tangy taste of strawberries dipped in bitter dark chocolate, their seeds sticking to my teeth and my tongue. I will not be satiated until the end. I smell the cinnamon oatmeal sitting on the oak dining table of the three bears, its aroma seeping through the pages and adding to the concoction of smells within my bedroom. But before I can finish, the timer goes off.

“Nuvvu nalugu tappulu cesaru. Adi khaccitanga undali. You made four mistakes. It must be perfect.”

My mother snaps the book shut, clicks the lamp light off, and shuts my bedroom door behind her as she leaves. The promise of fairy tales, of emerald houses, witches, ogres who want the taste of children’s bones, valiant knights battling fierce dragons, and even more valiant princesses standing against evil mothers, all disappear. I am left in the darkness. Only the moonlight from the window above shines into the room, reflecting on the gleaming cover. The book whispers to me, telling me to open it again. I think, maybe the world outside that window can be as tantalizing as the one within the covers of the books I never finish as fast as I want. But for now, I am alone.



I am nine when I walk into the unfinished basement of our new home in Illinois only to find my small feet ankle deep in murky

water. I run up the stairs, leaving dark imprints on the hardwood floor, screaming to my mother, crying that the ocean is swallowing the house whole and we have to leave. My mother knows exactly what to do, calmly ascending upstairs to the linen closet, and grabbing thick towels from among the stacks of toiletries and beautifully embroidered dresses.

With towels in hand, I follow her downstairs and watch as she steps delicately through the domestic swamp to the basement window where water is seeping in from the torrential rain the night before. With mindful and powerful palms, she covers the edges of the window in towels and checks periodically to ensure no more water is filling the basement. The next day, I watch as she carries buckets of water upstairs and pours them out the door, draining the water that entered without permission. I watch the water soak back into the earth, retreating in shame. As far as I am concerned, my mother has just tamed nature. She is a gentle robot as she moves methodically.

My parents were both born and raised in Andhra Pradesh, India. They grew up to the sound of monsoons soaking the rice fields and covering the land with a gentle sheen of growth, perpetuating the optimistic and reliable idea that the land would be reborn at the start of every new season and they too would continue to live their comfortable lives. While they did not live in luxury, they spent much of their time cultivating a rich childhood of outdoor games and primary school antics.

Growing up, I am enthralled by my father's stories of reckless motorcycle rides down the steep dirt hills of his hometown in Chirala, barely missing the tired mothers balancing metal water bowls on their heads, traveling up the hill from the river to their families, shrieking at the reckless Indian boy. This same boy is now subsumed within a tired old man, staring back at me with shining eyes and wrinkles.

I am enthralled by my mother's stories of nights with her own mother, both of them donning emerald saris and heavy gold jewelry, laughing at their self-indulgence. This same girl has now been consumed by a woman who does not take the time to care for herself, constantly in a state of panic at the well-being of her

family. As she looks at me and retells her stories, her eyes are filled with nostalgia. I know there is more to my parents than the adults I see now, the ones I perceive to be overbearing and restricting, who mourn my loss every day as they see me stray further and further from the conservative and scientific Indian woman they want me to be. I am becoming an artistic and outspoken wordsmith, independent, going to temple less, unafraid to speak openly about my passions and beliefs. I do not want to stay hidden.

I wonder how the individuals described within these memories could possibly be my parents, two computer engineers with a propensity to be rational rather than emotional, who pressure me to continue on a path in life that is concrete and secure rather than continue studying English. I listen as my father tells me that he once had a dream of being a teacher, trailing off as he realizes that dreams are meant to stay unspoken in our household. I listen as my mother tells me that she was studying to be a doctor when she was arranged to be married to my father, only to find that pregnancy and becoming the matriarch of a family would become far more important to her in-laws than a medical career.

My parents are not only robotic in their calculated minds, akin to any other traditional Indian who is ensconced within the stereotypical Asian mentality, but they are also robotic in their programmed understanding of how life must continue with these Indian traditions. They are robotic in that they do not resent that their culture and their transition to the United States forced them to relinquish their dreams, at least not openly to me, their only child. If my parents grew to rely on monsoons in their childhood, then I am their worst fear: a drought. With my bicultural upbringing, a natural assimilation into American culture alongside a traditional Indian upbringing by my Indian parents, the only element of my culture left untouched is the language that my parents and I share. Telugu was gifted to me by both of my parents, although my mother is determined to remind me of the incremental loss I face as I lose more of my Telugu each day. Maybe this is because she fears English, not only for how it brings me closer to my freedom but also for her own lack of control over it. I have chosen to step away from my mother tongue.



One evening when I am in sixth grade, I watch as the sky turns dark emerald green, like a friendly dragon's skin. My friend's mother is driving us home from karate. She wants to get us home quickly due to the impending storm, something that makes the other kids tremble with fear but fills me with excitement. I am no longer afraid of water. This can only be explained by what I now call the ancestral doppler shift; although I've never experienced a monsoon, my genetics predispose me to feel excited when the sky darkens, a deep-rooted memory that is passed through my family DNA and the stories my parents tell of their childhood, of the monsoons that restored balance to India during the rainy seasons. When the rice fields fill with rainwater, soaking the mud from the dry season, the wind pushing the tops of the thirsty plants over to sip the water flowing over the ground, the rice fields grow richer and stronger.

When I was six months old, my parents left for the United States permanently, under the conviction that they could give me a better life here. They so desperately try to keep the India they know alive within me, to continue the traditions of their ancestors and culture, despite the fact that the monsoons will never touch my skin the way they experienced.

When I get home, I run inside to find my parents standing near the back porch. They are looking out the sliding glass door, staring at the sky with nostalgia rather than fear. There is so much rain, I think the roof is going to collapse from the pressure. I beg my parents to let me go outside for just a moment, wanting to feel the torrent of water force its way into my skin. I want to feel what they felt long ago, to remember a life that I wish could be mine but never will, because I will never know India the way they do.

They finally relent, unlocking the sliding door and mesh screen. I step outside, the pouring rain making my body flinch with its cold lashes. Instantly, my clothes are soaked, but I am too overwhelmed to notice. The puddles of water glint in the shining light of the house. I let the water encapsulate me. I walk to the edge of the small deck and lay my hands roughly against the wet, wooden ledge. My

feet push against the floor, my toes writhing in the water pooling on the surface. I close my eyes, forcing myself to be my parents, forcing myself to feel what they did many years ago, to live the lives that they did. In that moment, I want for them to look out and see their daughter, reborn into the Indian girl they wanted me to be. As they watch me through the glass door, remembering their childhood, I hope they see that I am trying. With a shudder, I feel my mother's hand on my shoulder as she stands behind me.

"It's time to come inside now, Shaloo." We walk inside together, soaked to the bone.



The first time it happens, I am in the second grade. In the cafeteria, I open my tin lunch box to reveal the pungent aroma of idlis with coconut chutney. The smell of fresh coconut makes my mouth salivate, and I cannot wait to dig into the soft, tightly packed rice cakes.

"Ew, what is that?" says a small white girl wearing a princess T-shirt, laughing at my food while she points, her friends giggling next to her.

They are all staring, and I can't eat while they are looking. It's then that I notice the sea of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, the hot lunches of pizza and chicken nuggets taking up space among the lunchroom tables. I look down at my foreign food, and for the first time, I recognize that I am the foreigner. I am the other. Suddenly, the sweet smell of coconut is embarrassing. I am embarrassed that I enjoy *this kind* of food. I close my lunch tin.

I do not eat lunch that day, or any day after that. From then on, as my classmates devour their food, I sip my water and wait for them to finish. The hunger writhes inside me, pleading for me to gulp down the Indian food my mother packs for me, but I ignore the cravings, tossing the orange curries, red chutneys, white rice cakes, and golden sugar-covered puris in the trash. My ritual of assimilation continues even as my stomach turns with pain, and I force a smile at the lunchroom table, wanting to be similar to my friends and starving to do so.

It happens again in class when we are reading about animals. I say *zebra* with the classic Indian *zed* pronunciation, a sound that invokes a spaceship zipping through the air and planting an alien on the earth. I feel alien as my classmates laugh at my speech, and I am ashamed of my own tongue. My mother gave me this tongue, one slick with an Indian accent, yet I am ungrateful. I vow then to master the English language in the way that I hear my classmates speak. I will tame my tongue to do what my mother never could. And, with the intention to master and tame the language, English takes hold of my mind, making me realize its power and tranquility. Once I have mastered it, it brings me safety. My white classmates can only stare in awe as the brown girl masters their language better than them. I am nothing if I cannot craft my ideal self within blank pages, if I do not have a space to show how I feel. My household, where the strongest form of human affection is the warmth of a freshly brewed cup of tea, is not the place to express emotions.

This feeling of otherness happens for a final time once I officially declare my majors as English and Creative Writing and Secondary English Education. Within my newfound home of Iowa City, I think there is no better place to showcase my identity as a writer. I believe the promise of diversity and inclusion that the English program has advertised to me. But as I begin attending American literature classes, analyzing the writing of colonizers, and finding no authors that can speak to my Indian upbringing, my stomach churns at the thought that my brown body is taking up space among other white students at a predominantly white institution. The deep sickness continues as my friends, all white, never seem to understand why my writing or my culture is important to me, why their acts of othering me by saying they can't see me in the dark hurt my image of my body, or why their lack of presence at open mics and readings makes me feel lost in a crowd of people I do not belong in. As quickly as Iowa City felt like home, the feeling of belonging vanishes, along with my mother's support.

"How will you make a living?" my mother asks over the phone when I tell her about my plans to study English. I imagine the fear and anger within her dark brown eyes. To her, I have just sent home a wooden box with my severed tongue inside, the ultimate betrayal of an Indian daughter to her mother who sacrificed so much. I

have forged my own path against her wishes, a path away from the security that a biology major could offer me. She is disgusted that I would give up on my assumed dreams that easily. And most of all, she is disgusted by the reflection of herself she sees in me, another Indian girl giving up the dream of medical school to pursue something different.

That was her dream, though, not mine. I know I will never regret my pursuit of English. My father initially follows her lead, sending me emails advising me to apply to medical schools as an English major, stories of writers becoming engineers, dramatic documentaries of homeless artists and writers testifying to their deep regret of pursuing writing, and the subtle jab of the cost of living in most states side by side with the average salary of a high school English teacher. But after a phone call where I cry and explain to my father that writing is something I need to be happy, he begins to understand. I imagine that my mother's resentment only grows stronger knowing my father has decreased his force in the fight.

I imagine that part of her is filled with resentment, for I have chosen to follow a dream, a passion for literature, where she was never able to break from the traditions imposed on us. While on the phone with her, staring out across the empty expanse of a college town before finals week, I understand that while words give me the power to discover a lost self, that discovery has led my mother to realize that, eventually, I will not be the daughter she can mold. To her, I am losing the last part of me that makes me Indian: my tongue. Speaking Telugu is more than another form of communication; the language embodies a culture that I am stepping away from as my English grows more elaborate. We both fear that my Telugu will diminish and die, that the culture I have been raised to respect will be forgotten within my new American tongue.



My relationship with Iowa is troubled right now because I'm not sure who I am and who I'm looking for. I am not white enough to be accepted by my white friends, but I no longer need to be

in order to be happy. I am not Indian enough to be welcomed in many Indian communities, though I am trying to be. But I love the literature that Iowa allows people to produce. I love the potential I have here.

Now that I am older, resting in a duplex that I share with my longest college friends, I am learning to love my family in a new way as well, especially my mother. They still don't understand me, but I no longer place as much value on their perception of me as I do on my own self-worth. I stare at my bookshelf and my eye catches on a children's literature anthology on the top shelf. Suddenly, I am young again. I imagine my mom coming into my room, stopping outside the doorway to watch her six-year-old daughter lying patiently in bed. She is thinking I look small and innocent underneath the sheets, wondering why I am invested in words that frustrate her and cause her anxiety. She scuttles into my room, feigning a confidence that comes off to me as anger and strictness, and sits hurriedly on the bed, hoping that our reading time will be over as quickly as possible. But, it is not over as quickly as possible for her. I read faster than she can keep up with. She attempts to regain control by correcting whatever she can, even though she is uncertain of herself. Finally, the timer goes off, and she sighs in relief, slamming the book shut. She can see how disappointed I am that reading time is over, but she is pleased to be finished. She turns off the bedside light, returning us to the dark room I'll soon fall asleep in.

Before she leaves, she looks outside the high window in the middle of my wall. She's just tall enough to peer out of it, seeing the dark world outside. The ducks in the backyard pond are hovering at the edge of the lake, gently moving with the water's ripples. Within the trees surrounding the other houses, she can see the windows filled with light, imagining parents eagerly reading to their kids, still enveloped within the fantasy of their books. She resents that she cannot do the same for her daughter. She is sad that they left India, its warm sunlight kissing her skin every day, its rainy seasons filling her with the realization that a new season is about to begin. She was happy in India, and now she is here, afraid. She sits back down on the bed. She clutches me, taking hold of my small hands. She knows I am already swept away by words she cannot

begin to understand. She is a foreigner in my new home, and I am a foreigner in hers. This journey is difficult for both of us. I do not have the language to explain how I am to finish my own story without destroying the story she has carefully created already. With my story waiting to pour from my fingertips, some days more patient than others, I know that I might one day uncover the secrets to revealing a new story within the living story of another, or within the creation of a hybrid language of English and Telugu that stings the back of the throat and tastes sweet. But until that day comes, I'll choke on my own words, waiting for the moment when it all sounds right to say aloud.

మాతృ భుష

SHALINI JASTI

శ్రీను చేత అనువదించబడింది

నేను మంచం మీద గూడు కట్టుకున్నాను, వేసవి ఆట యొక్క మందమైన అవశేషాలు నాలో మునిగిపోతున్నాయి, నిదానముగా నిద్ర లోకి జారుకుంటున్నాను. నా మందపాటి నల్లటి జుట్టు, దిండు పైన వ్యాపించింది. కొబ్బరి నూనె వాసన నా దిండు లోకి చొచ్చుకుపోయినది. కొబ్బరి నూనె వాసనా దిండు నుంచి చాల బలంగా ఇప్పుడప్పుడే వదిలేటట్టు లేదు. నేను ఆమెను చూడటానికి ముందు నా తల్లి తివాచి పరిచిన నెల మీద అలికిడి లేనంతగా వస్తున్న సున్నితమైన శబ్దాన్ని వినగలను. ఆమె పొందుడగున ఉన్న నీడ నా పడక దీపం నుండి వెలువడే కాంతి నుండి వక్రీకరించబడింది. ఆమె నా పడకగదిలోకి చేరబడినారు, సన్నటి ధృఢమైన చెట్టు వేళ్ళు వలే ఉన్న ఆమె చేతులు నన్ను కొగలించు కోటానికి నా దగ్గరకు వస్తున్నాయి. ఆమె వంట చేసి నా గది లోకి వచ్చి నప్పుడు, ఆమె దగ్గర నుంచి వచ్చే మషాలా వాసన వల్ల ఆమె ఉనికిని తట్టుకోటం ఇబందిగా ఊందేది. ఆమె దగ్గర నుంచి వచ్చే బలమైన వాసన నా గదిలోని పాత డెస్క్ నుండి కలప యొక్క స్ఫుటమైన సువాసనతో సహజమైన మరియు అసహజమైన సుగంధాల మిశ్రమంలో కలసిపోయింది.

ఆమె మంచం మీద నా పక్కన తనను తాను తడుముకుంటుంది, ఒక పుస్తకాన్ని న వడిలో పడేసింది. పుస్తకము అట్ట చల్లని స్పర్శను దుప్పటి ద్వారా నా వంటికి తాకుచుంది. పుస్తకము అట్ట పైన నల్లటి ఎలుకబంటి మరియు చిన్న పాప బొమ్మలున్నాయి. ఎలుకబంటు బారుగా ఉండే టోపీ తో ఉండగా చిన్న పాపా జుట్టు బంగారు రంగులో ఉన్న బొమ్మలు చక్కగా అలంకరించి బడి ఉన్నాయి. నా తల్లి, పడక

పక్కనే కూర్చుని గడియారంలో ఒక నిమిషానికి సరి చెచి పెట్టింది. మొదటి తరగతిలో ప్రారంభమయ్యే అక్షరాస్యత మదింపులకు సిద్ధమవుతున్న ఆరేళ్ల వయస్సులో ఇది నా రాత్రి దినచర్య. ఆమె పేజీని తిప్పిన వెంటనే టైమర్ ప్రారంభిస్తుంది.

“గోల్డ్ లాక్స్ బేబీ బేర్ యొక్క చిన్న కుర్చీలో కూర్చుని సంతోషంతో బౌన్స్ అవ్వడం ప్రాంభించింది” నేను గట్టిగా చదవడం ప్రారంభించాను. “ఈ కుర్చీ కొంచెం సౌకర్యంగా లేదు-”

ఒక పదునైన నొప్పి నా చేతిని తాకటము వలన నేను ఒక చిన్న వాయివును విడిచిపెట్టాను. భుజాని కి చురుకు తగలటము వలన భయముతో న తల్లి వైపు చూస్తున్నాను.

“ఇది కంఫర్ట్-టేబుల్ అని ఉచ్చరిస్తారు. నా తల్లి యొక్క అత్యంత ప్రమాదకరమైన అంశం ఆమె పదునైన నాలుక, ఆమె వాడే తెలుగు పదాలు చాల సులువుగా ఆమె నోటి నుంచి ఊడి పడుతున్నట్టుగా వుంటాయి. ఆ పదాలు తెలివి, కోపం మరియు ద్వేషంతో నీండి ఉంటాయి. పాఠశాలలో పిల్లలు భిన్నంగా సుఖంగా ఉంటారని నాకు తెలుసు. కథ ముగింపుకు మాత్రమే చేరుకోవాలనే ఆశతో, నేను ఆమె ఉచ్చారణతో కొనసాగుతున్నాను, ఆమె ఆట ఆడుతున్నాను. నా చేతులు మనోహరమైన పేజీలను పట్టుకున్నాయి, అధికారాన్ని పొందాలని నా తల్లి నిర్దేశించిన తప్పుడు మార్గదర్శకాలపై విసుగు చెందాను. ఆమె నన్ను తన సాహిత్య పెట్టెలో అచ్చు వేసింది. నేను ఆమె మందపాటి భారతీయ యాసలో నిరంతరం చిక్కుకున్నాను, తెలివితేటలు కనబరచడానికి ఆమె విపరీత ఆంగ్ల పదాలను దుర్వినియోగం చేయడం మరియు ఆమె తనకు తెలియని ఆంగ్ల పదాల చుట్టూ తన భారతీయ నాలుకను చుట్టడానికి ప్రయత్నించినప్పుడు ఆమె నిరాశకు గురిచేసింది. నేను ఆమె సంప్రదాయాలకు మరియు లొంగిన మరియు నిశ్శబ్ద భారతీయ అమ్మాయి చిత్రానికి పరిమితం అయ్యాను. విజయవంతం కావడానికి నేను ఇంగ్లీష్ తెలుసుకోవాలి కాని నా స్వంత మనస్సును, తెలుగు చుట్టుముట్టే మనస్సులో ఉండలేని మనస్సును పెంపొందించుకునేంతగా

నాకు ఇంగ్లీష్ తెలియదు. ఆమె నన్ను తనకు తెలిసిన పద్ధతిలో తీర్చి దిద్దాలని ప్రయస్థిస్తుంది: ఇంగ్లీషుపై ఆమెకున్న పరిమిత అవగాహన మరియు పరిపూర్ణత మరియు ఖచ్చితత్వం కోసం ఆమె సొంత డ్రైవ్ ద్వారా, ఆసియా మనస్తత్వం యొక్క ఆలోచనలు ఆమె నరాల గుండా పరుగెత్తటం మరియు నన్ను ఆమెతో తీసుకెళ్లడం.

పరిమితులు మరియు ఒత్తిడి ఉన్నప్పటికీ, ఈ క్లాసిక్ అద్భుత కథలోని పదాలతో నా నేరు నిండి ఉంది. నా నోటిలో ఉండే పదాలు వల్ల నాకు చేదు ముదురు చాక్లెట్లో ముంచిన స్ట్రాబెర్రీల తీపి మరియు పుల్లటి రుచితో అవి నా నోటిని నింపి, వాటి విత్తనాలు నా దంతాలకు మరియు నా నాలుకకు అంటటము వలన వచ్చే అనుభూతి గలుగుతుంది. నేను చివరి వరకు సంతృప్తి చెందను.

నేను నా పుస్తకము లోని పేజీలను చదువుతున్నప్పుడు నాకు వంట గది నుంచి ఓట్స్ ని సీనమిం తో కలిపి వండిన వాసనలు వస్తున్నాయి. అదే సమయములో నేను మాడు ఏలుకుబంటులు వాటి భోజన అనుభవాన్ని చదువుతున్నాను. ఇంతలోనే నాకు ఇచ్చిన రీడింగ్ టైం గడిచి పోయింది.

“నువ్వు నలుగు తప్పులు సీజరు. ఆది ఖాసిటంగా ఉండలి. తప్పులు చేయకుండా చదవటం నూవ్వు నేర్చుకోవాలి.

నా తల్లి పుస్తకాన్ని మూసివేసి, దీపం వెలిగించి, నా పడకగది నుండి బయలుదేరినప్పుడు ఆమె వెనుక తలుపు మూసివేసింది. అద్భుత కథలు, పచ్చ ఇళ్ళు, మంత్రగత్తెలు, పిల్లల ఎముకల రుచినీ కోరుకునే ఓగ్రెస్, భయంకరమైన డ్రాగన్లతో పోరాడుతున్న వాలియంట్ వైట్స్ మరియు దుష్ట తల్లలకు వ్యతిరేకంగా నిలబడే మరింత ధైర్యవంతులైన యువరాణుల వాగ్దానం అన్నీ మాయమవుతాయి. నేను చీకటిలో మిగిలిపోయాను. కిటికీ నుండి వెన్నెల మాత్రమే నా గదిలో ప్రకాశిస్తుంది, వెన్నెల కార్పెట్ మీద మరియు నిగనిగలాడే కొట్టుమిట్టాడుకొంటున్న పుస్తకము కవర్ మీద ప్రతిబింబిస్తుంది. పుస్తకం నాతో గుసగుస లాడుతునట్టు

గా ఉంది, మల్లి తెరవమని అడిగన్నట్టుగా ఉంది. బహుశా ఆ కిటికీ వెలుపల ఉన్న ప్రపంచం పుస్తకాల కవర్లలో ఉన్నట్టుగా నేను కోరుకున్నంత వేగంగా పూర్తి చేయలేనేమో కానీ, ప్రస్తుతానికి, నేను ఒంటరిగా ఉన్నాను.



నేను తొమ్మిది సంవచ్చారాల వయసులో ఉన్నప్పుడు ఒకేసారి మా ఇల్లినాయిస్ లో ఇంటి లోని భూభాగములో ఉండే గది లోకి వెళ్లాను. అక్కడ నెల నీళ్ల తో మునిగి ఉంది. నా కాళ్ళ మణి కట్టు వరకు నీళ్లు పున్నాయి. అది గమనించి నేను పరిగెత్తుకుంటూ పైకి వచ్చి మా అమ్మకు అరుస్తూ మన ఇంటిని సముద్రం మింగేస్తుంది అని చెప్పటానికి ప్రయిస్తున్నాను. మనము వేగాంగా ఇల్లు వదిలి వెళ్లాలని పెద్దగా అరుస్తూ చెబుతున్నాను. మా అమ్మ కు కింద గది లోనికి నీరు వచ్చినట్టు అర్థమైంది. వెంటనే మా అమ్మ పాత బట్టలు తీసుకొని కింద గదిలోకి శుభ్రం చేయటానికి వెళ్లారు.

చేతిలో తువ్వొళ్లతో, నేను ఆమెను మెట్లమీదకు అనుసరిస్తాను మరియు ఆమె దేశీయ చిత్తడి గుండా నేలమాళిగ కిటికీకి సున్నితంగా అడుగులు వేస్తుండగా, అక్కడ ముందు రోజు రాత్రి కుండపోత వర్షం నుండి నీరు నెమ్మదిగా ప్రవహిస్తుంది. బుద్ధిపూర్వక మరియు శక్తివంతమైన అరచేతులతో, ఆమె కిటికీ అంచులను తువ్వొళ్లలో కప్పి, నేలమాళిగలో ఎక్కువ నీరు నింపడం లేదని క్రమానుగతంగా తనిఖీ చేస్తుంది. మరుసటి రోజు, ఆమె మేడమీద బకెట్ల నీటిని తీసుకువెళ్ళి, వాటిని తలుపు నుండి పోసి, అనుమతి లేకుండా ప్రవేశించిన నీటిని తీసివేస్తుంది. సిగ్గుతో వెనక్కి వెళ్లి, నీరు తిరిగి భూమిలోకి నానబెట్టడాన్ని నేను చూస్తున్నాను. నాకు సంబంధించినంతవరకు, నా తల్లి ప్రకృతిని మచ్చిక చేసుకుంది. ఆమె స్థిరంగా కదులుతున్నప్పుడు ఆమె సున్నితమైన మర మనిషి లాగా నడవటం గమనించాను.

నా తల్లిదండ్రులు భారతదేశంలోని ఆంధ్రప్రదేశ్ లో పుట్టి పెరిగారు. వారి బాల్యము అంతా వారి తాతల ఊరి లో గడిపారు.

వారి తాతలు వ్యవసాయ దారులు గనుక వారి బాల్యము వరి పొలాలను నానబెట్టడం మరియు వారి భూములను సున్నితమైన వృద్ధితో కప్పడం, ప్రతి కొత్త సీజన్ ప్రారంభంలో భూమి పునర్లక్ష్యం పొందుతుందనే ఆశావహ మరియు నమ్మకమైన ఆలోచనను కొనసాగించారు. వారు సాకర్యవంతమైన జీవితాలు నివసించకపోయినా, బహిరంగ ఆటలు మరియు ప్రాథమిక పాఠశాల చేష్టల యొక్క గొప్ప బాల్యాన్ని పండించడానికి వారు ఎక్కువ సమయం గడిపారు.

పెరుగుతున్నప్పుడు, నా తండ్రి తన స్వస్థలమైన చీరాల లో నిర్లక్ష్యంగా మోటారుసైకిల్ ఎత్తూ ఉన్న మట్టి కొండలపైకి వెళ్ళుతున్నప్పుడు కలిగిన అనుభవాన్ని నాకు కథలుగా చెబుతున్నప్పుడు అవి నన్ను ఎంతో ఆకట్టుకున్నాయి. అలసిపోయిన తల్లులు తమ తలపై లోహపు నీటి గిన్నెలను సమతుల్యం చేసుకోవడం, నది నుండి కొండపైకి వారి కుటుంబాలకు వెళ్ళేటప్పుడు వారి నా తండ్రి మోటార్‌కి పై చేసే విన్యాసాలను చూసి ఒక నిర్లక్ష్య కుర్రాడు అని విలపించేవారట. ఇదే కుర్రాడు ఇప్పుడు అలసిపోయిన వృద్ధుడిలో మునిగిపోయాడు, మెరిసే కళ్ళు మరియు ముడుతలతో నా వైపు తిరిగి చూస్తున్నాడు.

నా అమ్మ తన అమ్మతో కలిసి గడిపిన కథల రాత్రి అనుభాన్ని నాకు చెప్తున్నప్పుడు నన్ను ఎంతో ఆకట్టుకున్నాయి. వారి ఇద్దరు వారి చీరలను మరియు నగలను ధరించి వారి అనుభవాలు ఎంతో ఆనందాన్ని గలిగించేయటం. ఇదే అమ్మాయి ఇప్పుడు తనను తాను చూసుకోవటానికి సమయం తీసుకోదని నాకు తెలుసు, తన కుటుంబం యొక్క శ్రేయస్సుపై నిరంతరం భయాందోళనకు గురవుతుంది. ఆమె నా వైపు చూస్తూ, ఆమె కథలను తిరిగి చెప్పేటప్పుడు, ఆమె కళ్ళు వ్యామోహంతో పొంగిపోయిపోతున్నాయి. నేను ఇప్పుడు చూసే పెద్దల కంటే నా తల్లిదండ్రులకు చాలా ఎక్కువ ఉందని నాకు తెలుసు, నేను భరించ లేనంతగా పరిమితం చేస్తున్నట్లు భావిస్తున్నాను, ప్రతిరోజూ వారు నన్ను సంప్రదాయవాద మరియు శాస్త్రీయ భారతీయ మహిళ నుండి మరింత దూరం చేయడాన్ని చూస్తుంటు నా నష్టానికి వారు బాధపడుతుంటారు.

నేను ఒక కళాత్మక మరియు బహిరంగ మాటకారి గా తీర్చి దిద్దు కుంటున్నాను, తక్కువగా ఆలయానికి వెళుతున్నాను, నా కోరికలు మరియు నమ్మకాల గురించి బహిరంగంగా మాట్లాడటానికి భయపడను. నేను నా ఆలోచనలను దాచడానికి ఇష్టపడను.

ఈ జ్ఞాపకాలలో వివరించిన ఇద్దరు వ్యక్తులు నా తల్లిదండ్రులు అని నాకు ఆశ్చర్యం వేస్తుంది. వారి భావోద్వేగానికి బదులుగా హేతుబద్ధంగా ఉండటానికి ఇద్దరు కంప్యూటర్ ఇంజనీర్లు ఎలా అయ్యారని నేను ఆశ్చర్యపోతున్నాను. వారు నన్ను ఇంగ్లీషుతో కొనసాగకుండా కాంక్రీటు మరియు సురక్షితమైన జీవితంలో ఒక మార్గంలో కొనసాగాలని నన్ను ఒత్తిడి చేస్తారు. కలలు మా ఇంటిలో మాట్లాడకుండా ఉండటానికి ఉద్దేశించినవి అని తెలుసుకున్నప్పుడు, ఒకప్పుడు ఉపాధ్యాయుడిగా ఉండాలని ఒక కల ఉందని నా తండ్రి చెప్పినట్లు నేను విన్నాను . అమ్మ పెళ్లి కాక ముందు తాను తన తల్లిదండ్రులతో తాను డాక్టర్ అవ్వాలని చెప్పేదంత . అమ్మ అత్త గారికి తాను అమ్మ కావటము మరియు కుటుంబ గౌరావాన్ని కాపాడారని ప్రాధాన్యం ఇచ్చేవారంట

నా తల్లిదండ్రుల ఆలోచనలు మరమనిషి లాగా లెక్కించినవి గా ఇప్పుడు ఉన్న సాంప్రదాయ భారతీయులతో సమానంగా ఉంటాఇ, వారి ఆలోచనలు మాస ఆసియా మనస్తత్వంతో చుట్టుముట్టుకొని ఉంటాయి. ఈ భారతీయ సాంప్రదాయాలతో జీవితం ఎలా కొనసాగాలి అనే దానిపై ప్రోగ్రామ్ చేసిన అవగాహనలో మర మనిషి వాలే ఆలోచిస్తారు. వారి సంస్కృతిని వారు యునైటెడ్ స్టేట్స్కు కు వారి కలలని నెరవేర్చుటానికి వచ్చినప్పుడు వేడిచిపెట్ట లేక పోయారు. వారి పరివర్తన వారి కలలను విడిచిపెట్టమని బలవంతం చేయటానికి ఏకైక సంతానం అయిన న దగ్గర వ్యక్తము చేయలేదు, నా తల్లిదండ్రులు వారి బాల్యంలో రుతుపవనాలపై ఆధారపడుతూ పెరిగారు. వారికి రుతుపవనాల వాల్ల వచ్చే కరువు అంటే భయం. అదే భయం న పైన ఉంది నేను ఎక్కడ చేడు మార్గములో వెళతానేమో అని. నా భారతీయ తల్లిదండ్రుల సాంప్రదాయ భారతీయ పెంపకంతో పాటు అమెరికన్ సంస్కృతిలో సహజమైన సమ్మేళనం నా బికల్చరల్ పెంపకంతో,

నా సంస్కృతి యొక్క ఏకైక అంశం నా తల్లిదండ్రులు మరియు నేను పంచుకునే భాష. ప్రతిరోజూ నా తెలుగులో ఎక్కువ భాగాన్ని కోల్పోతున్నందున నేను ఎదుర్కొంటున్న పెరుగుతున్న నష్టాన్ని గుర్తుకు తెచ్చుకోవాలని నా తల్లి నిశ్చయించుకున్నప్పటికీ, తల్లిదండ్రులు ఇద్దరూ నాకు తెలుగు బహుమతిగా ఇచ్చారు. దీనికి కారణం ఆమె ఇంగ్లీషుకు భయపడుతుండటం, అది నా స్వేచ్ఛకు నన్ను ఎలా దగ్గర చేస్తుంది అనే దానిపై మాత్రమే కాకుండా, దానిపై ఆమె స్వంత నియంత్రణ లేకపోవడం వల్ల కూడా. నేను నా మాతృభాష నుండి వైదొలగాలని ఎంచుకున్నాను.



నేను సిక్స్ గ్రేడ్ లో ఉన్నప్పుడు ఒక రోజు సాయంత్రము న స్నేహితురాలి అమ్మ నన్ను మరియు న స్నేహితు రాలిని తన కారు లో కరాటే క్లబ్ నుంచి ఇంటికి తీసుకు వస్తున్నారు. కారు లో నుంచి బయట ఆకాశం చాల ముసుకు పోయినట్టు కనిపించింది. తను మమ్మలని పెద్ద గాలి వాన రక ముందలే ఇంటికి చేర్చాలని తొందర పడుతున్నారు. నాకు మాతృమూ గాలి వానలో బయటే ఉండాలని అసేగా ఉండేది. ఒక్కప్పుడు నాకు నీళ్ళంటే భయముగా ఉండేది. ఈత నేర్చున్నాక నాకు నీళ్ళంటే భయం లేదు. మా తాత ముత్తాతలు వ్యవసాయ దారులు కాబట్టి వారికి సహకాలములో పడే వర్షాలు వారికి చాల ఇష్టం. నేను వారి సంతతిని కాబట్టి నాకు కూడా వర్షాలు అంటే చాల ఇష్టం. నా తల్లిదండ్రులు వారు చిన్నప్పుడు వారి పంట పొలాలను వర్ష కాలంలో సాందర్శించ ఆనందాన్ని నాతో చెప్పేవారు. నేను వర్షాని చూసినప్పుడల్లా అంతే ఆనందాన్ని కలిగినట్టుగా ఉండేది. పంట పొలాలు వర్షపు నీటితో మునిగి ఉన్నప్పుడు వాటి పైనుంచి వచ్చే గాలులు వరి కంకేలను దృఢముగా చేస్తాయి.

నేను ఆరు నెలల వయసులో ఉన్నప్పుడు, నా తల్లిదండ్రులు యునైటెడ్ స్టేట్స్ కి ఓక మంచి జీవితము కోసము వచ్చారు. నా తల్లిదండ్రులు తరాలుగా వస్తున్న భారతీయ సంస్కృతిని నాకు అలవాటు చేయటానికి ప్రయత్నించేవారు. వారి సంస్కృతులు మరియు అలవాటులు నన్ను తాకలేక పోయాయి.

నేను ఇంటికి రాగానే పరిగెత్తుకుంటూ వెళ్లి న తల్లితండ్రి నుంచొని ఉన్న చోటుకు చేరుకున్నాను. వాళ్ళు ఇంటి వెనుక పక్కన ఉన్న ద్వారము వద్ద నుంచొని బయట కురుస్తున్న పెద్ద వర్షాన్ని గమనిస్తూ ఏ భయము అనందిస్తున్నారు. బయట పడిన వర్షాన్ని చూసి నేను మా ఇంటి పై కప్పు పడిపోతుందేమో అని అనుకున్నాను. నేను న పేరెంట్స్ ని అనుమతించండి అని అడుగుతున్నాను. నాకే బయటకు వెళ్లి వర్షములో తడవాలని కొరిగా ఉంది. నా పేరెంట్స్ నను వర్షము లోకి పంపించారు. నేను వర్షములో తడుస్తూ ఉంటే న ఆనందానికి అవధులు లేకుండా పోయాయి. గట్టిగ పడుతున్న వర్షపు చినుకులు న దేహాన్ని గట్టిగా గుచుకుంటున్నాయి. నాకు నా పేరెంట్స్ ఇండియా లో చిన్నప్పుడు ఎలగైతే వర్షా కాలాన్ని ఆనందిచారో అలాగే ఆనందించాలని ఉంది. కానీ అది ఇక్కడ సాధ్యపడదేమో. అంతలోనే న అమ్మ కూడా బయటకు వచ్చి న భుజంపైన చేయి వేసి లోపలి రమ్మని చెప్పారు.

షాలు ఇంకా చాలు లోపలి రవలి అనటతో మేము ఇంటి లోపలి వెళ్ళాము.

ఇది జరిగిన మొదటిసారి, నేను రెండవ తరగతిలో ఉన్నాను. ఫలహారశాలలో, కొబ్బరి పచ్చడితో ఇడ్లిస్ యొక్క సువాసనను బహిర్గతం చేయడానికి నా టీన్ లంచ్ బాక్స్ తెరిచాను. తాజా కొబ్బరి వాసన నా నోటిని లాలాజలంగా చేస్తుంది, మరియు మృదువైన, గట్టిగా ప్యాక్ చేసిన బియ్యం కేకులను త్రవ్వటానికి నేను వేచి ఉండలేను.

“ఈవ్, అది ఏమిటి?” యువరాణి టీ షర్టు ధరించిన ఒక చిన్న తెల్ల అమ్మాయి, ఆమె సూచించేటప్పుడు నా ఆహారాన్ని చూసి నవ్వుతుంది, ఆమె స్నేహితులు ఆమె పక్కన ముసిముసి నవ్వుతున్నారు.

వాళ్ళు న పక్క చూస్తుండగా నేను నా లంచ్ ని తినలేక పోవ దాన్ని. వెన్న మరియు జెల్లీ శాండవిచ్ల సముద్రం, పిజ్జా యొక్క

వేడి భోజనాలు మరియు చికెన్ నగ్గట్లు లంచ్ రూమ్ టేబుల్ల మధ్య స్థలాన్ని తీసుకుంటున్నట్లు నేను గమనించాను. నేను నా విదేశీ ఆహారాన్ని తక్కువగా చూస్తాను, మొదటిసారి నేను విదేశీయరాలు అని గుర్తించాను. నేను మరొకరిని అకస్మాత్తుగా, కొబ్బరి తీపి వాసన ఇబ్బందికరంగా ఉంది అని అవమానం తో సిగ్గు పడ్డాను. నేను ఈ రకమైన ఆహారాన్ని ఆస్వాదించాన అని సిగ్గుపడ్డాను. నేను నా భోజన టీన్ను మూసివేసాను.

నేను ఆ రోజు భోజనం తిన లేక పోయాను. ఆ తర్వాత ఏ రోజునైనా తినను. అప్పటి నుండి, నా క్లాస్ మేట్స్ వారి ఆహారాన్ని మ్రింగివేస్తుండగా, నేను నా నీటిని సిప్ చేసి, అవి పూర్తయ్యే వరకు వేచి ఉన్నాను. ఆకలి నా లోపల భాదపెడుతుంది, నా తల్లి నా కోసం ప్యాక్ చేసే భారతీయ ఆహారాన్ని తగ్గించమని వేడు, కాని కోరికలను విస్మరిస్తున్నారు, నారింజ కూరలు, ఎర్రపచ్చడి, తెలుపు బియ్యం కేకులు మరియు బంగారు చక్కెరతో కప్పబడిన పూరీలను చెత్తలో విసిరివేస్తున్నాను. నా కడుపు నొప్పితో ఉన్నప్పుడు కూడా నా ఆచారం కొనసాగుతుంది, మరియు నేను లంచ్ రూమ్ టేబుల్ వద్ద ఒక చిరునవ్వును బలవంతంగా ప్రయత్నిస్తున్నాను, నా స్నేహితులతో సమానంగా ఉండాలని కోరుకుంటున్నాను మరియు అలా చేయటానికి ఆకలితో ఉన్నాను.

మనం జంతువుల గురించి చదువుతున్నప్పుడు అదే తరగతిలో మళ్ళీ నాకు న ఇండియన్ ఆరిజిన్ ని బయట పడేలా జరిగింది. నేను క్లాసిక్ ఇండియన్ జెడ్ ఉచ్చారణతో జీబ్రా అని చెబుతున్నాను, ఆ ఉచ్చారణ ఒక అంతరిక్ష నౌకను గాలి ద్వారా జిప్ చేసి భూమిపై గ్రహాంతరవాసులను నాటడానికి పిలుస్తుంది అన్నటుగా. నా సహవిద్యార్థులు నా ప్రసంగాన్ని చూసి నవ్వుతూనే నేను పరాయివాడిగా భావించేదానిని, నా స్వంత ఉచ్చారణ పై నేను సిగ్గుపడుతున్నాను. నా మాత్ర బాష నాకు ఈ నాలుక ఇచ్చింది, భారతీయ యాసతో ఒక మృదువత ఉంది, అయినప్పటికీ నేను కృతజ్ఞత లేనిదానిని. నా క్లాస్ మేట్స్ మాట్లాడటం విన్న విధంగా ఆంగ్ల భాషలో ప్రావీణ్యం సాధిస్తానని ప్రతిజ్ఞ చేస్తున్నాను. నా తల్లి ఎప్పటికీ చేయలేనిది చేయడానికి

నేను నా నాలుకను మచ్చిక చేసుకుంటాను. మరియు, భాషను ప్రావీణ్యం మరియు మచ్చిక చేసుకోవాలనే ఉద్దేశ్యంతో, ఇంగ్లీష్ నా మనస్సును పట్టుకుంటుంది, దాని శక్తిని మరియు ప్రశాంతతను నాకు తెలుసుకుంటుంది. నేను దాన్ని స్వాధీనం చేసుకున్న తర్వాత, అది నాకు భద్రతను తెస్తుంది. నా తెల్లటి క్లాస్ మేట్స్ బ్రౌన్ గర్ల్ మాస్టర్స్ వారి భాష వారి కంటే మెరుగ్గా మాట్లాడమని వలన విస్మయంతో చూస్తారు. నా ఆదర్శాన్ని ఖాళీ పేజీలలో రూపొందించలేకపోతే, నేను ఎలా ఉన్నానో చూపించడానికి నాకు స్థలం లేకపోతే నేను ఏమీటి అని ఎవ్వరికీ తెలియక పోవచ్చు. నా ఇంటి, ఎక్కడ మానవ అప్యాయత యొక్క బలమైన రూపం తాజాగా తయారుచేసిన కప్పు టీ యొక్క వెచ్చదనం వాలే, భావోద్వేగాలను వ్యక్తీకరించే ప్రదేశం కాదు.

నా మేజర్లను అధికారికంగా ఇంగ్లీష్ మరియు క్రియేటివ్ రైటింగ్ మరియు సెకండరీ ఇంగ్లీష్ ఎడ్యుకేషన్ అని ప్రకటించిన తర్వాత నాకు ఆఖరి సారిగా భిన్నమైన అనుభవము కలిగినది. అయోవా నగరంలోని నా క్రొత్త ఇంటిలో, రచయితగా నా గుర్తింపును ప్రదర్శించడానికి ఇంతకంటే మంచి స్థలం మరొకటి లేదని నేను భావిస్తున్నాను. ఆంగ్ల కార్యక్రమం నాకు ప్రచారం చేసిన వైవిధ్యం మరియు చేరిక యొక్క వాగ్దానాన్ని నేను నమ్ముతున్నాను. నేను అమెరికన్ సాహిత్య తరగతులకు హాజరుకావడం, వలసవాదుల రచనలను విశ్లేషించడం మరియు నా భారతీయ పెంపకంతో మాట్లాడగలిగే రచయితలను కనుగొనడం ప్రారంభించగానే, నా గోధుమ శరీరం ప్రధానంగా శ్వేతజాతీయుల సంస్థలో ఇతర శ్వేత విద్యార్థులలో స్థలాన్ని తీసుకుంటుందనే ఆలోచనతో నా కడుపు మండిపోతుంది. . లోతైన అనారోగ్యం కొనసాగుతుంది, నా స్నేహితులు, అందరు తెల్లవారు, నా రచన లేదా నా సంస్కృతి నాకు ఎందుకు ముఖ్యమో అర్థం కాలేదు, చీకటిలో నన్ను చూడలేరని చెప్పడం ద్వారా వారు నన్ను వేరొకరు ఎందుకు చేస్తారు, నా శరీరం యొక్క నా ఇమేజ్ ను దెబ్బతీసింది, లేదా ఓపెన్ మైక్స్ మరియు రీడింగుల వద్ద వారి ఉనికికి నాకు చెందిన వ్యక్తుల సమాహారంలో నన్ను కోల్పోయినట్లు అనిపిస్తుంది. అయోవా సీటీ

ఇల్లులాగా భావించినంత త్వరగా, నా తల్లి మద్దతుతో పాటు, చెందిన భావన అంతరించుకు పోయింది.

“నువ్వు ఎలా జీవనం సాగిస్తావు?” అని నా తల్లి ఫోన్ ద్వారా అడుగుతుంది. ఆమె ముదురు గోధుమ కళ్ళలోని భయం మరియు కోపాన్ని నేను ఊహించాను. ఆమెకు, నేను నా నాలుకను కోసి ఒక చెక్క పెట్టెలో పెట్టి ఇంటికి పంపించినంత స్పర్శ కలిగింది. ఒక భారతీయ కుమార్తె యొక్క అంతిమ ద్రోహం ఆమె తల్లికి త్యాగం చేసిన దానికి ప్రతిఫలం ఆమె కోరిక ప్రకారం నేను నా కాలేజీ మేజర్ ఇన్ సెలెక్ట్ చేసుకోక పోవటం. నేను ఆమె ఇష్టానికి వ్యతిరేకంగా నా స్వంత మార్గాన్ని ఏర్పరచుకున్నాను, ఒక జీవశాస్త్ర మేజర్ నాకు అందించే కీర్తి మరియు భద్రతకు దూరంగా ఉన్న మార్గం. నా కలలను నేను తేలికగా వదులుకుంటాననే ఆలోచనతో ఆమె విసుగు చెందింది. అన్నింటికంటే, ఆమె నాలో తాను చూసిన ప్రతిబింబంతో ఆమె విసుగు చెందింది, మరొక భారతీయ అమ్మాయి వేరే ఏదో చేయటానికి మెడికల్ స్కూల్ కలలను వదులుకుంటుంది. అయినప్పటికీ, నేను ఇంగ్లీషును అనుసరించడానికి చింతిస్తున్నాను అని నాకు తెలుసు. నా నిర్ణయం తరువాత నా తండ్రి మొదట ఆమె వినాశనాన్ని అనుసరించాడు. మెడికల్ స్కూళ్ళకు ఇంగ్లీష్ మేజర్ గా దరఖాస్తు చేసుకోవాలని నాకు సలహా ఇస్తున్న ఇమెయిళ్ళు, రచయితలు ఇంజనీర్లుగా మారిన కథలు, నిరాశ్రయులైన కళాకారులు మరియు రచయితల నాటకీయ డాక్యుమెంటరీలు, వారి లోతైన విచారం రచనను కొనసాగిస్తున్నాయని మరియు చాలా రాష్ట్రాల్లో జీవన వ్యయం యొక్క సూక్ష్మ జబ్ ఒక ఉన్నత పాఠశాల ఆంగ్ల ఉపాధ్యాయుడి సగటు జీతంతో పక్కపక్కనే. ఒక ఫోన్ కాల్ ఫోన్ ద్వారా ఏడుస్తున్న తరువాత, సంతోషంగా ఉండటానికి రాయడం నాకు అవసరమని నాన్న అర్థం చేసుకోవడం ప్రారంభించాడు. నా తండ్రి పోరాటంలో తన శక్తిని తగ్గించాడని తెలుసుకోవడం వల్ల నా తల్లి యొక్క శాశ్వత ఆగ్రహం మరింత బలపడిందని నేను ఊహించాను.

ఆమెలో కొంత భాగం ఆగ్రహంతో నిండి ఉందని నేను ఊహించాను, ఎందుకంటే నేను ఒక కలను, సాహిత్యం పట్ల అభిరుచిని అనుసరించడానికి ఎంచుకున్నాను, అక్కడ ఆమె మనపై విధించిన సంప్రదాయాల నుండి ఎప్పటికీ విడిపోదు. ఫోన్లో ఉన్నప్పుడు, ఫైనల్స్ వారానికి ముందు కళాశాల పట్టణం యొక్క ఖాళీ విస్తారంలోకి చూస్తూ, పదాలు నాకు కోల్పోయిన స్వీయతను కనుగొనే శక్తిని ఇస్తాయని నేను అర్థం చేసుకున్నాను, ఆ ఆవిష్కరణ నా తల్లిని అర్థం చేసుకోవడానికి వదిలివేస్తుంది, చివరికి, నేను కాదు కుమార్తె ఆమె అచ్చు చేయవచ్చు. ఆమెకు, నేను భారతీయుడిని చేసే నా చివరి భాగాన్ని కోల్పోతున్నాను: నా నాలుక. తెలుగు మాట్లాడటం మరొక రకమైన కమ్యూనికేషన్ కంటే ఎక్కువ, నా ఇంగ్లీష్ మరింత విస్తృతంగా పెరిగేకొద్దీ నేను దూరంగా ఉన్న సంస్కృతిని ఈ భాష మూర్తీభవించింది. ఆమె మరియు నేను ఇద్దరూ నా తెలుగు వాడకం తగ్గిపోయి చనిపోతారని, నేను గౌరవించటానికి పెరిగిన సంస్కృతి నా కొత్త అమెరికన్ నాలుకలో మరచిపోతుందని భయపడుతున్నాను.



ఆరవ తరగతిలో, స్నేహపూర్వక డ్రాగన్ చర్మం వలె ఆకాశం ముదురు పచ్చ ఆకుపచ్చగా మారినప్పుడు నేను చూస్తున్నాను. నా స్నేహితుడి తల్లి కరాటే నుండి మమ్మల్ని ఇంటికి నడుపుతోంది. రాబోయే తుఫాను కారణంగా మమ్మల్ని త్వరగా ఇంటికి తీసుకురావాలని ఆమె కోరుకుంటుంది, ఇది ఇతర పిల్లలను భయంతో వణికిపోయేలా చేస్తుంది కాని నన్ను ఉత్సాహంతో నింపుతుంది. నేను ఇకపై నీటికి భయపడను. నేను ఇప్పుడు పూర్వీకుల డాప్లర్ షిప్ట్ అని పిలిచే దాని ద్వారా మాత్రమే దీనిని వివరించవచ్చు; నేను ఎప్పుడూ రుతుపవనాలను అనుభవించనప్పటికీ, ఆకాశం ముదురుతున్నప్పుడు నా జన్మశాస్త్రం నన్ను ఉత్సాహపరుస్తుంది, నా కుటుంబం DNA ద్వారా లోతుగా పాతుకుపోయిన జ్ఞాపకం మరియు నా తల్లిదండ్రుల వారి బాల్యం గురించి చెప్పే కథలు, సమతుల్యతను పునరుద్ధరించిన వర్షాకాలం వర్షాకాలంలో భారతదేశం. వరి

పొలాల వద్దపు నీటితో నిండినప్పుడు, ఎండిన కాలం నుండి బురదను నానబెట్టినప్పుడు, గాలి భూమిపైకి ప్రవహించే నీటిని సీవ్ చేయడానికి దాహం వేసిన మొక్కల పైభాగాలపైకి నెట్టివేసినప్పుడు, వరి పొలాల ధనిక మరియు బలంగా పెరుగుతాయి.

నాకు ఆరు నెలల వయస్సు ఉన్నప్పుడు, నా తల్లిదండ్రులు ఇక్కడ నాకు మంచి జీవితాన్ని ఇవ్వగలరనే నమ్మకంతో శాశ్వతంగా యునైటెడ్ స్టేట్స్కు బయలుదేరారు. రుతుపవనాలు నా చర్మాన్ని ఎప్పటిలాగే తాకవు అనే వాస్తవం ఉన్నప్పటికీ, వారు తమకు తెలిసిన భారతదేశాన్ని నాలో సజీవంగా ఉంచడానికి ప్రయత్నిస్తారు, వారి పూర్వీకులు మరియు సంస్కృతి యొక్క సంప్రదాయాలను కొనసాగించడానికి ప్రయత్నిస్తున్నారు.

నేను ఇంటికి రాగానే పరిగెత్తుకుంటూ వెళ్లి న తల్లితండ్రి నుంచేని ఉన్న చేతుకు చేరుకున్నాను. వాళ్ళు ఇంటి వెనుక పక్కన ఉన్న ద్వారము వద్ద నుంచేని బయట కురుస్తున్న పెద్ద వర్షాన్ని గమనిస్తూ ఏ భయము అనందిస్తున్నారు. బయట పడిన వర్షాన్ని చూసి నేను మా ఇంటి పై కప్పు పడిపోతుందేమో అని అనుకున్నాను. నేను న పేరెంట్స్ ని అనుమతించండి అని అడుగుతున్నాను. నాకే బయటకు వెళ్లి వర్షములో తడవాలని కొరిగా ఉంది. నా పేరెంట్స్ నను వర్షము లోకి పంపించారు. నేను వర్షములో తడుస్తూ ఉంటే న ఆనందానికి అవధులు లేకుండా పోయాయి. గట్టిగ పడుతున్న వర్షపు చినుకులు న దేహాన్ని గట్టిగా గుచుకుంటున్నాయి. నాకు నా పేరెంట్స్ ఇండియా లో చిన్నప్పుడు ఎలగైతే వర్షా కాలాన్ని ఆనందిచారో అలాగే ఆనందించాలని ఉంది. కానీ అది ఇక్కడ సాధ్యపడదేమో.

“షాలూ, ఇప్పుడు లోపలికి రావడానికి సమయం ఆసన్నమైంది.” ఎముకకు ముంచిన మేము కలిసి లోపలికి నడుస్తాము.

ఉండటంతో నా భుజం మీద చేయి ఉన్నట్లు నేను భావిస్తున్నాను.

అయోవాతో నా సంబంధం ప్రస్తుతం సమస్యాత్మకంగా ఉంది, ఎందుకంటే నేను ప్రాతినిధ్యం కోరుతున్నాను, నేను ఎవరో మరియు నేను ఎవరిని వెతుకుతున్నానో నాకు తెలియదు కాబట్టి నేను పొందగలనని నాకు ఖచ్చితంగా తెలియదు. నా తెల్లని స్నేహితులు అంగీకరించేంత తెల్లగా నేను లేను, కానీ సంతోషంగా ఉండటానికి నేను ఇకపై ఉండవలసిన అవసరం లేదు. నేను ఉండటానికి ప్రయత్నిస్తున్నప్పటికీ, అనేక భారతీయ సమాజాలలో స్వాగతించేంత భారతీయుడిని నేను కాదు. నేను అయోవాను ప్రేమించకపోవచ్చు, కానీ అయోవా ప్రజలను ఉత్పత్తి చేయడానికి అనుమతించే సాహిత్యాన్ని నేను ప్రేమిస్తున్నాను. నేను ఇక్కడ ఉన్న సామర్థ్యాన్ని ప్రేమిస్తున్నాను. నేను పెద్దవాడయ్యాక, నాతో మరియు నా పొడవైన కళాశాల స్నేహితులతో పంచుకునే డ్యూప్లెక్స్ లో విశ్రాంతి తీసుకుంటున్నాను, ఇంట్లో నా కుటుంబాన్ని, ముఖ్యంగా నా తల్లిని ప్రేమించడం నేర్చుకుంటున్నాను. వారు ఇప్పటికీ నన్ను అర్థం చేసుకోలేదు, కానీ నేను నా స్వంత స్వీయ-విలువతో చేసినట్లుగా నా గురించి వారి అవగాహనలో నాకు అంత విలువ లేదు. నేను నా పుస్తకాల అరలో చూస్తూ ఉంటాను మరియు నా కన్ను నా వద్ద ఉన్న పిల్లల సాహిత్య సంకలనాన్ని పట్టుకుంటుంది, పైన షెల్ఫ్ లో విశ్రాంతి తీసుకుంటుంది. అకస్మాత్తుగా, నేను మళ్ళీ చిన్నవాడిని. ఆరేళ్ల కుమార్తె మంచం మీద ఓపికగా పడుకోవడాన్ని చూడటానికి మా అమ్మ నా గదిలోకి వస్తోందని నేను ఊహించుకుంటాను. పీట్ల క్రింద నేను చిన్నగా మరియు అమాయకంగా కనిపిస్తున్నానని ఆమె ఆలోచిస్తోంది, ఆమెను నిరాశపరిచే మరియు ఆమె ఆందోళన కలిగించే పదాలలో నేను ఎందుకు పెట్టుబడి పెట్టాను అని ఆలోచిస్తున్నాను. ఆమె నా గదిలోకి దూసుకెళ్తుంది, నాకు కోపం మరియు కఠినత అని ఒక విశ్వాసాన్ని చూపిస్తూ, మా పఠన సమయం వీలైనంత త్వరగా అయిపోతుందనే ఆశతో మంచం మీద తొందరపడి కూర్చుంటుంది. కానీ, అది ఆమెకు వీలైనంత త్వరగా ముగియలేదు. ఆమె కొనసాగించగలిగే దానికంటే వేగంగా

చదివాను. ఆమె తనను తాను అనిశ్చితంగా ఉన్నప్పటికీ, ఆమె చేయగలిగినదాన్ని సరిదిద్దడం ద్వారా నియంత్రణను తిరిగి పొందడానికి ప్రయత్నిస్తుంది. చివరగా, ట్రైమర్ ఆగిపోతుంది, మరియు ఆమె ఉపశమనంతో నిట్టూర్చి, పుస్తకాన్ని మూసివేసింది. పఠనం సమయం ముగిసిందని నేను ఎంత నిరాశకు గురయ్యానో ఆమె చూడగలదు, కాని ఆమె పూర్తి కావడం ఆనందంగా ఉంది. ఆమె పడక కాంతిని ఆపివేసి, మమ్మల్ని చీకటి గదికి తిరిగి ఇస్తుంది, నేను త్వరలోనే నిద్రపోతాను.

ఆమె బయలుదేరే ముందు, ఆమె నా గోడ మధ్యలో ఎత్తైన కిటికీ వెలుపల కనిపిస్తుంది. వెలుపల చీకటి ప్రపంచాన్ని చూసే ఆమె దాని నుండి బయటపడటానికి సరిపోతుంది. పెరటి చెరువులోని బాతులు సరస్సు అంచున కొట్టుమిట్టాడుతున్నాయి, నీటి అలలతో మెల్లగా కదులుతున్నాయి. ఇతర ఇళ్ల చుట్టూ ఉన్న చెట్లు సంఘీభావంగా నిలుస్తాయి. ఆమె కాంతితో నిండిన ఇతర కిటికీలను చూడవచ్చు, తల్లిదండ్రులు తమ పిల్లలను ఆసక్తిగా చదువుతున్నారని ఊహించుకుంటారు, వారి పుస్తకాల ఫాంటసీలో ఇప్పటికీ కప్పబడి ఉంటుంది. తన కుమార్తె కోసం తాను అదే చేయలేనని ఆమె అగ్రహం వ్యక్తం చేసింది. వారు భారతదేశాన్ని విడిచిపెట్టినందుకు ఆమె విచారంగా ఉంది, ప్రతిరోజూ దాని వెచ్చని సూర్యకాంతి ఆమె చర్మాన్ని ముద్దుపెట్టుకుంటుంది, దాని వర్షాకాలం కొత్త సీజన్ ప్రారంభం కానుందని గ్రహించి ఆమెను నింపుతుంది. ఆమె భారతదేశంలో సంతోషంగా ఉంది, ఇప్పుడు ఆమె ఇక్కడ ఉంది, భయపడింది. ఆమె తిరిగి మంచం మీద కూర్చుంది. ఆమె నా చిన్న చేతులను పట్టుకొని నన్ను పట్టుకుంటుంది. ఆమె అర్థం చేసుకోవడం ప్రారంభించలేని పదాల ద్వారా నేను ఇప్పటికే కొట్టుకుపోయానని ఆమెకు తెలుసు. ఆమె నా కొత్త ఇంటిలో ఒక విదేశీయురాలు, నేను ఆమెలో ఒక విదేశీయుడిని. ఈ ప్రయాణం మా ఇద్దరికీ కష్టం. అప్పటికే ఆమె జాగ్రత్తగా సృష్టించిన కథను నాశనం చేయకుండా నా స్వంత కథను ఎలా పూర్తి చేయాలో వివరించే భాష నా దగ్గర లేదు. నా కథ నా వేలికొనల నుండి పోయడానికి వేచి ఉంది, ఇతరులకన్నా

కొన్ని రోజులు ఎక్కువ ఓపికతో, ఒకరోజు ఒక కొత్త కథను మరొకరి జీవన కథలో, లేదా ఇంగ్లీష్ యొక్క హైబ్రిడ్ భాష యొక్క సృష్టిలో మరియు ఒక కొత్త కథను బహిర్గతం చేసే రహస్యాలను నేను వెలికి తీయగలనని నాకు తెలుసు. గొంతు వెనుక భాగంలో తీగలను తీపి రుచిగా చూసే తెలుగు. కానీ, ఆ రోజు వచ్చేవరకు, నేను నా మాటలను ఉక్కిరిబిక్కిరి చేస్తాను, బిగ్గరగా చెప్పటానికి ఇవన్నీ వ్రాస్తాయని నేను భావిస్తున్నాను.



VANESSA "CUEPONICIHUATL" ESPINOZA

ARTIST STATEMENT

I WAS BORN in the silver state of Zacatecas, México. I grew up in a house in El Rancho La Hoya that was made by the hands of my abuelito and constructed of adobe bricks. As a toddler, I made the journey with my family to the United States, where we made Conesville, Iowa, our home. For the majority of my life, I have lived in rural areas. Rural living has always been a big part of my identity. It shaped my values and ethics, but it also prohibited me from experiencing opportunities. It wasn't until I left these two rural towns that I questioned who I was.

What are you? Where are you from? Questions asked in a tone that made you feel like you weren't supposed to be there, that you were not supposed to have lived in Iowa most of your life. I asked myself if this different path I was taking—a path no other person in my family had decided to take—was worth it. I did not know how difficult or lonely the journey would be. In order to open those doors in my path, I had to gain strength from what I had and what I knew. That strength was so powerful because it came from the people who came before me.

I am who I am because of the shoulders I stand on and because the stories of my people keep me from losing my identity, even during those times when I am questioned where I am from—from mis tatarabuelos who resisted colonization, bisabuelas who kept the family together during la Revolución Mexicana, abuelos who came to work in the fields in the United States as braceros, and parents who work tirelessly in meatpacking plants and construction. Their hard work has not been in vain. It is time to honor them by sharing a piece of us.

Growing up, I never read stories that I could identify with, and the stories I read about Mexican people did not reflect my own lived experiences. Stories were often inaccurate and filled with stereotypes. We were often forgotten, even though Mexicans have been in Iowa since before it became a state. Stories were never written about those of us who lived in rural places like Conesville, Iowa. We, the people who live in these rural areas, are feeding the country, but we have been erased.

Although my family passes down testimonios from generation to generation, we have never documented our history. It is now time to share un pedazo de nuestro testimonio, a piece of our story.

Iowa has been a door for me. Often, this door came with many locks, bolts, and bars, but it has been nice enough to me to keep me here. When people learn more about my culture, I hope they understand why some traditions are sacred and how practicing our beliefs and values is a way of survival. Migrating puts us at risk of losing part of our identity because negative societal messages make us feel unempowered, a loss of our sense of self in the face of white supremacy. Our identity is hanging by a thread, but it is also weaving into other threads that we've stumbled upon in the environment we live in. Because of this, we preserve what we can and hold onto it tightly. When our culture becomes appropriated, the traditions and customs start losing their purpose and meaning, and our existence starts to be erased or retold in an unauthentic way. I dream that others find beauty in their own story and are brave enough to share it themselves.

MORE THAN A PIECE OF PAPER

VANESSA "CUEPONICHUATL" ESPINOZA

Departure Number
8 2 08

PROCESSED FOR I-551.
TEMPORARY EVIDENCE OF
LAWFUL ADMISSION FOR
PERMANENT RESIDENCE
VALID UNTIL
EMPLOYMENT AUTHORIZED

Im
Na
I-9
De

14. Family Name
ESPINOZA - MADRIGAL

15. First (Given) Name
VANESSA

16. Birth Date (Day/Mo/Yr)

17. Country of Citizenship
MEXICO

See Other Side ENGLISH STAPLE HERE

THIS PAPER *es más que un papel*. It is my story. It is a reminder of how far I have come and what I have had to endure. It is the exhale of a long, deep breath I'd been holding for almost seven years, ever since my family came to Iowa from México. This paper is a reminder of privilege. It is a chance. It is the American Dream. It is like getting into college when nobody in your family has ever gone to college or finding out that after you studied so hard, you finally passed the driving exam to get your license. *Es esperanza*. Hope.

This paper is my permanent residency that gave me permission to travel back to México. It is a little bent because it was stuck in a drawer for years. You can still feel the raised seal, and if you're not careful, the staple can still prick you. My mom doesn't know I have it. She doesn't like us to have important documents because she thinks we are going to damage them, but it is mine. I will never throw it away.

The words on the paper are written in red like the big *F* the teacher wrote on my math test. I was never good at math, but I was good at English. I even got the Senior English Award. I am proud of that award because English is not my first language. I don't like red markings on paper, but on this paper I do. On this paper, the things that are written are good.

The best thing is that my birth name is written on this paper. Vanessa Espinoza Madrigal. I wish my surname hadn't been removed when I became a U.S. citizen on February 27, 2001. I remember missing school that day and signing my citizenship certificate in ugly cursive because I still didn't know how to write in good cursive. The adults kept telling my sister and I to write as pretty as we can. They even gave us a blank piece of paper to practice before we wrote on the certificate. When my dad was studying for his citizenship exam, he would put on a CD with the civic questions. I remember repeating the thirteen colonies with my sister and laughing because we would always say *Massachusetts* in a weird way. As I wrote my name on the certificate, I just kept repeating the thirteen colonies in my head.

In this country, we don't have two last names. You have to pick only one last name. That's what the immigration officer said. I wondered which *apellido* I should pick, then remembered my dad had decided already. We would keep his paternal last name. *Did we just renounce the Madrigal family?* I wondered. *Will they forgive me for erasing that name? What does it mean to not have Madrigal in my name anymore? Now people will only call me Vanessa Espinoza.* And they did just that.

When I got married, I did not change my *apellido*. I did not want to continue losing my identity even more. Yet, Vanessa isn't what I am called anymore. I use my indigenous name now,

CueponiCihuatl. Blooming or Blossoming Womxn. I received this name in a dream. It is a name my ancestors said I need to live up to. My ancestors, the people who died before I existed and the ones who died before I could see them again. The Chichimecas, Zacatecos, the ones who fought against the Spaniards, the only indigenous group to be bribed into peace because the *colonizadores* could not continue fighting against people who were so resilient. *Siempre estas creciendo, aunque no lo puedas ver.* You are always growing, even if you cannot see it. Be patient. Endure. It will be painful, but it will make you stronger. You are like *el nopal*. The cactus plant that grows without water.

I am almost ten years old in the picture on my residency card, though I look younger. The picture is weird because nobody takes pictures facing the side like that for government identification anymore. You can see my ugly haircut, my *copete* all crooked and too short. I have the same ears as my dad. *Que bueno* that they only took one side of me, because otherwise you would see that one of my ears is bigger than the other.

You can't tell yet that the sideburns would grow bigger throughout the years because I am so hairy. You can barely see my mustache. A girl with a mustache. That was never fun. *Estás bien peluda y pareces una changa*, you are so hairy and look like a monkey. My sister and all the kids at school would laugh at me for this. I had hair on my knuckles and on my toes. It was never a big deal until someone pointed it out like that one time on my way home from school. Adam and Andrew laughed at me on the school bus and with a pencil poked at my hairy toes. *Look at her nasty feet. Ewww. You need to shave that off. You're nasty.* How could I shave them if my parents didn't let me? I hated P.E. because everyone would see my hairy legs when I changed into shorts.

Hair has always been a complicated part of my identity. Some of the biggest bonding memories I have with my *tías* and *mami* have to do with hair like when they made *trenzas* for me. As I got older, I was ashamed of using *trenzas* because I would get called India. I tried to dye my hair blonde because I hated my dark hair. I would straighten it too because I was told that my hair was *pelo malo* just because it was curly and puffy. I felt liberated when I cut my hair

because we weren't allowed to cut it. If we cut it, it would be offered to *el Santo Niño de Atocha* as a thank you for granting us miracles. Hair is complicated like the *barañas que se te hacen cuando no te peinas*.

I remember when I went to take this picture as if it were yesterday. My dad warned us not to get all *sucias* because we would be taking pictures. The lady who took our pictures at Walmart had piercings on her face and a shirt that showed her belly. My mom said she looked like a *toro* with her nose ring. I had to look at the poster on the wall, and when she took my picture, I closed my eyes because of the flash, like I always do. We took another photo and the second time it did come out good.

Yo anhelaba papeles. I had wanted papers for so long. I wanted them so I could return to the Motherland, back to the silver mining state of Zacatecas, to the *Pueblo Mágico* Jerez, Zacatecas. I would cry myself to sleep thinking that I would never see my *abuelitos* again. I did get to see *mi abuelita* again when she came to visit us from México when we lived *en las trailas*. Oh how I wished we had a house during that time. I did not want her to see us living *en las trailas*. We didn't even have a basement in case there was a tornado. I got to see my other *abuelitos* when we went back to México, but I did not know that every time I would go back, it would be the last time I said goodbye to my *abuelita* and *bisabuelitos*.

Algún día los volveremos a ver. One day we will see them again. That is all my mom would say. She would especially say that when I would come home upset from school on Grandparent's Day. My classmates had their grandparents with them at school and I didn't. We couldn't even call our loved ones back home because they lived in *el rancho* and there was no electricity there. The only thing we could do was send them letters, so I paid attention in class when we were writing so I could write letters to my *abuelita*. I learned to read and write in English, but I did my best writing out words in Spanish, and my sister would proofread my letters. She was a year ahead of me. She already knew how to sign her name in cursive. I couldn't wait to learn to write fancy words so I could sign my letters. My dad didn't always give us an allowance, but when he did, I would save *los dólares* to send in my grandma's letters, wrapping

them in aluminum and tucking them between the folded *cartas*. You had to do that because if the mail people in México looked through the envelope and saw the money, they would take it.

I also wanted papers so I could stop feeling scared. Sometimes I could not concentrate in school because I was worried that I would come home and my mom would not be there because *la migra* took her like it was detaining a lot of people that did not have papers. I did not want her to be taken like one of my classmate's mom was taken. My dad had papers. He got to travel back to México all the time and bring us *dulces, huaraches de llanta*, and other stuff from México like *camisetas de Las Chivas*—jerseys of our favorite soccer team. He got to see his parents. My mom couldn't.

My family was separated because my dad was always *trabajando en el norte*, working in the North. We only got to see him once a year. It was hard on all of us so we decided not to be separated anymore. That is why we came to this country, so we could be together. My sister and I crossed the border together in 1994. My mom took a whole week to cross the border, and my dad was already in Columbus Junction, Iowa, where he was working at a meatpacking plant called IBP. We crossed the border in a car with my uncle and *abuelita*. *Welita* Yeyes had to come with us because we did not want to leave México, and if we didn't see my mom or *welita* we would start crying.

In México, we lived with our paternal grandparents in *El Rancho La Hoya*. My first taste of food was in my *abuelita* Reyes' kitchen, where she would make *tortillas a mano* and feed me *bolitas de masa*. We would wake up in the morning and run to hug our *abuelitos* and say *buenos días*. I don't remember crossing the border because we fell asleep in the car. I just remember waking up and arriving at *la casa de mis padrinos* in El Monte, California. Mom wasn't there yet. She was still crossing the border. We latched onto my grandma. I was at her feet the whole time. If she got up to go to the kitchen, I was there next to her.

When my sister and I needed to go to the bathroom, we went outside by the bushes. My cousin Patty started laughing at us. *Why are they peeing outside like animals?* My *madrina* Lupe yelled at us, *Mijas no hagan del baño afuera, hagan del baño aqui*, go to the

bathroom inside, here in the toilet. They started watching us every time we would go outside. They would grab us and make us go to the bathroom in these bowls that looked like you could fall into and get your butt wet. What if I drowned in that bowl? Why did I have to push the flush, and where did the poop go? We would escape and go to the bathroom outside. My grandma reminded Patty that there were no toilets in *el rancho*. We did not have running water. We would go to the bathroom in *el corral*. It was going to take us a while to learn that in the United States, you go to the bathroom inside. *No te burles de ellas*, don't laugh at them.

My mom finally arrived, and a couple of days later, we left for Iowa on the plane. *Why is everyone crying? Where are we going? Why isn't Grandma coming with us? No! I don't want to leave. Let's stay here. Are we going to see our grandma again?* we asked. *Yes, tomorrow*, she said.

But tomorrow never came. It took another four years until we saw each other again. My *abuelita* had a visa, and she was able to come see us in Iowa during the summer. She couldn't come in the winter, *no aguantaría el frío*. She did not come often though because she was getting sick and traveling was hard for her. We saw her again when we got our papers and traveled back to México. We tried to stay in touch through *cartitas*, but after years, memories start to fade, and it all felt like a dream. Often, the smell of fresh corn tortillas or the sound of *chiles tostándose* would take me back to those days on *el rancho*, but I had forgotten the faces of *mi gente*, my people.

We arrived in Iowa in the summer. It was so humid, a different kind of hot that we weren't used to. We didn't know anybody. We didn't speak English. My mom didn't know how to drive and there was no public transportation like in México. We locked ourselves in the apartment. It was located downtown and had a lot of cockroaches when we first moved in. We had never had cockroaches in our house in México. We lived on the first floor, and in the basement of the apartments lived Soledad, or Chole, one of my mom's Dominican friends who had two kids around our age. Her Spanish was a little funny and her food was different. She introduced us to *arroz con habichuelas* and bachata music. She really liked our Mexican food.

The sidewalk and stairs in the apartments were all cracked. We told the landlord to fix it but they didn't. My sister broke her arm because she fell on that cracked sidewalk. It was only then that they fixed it. There were no animals. The rooster didn't wake us up. We drank milk from a gallon jug and not fresh from the cow. It was cold inside the house because there was a box by the window that threw out air that felt like a freezer. We cried every day. We missed nature. We missed our *casa de adobe*.

Dad worked at night. We slept all day. *Nos atiriciamos* because we were sad. Our souls stayed behind in México. There was nothing to do. There was nobody to see. There was no community, no sense of belonging. No cousins and *tías* that would come on Sunday to make *gorditas de horno* and *chiles rellenos*. Here, no *había familia que se juntara*. No family that would gather together. *Pepe. Pepe. Quiero a mi welito Pepe*, I want to see my Grandpa Pepe. We cried, and my mom cried with us. *Ya pronto los vamos a ver*. Soon. Soon we will see them.

But soon never arrived. It got worse, especially during our first winter. It was so cold that our *pelos de la nariz* froze, and even though my mom would bundle us up so thickly that we wobbled like penguins in all the layers of clothing, we were still cold. We didn't even know how to walk in the snow. We kept falling down. We didn't want to go outside, not even to make snowmen. We started getting sick. The doctor told my parents that they had to take us outdoors, even if we didn't want to go. We needed to build up our immune system by playing outside and escaping from indoor germs and bacteria.

A couple of years after arriving in Iowa, we began to lose some of our Mexican traditions, like *Día de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead. We could not find *pan de muerto*, *papel picado*, or *cempazúchitl* flowers in Iowa. There were no sugar skulls. No *Catrina* parades. All the monarch butterflies by this time had left Iowa, whereas in México, the butterflies always migrated during Day of the Dead, and my *tías* would say, "*Son nuestros seres queridos*," they are our loved ones coming back to visit. Our ancestors' graves were in México. How were we supposed to go to the cemetery and decorate the graves if their graves weren't in Iowa? We also didn't have their

pictures to put on the altar. My mom said that we could *prender una veladora* and leave them fruit. We could say a prayer for our ancestors. That was all. But the fruit was not the same. None of the stores sold *guayabas*, *tamarindo*, or *pitayas*.

Eventually, making an *altar de muertos* became even more difficult because my parents came home exhausted from working in the factory. How were they supposed to cook this buffet of food for our ancestors if they were tired and it took all day to make *tamales*, *mole*, and everything else? It's not like we forgot about our ancestors. Instead of celebrating *Día de los Muertos* in Iowa, my mom would send my *tías* money. She made sure to send enough so that their graves could be decorated elaborately and that they had the best food.

My parents also always made sure to share their loved ones' stories with us and tell us that they were our *angelitos* watching over us. When my mom would make a special food like *mole*, she would describe how my dad's mom taught her how to cook because when she got married, she didn't know how to cook. My mom never learned to cook because she was always working. She had to drop out of elementary school so she could work. My *abuelita* was patient with my mom and never judged her, even though most womxn in México are expected to know how to cook. My grandma was a good cook because she was one of the oldest in her family. When her parents went to Fresno to sell *carnitas*, *chicharrones*, *verduras*, and more, she was stuck at home babysitting her younger siblings and was in charge of washing all the *ollas* and making *tamales*.

Mom also shared how she went to her grandma's house and ate *postre de guayaba*, and how her other grandparents lived in a house that was dug into the earth. It was made of grass and dirt, a hole in the ground. My great-grandfather would make adobes and fall asleep drunk in the mud, and my great-grandmother would cook in a ravine. She would heat up the food by lighting wood that she would find. They suffered a lot in life. Poverty was too real and my great-grandpa would take refuge in alcohol. They did eventually live in a house made of adobe. It was small and ugly. My great-grandma who lived in this underground home also never wore shoes. She could climb cactus trunks and the thorns never bothered

her. Oh, the memories of those stories that they shared! I felt as if I knew all these people I had never met.

When I graduated college, my grandma came to me in a dream. She had died on my last day of fifth grade. My dad was the only one who could go to her funeral in México, and I never got to say my last goodbye. In my dream, she told me that she had never left me, that she was always with me. I cried to her, telling her that I felt bad that we had left her behind. *Se tuvieron que ir. Si no, no fueras la gran mujer que eres hoy.* You had to leave. You had to leave so you could be the womxn that you are today.

Even my *abuelita* knew that in México, we would not have the opportunities that Iowa gave us. Iowa gave us the chance to be more than a housewife. We could go to school. We wouldn't have to quit school in second grade and start working like my mom did. We did not have to be a nanny or a domestic worker. It was honorable work, but it was also work that nobody wanted to do. We could have an actual childhood. Toys. Birthday parties. More than three outfits. We wouldn't have to wear rubber shoes that gave us blisters and burned us because our feet got wet or sweaty. We could have more than one pair of underwear and socks. We didn't have to carry water in big drums from *el arroyo* and put them on the wagon attached to the tractor. We didn't have to walk seven miles to school. We could have a chance. A chance at life.

After *mi abuelita* came to me in a dream, I decided to continue honoring her memory by making an altar for her on the Day of the Dead. I made my own *cempazúchitl* flowers with tissue paper. I served the food in *platos de barro*, and I took the day off from work so I could spend time praying. I called my aunts to ask them what my grandma liked to eat and made her *atole* and *huevo con chile a mano*. I used pictures from the time we first arrived in the United States. In one photo, we are sitting on the coach side by side and she has her arm around me. In another, my sister is on her lap. In this picture, my grandma is not as sick as she was in her last moments of life when cancer killed her.

I added a picture of my father-in-law, whom I never got to meet, and my great-grandparents, whose pictures are in a sepia tone. My father-in-law loved *pollo en naranja*, a dish not typical in Zacatecas,

but I learned to make it to honor him. I looked for the best fruit, and I added salt in a dish for purification and a glass of water. Although I wanted to light real candles, I used fake ones because I did not want to burn down the apartment. The altar has grown every year, and I have been able to add more items because as the Latinx population has grown in Iowa, so has access to Mexican representation like *pan de muerto*. When I returned to México, my *tía* Celia and I opened up *el baul de los recuerdos* and I was able to get pictures of my grandparents when they married and of my paternal great-grandmothers.

Sometimes it is hard to hold a mirror to our face and accept the flaws we see in ourselves. Honoring my ancestors is a very sacred thing to me, and I used to think I was my ancestors' wildest dreams, especially after my grandma told me she was proud of me for being the womxn I am today. Yet, I am not their wildest dreams. I am my own wildest dreams. Higher education can have a way of objectifying one's suffering or trauma as a way of inspiration. I fell into this trap. As much as I used to say that my degree was for my family and all the ones who couldn't make it, I truly only went to college for myself. I went to college to escape machismo. To escape rural Iowa. To find doors that my town did not have to offer me. The only thing my small town offered me was a job at a meatpacking plant. College gave me wings. I transformed myself and had to unlearn a lot of the problematic mindsets I used to have like colorism, fatphobia, classism, homophobia, and more. I am still unlearning this. Through the theories I learned, I experienced a liberatory process, a place for healing. I always thought that the system was the problem, but did not realize I was a part of the system too. I benefited from it. The very least I should be doing is acknowledging that now I have a power and privilege I did not have before.

Además, my family is not always happy with the knowledge I got from going to all these colleges. For me to say these degrees are for my parents is a lie because I know that my parents resent the education I got. You see, *yo soy más vocal*. I challenge machismo. I would consider myself a *mujerista*, and my family is not ready for a womxn to be that way. To this day, whenever I try to speak up, I am told *calladita te ves más bonita*. My worth is also measured by the

amount of children I have. I do not have children, and at my age, I should have had children already. A career womxn isn't something to be proud of, especially if she has been married for many years and does not have kids yet. *A pesar de todo*, I try to include them in what I know and what I do. Just because *mis padres* are from *el rancho*, it doesn't mean they won't understand what I am going through when I work in an air-conditioned office with my own mini fridge and microwave and I'm the only Mexican in some meetings.

I wonder if my descendants will put my photo on their altar. Will they find me worthy enough to make an altar for? Who gets remembered and who gets forgotten? What stories will they say about me? Will they talk about my name CueponiCihuatl and the journey it took to become the womxn I am today? Will I be remembered as the unapologetic ancestor that spoke her mind and took the different, lonely path? Or will I be forgotten like the dust that I am and will become?

Honoring my ancestors and heritage helps me celebrate the present and embrace the future. It helps me *mantener mis pies firmes en la tierra*, keep my feet firm on the ground. What a powerful piece of paper. It is a *punte* between my ancestry and life in Iowa. This paper is my story. It is the story that kept my heart beating. It is the object that gave me the opportunity to find my soul again, to feel the warmth I couldn't feel in Iowa, especially during the cold winters. This *papel* helped me stay in Iowa and understand that Iowa has to be my home *hasta mañana*.

We are still in Iowa because *Dios nos tiene aquí*. God has us here. How else would we have survived so long? One day I will return again to the place where my husband and I can feel a sense of belonging, where we won't be othered because of our nationality, where we can speak Spanish freely and not feel *la soledad* among the busy people in the college town we live in. A place where people say hi to you and when they ask you how you're doing, they really want to know the answer. We do not know what the future holds for us, but if I ever become a mother, I hope my children experience this feeling where all your worries go away, *el calor de la gente* or warmth of people, and you find that the things you complained about do not actually matter. What matters is being in presence with people

that only care about sharing their time with you, even if it is just to eat a plate of *sopa y frijoles de la olla* with *un taco de queso con chile al molcajete*. A place where people can talk all day and not turn on the TV or look at their phone. A place called home.

MÁS QUE UN PEDAZO DE PAPEL

VANESSA "CUEPONICIHUATL" ESPINOZA

TRADUCIDO AL ESPAÑOL POR
VANESSA "CUEPONICIHUATL" ESPINOZA

Departure Number
8

Im
Na
I-9
De

PROCESSED FOR I-551.
TEMPORARY EVIDENCE OF
LAWFUL ADMISSION FOR
PERMANENT RESIDENCE
VALID UNTIL
EMPLOYMENT AUTHORIZED

14. Family Name
ESPINOZA - MADRIGAL

15. First (Given) Name
VANESSA

16. Birth Date (Day/Mo/Yr)

17. Country of Citizenship
MEXICO

See Other Side ENGLISH STAPLE HERE

ESTE PAPEL ES MÁS que un papel. Es mi historia. Es un recordatorio de lo lejos que he llegado y he tenido que aguantar. Es la exhalación de una respiración larga y profunda que he estado conteniendo durante casi siete años, desde que mi familia llegó a Iowa desde México. Este documento es un recordatorio del privilegio que tengo. Es una oportunidad. Es el sueño americano. Es como cuando ingresas a la universidad cuando nadie en tu familia ha ido a la universidad o descubrir que después de haber estudiado tanto,

finalmente pasaste el examen de manejo para obtener tu licencia. Es esperanza.

Este documento es mi residencia permanente que me dio permiso de viajar de regreso a México. Está un poco doblado porque estuvo atorado en un cajón durante años. Todavía puedo sentir el sello elevado, y si no tienes cuidado, la grapa aún te puede pinchar. Mi mamá no sabe que lo tengo. No le gusta que tengamos documentos importantes porque cree que los vamos a dañar, pero es mío. Nunca lo tiraré a la basura.

Las palabras en este pedazo de papel están escritas en rojo como la gran F que la maestra escribió en mi examen de matemáticas. Nunca fui buena en matemáticas, pero sí en inglés. Incluso, en el último año de la prepa obtuve el reconocimiento de tener el mejor promedio en mi clase en el inglés. Estoy orgullosa de ese premio porque el inglés no es mi primer idioma. No me gustan las marcas rojas en el papel, pero en este papel sí. En este papel, las cosas que están escritas son buenas.

Lo mejor es que mi nombre de nacimiento está escrito en este papel. Vanessa Espinoza Madrigal. Me hubiera gustado que todo mi apellido no se hubiera eliminado cuando me convertí en ciudadana estadounidense el 27 de febrero de 2001. Recuerdo que falté a la escuela ese día y firmé mi certificado de ciudadanía en letra cursiva fea porque todavía no sabía cómo escribir así. Los adultos no dejaban de decirle a mi hermana y a mí que escribiéramos lo más bonito posible. Decían, “escribe en carta.” Incluso nos dieron un papel en blanco para practicar antes de que escribiéramos en el certificado. Cuando mi padre estudiaba para su examen de ciudadanía, ponía un CD con las preguntas cívicas. Me acuerdo que repetía las trece colonias con mi hermana y nos reíamos porque siempre decíamos Massachusetts de una manera extraña y chistosa. Mientras escribía mi nombre en el certificado, seguía repitiendo las trece colonias en mi cabeza.

En este país, no tenemos dos apellidos. Tienes que elegir solo un apellido. Eso es lo que dijo el oficial de inmigración. Me preguntaba qué apellido debería elegir, luego recordé que mi padre ya había decidido. Mantendremos el apellido paterno. *¿Acabamos de renunciar*

a la familia Madrigal? Me preguntaba todo esto mientras nos daban la ciudadanía. ¿Me perdonarán por borrar ese nombre? ¿Qué significa no tener Madrigal en mi nombre nunca más? Ahora la gente solo me llamará Vanessa Espinoza. Y ellos hicieron justamente eso.

Cuando me casé, no me cambié mi apellido. No quería seguir perdiendo mi identidad aún más. Sin embargo, Vanessa ya no es lo que me llaman. Ahora uso mi nombre indígena, CueponiCihuatl. Mujer floreciente. Recibí este nombre en un sueño. Es un nombre que mis ancestros dijeron que necesito cumplir. Mis antepasados, las personas que murieron antes de que yo existiera y los que murieron antes de que pudiera volver a verlos. Los Chichimecas, los Zacatecos, los que lucharon contra los españoles, el único grupo indígena que fue sobornado a paz porque los colonizadores no podían continuar luchando contra un pueblo que era tan resistente. *Siempre estas creciendo, aunque no lo puedas ver. Se paciente. Aguantá. Será doloroso, pero te hará más fuerte. Eres como el nopal. La planta que crece sin agua.*

Tengo casi diez años en la foto de mi tarjeta de residencia, aunque parezco más joven. La imagen es extraña porque ya nadie se toma fotos mirando hacia un lado para fotos de identificación del gobierno. Puedes ver mi corte de pelo feo, mi copete todo torcido y demasiado corto. Tengo los mismos oídos que mi papá. Que bueno que solo se puede ver un solo lado de mí, porque de lo contrario, verías que una de mis orejas es más grande que la otra.

Aún no se puede ver que las patillas crecerían más a lo largo de los años porque soy muy peluda. Casi no puedes ver mi bigote. Una niña con bigote. Eso nunca fue divertido. *Estás bien peluda y pareces a una changa.* Mi hermana y todos los niños en la escuela se reían de mí por esto. Yo tenía vello en los nudillos y en los dedos de los pies. Nunca fue un gran problema hasta que alguien lo señaló una vez de camino a casa desde la escuela. Adam y Andrew se rieron de mí en el autobús escolar y con un lápiz me pincharon los dedos peludos. *Mira sus pies desagradables. Ewww. Necesitas afeitarte eso. Eres repugnante.* ¿Cómo podría yo afeitarme los si mis padres no me dejaban? Siempre odié la clase de educación física porque todos iban a poder ver mis piernas peludas cuando me cambiaba de chor.

El pelo siempre ha sido una parte complicada de mi identidad. Algunos de los mejores recuerdos que tengo con mis tías y mi mamá tienen que ver con el cabello, como cuando me hacían trenzas. A medida que crecí, me avergonzaba usar trenzas porque me llamaban india. Traté de teñirme el pelo de rubio porque odiaba mi cabello oscuro. También me lo alasiaba porque me dijeron que mi cabello era pelo malo solo porque era pelo chino y esponjoso. Me sentí liberada cuando me corté el pelo porque no se nos dejaban cortarlo. Si no lo cortamos, se lo ofrecíamos al Santo Niño de Atocha como agradecimiento por concedernos milagros. El pelo es complicado como las barañas que se te hacen cuando no te peinas.

Me acuerdo cuando me fui a tomar esta foto como si fuera ayer. Mi papá nos advirtió que no anduviéramos sucias porque nos estaríamos tomando fotos. La señora que nos tomó fotos en la Walmart tenía perforaciones en la cara y una camisa que mostraba su ombligo. Mi mamá dijo que parecía como un toro con el arete en la nariz. Tuve que mirar el póster en la pared, y cuando me tomó la foto, cerré los ojos por el flash de la cámara, como siempre. Me tomó otra foto y la segunda vez salió bien.

Yo anhelaba papeles por mucho tiempo. Los quería para poder regresar a la patria, de regreso al estado minero de plata de Zacatecas, al pueblo mágico de Jerez, Zacatecas. Lloraba hasta quedarme dormida pensando que nunca volvería a ver a mis abuelitos. Llegué a ver a mi abuelita nuevamente cuando vino a visitarnos desde México cuando vivíamos en las trailas. Oh, cómo me hubiera gustado tener una casa durante ese tiempo. No quería que nos viera viviendo en las trailas. Ni siquiera teníamos un sótano en caso de que hubiera un tornado. Pude ver a mis otros abuelitos cuando volvimos a México, pero no sabía que cada vez que volvería, sería la última vez que me despediría de mis abuelita y bisabuelitos.

Algun día los volveremos a ver. Eso es todo lo que me decía mi mamá, especialmente cuando yo llegaba molesta de la escuela cada que tenían el Día de los Abuelitos. Mis compañeros de clase tenían a sus abuelitos con ellos en la escuela y yo no. Ni siquiera podíamos llamarle a nuestros seres queridos en México porque vivían en el rancho y no había electricidad allí. Lo único que podíamos hacer era enviarles cartas, así que siempre presté mucha atención en clase

cuando estábamos escribiendo para poder escribir cartas a mi abuelita. Aprendí a leer y escribir en inglés, pero hacía lo mejor que podía para escribir las palabras en español, y mi hermana corregía mis cartas. Ella iba un año más que yo en la escuela. Ella ya sabía cómo firmar su nombre en cursiva. Me emocionaba llegar aprender a escribir palabras elegantes para poder firmar mis cartas. Mi papá no siempre nos daba nuestro domingo, pero cuando lo hacía, yo ahorrraba los dólares para enviárselos en las cartas a mi abuela, envolviéndolos en aluminio y metiéndolas entre las cartas dobladas. Tenías que hacer eso porque si la gente de correo en México miraba a través del sobre y veía el dinero, se lo quedaban.

También quería papeles para poder dejar de sentir miedo. A veces no podía concentrarme en la escuela porque me preocupaba volver a casa y no encontrar a mi mamá porque la migra se la llevó, así como estaba deteniendo a muchas personas que no tenían papeles. No quería que se la llevaran como se llevaron a una de las madres de mi compañera de clases. Mi papá tenía papeles. Él podía viajar a México todo el tiempo y traernos dulces, huaraches de llanta y otras cosas de México como camisetas de Las Chivas. Él podía ver a sus padres. Mi madre no podía

Mi familia estaba separada porque mi papá siempre estaba trabajando en el norte. Solo pudimos verlo una vez al año. Fue difícil para todos nosotros, así que decidimos no separarnos jamás. Esa fue la razón por la cual nos venimos a este país. Para no estar separados. Mi hermana y yo cruzamos la frontera juntas en el año de 1994. Mi mamá tardó una semana para cruzar la frontera, y mi padre ya estaba en Columbus Junction, Iowa, donde trabajaba en una planta empacadora de carne llamada IBP. Cruzamos la frontera en un auto con mi tío y abuelita. Welita Yeyes tuvo que venir con nosotros porque no queríamos irnos de México, y si no veíamos a mi mamá o welita, comenzábamos a llorar.

En México, vivíamos con nuestros abuelitos paternos en El Rancho La Hoya. La primera vez que probé la comida fue en la cocina de Abuelita Reyes, donde ella hacía tortillas a mano y me daba de comer bolitas de masa. Nos despertábamos en la mañana y corríamos para abrazar a nuestros abuelitos y decir buenos días. No recuerdo haber cruzado la frontera porque nos quedamos

dormidas en el auto. Solo recuerdo despertarme y llegar a la casa de mis padrinos en El Monte, California. Mamí aún no estaba allí. Ella todavía estaba cruzando la frontera. Nos pegamos mucho mi abuela, parecíamos chicle. Estuve a sus pies todo el tiempo. Si ella se levantaba para ir a la cocina, yo estaba allí a su lado.

Cuando mi hermana y yo necesitábamos ir al baño, salimos hacer del baño afuera por los arbustos. Mi prima Patty comenzó a reírse de nosotros. *¿Por qué están orinando afuera como animales?* Mi madrina Lupe nos gritó, *Mijas no hagan del baño afuera, hagan del baño aquí, vayan al baño adentro, aquí en el baño.* Comenzaron a mirarnos cada vez que salíamos. Nos agarraban y nos hacían ir al baño en esas tazas que parecían que te podías caer y mojarte el trasero. *¿Qué pasa si me ahogo en la taza del baño? ¿A dónde se iba la caca cuando le jalaba la cadena?* Nos escapábamos y íbamos al baño afuera. Mi abuela le recordó a Patty que no habían baños en el rancho. No teníamos agua corriente. Íbamos al baño en el corral. Nos iba a tomar un tiempo saber que en los Estados Unidos, vas al baño adentro. *No te burles de ellas, no te rías de ellas.*

Mi mamá finalmente llegó, y un par de días después, nos fuimos a Iowa en el avión. *¿Por qué están llorando todos? ¿A dónde vamos? ¿Por qué no viene con nosotros mi wewita? ¿No! No me quiero ir. Quedémonos aquí. ¿Vamos a ver a mi abuelita otra vez?* Todo esto preguntamos. *Sí, mañana,* dijo ella. Pero mañana nunca llegó. Pasaron otros cuatro años hasta que nos volvimos a ver. Mi abuelita tenía una visa y pudo venir a vernos a Iowa durante el verano. No podía venir en invierno, no aguantaría el frío en Iowa. Sin embargo, no venía a menudo porque se estaba enfermando y viajar era difícil para ella. La volvimos a ver cuando recibimos nuestros papeles y viajamos de regreso a México. Intentamos mantenernos en contacto a través de las cartitas, pero después de años, los recuerdos comenzaron a desvanecerse, y todo se sintió como un sueño. A menudo, el olor de las tortillas de maíz frescas o el sonido de los chiles tostándose me llevaban a aquellos días en el rancho, pero había olvidado los rostros de mi gente.

Llegamos a Iowa en el verano. Estaba tan húmedo, era un calor diferente del cual no estábamos acostumbrados. No conocíamos a nadie. No hablábamos inglés. Mi mamá no sabía conducir y no

había transporte público como en México. Nos encerramos en el apartamento. Estaba ubicado en el centro y tenía muchas cucarachas cuando nos mudamos por primera vez. Nunca habíamos tenido cucarachas en nuestra casa en México. Vivíamos en el primer piso, y en el sótano de los apartamentos vivía Soledad, o Chole, una de las amigas dominicanas de mi mamá que tenía dos hijos de nuestra edad. Su español era un poco chistoso y su comida era diferente. Ella nos presentó al arroz con habichuelas y la música bachata. A ella le gustaba mucho nuestra comida mexicana.

La banquetta y las escaleras en los apartamentos estaban agrietadas. Le dijimos a la dueña de los apartamentos que las arreglara, pero no lo hizo. Mi hermana se rompió el brazo porque se cayó en la banquetta agrietada. Fue solo entonces que lo arreglaron. No había animales. El gallo no nos despertaba. Bebíamos leche del galón. No era fresca de la vaca. Hacía frío dentro de la casa porque había una caja junto a la ventana que tiraba aire que hasta se sentía como un congelador. Llorábamos todos los días. Extrañábamos la naturaleza. Extrañábamos nuestra casa de adobe.

Mi papá trabajaba de noche. Dormimos todo el día. Nos atiriciamos porque estábamos tristes. Nuestras almas se quedaron en México. No había nada que hacer. No había nadie que ver. No había comunidad, ni sentido de pertenencia. No habían primas y tías que vendrían el domingo para hacer gorditas de horno y chiles rellenos. Aquí, no había familia que se juntara. *Pepe, Pepe, quiero a mi welito Pepe, quiero ver a mi abuelo Pepe.* Lloramos y mi mamá lloraba con nosotros. *Ya pronto los vamos a ver. Pronto. Pronto los veremos.*

Pero pronto nunca llegó. Se puso peor, especialmente durante nuestro primer invierno. Hacía tanto frío que nuestros pelos de la nariz se congelaron, y aunque mi mamá nos abrigó tanto que nos tambaleamos como pingüinos en todas las capas de ropa, todavía teníamos frío. Ni siquiera sabíamos cómo caminar en la nieve. Nos caíamos siempre. No queríamos salir, ni siquiera para hacer muñecos de nieve. Empezamos a enfermarnos. El médico les dijo a mis padres que tenían que llevarnos al aire libre, aunque no queríamos. Necesitábamos fortalecer nuestro sistema inmunológico jugando afuera y escapando de los gérmenes y bacterias interiores.

Un par de años después de llegar a Iowa, comenzamos a perder algunas de nuestras tradiciones mexicanas, como el Día de los Muertos. No pudimos encontrar flores de cempazúchitl, pan de muerto, o papel picado en Iowa. No había calaveras de azúcar. Ni desfiles de Catrina. Para entonces, todas las mariposas monarcas habían migrado de Iowa, mientras que en México, las mariposas ya estaban llegando para el Día de Muertos. Mis tías decían *son nuestros seres queridos que regresan a visitarnos*. Las tumbas de nuestros antepasados estaban en México. ¿Cómo se suponía que íbamos ir al cementerio y decorar las tumbas si sus tumbas no estaban en Iowa? Tampoco teníamos sus fotos para poner en el altar. Mi mamá dijo que podíamos prenderles una veladora y dejarles fruta. Podríamos rezar por nuestros ancestros. Eso era todo lo que podíamos hacer. Pero la fruta no era la misma. Ninguna de las tiendas vendía guayabas, tamarindo o pitayas.

Eventualmente, hacer un altar de muertos se volvió aún más difícil porque mis padres llegaron a casa exhaustos de trabajar en la fábrica. ¿Cómo se suponía que iban a cocinar este buffet de comida para nuestros ancestros si estaban cansados y se tomaba todo el día en hacer tamales, mole y todo lo demás? No es que nos hayamos olvidado de nuestros antepasados. En lugar de celebrar el Día de los Muertos en Iowa, mi madre enviaba dinero a mis tías. Se aseguró de enviar lo suficiente para que sus tumbas pudieran ser decoradas de forma elaborada y que tuvieran la mejor comida.

Mis padres también siempre se aseguraban de compartir las historias de sus seres queridos con nosotros y decirnos que eran nuestros angelitos que nos cuidaban. Cuando mi mamá hacía una comida especial como el mole, ella describía cómo la mamá de mi papá le enseñó a cocinar porque cuando se casó, ella no sabía cómo cocinar. Mi mamá nunca aprendió a cocinar porque siempre estaba trabajando. Tuvo que abandonar la escuela primaria para poder trabajar. Mi abuelita fue paciente con mi madre y nunca la juzgó, a pesar de que se espera que la mayoría de las mujeres en México sepan cocinar. Mi abuela era buena cocinera porque era una de las hijas mayores de su familia. Cuando sus padres se iban a Fresno para vender carnitas, chicharrones, verduras y más, le tocaba quedarse en casa cuidando a sus hermanos menores y estaba a cargo de lavar todas las ollas y hacer tamales. Mi mamá también

nos platicaba cómo le gustaba ir a la casa de su abuelita y les hacía postre de guayaba. Nos platicó cómo vivieron sus otros abuelos. Ellos vivieron en una casa que estaba hecha de hierba y tierra, un agujero en el suelo. Mi bisabuelo hacía adobes y se quedaba dormido, borracho en medio del barro, y mi bisabuelita le hacía de comer en un barranco. Ella hacía una lumbrada. Ellos sufrieron mucho en la vida. La pobreza era muy canija y mi bisabuelito se refugiaba en el alcohol. Eventualmente vivieron en un casita de adobe, pero era fea y pequeña. La abuela que vivía en esta casa subterránea nunca usó zapatos. Podía treparse a los nopales y las espinas nunca le molestaban. ¡Oh, los recuerdos de esas historias que compartieron! Sentía como si conociera a todas estas personas que nunca había conocido.

Cuando me gradué de la universidad, mi abuela vino a mí en un sueño. Ella había muerto en mi último día del quinto grado de la primaria. Mi papá fue el único que pudo ir a su funeral en México, y nunca pude despedirme de ella. En mi sueño, ella me dijo que nunca me había abandonado, que siempre estaba conmigo. Le grité sollozando, diciéndole que me sentía mal por haberla dejado atrás. *Se tuvieron que ir. Si no, no fueras la gran mujer que eres hoy.*

Mi abuelita sabía que en México no tendríamos las oportunidades que Iowa nos dio. Iowa nos dio la oportunidad de ser más que una ama de casa. Era un trabajo honorable, pero también era un trabajo que nadie quería hacer. Podríamos ir a la escuela. No tendríamos que abandonar la escuela en segundo grado y comenzar a trabajar como lo hizo mi mamá. No teníamos que ser niñeras ni trabajadoras domésticas. Podríamos tener una infancia real. Juguetes. Fiestas de cumpleaños. Más de tres cambios de ropa. No tendríamos que usar zapatos de hule que nos dieran ampollas y que nos quemaran porque nuestros pies se mojaron o sudaron. Podríamos tener más de un par de ropa interior y calcetines. No teníamos que cargar agua en grandes tambos desde el arroyo y ponerlos en la carreta unida al tractor. No teníamos que caminar siete millas hasta la escuela. Podríamos tener una oportunidad. Una oportunidad a vivir una buena vida.

Después de que mi abuelita vino a mí en un sueño, decidí continuar honrando su memoria haciéndole un altar para el Día

de los Muertos. Hice mis propias flores de cempazúchitl con papel de seda. Serví la comida en platos de barro, y me tomé el día libre del trabajo para poder pasar el tiempo rezando y honrando a mis ancestros. Le llamé a mis tías para preguntarles qué le gustaba comer a mi abuela y le preparé atole y huevo con chile a mano. Usé fotos desde el momento en que llegamos a los Estados Unidos. En una foto, estamos sentadas mi hermana y yo en el sillón con mi abuelita y en otra ella me está abrazando. En esta imagen, mi abuela no está tan enferma como en sus últimos momentos de la vida cuando el cáncer la mató.

Agregué una foto de mi suegro, a quien nunca conocí, y mis bisabuelos, cuyas fotos están en tono sepia. Mi suegro amaba el pollo en naranja, un plato que no es típico en Zacatecas, pero aprendí a hacerlo para honrarlo. Busqué la mejor fruta y agregue sal en un plato para purificar y un vaso de agua. Aunque quería encender velas reales, tuve que usar velas falsas porque no quería quemar el apartamento. El altar ha crecido todos los años, y he podido agregar más artículos porque a medida que la población Latinx ha crecido en Iowa, también ha crecido el acceso a la representación mexicana como pan de muerto. Cuando regresé a México, mi Tía Celia y yo abrimos el baúl de los recuerdos y pude tomar fotos de mis abuelos cuando se casaron y de mis bisabuelas.

A veces, es difícil sostener un espejo en nuestra cara y aceptar los defectos que vemos en nosotros mismos. Honrar a mis antepasados es algo muy sagrado para mí. Solía pensar que yo era el sueño más chingon de mi antepasados, especialmente después de que mi abuela me dijo que estaba orgullosa de mí por ser la mujer que soy ahora. Sin embargo, no soy sus sueños más chingones. Soy mis propios sueños más chingones. Creo que la educación superior tiene una forma de objetivar el sufrimiento o el trauma de alguien como una forma de inspiración. Caí en esta trampa. Por mucho que solía decir que mi título era para mi familia y todos los que no pudieron lograrlo, realmente solo fui a la universidad por mí misma. Fui a la universidad para escapar del machismo. Para escapar de las zonas rurales de Iowa. Me fui para poder encontrar puertas que mi pueblo no tenía para ofrecerme. Con toda honestidad, lo único que me ofreció mi pueblo pequeño en Iowa, fue un trabajo en una planta empacadora de carne. La universidad me dio alas. Me transformé

y tuve que desaprender muchas de las mentalidades problemáticas que solía tener, como el colorismo, la gordofobia, el clasismo, la homofobia y más. Todavía estoy desaprendiendo esto. A través de las teorías que aprendí, experimenté un proceso liberador, un lugar de sanación. Siempre pensé que el problema era el sistema, pero no me di cuenta de que yo también era parte del sistema. Yo beneficié de eso. Lo menos que debería estar haciendo es reconocer que ahora tengo un poder y un privilegio que antes no tenía.

Además, mi familia no siempre está contenta con el conocimiento que obtuve al ir a todas estas universidades. Al yo decir que estos títulos son para mis padres es una mentira porque sé que a veces a mis padres les molesta la educación que recibí. Es que mira, yo soy más vocal. Reto al machismo. Me considero una mujerista y mi familia no está lista para que una mujer sea así. Hasta el día de hoy, cuando trato de hablar, me dicen *calladita te ves más bonita*. Mi valor también se ve por la cantidad de hijos que tengo. No tengo hijos y, a mi edad, ya debería haber tenido hijos. Una carrera profesional no es algo de lo que estar orgullosa, especialmente si ya tengo muchos años de casada y todavía no tengo hijos. A pesar de todo, trato de incluirlos en lo que sé y lo que hago. El hecho de que mis padres sean del rancho no significa que no entiendan por lo que estoy pasando cuando trabajo en una oficina con aire acondicionado con mi propio mini refrigerador y microondas, y soy la única mexicana en algunas reuniones.

Me pregunto si mis descendientes pondrán mi foto en su altar. ¿Me encontrarán lo suficientemente digna para hacerme un altar? ¿Quién es recordado y a quién olvidamos? ¿Qué historias dirán sobre mí? ¿Hablarán sobre mi nombre CueponiCihuatl y el viaje que tomé para convertirme en la mujer que soy hoy? ¿Seré recordada como aquella cabrona que decía lo que pensaba y tomó el camino diferente y solitario? ¿O seré olvidada como el polvo que soy y en el que me convertiré?

Honar a mis antepasados y mi herencia me ayuda a celebrar el presente y abrazar el futuro. Me ayuda a mantener mis pies firmes en la tierra. Qué pedazo de papel tan poderoso. Es un puente entre mi linaje y vida en Iowa. Este artefacto es mi historia. Es la historia que mantuvo mi corazón latiendo. Es el objeto que me dio la

oportunidad de encontrar mi alma nuevamente, sentir el calor que no podía sentir en Iowa, especialmente durante los fríos inviernos. Este papel me ayudó a quedarme en Iowa y entender que Iowa tiene que ser mi hogar hasta mañana.

Todavía estamos en Iowa porque Dios nos tiene aquí. ¿De qué otra forma habríamos sobrevivido tanto tiempo? Un día regresaré nuevamente al lugar donde mi esposo y yo podemos sentir un sentido de pertenencia, donde no seremos cuestionados por nuestra nacionalidad, donde podremos hablar español libremente y no sentir la soledad entre las personas ocupadas en el ciudad universitaria en la que vivimos. Un lugar donde la gente te saluda y cuando te preguntan cómo estás, realmente quieren saber la respuesta. No sabemos qué nos tiene preparado el futuro, pero si alguna vez me convierto en madre, espero que mis hijos experimenten este sentimiento donde todas sus preocupaciones desaparezcan. Quiero que sientan el calor de la gente y descubran que las cosas básicas de las cuales se quejan realidad no importan. Lo que importa es estar en presencia de personas que solo se preocupan por compartir el tiempo contigo, incluso si es solo para comer un plato de sopa y frijoles de la olla con un taco de queso y chile al molcajete. Un lugar donde la gente puede hablar todo el día y no tener la televisión prendida o estar picando a su celular. Un lugar llamado hogar.



DHUHA TAWIL

ARTIST STATEMENT

I WAS BORN into generational trauma. My grandmother still carried with her the oral stories of the Crusades on her back. She would tell us of a time when the streets of Jerusalem were filled with blood flowing like rivers. She witnessed the death of four of her children during the occupation in 1948 and carried around her neck the key to her house after she was forced out of her home.

I am a Palestinian American. My father was born in Jerusalem and came here in the early 1980s to join other family members who came much earlier. I was born with awareness of the world's injustice in my bones and was strengthened on a diet full of olive oil and lemons. My face carries with it a map of Jerusalem, and it is hard for people to distinguish where my exact origin is. I don't fit into a box here at home; the word Semitic does not exist on the U.S. Census. I was raised a Muslim and I have Jewish, Italian, Caucus, and Middle Eastern DNA.

All stories are mediated through the language they are told in. It was difficult for me to pick which language to represent my story faithfully and for a wide audience. Arabic is not the language of my ancestors, nor is it necessarily my own language, but it is a language to which I feel a close connection. In Jerusalem, my relatives speak Hebrew and Arabic at home. I decided to pick Arabic as my choice of language for translation because, along with English, it is one of the most spoken languages in the world and the language of the Qur'an.

I decided to tell my story after the birth of my son. As a mother, I now understand how my journey can help others. The sense of injustice that I carry with me has helped me seek my own truth. As a Palestinian, I realize the importance of storytelling, and yet I am used to not being able to rely on mass media to share my story. As a Palestinian Muslim searching for answers about myself and my religion, I knew I had to find my own story.

I wish to share my story as a reminder that no matter which tribe or religion you come from, we are all connected somehow. We are all on our own journey in this world, and may we all make the best of it.



UNCOVERING MY TRUTH

DHUHA TAWIL

THE WHITE COTTON fabric was soft between my fingertips as I picked it up and began to cover my head. I looked at myself in the mirror that was adorned with colorful Lisa Frank stickers and pushed unruly dark brown strands of hair away from my face and into my hijab. It was my first day wearing the hijab, and I wanted to look perfect. I had decided to wear blue jeans and a T-shirt on that hot August morning, and my room was littered with clothes I had tried on and discarded. I felt as if I were embarking on a new adventure, and I was excited but nervous because I had no idea what the outcome of my adventure would be.

The hijab is a headscarf that is traditionally worn with long, loose-fitting clothing. Some Muslim women wear the hijab to cover their head and hair, while others wear a burka or niqab, which also covers their face. Although the hijab predates Islam, it has become a way to show submission to God, and there are verses in the Qur'an and Hadith that talk about the concept of hijab and dressing modestly. It is first worn when the individual is ready, often between the ages of sixteen and twenty, though I was ten when I began wearing it.

When my classmates saw me with the hijab for the first time, they asked why I was wearing it, and I answered that it was part of my religion. After a couple of months, everyone became used to it, including myself. My parents supported me and worked with me so I could gradually become accustomed to dressing modestly with it. I remember playing softball in a T-shirt while wearing the hijab, and on those occasional weekends when my mother would drive my friends and me to Super Skate, I would wear my favorite gray tank top with a white button-down shirt, my arms showing as I flew around the circle trying to go as fast as I could go on Rollerblades. Eventually, I would only wear long-sleeve shirts.

I was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to my mother, father, and the rest of the world. My parents emigrated from the Promised Land—Jerusalem, Palestine—to the land of promise. I was born on a cold January day, the first girl after three boys. My mother is a traditional Palestinian woman with a PhD in psychology from a private university in Iowa. Her strongest belief is that every meal should be cooked at home. She embodies the strength and perfectionism that have been passed down to every woman in our family. She worked full time, raised children, and cooked meals every night. Now that I am an adult and a parent, I have no idea how she did it all with such grace and class.

My father is a religious man who has graduate degrees in law and theology from Jerusalem University and the University of Iowa. He helped found the first surviving mosque in North America, called the Mother Mosque of America, with Dr. T. B. Irving, who was the first person to translate the Qur'an into American English. The Mother Mosque of America is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and honors the extensive history of Muslims in Iowa, especially those who arrived from the Levant region, specifically around Lebanon. Many came before 1916 when the British divided the region into the countries we know today. Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria used to be considered one country that was called *Al Shem*, or the Levant, and people knew where you came from by cities and family names.

A simple white two-story building with a green dome, the Mother Mosque of America sits inconspicuously in a residential neighborhood of Cedar Rapids. The upper level was used for prayer and the lower level as a social house where people came to play cards and hold parties. The Muslim population expanded in the late 1960s, and in 1972 a bigger mosque was built off First Avenue. The Mother Mosque was then sold by various groups until my father turned it into a historical museum in the 1990s.

My childhood was unique and beautifully diverse. I was raised under the strict teaching of the Islamic religion and Jerusalemite tradition in Protestant Anglo-Saxon Iowa in the 1990s. My father and mother gave all of their children ancient names that are uncommon even where the language originates. So, I carried

my name of Dhuha, which means “forenoon,” in my preschool, primary, and secondary school days among many children who had never seen another person of color, let alone knew how to pronounce names beyond Ashley or Kyle or one of the other few names that were common in every classroom.

My name helped forge my uniqueness in school and cultivate my identity. I carried a name with meaning, and my family history made me proud of who I was and what I believed in. My parents raised me to always question authority and to do what was right, so it was not surprising to them that I decided to wear the hijab at the age of ten.

My siblings and I attended many interreligious events, such as church lectures and synagogue events, and were exposed to many ideas and theologies. My father founded the Inter-Religious Council of Linn County, and our life was always buzzing with monks, priests, rabbis, and imams from various schools of thought. I was taught about the beauty and goodness of people from my parents. I met so many good (and bad) people of many faiths growing up, and I was taught that we are all on our own personal journey and should not judge one another. The biggest virtue that was instilled in me was that no one is better than anyone else and that it is up to God or Allah to judge. We shouldn’t judge each other on titles and what we perceive from the outside; instead, we should greet each other with peace, “*Assalamu alaikum*,” and begin from there.

Growing up with three brothers, I was very much a tomboy; my parents would always joke that I was more like a boy than my brothers. I loved playing outside and running, and wearing the hijab didn’t stop me from doing either one. I played softball, soccer, and basketball and ran track while wearing the hijab. I was the only hijabi and Muslim most of my classmates ever met, and I was the only hijabi in Cedar Rapids playing sports.

I was the first American girl to wear the hijab in my community. Once I began wearing it, other girls at my mosque were encouraged to wear it as well. In a couple of years, a handful of girls were wearing the hijab to school.

I spent my days in schools that were largely homogenous. Most of my classmates had ancestors who had immigrated from

Germany or the Czech Republic. There was one Jew in my school, and we would silently step aside while our classmates participated in Christmas and Easter activities. It felt good to have someone like me who didn't sing the religious songs or eat pork. We shared an unspoken bond knowing that there was someone else like us.

Even with the lack of diversity, I felt protected by my classmates. They had no knowledge of Islam for the most part, and if they had questions, they knew they could ask me. We didn't really care about differences in religion. As long as we didn't bother each other or force our beliefs down each other's throats, it was all good. Many of my classmates had known me since I was a toddler, which was an advantage of living in small-town Iowa. No one saw my hijab as a political symbol; it was just what I wore. I had one friend, Ashley, who hated doing her hair in the morning and would jokingly ask if she could borrow a hijab to wear. Many classmates have told me that they even forgot I wore it because they just knew me as Dhuha. In those days, if you had a problem, you talked about it. It helped that I was an outgoing kid who found it easy to talk to others, so even if people were shy, they knew they could talk to me.



My life began to change after September 11, 2001, when I was a freshman in high school. A teacher ran into our classroom and shouted at us to turn on the TV. Everyone turned and saw a plane crashing into one of the World Trade Center towers. I really didn't understand what was going on. New York seemed so big compared to Iowa, and seeing the tall skyscrapers on TV was surreal, like watching a movie. There was a moment of silence in our classroom as we tried to take it all in, but we were too young to fully understand the magnitude of what had happened.

During the following weeks, I noticed a shift in the behavior of my teachers. They would look at me as if they were trying to figure something out. A couple of months later, I started to notice a change in my classmates.

One girl approached me and asked, "Where are you from?"

I gave her my home address as a joke.

“No, but where are you really from?” she asked again.

I looked at her, puzzled. “What do you mean?”

Soon there were a handful of classmates who would ask me the same question in different ways. After they talked to me, they looked confused, as if my answer wasn't what they anticipated. They were trying to figure out my otherness so that they could understand the hate around them. At first I thought it was odd. Most of these classmates were people I grew up with, and they knew exactly where I was from. But after 9/11, a quiet tension pulsed beneath the surface, and even people I grew up with began to treat me differently.

The interrogative, repetitive questions didn't bother me as much as seeing how quickly people could change. I had always felt protected and safe, and now I felt exposed to unpredictable elements. It terrified me how people I had known my entire life could suddenly make me feel as if I didn't belong or as if I were dangerous. Even my friend Ashley, who once regarded the hijab as just another piece of clothing, now looked at me with suspicion and asked me where I got my hijabs from. I couldn't figure out how anyone could put me in the same category as the murderers and terrorists who came from another country than the one my family was from, and I didn't understand why my classmates would connect me with them. I just wanted to run track and pass my classes like everyone else.

This quick change in behavior planted a seed of doubt in my young mind that would affect me for the rest of my life. Was it my ethnicity, my name, my religion, my hijab, or all the above that led to my perceived otherness? Now when I read stories about the Holocaust and how Germans turned on their Jewish neighbors, I think about my childhood after September 11. I wanted to shout, “But I am your neighbor! You have known me your whole life!” How can someone become the enemy so quickly just because they happen to be a Muslim or a Jew? How can a couple of bad eggs represent the nearly two billion Muslims around the world who have existed peacefully for thousands of years?

It was then that I started to distance myself from my classmates so I could sort through what I was feeling. My conviction to wear the hijab became stronger. I had to show my classmates that Muslims are humans first and that, as an American, I was free to be who I was. I believe some of my classmates respected me more because they saw that I didn't give up, while others likely felt reaffirmed that I had an agenda. Regardless of what others thought, I was doing what I felt was right. As a silver lining, one of the most valuable lessons I learned from that time was the importance of family and good friends. Even when it felt like the world turned its back on me, I knew I wasn't alone even though my journey was a lonely one.

My parents worried about me after September 11. The principal reassured them, saying, "Everyone knows your daughter as Dhuha, and she's Dhuha and no one else." I was considered tough because I was already paving my own path by wearing the hijab, and everyone expected me to handle any problems that came up. No one had the experience to help me, so I learned to stand tall and take my own action.

It was in Spanish class when things came to a head. We were lining up to leave the classroom when a typically quiet girl shouted, "You're just a terrorist and you have a terrorist religion!"

The entire class was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. I looked at my Spanish teacher, but she did not say one word; she appeared unbothered. I looked at the girl and said, "Is that so?" After that, the tension seemed to vanish. The word *terrorism* and its connection to Islam were so overused in the media that I think someone just wanted to say it to me to see how I would react.

At that point, I knew I needed to be in a different environment, so I decided to graduate from high school early. My experiences wearing the hijab had led me to mature much faster than my peers, and I spent a lot of time with college-aged friends. I wanted to be around them more than my high school friends; I wanted to be around people who were independent and free-thinking. I thought I would feel safer around people who thought about things instead of simply reacting, and I thought that's how college would be.



At the University of Iowa, I found myself alone. My classes were filled with students who just wanted to party, and I had some bad luck my freshman year with unmotivated TAs, so I didn't feel intellectually stimulated. I spent a good amount of energy trying to find my community, to find people I could relate to, but it was hard. I joined so many clubs and organizations like the Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Dance Marathon, and Muslim Student Association, and I volunteered at the hospitals, but I still felt alone.

I was participating in all these activities that encouraged diversity, but something felt off, and I started questioning the concept of diversity. Was it a face, character, culture, or all the above? The more I talked to others, the more I realized we are all the same, and I wanted to understand why we think we are so different from each other.

One day, I took a cultural anthropology class and was so mesmerized, I decided to pick it as my major. Observing and exploring different cultures became my heartbeat. As a cultural anthropology major, I started to question certain political terms and geographic lines that had shaped my identity. I have always thirsted for adventure, and my classes helped me feel like I was exploring new worlds.

In one class, I came across the political and ethnic word that was used to classify people of the Levant region during the colonizing periods: Arab. In Israel, Arabs are seen as foreigners who come from another tribe or land, and the label is often used in a negative way, as if they are barbaric. Palestinians (Christians and Muslims) are marked as Arab, whereas Jews are marked as Semitic. However, *Semitic* means anyone who relates to the languages of Arabic or Hebrew, which all Palestinians speak. It is difficult to tell the difference between a Semite and an Arab—we're talking about people from small regions that are thousands of years old. Geographical boundaries are arbitrary and have been changed many times over the years. This newfound understanding of a label that I had carried with me my entire life started me on a journey toward truth that I did not expect.

As the sexual revolution ascended in the West in the 1970s, a religious revolution began in the Middle East. When the oil

industry developed in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, Saudi power grew tremendously, and their extreme patriarchal culture that stemmed from Wahhabism started to spread in all countries where Muslims lived. Fundamentalist male clerics who called themselves Islamic scholars started issuing fatwas on physical Islamic appearances, leading to a religious fracture with moderate Muslims.

As a child of parents who went through this religious revolution, I felt as if I had to wear the hijab to mark my identity as a Muslim. But with my new understanding of political jargon and geographic lines, I started to question rules such as why women were required to have a *mahram* while traveling and why women had to cover themselves from head to toe while men did not.

I wanted to see my religion without the cultural and traditional footnotes that I inherited in my upbringing, so I began attending an Islamic school in Chicago on the weekend where I could learn from world-renowned scholars. I was desperate to learn about the religion that I had represented my entire life. Little did I know, these courses would change my life forever.

The courses were famous for providing authentic Hadith and Qur'anic verses to support every single fatwa or issue. They were academically rigorous on a religious scale. One day during a question-and-answer session, a girl asked the famous Islamic scholars a question: "*Assalamu alaikum*, I just had a question about rules pertaining to the hijab and where the rules of wearing the hijab came from in the Islamic faith."

I rolled my eyes. I had been attending these courses for almost three years, and her question seemed so elementary. However, the Islamic scholars were caught off guard, perhaps because they too thought the question was elementary. They quickly found Qur'anic and Hadith verses that mention the concept of hijab, but they failed to offer evidence supporting the extreme rules in use today. This lit a spark in my mind. In Islam, the Qur'an is direct when it comes to actions that are considered moral or immoral. The hijab has strict standards in many Muslim countries and cultures, and I now questioned where these rules came from.

It was then that I started my own quest for truth, which is what my religion encourages. In Islam, there are no holy men or women. You speak with God directly and do your own research.

Imams are not ordained leaders but people who have knowledge of Islam, and anyone can better their knowledge. However, with the expanding influence of the media and the rise of the Internet, the patriarchal interpretation of the women's dress code permeated Muslim homes, and it became easier to rely on the information you were given rather than doing your own research.

Over the next year, I interviewed friends and scholars about hijab. I talked to my parents and family. I traveled to areas with large Muslim populations in major cities like Chicago and Minneapolis in my search for answers. I was never satisfied by the explanations I was given for the rules and reasons of the hijab; they seemed to come from a biased perspective that was not necessarily backed by Islamic scholarship. Modesty is important in Islam and to many people of religious faith, but how covered one should be seemed subjective. What one culture considers modest, another would consider immodest.

So I did my own scholarship, poring over religious texts for hours. The Qur'an has more than 6,000 verses pertaining to modesty, and the clearest verse on modesty is in Surah Al-Nur, verse 31, which commands women to take a piece of clothing from their head to cover their chest. Many Islamic scholars would say that the verse specifically pertains to women of that era who would wear a headcover but leave their chest exposed. No other direct rules on modesty are laid out in the scripture.

I couldn't understand why the hijab rules were not detailed in the Qur'an when other rules are much more clear. And because of this, I couldn't understand the mismatched balance of the hijab in the Qur'an and Hadith versus its emphasis in Muslim life. There seemed to be a bigger emphasis on the hijab in the Muslim world than in the Islamic texts. Sometimes it felt like prayer, fasting, and charity were less important than whether a woman looked her part as a Muslim.

The concept of diversity that had plagued me since I was sixteen years old started to resurface. Did it make me diverse to look a part? Was I a better Muslim or a better person if I looked the part? This construct of image haunted me. Many Muslim women are judged based on their image, and I came to realize that if you can control the image of a person, then you can control that person.

That is when I decided to take the hijab off after wearing it for thirteen years.

In my quest for truth, I didn't get the direct answer I wanted. I came to believe that the idea of hijab is part of Islam, but it was not intended to be used in the way it is today. The ultraconservative Saudi influence on the Muslim world turned the beauty of wearing the hijab from a method for reclaiming one's body from sexual objectification to a method of control.

Many Muslim women have wrested that control back and reclaimed the hijab as their own, in direct opposition to the patriarchal constructs that exist in the Muslim world. But the more I learned about Islam, the more I realized that God is focused on our character and morals rather than our clothing. It seemed that a Muslim woman's worth was dependent on whether she wore hijab or not—the measure of her religious devotion. If a woman took off her hijab, she was looked at with contempt. However, my journey led me to the conclusion that our religion is about good intentions and actions more than appearance.

The first time I took off my hijab was at a local festival. I wanted to be in a crowded area so that I wouldn't feel singled out. When I took it off, I felt not only incredibly sad but also naked and exposed, as if I'd lost a limb from my body.

Taking off the hijab was a huge risk for me and one of the hardest decisions of my life. It was everything I had known and stood for, everything that had defined me. Taking it off sent a ripple through my community. My parents did not feel comfortable with my choice at first because it had been part of my identity for so long. My religious father was more understanding about my decision than my traditional mother, which was what I had expected; it is the perceived tradition that holds a stronger power than the religiosity of the hijab. However, they both eventually came to accept my decision.

It was also difficult to deal with judgments about whether I was still a good Muslim without the hijab. I was surprised to find that it wasn't just certain members of the Muslim community who judged me but many non-Muslims as well. I would get comments like, "You were so brave wearing the hijab," as if the only reason to take the

hijab off was because of fear. Only those who knew me personally understood that I had taken the hijab off as an intellectual and political action and that it was not about fear or “going wild.”

So many of us project an image to the world, but how many of us are authentic to ourselves? After deciding to take off the hijab, I started to notice more of my character, and it was not anywhere near where I wanted it to be. I was looking inside myself now that I had stopped focusing on the outside. Sometimes I would make decisions based on whether it was appropriate for a Muslim girl wearing a hijab to do something like travel alone to another country or even make dark jokes. I had felt like a walking representation of a religion for my entire life, as if I had to be a perfect Muslim woman and pretend my life was perfect. No one wanted to hear about a troubled Muslim woman; most people couldn't even relate to a normal one. People commended my strength and my resilience as if they were my only identifying features.

I was at peace with my decision to take off the hijab, though not without some guilt, because I believe in it. I believe in modesty, but I also feel strongly that modesty should first come from the inside. I wish to live in a world where all women are free to wear what they feel comfortable with, whether that means covering their heads or not. I wish for a world where women are not judged harshly on their appearance, and challenging the status quo is my way of doing my part to make that world a reality.

After taking my hijab off, I noticed that people paid less attention to me, and the burden of carrying my religion on my head and shoulders started to wane. I could enjoy my life without feeling judged. I began to focus more on my character and achieving my goals of being true to myself. My relationship with God is more genuine now.

Maybe one day I will reclaim the hijab as my own. For now, I know that I am not perfect, but I also know that I am working on my own salvation, and how others think of me and my appearance is their issue. There is bravery in wearing the hijab. But in the years since I decided to take it off, I've learned that it is also brave to walk uncovered, in your own truth.

الكشف عن حقيقتي

DHUHA TAWIL

تُرجمت إلى العربية من قبل أسماء بن رمضان

كان قماش القطن الأبيض ناعما بين أطراف أصابعي عندما التقطته وبدأت في تغطية رأسي. نظرت إلى نفسي في المرأة التي زُيِّنت مملصقات «ليزا فرانك» المملونة ودفعتُ خصلات الشَّعر ذات اللُّون البني الداكن بعيدا عن وجهي تحت حجابي. كان اليوم الأول الذي ارتدي فيه الحجاب، وأردت أن أبدو مثاليَّة. كنت قد قرَّرت ارتداء جينز أزرق وقميص في صباح ذلك الأوغسسطس الحار، وكانت غرفتي غير مرتَّبة تتناثر بها الملابس التي حاولت ارتدائها ثم رميتها. شعرت كما لو كنت أُقيل على مغامرة جديدة، وكنت متحمَّسة و متوتِّرة في آن واحد خاصَّة لأنني لا أعرف ردة الفعل التي سأتلقها نتيجة مغامرتي هذه

الحجاب هو غطاء الرأس الذي يتم ارتداؤه عادة مصحوبا بملابس طويلة فضفاضة. ترتدي بعض النِّساء المسلمات الحجاب لتغطية رأسهنَّ وشعرهنَّ، في حين ترتدي بعض الأخريات البركة أو النِّقاب الذي يغطِّي وجههنَّ أيضا. على الرِّغم من أنَّ الحجاب يسبق ظهور الإسلام، فقد أصبح وسيلة لإظهار التضرُّع إلى الله، وهناك آيات في القرآن والحديث تتحدَّث عن مفهوم الحجاب وارتداء الملابس بشكل متواضع. يتم ارتداؤه لأوَّل مرَّة عندما يكون الفرد جاهزا، غالبا في عمر يتراوح بين السادسة عشرة والعشرين على الرِّغم من أنَّني كنت في سنِّ العاشرة عندما بدأت في ارتدائه.

عندما رأني زملائي بالحجاب للمرة الأولى، سألوني عن سبب ارتدائه، فأجبت أنه جزء من ديني. بعد بضعة شهور، اعتاد الجميع على ذلك، بما في ذلك أنا. دعمني والداي وساعداني على الاعتياد تدريجيًّا على ارتداء الملابس البسيطة التي تتماشى معه. أتذكَّر أنني كنت ألعب الكرة اللينة «السُّوفت بول»

بقميص أثناء ارتداء الحجاب، وأحيانا خلال بعض عطلات نهاية الأسبوع عندما كانت والدي تصطحبني و أصدقائي إلى «سوبر سكايت»، كنت أرثدي قميصي الرمادي المفضّل و معه قميص أبيض ذو أزوار، كانت ذراعيّ تظهران أثناء تحليقي حول المركز الدائري محاولة التّزحلق على الزّلاجات بأقصى سرعة ممكنة. و في النّهاية، صرت أرثدي قمصانا طويلة الأكمام فقط.

ولدت في «سيدار رابيدز»، أيوا، في نظر أُمي وأبي وبقية العالم. هاجر والداي من الأرض الموعودة - القدس، فلسطين - إلى أرض الوعود. ولدت في يوم بارد من شهر يناير، البنت الأولى بعد ثلاثة أولاد. والدي امرأة فلسطينيّة تقليديّة متحصّلة على دكتوراه في علم النّفس من جامعة خاصة في ولاية أيوا. أكثر الأشياء التي تؤمن بها هو أنّه يجب طهي كل وجبة في البيت. إنّها تجسّد القوّة والكمال اللّذين توارثتهما كلّ امرأة في عائلتنا. كانت تعمل بدوام كامل، ربّت الأطفال، و طبخت الطّعام كلّ ليلة. الآن بعد أن أصبحت راشدة ووالدة، مازلت لا أفهم كيف فعلت كلّ ذلك بمثل هذا اللّطف و الرّقّي.

والدي رجل دين متحصّل على درجات عليا في القانون و علم اللاهوتيّة من جامعة القدس وجامعة أيوا. ساهم في اكتشاف أوّل مسجد مُتبَقّي في أمريكا الشماليّة، يسمّى بالمسجد الأمّ لأمريكا، رفقة الدّكتور «ت.ب. إيرفينغ»، الذي كان أوّل شخص يترجم القرآن إلى اللّغة الإنجليزيّة الأمريكيّة. المسجد الأمّ لأمريكا مُدرَج ضمن السّجل الوطني للأماكن التّاريخية ويكرّم التّاريخ الكبير للمسلمين في ولاية أيوا، وخاصّة أولئك الذين جاؤوا من منطقة المشرق العربي، وتحديدًا لبنان و المناطق المجاورة لها. جاء الكثيرون منهم قبل عام ١٩١٦ عندما قسّم البريطانيون المنطقة إلى دول نعرفها اليوم. كانت لبنان وفلسطين وسوريا تُعتبَر بلدًا يُدعى الشّام أو بلاد الشّام، وكان النّاس يحزرون من أين أتيت من خلال أسماء المدن و العائلات.

يقع المسجد الأمّ لأمريكا في مبنى سكنيّ بسيط متكوّن من طابقين مع قبّة خضراء، ويتمركز بمكان غير مُثير للانتباه في حيّ سكني في سيدار رابيدز. تم استغلال الطّابق العلوي للصّلاة في حين استُغلّ الطّابق السّفلي كمكان للملتقيات الاجتماعيّة حيث يأتي النّاس للعب الورق وإقامة الحفلات. إزداد عدد السّكان المسلمين في أواخر السّتينات، وفي عام ١٩٧٢ تمّ بناء مسجد أكبر

على الشَّارع الرئيسي. بعد ذلك، قامت أطراف مختلفة في التَّفريط في المسجد الأم ليتَمَّ بيعه من طرف مجموعات مختلفة إلى أن حوَّله والدي إلى متحف تاريخي في التَّسعينات.

كانت طفولتي ممَيَّزة ومختلفة بشكل رائع. لقد ترعرعت في ظلِّ التَّعليم الصَّارم تحت مبادئ الدِّين الإسلامي والتَّقاليد المقدَّسة في ولاية أيوا البروتستانت أنجلو ساكسونية في التَّسعينات. أعطى والدي ووالدي جميع أبنائهم أسماء قديمة نادرة غير مألوفة حتَّى في أصل مكان اللغة نفسها. لذلك، في الأيَّام التي سبقت دخولي المدرسة، وخلال دراستي بالمدرسة الابتدائية والثَّانوية، حملت اسمي ضحى، بمعنى «الصَّحى»، بين العديد من الأطفال الذين لم يروا شخصاً آخر مختلف اللون، ناهيك عن معرفة كيفية نطق الأسماء عدى «أشلي» و «كايل» أو واحداً من الأسماء القليلة الأخرى الشائعة في كلِّ فصل دراسي.

ساعد اسمي على تمييزي في المدرسة وتعزيز هويَّتي. حملت إسماً ذا معنى، وقد جعلني تاريخ عائلتي فخورة بما كنت عليه وما كنت أوَّمن به. لقد ربَّاني والداي على التَّشكيك في السُّلطة دائماً وفعل ما هو صائب، لذلك لم يكن مفاجئاً بالنَّسبة إليهم أنني قرَّرت ارتداء الحجاب في سنِّ العاشرة.

لقد حضرت أنا وإخوتي العديد من الملتقيات بين الدِّيانات، كمحاضرات الكنيسة وفعاليَّات المعبد اليهودي، وتعرَّفنا على العديد من الأفكار والأهوت. قام والدي بتأسيس المجلس المشترك بين الأديان في مقاطعة «لين»، وكانت حياتنا مليئة دائماً بالرَّهبان والكهنة والحاخامات والأئمة من مختلف المدارس الفكرية. تعرَّفت على جمال وطيبة النَّاس من والدي. قابلت الكثير من النَّاس الصَّالحين (والطَّالحين) من العديد من الأديان خلال نشأتي، وقد تعلَّمت أن كلَّ منَّا في مشوار خاص به ويجب ألاَّ نحكم على بعضنا البعض. كانت أكبر فضيلة عُرست في داخلي هي أنَّه لا يوجد أحد أفضل من الآخر، وأنَّ الأمر متروك إلى الإله أو لله للحكم فيه. لا يجب أن نحكم على بعضنا البعض على أساس الألقاب وما نراه من الخارج، عوضاً عن ذلك، يجب أن نلقي التَّحيَّة على بعضنا البعض بسلام، «السَّلام عليكم» ونبدأ من هناك.

بما أنني نشأت مع ثلاثة إخوة، كنت مسترجلة جدًا. لطالما كان والداي يمزحان معي و يشبهاني بفتى أكثر من إخوتي. أحببت اللعب في الخارج والركض، ولم يمنعني ارتداء الحجاب من ممارسة أي منهما. كنت ألعب الكرة اللينة وكرة القدم وكرة السلة وكنت في فريق العدو عند ارتداء الحجاب. كنت المحجبة والمسلمة الوحيدة التي قابلها معظم زملائي في الصف، وكنت المحجبة الوحيدة التي تمارس الرياضة في سيدر رابيدز.

كنت أول فتاة أمريكية ترتدي الحجاب في مجتمعي. بمجرد أن بدأت في ارتدائه، تشجعت فتيات أخريات في المسجد على ارتدائه أيضا. و في بض سنوات، كانت حُفنة من الفتيات يرتدين الحجاب في المدرسة.

قضيت أيامي في مدارس كانت متجانسة إلى حد كبير. كان لمعظم زملائي أسلاف هاجروا من ألمانيا أو من جمهورية التشيك. كان هناك يهودي واحد في مدرستي، وكنا نتنحى جانبا في صمت بينما كان زملائنا في الفصل الدراسي يشاركون في أنشطة عيد الميلاد وعيد الفصح. كان من المريح أن يكون هناك شخص لا يغني الأغاني الدينية أو يأكل لحم الخنزير مثلي. تشاركنا رابطا غير معلن في صمت لمعرفتنا أنه كان هناك شخص آخر مثلنا.

شعرت بالحماية من قبل زملائي في الصف على الرغم من انعدام التنوع. لم يكن لديهم دراية بالإسلام في أغلب الأحيان، وكانوا إذا ما كانت لديهم أسئلة، يعرفون أنه بإمكانهم طرحها عليّ. في الحقيقة، لم نكن نهتم بالاختلافات في الدين. فطالما لم نزعج بعضنا البعض أو نفرض معتقداتنا على بعضنا البعض، كان كل شيء على ما يرام. كان العديد من زملائي في الصف يعرفونني منذ أن كنت طفلة صغيرة، وكانت هذه ميزة العيش في بلدة صغيرة في ولاية أيوا. لم ير أحد حجابي كرمز سياسي. كان فقط ما أردتديه. كان لدي صديقة واحدة، «أشلي»، كانت تكره تسريح شعرها في الصباح فكانت تسألني مازحة ما إذا كانت تستطيع استعارة حجاب لتضعه. أخبرني العديد من زملائي في الصف أنهم نسوا أنني أضعه لأنهم يرونني فقط كضحى. في تلك الأيام، إذا ما كانت لديك مشكلة، يمكنك التحدث عنها. ساعدني كوني طفلة صريحة يسهل عليها التحدث إلى الآخرين، لذلك حتى لو كان الناس خجولين، كانوا يعرفون أنهم يستطيعون التحدث إليّ.

بدأت حياتي تتغيّر بعد ١١ سبتمبر ٢٠٠١، عندما كنت طالبة في المدرسة الثانوية. قَدِمَ مدرّس مسرعا إلى صَفِّنا و دعانا بصوت عال أن نُشغِّل التلفزيون. استدار الجميع ورأوا اصطدام طائرة بأحد أبراج التّجارة العالميّة. لم أفهم حقًا ما الذي يجري. بدت نيويورك كبيرة جدًا مقارنة بأيووا، وكانت رؤية ناطحات السّحاب الطّويلة على شاشة التّلفزيون خياليّة، شبيهة بمشاهدة فيلم. كانت هناك لحظة صمت في صَفِّنا حيث حاولنا استيعاب ما يجري، ولكننا كنّا لا نزال صغارًا جدًّا لنفهم تمامًا حجم ما حدث.

خلال الأسابيع التّالية، لاحظت تغييرًا في سلوك أستاذتي. كانوا ينظرون إليّ كما لو كانوا يحاولون معرفة شيء ما. بعد ذلك بشهرين، بدأت ألاحظ تغييرًا بين زملائي

اقتربت منّي فتاة وسألّت، «من أين أنت؟»

أعطيتها عنوان منزلي على سبيل الدّعابة.

«لا، ولكن من أين أنت حقًا؟» سألت مرة أخرى.

نظرت إليها في حيرة. «ماذا تعنين؟»

سرعان ما كان هناك مجموعة من زملائي الذين ما لبثوا يسألونني نفس السّؤال بطرق مختلفة. بعد أن تحدّثوا معي، بدوا مرتبكين وكأنّ إجابتي لم تكن كما كانوا يتوقّعون. كانوا يحاولون معرفة اختلافي حتّى يتمكّنوا من فهم الكراهيّة من حولهم. اعتقدت في البداية أنّه أمر غريب. معظم هؤلاء الزّملاء كانوا أشخاصًا نشأت معهم، وكانوا يعرفون تمامًا من أين أتيت. ولكن بعد الحادي عشر من سبتمبر، خُلِقَ توتّر هادئ غير مرئيّ، وحتّى الأشخاص الذين ترعرعت معهم بدؤوا يعاملونني بشكل مختلف.

لم تزعجني الأسئلة الاستجوابية المتكرّرة بقدر ما رأيت مدى سرعة تغيّر الناس. لطالما شعرت بالحماية والأمان، والآن أصبحت أشعر بأنّي أتعرّض لأشياء لا يمكن التنبؤ بها. لقد أرعبني كيف يمكن للأشخاص الذين عرفتهم طوال حياتي أن يجعلوني أشعر فجأة كأنني لا أنتمي إليهم أو كما لو كنت أشكّل

خطرا. حتّى صديقتي آشلي التي كانت تعتبر الحجاب مجرد قطعة ملابس أخرى، أصبحت تنظر إليّ الآن بريبة وتسالني من أين حصلت على حجابي. لم أمكّن من معرفة كيف يمكن لأيّ شخص أن يضعني في نفس فئة القتلة والإرهابيين الذين جاؤوا من بلد آخر كتلك التي كانت عائلتي تنتمي إليها، ولم أفهم لماذا يصلني زملائي بهم. أردت فقط أن أخوض سباقات العدو وأن أنجح في صفوفني مثل أيّ شخص آخر.

زرع هذا التّغيير السّريع في السّلك بذرة من الشّك في ذهني الصّغير ممّا قد يؤثّر على بقية حياتي. هل كان عرقي، اسمي، ديني، حجابي، أو كلّ ما سبق هو ما قاد إلى اختلافي الملحوظ؟ عندما أقرأ الآن حكايات عن "الهولوكوست" وكيف انقلب الألمان على جيرانهم اليهود، أفكر في طفولتي بعد ١١ سبتمبر. أردت أن أصرخ، «لكنني جارتكم! لقد عرفتموني طوال حياتكم!» كيف يمكن لشخص ما أن يصبح عدواً بهذه السّعة لمجرد أنّه مسلم أو يهودي؟ كيف يمكن لبيضتين فاسدتين أن تمثّلا ما يقارب ملياري مسلم حول العالم عاشوا بسلام منذ آلاف السّنين؟

بدأت آنذاك في ترك مسافة بيني وبين زملائي في الصّف حتى أمكّن من تحديد ما كنت أشعر به. أصبح اقتناعي بارتداء الحجاب أقوى. كان عليّ أن أظهر لزملائي في الصّف أنّ المسلمين بشر أولاً وأنني كأمرليكيّة، كنت حرّة في أن أكون على طبيعتي. أعتقد أنّ بعض زملائي إحترموني أكثر لأنهم رأوا أنني لم أستسلم، بينما شعر آخرون مجدداً أنّه لديّ حتما مخطّط. بغضّ النّظر عمّا كان يعتقدّه الآخرون، كنت أفعل ما أراه صوابا. الجانب المضيء في هذا كلّه، كان من أهمّ العبر التي تعلّمتها من ذلك الوقت، وهي مدى أهميّة العائلة والأصدقاء الجيدين. حتّى عندما شعرت أنّ العالم أدار ظهره لي، كنت أعرف أنني لست لوحدي على الرّغم من أنّ رحلتي كانت وحيدة.

كان والداي قلقين عليّ بعد ١١ سبتمبر. وطمأنهما المدير قائلاً: «الكّل يعرف ابنتكم باسم ضحى، وهي ضحى ولا أحد غيرها.» كنت أعتبر قوية لأنني كنت بالفعل أوصل طريقي بارتداء الحجاب، وكان الجميع يتوقّع مني أن أكون قادرة على التّعامل مع أيّ مشكلة تعترضني. لم يكن لدى أحد الخبرة على مساعدتي، لذلك تعلّمت أن أف شامخة وأتخذ قراراتي بمفردي.

كنت في صف اللّغة الإسبانيّة عندما وصلت الأمور إلى ذروتها. بينما كنّا نصطف لمغادرة الصّف، فجأة، صرخت فتاة عادة ما كانت هادئة، «أنت مجرد إرهابية ولديك دين إرهابي!»

كان الهدوء يُخيم الفصل على بأكمله حيث بإمكانك سماع صوت سقوط دبّوس على الأرض. نظرت إلى أستاذة اللّغة الإسبانيّة، لكنّها لم تنطق كلمة واحدة، بدت غير منزعجة. نظرت إلى الفتاة وقلت، «هل هذا صحيح؟» بعد ذلك، بدا أنّ التّوتر قد زال. لقد استُخدمت كلمة الإرهاب وارتباطها بالإسلام في وسائل الإعلام بطريقة مُفَرِّط فيها لدرجة أنّني أعتقد أن شخصا ما أراد أن يقولها لي فقط ليرى كيف ستكون ردّة فعلي.

في تلك المرحلة، أدركت أنّني بحاجة إلى أن أكون في محيطٍ آخر، لذلك قرّرت التّخرج من المدرسة الثانوية مبكّرا. لقد مكّنتني تجربتي في ارتداء الحجاب إلى أن أنضح أسرع بكثير من أقراني، وقضيت الكثير من الوقت مع أصدقاء في سنّ الجامعة. أردت أن أكون برفقتهم أكثر من أصدقائي من المدرسة الثانوية. أردت أن أكون حول أناس مستقلّين وذوي تفكير حرّ. اعتقدت أنّني سأشعر بالأمان أكثر عندما سيكون حوّلي أشخاص يفكّرون في الأشياء بدلا من مجرد ردّ الفعل، واعتقدت أنّ الجامعة ستكون هكذا.

وجدت نفسي وحيدةً في جامعة أيوا. كانت الفصول الدّراسية التي كنت مرسّمةً بها مليئة بالطلاب الذين أرادوا فقط إقامة الحفلات، و لم أكن محظوظة كثيرا في سنتي الأولى مع معيدين ينقصهم الحماس، ممّا جعلني لا أشعر بالتحفيز الفكري. سخّرت وقتنا طويلا لمحاولة إيجاد مجتمعي، للعثور على أشخاص يمكنني التّواصل معهم، و لكنّ الأمر لم يَكُن هَيئًا. انضمت إلى العديد من الأندية والمنظّمات مثل «بيغ براذرز» و «بيغ سيستيزز»، و ماراتون الرّقص، و جمعيّة الطلاب المسلمين، وتطوّعت في المستشفيات، ولكنني كنت لا أزال أشعر بالوحدة.

كنت أشارك في كلّ هذه الأنشطة التي تدعّم مبادئ الاختلاف، لكنّ شيئا ما بدا لي غير واضح، وبدأت أتساءل عن مبدأ الاختلاف. هل كان وجهها أو شخصيّة أو ثقافة أو كلّ ما سبق؟ كلّما تحدّثت مع الآخرين، كلّما أدركت أنّنا جميعا

متشابهون، وأردت أن أفهم لماذا نَظُنُّ أننا مختلفون جدًّا عن بعضنا البعض.

في أحد الأيام، إلتحقت بفصل مادّة الأنثروبولوجيا الثقافية وكنت مُنبهرةً جدًّا بها، فقررت أن أختارها كمجال تخصصي. أصبحت مولعة بمراقبة واستكشاف الثقافات المتنوّعة. بصفتي متخصصة في الأنثروبولوجيا الثقافية، بدأت أتساءل عن مصطلحات سياسية وحدود جغرافية معيّنة شكّلت هويّتي. لطالما تعطّشت للمغامرة، وساعدتني الفصول الدّراسية التي كنت مرسّمةً بها على الشّعور بأنني أكتشف عوالم جديدة.

في إحدى فصولي الدّراسية، صادفت المصطلح السياسي والعرقّي الذي كان يُستخدم لتصنيف شعوب منطقة الشام خلال فترات الاستعمار: عرب. يُعتبر العرب في إسرائيل غرباء أتوا من قبيلة أو أرض أخرى، وغالبا ما تُستخدم هذه التسمية بمفهوم سلبي، كما لو كانوا بربريين. بينما يُطلق على الفلسطينيين (المسيحيين والمسلمين) اسم «العرب»، يُسمّى اليهود بـ «السّاميين». ومع ذلك، فإنّ السّامية تشمل أيّ شخص له علاقة باللّغة العبرية أو العربية، وهي ما يتحدّثها جميع الفلسطينيين. من الصّعب معرفة الفرق بين العربي والسّامي - نحن نتحدّث عن أناس من مناطق صغيرة عمرها آلاف السنين. الحدود الجغرافية وُضعت بطريقة عشوائية وقد تمّ تغييرها عدّة مرات على مرّ السنين. بدأ هذا الفهم الجديد لعلامة حملتها معي طوال حياتي في رحلة نحو الحقيقة التي لم أكن أتوقّعها.

مع قيام الثّورة الجنسيّة في الغرب في السبعينات، اندلعت ثورة دينيّة في الشرق الأوسط. عندما ازدهرت تجارة النّفط في المملكة العربية السّعودية في السبعينات، تمت القوة السّعودية بشكل هائل، وبدأت ثقافتها الذكوريّة المتطرّفة النّاشئة عن الوهابيّة تنتشر في جميع البلدان التي يعيش فيها المسلمون. بدأ رجال الدّين المتعصّبون الذين أطلقوا على أنفسهم علماء المسلمين في إصدار فتاوى حول قواعد المظهر الخارجي في الإسلام، ممّا أدّى إلى انشقاق ديني مع المسلمين المعتدلين.

كابنة لوالدَيْن مرّا بهذه الثّورة الدينيّة، شعرت كما لو أنّني اضطُرت إلى ارتداء الحجاب لتحديد هويّتي كمسلمة. ولكن مع فهمي الجديد

للمصطلحات السياسيّة والحدود الجغرافيّة، بدأت أتساءل عن جملة من القواعد مثل السبب وراء إلزام النّساء على مرافقة مَحْرَم أثناء السّفر و سبب تغطية النّساء لأنفسهنّ من الرّأس إلى أخمص القدمين بينما لا يفعل الرجال ذلك.

كنت أرغب في رؤية ديني بدون الهوامش الثّقافية والتّقليدية التي ورثتها في نشأتي، ولذلك بدأت في حضور دورات تنظّمها مدرسة إسلامية في شيكاغو في عطلة نهاية الأسبوع حيث يمكنني التكوّن على يد علماء دين ذوي صيت ذائع. كنت أرغب بشدّة في معرفة الدّين الذي كنت أمثله طوال حياتي. لم أكن أعلم بالمرّة أنّ هذه الدّورات ستغيّر حياتي إلى الأبد.

اشتُهرت الدّورات بالاستشهاد بالأحاديث الصحيحة و آيات القرآن لدعم كل فتوى أو فكرة. كانت دقيقة جدّا على النطاق الديني. ذات يوم خلال جلسة أسئلة و أجوبة، طرح فتاة على علماء المسلمين المشهورين سؤالاً: «السّلام عليكم ، لديّ سؤال فقط حول القواعد المتعلّقة بالحجاب ومن أين جاءت قواعد ارتداء الحجاب في العقيدة الإسلاميّة؟

امتعضت و قلبت عيني بانزعاج. لقد حضرت هذه الدّورات لمُدّة ثلاث سنوات تقريباً، وبدا سؤالها بسيطاً للغاية. ومع ذلك، فقد فوجئ العلماء المسلمون، ربّما لأنهم اعتقدوا أيضاً أن السّؤال كان بسيطاً. وجدوا بسرعة آيات قرآنية وأحاديث تفسّر مبدأ الحجاب، لكنّهم فشلوا في تقديم أدلّة تفسّر مظاهر التّشدد التي نراها اليوم. عندها أوّقد هذا النّقاش شرارة الشّك في نفسي. في الإسلام، القرآن واضح عندما يتعلّق الأمر بالأعمال سواء كانت أخلاقيّة أو غير أخلاقيّة. الحجاب يتضمّن قواعد صارمة في العديد من البلدان والثّقافات الإسلاميّة، ممّا جعلني أتساءل من أين جاءت هذه القواعد.

عندها بدأت بحثي عن الحقيقة، وهو ما يحثُّ عليه ديني. في الإسلام، لا يوجد رجال مقدّسون أو نساء مقدّسات. تخاطب الله مباشرة وتقوم بالبحث بمفردك. الأئمة ليسوا كهنة ولكنهم أشخاص لديهم دراية بالإسلام، ويمكن لأيّ شخص تطوير معرفته. ورغم ذلك، ومع التّأثير المتزايد لوسائل الإعلام وظهور الإنترنت، اخترق التّفسير الذّكوري المتّحامل على لباس المرأة منازل المسلمين،

وأصبح من الأسهل الاعتماد على المعلومات التي وردت إليك بدلا من القيام بالبحث بنفسك.

و في العام الموالي، أجريْتُ مقابلات مع أصدقاء وعلماء حول موضوع الحجاب. تحدّثت مع والديّ وعائلتي. سافرت إلى مناطق فيها عدد كبير من المسلمين في المدن الكبرى مثل «شيكاغو» و «مينيابوليس» بحثا عن إجابات. لم أكن راضية أبدا عن التفسيرات التي أعطيت لي لقواعد ودواعي إرتداء الحجاب. بدا أنّها أتت من منظور متحيّز لم يكن مدعوما بالضرورة بالعلم الإسلامي. التّواضع مهمّ في الإسلام وكذلك للعديد من الناس من ذوي المعتقدات الدّينية، ولكن كيف للمتحمّجة أن تبدو غير موضوعيّة؟ ما تعتبره ثقافة ما اعتدالا، تعتبره الأخرى وقاحة.

لذلك، شرعت في بحثي الخاص، حيث كنت أتأمّل النّصوص الدّينية لساعات. يحتوي القرآن على أكثر من ستة آلاف آية تتعلق بالتّواضع، وأوضح آية عن التّواضع تتجلى في سورة النور، الآية ٣١، التي تأمر النّساء بأخذ قطعة من الملابس من رؤوسهن لتغطية صدورهنّ. يقول العديد من علماء الإسلام أنّ الآية تتعلّق تحديدا بالنّساء في تلك الحقبة و اللّاتي يغطّين رؤوسهنّ ويتركن صدورهنّ مكشوفة. لا توجد في الكتاب المقدّس قواعد صريحة أخرى تتعلّق بالتّواضع.

لم أستطع أن أفهم لماذا لم تكن مبادئ الحجاب مفصّلة في القرآن بينما كانت القواعد الأخرى أكثر وضوحا. وبسبب ذلك، لم أستطع فهم التّوازن غير المتناسق للحجاب في القرآن والحديث في حين تأكّيده في الحياة الإسلامية. كان يبدو أنّ هناك أو تشديد أكبر على الحجاب في العالم الإسلامي مقارنة بالنّصوص الإسلامية. في بعض الأحيان، كنت أشعر أنّ الصّلاة والصّوم والزكاة كانوا أقل أهميّة من دور المرأة كمسلمة.

بدأ مفهوم الاختلاف الذي ابتليت به منذ أن كان عمري ستّة عشر عاما في البروز. هل جعلني مختلفة لأبدو كجزء من هذه المنظومة؟ و هل كنت مسلمة أفضل حالا أم شخص أفضل حالا إذا بدوت كجزء منها؟ كانت هذه الصورة تشغل بالي. يتمّ الحكم على العديد من النّساء المسلمات بناء على

صورتهم، وأدركت أنه إذا كان بإمكانك التحكّم في صورة شخص ما، فيمكنك التحكّم في ذلك الشخص.

عندها قرّرت نزع الحجاب بعد ارتدائه لثلاث عشرة سنة.

في رحلة بحثي عن الحقيقة، لم أحصل على الجواب الشافي الذي أردته. بدأت أوّمن بأنّ فكرة الحجاب هي جزء من الإسلام، ولكن لم يكن المقصود استخدامها كما هي عليه اليوم. حوّل التأثير السعودي المتشدّد على العالم الإسلامي جمال ارتداء الحجاب من وسيلة لاستعادة الجسد من التّشبيّه الجنسي إلى وسيلة للسيطرة.

انتزعت العديد من النّساء المسلمات تلك السيطرة واسترددن الحجاب كأنّه ملكهنّ، كمعارضة مباشرة للهياكل الذّكوريّة التسلّطيّة الموجودة في العالم الإسلامي. لكن كلّما تعلّمت أكثر عن الإسلام، أيقنت أكثر أن الله يركّز على طبعنا وأخلاقنا بدلا من ملابسنا. يبدو أنّ قيمة المرأة المسلمة كانت تعتمد على ما إذا كانت ترتدي الحجاب أم لا - مقياس عبادتها أو إخلاصها الديني. إذا نزعَت المرأة حجابها، يُنظر إليها بازدراء. ومع ذلك، قادتني رحلتي إلى استنتاج مفاده أنّ ديننا يركّز أكثر على النوايا الحسنة والأفعال أكثر من المظهر.

نزعَت حجابي للمرة الأولى في مهرجان محلي. كنت أريد أن أكون في منطقة مزدحمة حتّى لا أشعر بأنني لوحدي. عندما نزعته، لم أشعر بالحزن الكبير فحسب، بل و كأنني عارية و مكشوفة، كما لو كنت قد فقدت أحد أطراف جسدي.

كان نزع الحجاب مجازفة كبيرة بالنّسبة لي و واحد من أصعب القرارات في حياتي. كان كلّ ما عرفته وأيدته، كلّ ما ميّزني. نزعته خلف ضجّة وسط المجتمع الذي أنتمي إليه. لم يشعر والديّ بالارتياح تجاه اختياري في البداية لأنّه كان جزءا من هويّتي لفترة طويلة. كان والدي المتديّن أكثر تفهّما لقراري من والدي التّقليديّة، وهو ما توقّعت، إنّها التقاليد السّائدة التي تمتلك سلطة أقوى من الجانب الدّيني للحجاب. ومع ذلك، قَبِل كلاهما بقراري في نهاية المطاف.

كان من الصَّعب أيضا التَّعامل مع الأحكام المتعلِّقة بكوني إذا ما أزال مسلمة صالحة بدون الحجاب أم لا. لقد تفاجأت عندما اكتشفت أنه ليس فقط بعض أفراد الجالية المسلمة الذين حكموا عليّ، بل العديد من غير المسلمين كذلك. كنت أتلقّى تعليقات مثل، «لقد كنت شجاعة للغاية بارتدائك الحجاب»، كما لو كان السَّبب الوحيد لنزع الحجاب هو الخوف. فقط أولئك الذين عرفوني بشكل شخصي أدركوا أنني نزع الحجاب كردّ فعل فكري وسياسي وأنّ الأمر لا يتعلّق بالخوف أو «بالجموح».

الكثير ممّا يعرض صورة للعالم، ولكن كم واحد ممّا صادق مع نفسه؟ بعد أن قرّرت نزع الحجاب، بدأت في التّركيز أكثر على شخصيتي، ولم أكن قريبة بالمرّة من المكانة التي أردتها لنفسِي. آن ذاك، أصبحت أنظر إلى ما بداخلي بعد أن توقّفت عن التّركيز على العالم الخارجي. كنت في بعض الأحيان أتخذ قرارات مرتكزةً على ما إذا كان من المناسب أو اللائق لفتاة مسلمة ترتدي الحجاب أن تفعل شيئًا مثل السّفر بمفردها إلى بلد آخر أو حتّى القيام بالدّعابات السيّئة. لقد كنت أشعر طوال حياتي بأنني تجسيد للدين، كما لو كان عليّ أن أكون امرأة مسلمة مثاليّة وأدعي أنّ حياتي كانت مثاليّة. معظم النّاس لا يستطيعون التّواصل مع مسلمة عاديّة فما بالك إذا كانت مسلمة مضطربة. أثنى الناس على قوّتي و قدرتي على الصّمود كما لو كانت هذه سماتي المميّزة الوحيدة.

كنت متصالحةً مع قراري المتعلّق بنزع الحجاب، ولكن ليس دون أو من غير ذنب، لأنني أوّمن به. أنا أوّمن بالتّواضع، لكن لديّ شعور قويّ أيضًا بأنّ التّواضع يجب أن يأتي أوّلا من الدّاخل. أتمنّى أن أعيش في عالم حيث تكون فيه جميع النّساء أحرار في ارتداء ما يريحهنّ، سواء كان ذلك بتغطية رؤوسهنّ أم لا. أحلم بعالم لا يُحكّم فيه على النّساء بقسوة بسبب مظهرهنّ، وتحديّ الوضع الرّاهن هو سيّلي للقيام بدوري في جعل ذلك العالم حقيقة.

بعد خلع الحجاب، لاحظت أنّ النّاس لم يعودوا يعيروني اهتماما مثل الذي كان من قبل، وبدأ عبء حمل ديني على رأسي وكتفي في التّلاشي. يمكنني الاستمتاع بحياتي دون الشّعور بأنني محلّ انتقادات. بدأت في التّركيز أكثر على شخصيتي و تحقيق أهدافي بأن أكون صادقة مع نفسي. علاقتي مع الله أكثر صدقا الآن.

رَبِّمَا فِي يَوْمٍ مِنَ الْيَومِ سَأَسْتَعِيدُ حِجَابِي. فِي الْوَقْتِ الْحَالِي، أَعْلَمُ أَنَّي لَسْتُ
مِثَالِيَّةً، لَكِنِّي أَعْلَمُ أَيضاً أَنَّي أَعْمَلُ عَلَى تَحْسِينِ نَفْسِي، وَكَيْفَ يَنْظُرُ الْآخَرُونَ
إِلَيَّ وَإِلَى مَظْهَرِي فَهُوَ مَشْكَلَتُهُمْ. هُنَاكَ شِجَاعَةٌ فِي ارْتِدَاءِ الْحِجَابِ. وَلَكِنْ فِي
السَّنَوَاتِ الَّتِي مَضَتْ مِنْذُ أَنْ قَرَّرْتُ خَلْعَهُ، تَعَلَّمْتُ أَنَّهُ مِنَ الشِّجَاعَةِ أَيضاً أَنْ
تَمْشِي مَكْشُوفًا، بِحَقِيقَتِكَ الْخَاصَّةِ بِكَ.



GEORGE KHAL

ARTIST STATEMENT

I WAS BORN in Haifa, Palestine, and my family and I fled to Cairo during the 1948 war with the intent of returning after the fighting ended. But the fighting didn't end, and we were never able to return. We lost our home, business, and friends. We became refugees in Egypt. In 1948 alone, 750,000 Palestinians were displaced. Conflicts continue in the Biblical lands and the lands of the pharaohs.

While I lived a happy childhood in Cairo, I was unaware of the chaos and insecurities my parents weathered as they rebuilt our lives. They would soon experience additional upheavals during the Egyptian revolution and the nationalization of businesses. Sensing the need to leave the Middle East, my parents sent me to school in Jerusalem, Jordan, at age thirteen to better master the English language in addition to the Arabic and French I already spoke. Eventually my parents succeeded in sending my siblings and me to Iowa City, but their effort cost them their lives before they were able to join us here.

I struggled to adapt to a new culture in the United States. I lived in fear of being falsely labeled a Palestinian terrorist. As an eighteen-year-old immigrant, I had no podium to tell people that Palestinians have the same aspirations as other human beings, to live in peace, earn a decent living, and raise a family.

Fifteen years ago, I began to write my story to document my history for my American-born daughter and to honor my parents' memories. In my struggle to remember all the details, especially the years before 1948 and our early years in Cairo, my siblings and I huddled for weeks and months reminiscing about the past. We rummaged through photo albums and letters as well as watching videos of our uncles relating our family story. The treasure trove of letters from my parents shed a brighter light into our lives. As I read and reread their handwritten words on the delicate parchment paper, sometimes I sobbed uncontrollably, overcome with guilt for my failure to help them.

Living in a multicultural place like Iowa City has brought my siblings and me comfort as we meet other immigrants with similar

stories of adapting to a new life in a new country. We all long for a place so far away, yet so close to our hearts.

I keep our memories and traditions alive when I prepare our favorite dishes, especially kibbeh, mujaddara, and maamoul, and share them with family and friends. As the scents of familiar spices fill my kitchen, a sense of love and security surrounds me as it once did in our tiny kitchen in Cairo.

In writing, I find the courage to embrace my Palestinian heritage. I write to capture the memories of my family's struggles and victories, to honor my parents for their sacrifices, and to communicate my appreciation to them in written words, words I never had a chance to say to them while they were alive.



UNDER THE NEW CRESCENT MOON

GEORGE KHAL

DEAR MAMA AND BABA,

It is Sunday afternoon and I am sitting at my desk in the home I've shared with my wife for forty-eight years in Iowa City. As I work on my memoir, my gaze returns again and again to four of my favorite photographs sitting before me.

The first is from your wedding day in 1933. Mama, you are a beautiful bride in flowing silk, your expression full of confidence, the same expression you wore all your life. You are seated next to Baba, your tall, handsome groom in a tuxedo with tails who seems to be thinking, *I am marrying the greatest pianist and the most beautiful woman in Palestine.*

The second is of the three-story stone home you built for us in Haifa, Palestine. It is the home where your children were born and where we lived until we fled to Cairo during the war of 1948.

The third shows Baba wearing his tarboosh, arm wrapped tightly around me at the Cairo Zoo when I was three, only two years after we had settled into our new home in Egypt.

In the fourth photograph, Mama stands next to me on the day I graduated from the Christian Brothers boarding school in Jerusalem in 1965, her smile reflecting pride and hope for our future.

When I began working on my memoir, I looked at all our family photos from Palestine and Egypt, and I reread the letters you two sent my siblings and me over the years when I was a boarder in Jerusalem and then when I immigrated to the United States for college. I hope my words will honor you, as I have come to realize all the risks and sacrifices you made so my siblings and I could have a better life. My journey from Haifa to Cairo to Jerusalem to Beirut to Iowa City is complete. Your dream of sending all your children to the U.S. came true. Doris, Olga, Nadia, Fouad, and I are all American citizens.

Because I was so young when we fled from Haifa to Cairo in 1948, I have relied on your stories and those of my uncles and older sisters to keep alive the experiences we enjoyed in Haifa and the early days of adjusting to a new life in Cairo. They told me how you rebuilt your tourism business in Cairo but were always uneasy about the political unrest, which eventually led to the Egyptian revolution in July of 1952.

Mama, I keep your memory alive by looking for the new crescent moon every month. I will never forget what you told me on the evening of January 26, 1952, now known as Black Saturday. I was five years old and terrified when I heard the screaming in the streets and saw buildings on fire in the neighborhood. Cairo was burning. Noticing my distress, you said, "George, *ya habibi*, let's go to the balcony to see the new crescent moon." I held your outstretched hand and followed you with anticipation. As we passed through the living room, I remember running my hand along the gray-veined marble coffee table to feel its smoothness. The sky was darkened with smoke, but you assured me that the crescent was right behind the haze. You guided my face toward the western sky, then pointed and said, "*Hal hilalak, shahr mubarak*, behold your new crescent moon, may it bring you a blessed month."

You took off your wedding band and told me to close my eyes. While you passed the band over each of my eyelids, you said, "*La tebeid ain el hassoud*, to chase away and protect you from the evil eye of jealous people." You slid the band back on your finger, knelt next to me, and hugged me tight while saying, "The fires are gone, don't be frightened *ya habibi*." I breathed in the comforting scent of your Chanel No. 5 perfume, and my world was at peace.

You took me back to the balcony the next two nights, when we could clearly see the moon, and you promised that every month we would watch the new crescent moon together. When we came back inside the apartment, you pointed to a statuette of the Assumption of Mary. She was standing on the crescent moon surrounded by angels. I know now that many faiths believe the crescent is a sign of rebirth and a cradle for our newly born dreams.

Three months later, at a picnic during Sham El-Nessim, I spotted the crescent moon. I asked you why the moon was here and

not on our balcony. You smiled and said, “No matter where you are in the whole wide world, the moon will follow you.”

I pondered your answer for a moment, then asked, “Will it follow me even if I am back in Palestine?”

You closed your eyes and nodded. “Yes, *ya habibi*.” You had the same look as when you told me stories about the wonderful life our family shared in Palestine, a life I was too young to remember because I was only a baby when we fled.

Now, whenever I spot the crescent, I repeat your precious words to whoever is with me at that moment. I still have your wedding band that you rubbed gently across my eyelids. I have shared your story with my daughter, the granddaughter you never met, and each month when the new crescent moon appears, she thinks of us on the balcony that night.

In my early childhood, I wasn’t aware of the stress you and Baba endured after we fled Palestine and rebuilt our fortunes. When we relocated to Cairo, you both shielded me from the turmoil. I didn’t learn until many years later that you were forming a plan to make our family’s life better, to leave the Middle East.

Looking back, I realize that the first step in your plan occurred when Doris married her fiancé after he completed medical school in Cairo in 1955. You arranged their trip to the U.S. so they could begin to establish a life there and possibly sponsor the rest of us in the future.

Baba, I also came to understand why you sent Fouad and me to your alma mater, the Christian Brothers boarding school in Jerusalem, to get an English-based education instead of the predominantly French one we had received in Cairo. It was so we could speak fluent English when we immigrated to the U.S. to attend college. But when you sent us away to boarding school in 1960, we knew nothing of your plan. I was devastated to leave the comforts of home at the age of thirteen. I felt you were punishing me for not living up to your expectations in Cairo.

Mama, I know you cried your heart out when Fouad and I left for boarding school. I missed your hugs and tender heart and delicious meals of *warak enab*, *kibbeh*, *maamoul*, and especially

kanafeh. Most of all I missed attending church with you on Palm Sunday, carrying the palms decked with carnations and roses, our tradition from Palestine. I found the crescent moon every month and thought of you.

When I was home for summer break in 1963, Baba, you finally made me realize what you and Mama had been going through. You invited me to the opera house to watch the Cairo Symphony perform *The Barber of Seville* overture. As we sat in the auditorium and the music surrounded us, I was overcome with pride. I was a young man now, and for the first time in a long time, I knew you wanted to spend this special evening with me alone. After the concert you treated me to my favorite *marron glacé* at Groppi. As I slowly peeled back the foil wrap, I inspected the shiny glaze covering the chestnut, then without hesitation took my first bite, savoring the soft, sweet nut. We chatted about our favorite parts of the performance, and I told you how I was swept away by the harmony, the rhythm, and the crescendos, how I'd hoped the music would never end.

You reached across the table, rested your hand on my forearm, and said, "George, do you realize we are refugees? The Middle East is at a tipping point for more conflicts, and life will soon get harder for us here. But before you go to America, you have to succeed in school."

I froze for a moment and looked at you, trying to figure out if you were the same father who scolded me so many times about my schoolwork. You moved your hand to my shoulder and squeezed it. Your face was troubled yet loving. I had never before heard you say that we were refugees or that you wanted to send me to America. I wondered if being refugees meant that we didn't belong anywhere. I can still see the angst on your face and hear your voice as you talked to me. That evening brought into focus what I had not understood before, that I needed to succeed in high school so I could be accepted into an American university. *The Barber of Seville* continues to be my favorite classical music because it reminds me of our special day together. I went back to school in the fall with renewed energy, looking forward to October, when you and Mama planned to visit Fouad and me in Jerusalem.

I remember that day when you flew from Cairo to Jerusalem and picked us up from school to go to lunch. We dined at a café on the Dead Sea, and I loved that you were both with us in Jerusalem for the first time in the three years I had been a student there. The loneliness I had felt every day as a boarder was absent that afternoon. After lunch we hugged and said goodbye as you boarded the plane to return home to Cairo.

Baba, I had no way of knowing that would be the last time I would ever see you. Mama telegraphed the school immediately to tell them you had died on the plane, but the school principal hid that fact from me until two months later, at Christmas break, so as not to distract me from my studies. Can you imagine my rage when I learned they had waited so long to tell me you had died? You must have been under unimaginable stress during our lunch that day by the Dead Sea. You didn't tell Fouad or me that you had just received a telegram informing you that you were no longer the general manager of Eastmar Travel, the company you founded, because Egypt was nationalizing private companies, replacing Christian managers with Muslims.

I finally graduated in 1965, and Mama came to my graduation. After your death I could not get a visa to return to Cairo, so I spent the summer in Beirut with Mama and Fouad at Uncle Raja's house. The summer was uneventful yet stressful. I was going to be displaced again, moving to a foreign place far away, not knowing if I would see Cairo, Haifa, Jerusalem, or Beirut ever again. On the night before my departure, I took Mama out to the balcony and repeated her precious words to her under the new crescent moon. We talked about the future and her hope that one day we would reunite in America and live together again.

The next day at the Beirut airport, Mama told me, "You're the man of the family now." It was a humbling and undeserving title when I thought of your accomplishments, Baba, but I was proud of it. I was on my way to Iowa City, a place I knew nothing about. I would live with Doris and her family, the only people I knew in America. I would enroll at the University of Iowa, and I prayed to God that I would succeed, for Mama's sake.

When I landed in Iowa, I was excited yet frightened. Iowa City was small compared with Haifa, Cairo, Jerusalem, and Beirut. But the landscape calmed me with its rolling hills, and the symmetrical rows of corn instilled a sense of order amid the chaos I felt after being uprooted so many times. The bales of hay and colors of the fields signaled the predictable changing of seasons, unlike the monotony of the desert landscape in Cairo.

I saw Amish horse-drawn buggies transporting families rather than donkey-drawn carts hauling fruits and vegetables to the open markets. I listened to the quiet traffic, absent the chaos, congestion, and blaring car horns of Cairo. I saw wide streets and homes surrounded by green lawns. I walked through snow in the harsh winter with my first pair of boots, winter parka, and wool hat. I wish you could have experienced these things with me.

At first it didn't seem Americans wanted to get to know me. But as I mingled with students in classes and at my summer jobs, I found them to be inquisitive and welcoming. I soon learned that Americans used words differently than in the formal English I had learned. With the help of my three nieces, I quickly adapted to the American lingo. For example, I learned that mad often meant "angry," not "crazy," and guys referred to both girls and boys, not boys only.

When people asked me where I was from, I hesitated while my thoughts raced to decide what to answer. I was afraid to say Palestine. I worried that the U.S. saw all Palestinians, whether Christian or Muslim, as obstacles to Israel's control of Palestine. You always told me that we and other Palestinians had lived peacefully in the Holy Land alongside people of all faiths. It was demoralizing to listen to the media celebrating Israel while demonizing Palestinians because they dared to reclaim their land and properties.

So when people asked where I was from, I always said Lebanon because it was a neutral country. I secretly hated myself each time I refused to say, "I am from Palestine." Sometimes I would respond with "Yep" or "Uh-huh" and move on. Sometimes I wanted to crawl into a shell to avoid the hurt.

Mama, thank you for faithfully writing me letters of encouragement after I left the Middle East. You always told me

that you would wait for me to get my diploma so I could bring you to the U.S. and we could live together again. But adapting to a new culture delayed my graduation from the University of Iowa. First, the Vietnam War was raging, and I could have been drafted if not for my high draft number. Then I realized that the engineering and medicine fields were not a good fit for me. I had to drop out of school for a while because I was failing. I am sorry I failed you, Mama. When you passed away in 1970 in Cairo after a series of strokes, I still had not graduated. I kept all of your letters and still take comfort as I read your hopeful messages and see your handwriting on the delicate parchment paper.

Three months after your death, I met Barbara from Fairbank, Iowa. Fairbank is a small town of eight hundred people, enough to fill ten apartment buildings in our neighborhood in Cairo. One day her roommate asked my roommate if Barbara could borrow a rubber mallet to fix a few dents in her 1951 red Ford pickup after running into a telephone pole during a December snowstorm. I had access to tools because I was working at a rental store. Unbeknownst to me, her roommate had told Barbara that I would do anything for a girl if she sweet-talked me.

I took the rubber mallet to Barbara's apartment. When she opened the door, the first thing I saw was her green eyes, then her shoulder-length red hair. My heart skipped a beat, and all I could think was, wow. I felt as if I were in the middle of a calm ocean and could not hear even my own voice. "You must be George," she said after seeing the rubber mallet in my hand. I shook my head to wake up from my trance, then nodded. She took me to where her pickup sat with its fan bashed into the radiator. I chuckled and told her that she needed a body shop instead of a rubber mallet.

I spent the night debating whether to call Barbara the next day. What if she rejected me? After agonizing, I finally called her. I was bracing for a rejection, but her voice was comforting. She was happy I called. It was a good start, a start that changed my life forever.

Barbara's parents were surprised that I asked their permission to marry her, but that was what all respectful Palestinian men did. You both taught me that, Mama and Baba. She immediately loved Palestinian cooking, and my sisters taught her to make *kibbeh*,

stuffed grape leaves, and baklava. Her parents and large extended family officially welcomed me into their family when we married in 1972. I taught them that it was okay to hug and kiss on the cheeks, a tradition mastered by all Palestinians yet unknown to her German clan. When Barbara and I walked around her neighborhood, she would point out the husband and wife who sold vegetables at the corner grocery; the neighbors who waved when she walked home from school; the elementary school she attended; the ice cream shop where she ate cold treats on hot summer days. My heart ached that I couldn't take Barbara to the Cairo streets of my boyhood, where I too had waved to the local shopkeepers, neighbors, and friends.

I never became a doctor or engineer like you both hoped, but Barbara encouraged me to return to school. I studied computer science, a field that was still in its infancy in 1972. Barbara and I graduated together at the end of 1972, and my first professional job was as a computer programmer at the University of Iowa. Over the next thirty years I held many rewarding positions in the field of computer science.

I liked Iowa City, but I missed many things about Cairo. I missed the street vendors peddling grilled corn, tamarind juice, and sugar cane juice. I missed the daily blaring call for prayers by the muezzins. I missed walking by the sidewalk cafés where men smoked shishas, the percolating water from each pipe merging with the others until they sounded like drums in a symphony hall. I missed standing near the calming sandstone of the pyramids, stroking the large stones to feel their history while thinking about the people of the past who had walked, toiled, and breathed in the exact spot where I was standing. I missed the weekends when you serenaded us on the piano and played without sheet music, saying “*Par oreille.*” And most of all, I missed the aromas of rose water and orange-blossom water when making *maamoul* with Mama, my sisters, and Teta Noor around Easter and Christmas. I make it now to share with friends and family, and I always remember how Mama taught me to pinch the top of the dough.

I never dreamed the hearing loss from Mama's side of the family would become a blessing in disguise. In 1980 my hearing started to deteriorate. Shame possessed and paralyzed me. The word *trash*

haunted me as I remembered how Uncle Charlie was treated as an outcast for his deafness in Palestine and Egypt. Fearing that I was no longer normal and people would reject me because of my disability, I grew my hair below my ears to hide my hearing aids. I was now hiding my hearing disability as well as my Palestinian heritage.

Gradually, with the help and encouragement of audiologists, my attitude changed. I started six support groups in Iowa. I was with people like me, and I became an expert on assistive hearing technology. In 1992, I lobbied to host and chair the Hearing Loss Association national convention in Cedar Rapids, only twenty-five miles from Iowa City. More than nine hundred people attended from around the country. It was the first time since I started wearing hearing aids that I cut my hair short. I was no longer embarrassed.

Baba, I felt your presence next to me when I addressed the attendees in the welcoming and opening remarks. I remembered your stories of the tourism conventions you led in Palestine, Egypt, and Europe. I looked at the audience while they applauded, accepting all of me without judgment. It was a new feeling that I cherish to this day.

During the five-day event, many attendees approached me to congratulate me on a well-planned convention. Some asked the fateful question, “Where are you from?”

This time I did not hesitate. “I am from Palestine,” I replied. I studied their faces, expecting rejection, but their expressions were nonjudgmental. Some shook my hand, and some hugged me. I have never hidden my Palestinian heritage or my hearing loss since.

Empowered by my experience with the conference, I took a huge leap of faith and founded Sound Clarity, Inc., a company to dispense assistive hearing technology internationally. I opened a store in Iowa City, developed a website, gave presentations to service clubs about hearing loss, hired university students to help me run the company, and wrote articles in professional journals.

Mama and Baba, I finally made it home not just in my heart but in reality when Barbara and I traveled to the Middle East in 2018, fifty-three years after I left. Just as I had dreamed when Barbara showed me around her hometown, I was able to show her

our apartment and my elementary school in Cairo, my boarding school in Jerusalem, and our family home in Haifa, as well as the holy places in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Jericho in Palestine. In Cairo, we were able to enter our apartment because Uncle Charlie's son still lived there. Our furniture showed its age, but the marble-top coffee table was still as smooth as ever. We stood on the balcony where we had watched the crescent moon. We touched the piano keys that you played when you serenaded us. We walked past Eastmar, your travel company. We stopped at Groppi for a *marron glacé*. We visited our Greek Orthodox church and lit a candle at the altar where we prayed every Sunday. We visited the mausoleum where you are both buried alongside the rest of our family members who have passed on.

In Jerusalem I found Frere Rafael still living at the Christian Brothers school. He was the vice principal when I was a student. He remembered me, and we shared stories in the same hallways I had walked when I was a boarder. On our first night there the crescent moon was shining high in the sky. I hugged Barbara and repeated the ritual of your precious words. In the West Bank, we witnessed how difficult life is for Palestinians with checkpoints and thirty-foot concrete walls separating families. Never at a loss for words, Barbara stood in stunned silence every time she saw the illegal settlements and armed Israeli soldiers in the occupied territories, haunting images that were no longer just stories she had heard from me.

We visited the beautiful home you built for us in Haifa. The building with its spiral marble staircase and wrought-iron balconies still stands strong. It weathered the 1948 war, and now the first floor is occupied by a music school for Palestinian children. We climbed to the second and third floors where our families had lived before the war. The apartments were unoccupied and closed, but I was able to peer through the glass of the door on the second floor to see the bedroom door of Teta Noor's apartment, where I was born. We climbed to the terrace where Doris, Olga, and Uncles Theo and Raja would watch the Haifa harbor and bet on how many ships entered from the Mediterranean Sea. I imagined the fragrant jasmine vines and roses climbing on the balconies. Your stories of joy came to life with every step I took. I felt your presence

everywhere, and I wondered what our lives would have been like if there had been no war and we had never fled Palestine.

You risked everything the day we fled from Palestine. It was January 7, 1948. Doris told me our escape was executed perfectly. Baba, you rushed to my crib, scooped me up with blankets, mattress and all, and told everyone else to go quickly to the back door of the house. We climbed into the waiting ambulance and fled undetected to the airport, driving down back roads and alleys to avoid areas where the fighting was fierce. Thank goodness you owned an airline franchise so you could arrange a small private plane to take us to Cairo. You must have been terrified that we might not escape before being injured or killed by the bombings.

Mama and Baba, you set me on a new life's journey, one that brought me and my siblings to Iowa. We are all together again and have passed our Palestinian heritage to your seven grandchildren and fifteen great-grandchildren. I am loved by Barbara's family, and we often visit her childhood home in Fairbank to share stories of our families, including all you did to send your children to a land of peace, acceptance, and opportunity. I will always remember both of you in my new home in Iowa, a place that is lush and green, where the new crescent moon shines as brightly as it did in Cairo and Haifa.

After I finish this letter to you, I will remain at my desk and return to my memoir. It is early evening, and as I do every month, I look to the west and hope for a clear sky to find the crescent moon.

Your loving son,
George

تحت الهلال الجديد

GEORGE KHAL

تُرجمت إلى العربيّة من قِبَل أسماء بن رمضان

حبايبي ماما وبابا،

اليوم ظهر الأحد وأنا قاعد على مكتبي بالبيت اللي شاركته مع زوجتي ثمانية وأربعين سنة بمدينة أيوا سيتي. وأنا بشتغل على مذكراتي، كانت نظراتي عم ترجع كل مرة لأربع من أفضل الصور اللي قدامي.

الأولى من يوم عرسكم سنة ١٩٣٣. ماما، أنت عروس حلوة لابسة الحرير، تعبير وجهك مليان بالثقة، نفس التعبير اللي كان عندك طول حياتك. قاعدة جنب بابا، العريس الحلو الطويل اللي لابس توكسيدو، كان مبين إنو بيفكر « أنا رح أتزوج بأحسن عازفة بيانو وأحلى امرأة بفلسطين».

الثانية كانت للبيت الحجري المكوّن من ثلاث طوابق اللي بنيتوه إلنا بحيفا، فلسطين. هاذ البيت اللي انولد فيه أولادكم وعشنا فيه حتى هربنا للقاهرة خلال حرب ١٩٤٨.

الثالثة كان فيها بابا لابس طربوش، لافف إيدو بقوة عليّ بحديقة حيوانات القاهرة لما كان عمري ثلاث سنين، بعد سنتين بس من وقت ما استقرينا في بيتنا الجديد بمصر.

في الصورة الرابعة، ماما كانت واقفة جنبي في اليوم اللي تخرّجت فيه من مدرسة «الإخوان المسيحيين» الدّاخلية في القدس عام ١٩٦٥، وابتسامتها بتعكس الفخر والأمل بمستقبلنا.

لما بلّشت اشتغل على مذكراتي، شفت كلّ صور عيلتنا من فلسطين ومصر، قريت من جديد الرّسائل اللي بعثتها إلي ولاخواتي على مرّ السنين لما كنت

ساكن بالقدس و بعدين لما هاجرت على أمريكا علسان الجامعة. بتمنى
تكرمكم كلماتي، لأنو فهمت معنى كل المخاطر والتضحيات اللي قدمتها
إلي وإخواتي علسان تكون عنّا حياة أفضل. كملت رحلتي من حيفا للقاهرة
للقدس لبيروت لآيوا سيتي. حلمكم إنو تبعثوا كل أولادكم لأمريكا تحقّق. أنا
ودوريس وأولجا ونادية وفؤاد كلنا مواطنين أمريكيين.

لأنو كنت صغير كثير لما هربنا من حيفا للقاهرة عام ١٩٤٨، اعتمدت على
قصصكم وقصص أعمامي وأخواتي البنات الأكبر مني علسان أحافظ على
التجارب اللي استمتعنا بها في حيفا والأيام الأولى حتى نتأقلم مع حياة
جديدة بالقاهرة. خبروني يا باباكيف بنيت من جديد شغلك السياحي
بالقاهرة، بس كنت دايما مش مرتاح عشان الاضطرابات السياسية، اللي أدت
في النهاية للثورة المصرية في يوليو ١٩٥٢.

ماما، بتظّل ذاكرتك حية كل ما بدور على الهلال الجديد كل شهر. ولا يمكن
أنسى أبداً شو قلت لي مساء ٢٦ يناير ١٩٥٢، المعروف هلاً باسم السبت
الأسود. كان عمري خمس سنين وكنت مرعوب لما سمعت الصياح في الشوارع
وشفت المباني بتتحرق في الحي. القاهرة كانت عم تحترق.

لما لاحظتني حزني، قلت لي: «يا جورج يا حبيبي، خلينا نروح على البلكونة
علسان نشوف الهلال الجديد». مسكت بايديك الممدودة وتبعتك بشغف.
لما مرقنا من الصالون، بتذكّر أيّ مسحت ايدي على طاولة القهوة الرمادية
الرخامية حتى أحسّ بنعومتها. كانت السماء مظلمة بالدخان، بس أكدي لي
إنو الهلال كان وراء الضباب بالضبط. لقيتيلي وجهي ناحية السماء الغربية،
بعدين أشرقي باصابعك وقلتلي: «هَلْ هلالاك، شهر مبارك، تمعن بها الهلال
الجديد، إن شاء الله يجيب لك شهر مبارك».

شلتحتي خاتم عرسك وقلتلي لي أغمض عيوني. لما كنتي بتمرري الخاتم على
كل جفن، قلتلي: «لا تبعد عين الحسود، علسان تطرد و تحميك من حسد
الحاسدين». حطيتي الخاتم مرة ثانية بإصبعك، وركعتي جنبي، وحضنتيني
بقوة و قلتلي: «راحت الحرايق، ما تخاف يا حبيبي». شميت ريحة عطرك اللي
بيریح، شانيل رقم ٥، وحسيت بسلام.

رَجَّعْتينِي عالِبلِكونة في اللَّيلتين الجايين، وقت اللَّي كان فينا نشوف القمر
بوضوح، ووعدتيني إنَّو رح نشوف الهلال الجديد كلَّ شهر مع بعض. لمَّا
رجعنا داخل البيت، أَشْرَتي لتمثال صغير لقلعة مريم. كانت واقفة على الهلال
دايرين حواليتها الملائكة. أنا بعرف هلاً إنَّو الكثير من الأديان بتعتقد إنَّو
الهلال هو علامة ولادة ومهد لأحلامنا الجديدة.

بعد ثلاث شهور، في رحلة برة وقت شمِّ النَّسيم، لمحت الهلال. سألتك ليش
القمر هون ومو على بلكونتنا. ابتسمتي وقلتي، «بغضَّ النظر عن مكان
وجودك في العالم كله، القمر رح يلحقك.»

فكَّرت في إجابتك لثانية بعدين سألت: «رح يلحقني حتَّى لو رجعت على
فلسطين؟».

غمَّضتني عيونك و هزَّتي براسك: «إيه، يا حبيبي». كان عندك نفس النَّظرة لمَّا
كنتي بتخبريني قصص عن الحياة الحلوة الَّي تشاركتها عيلتنا في فلسطين،
حياة كنت أصغر من إني أتذكَّرها علشان كنت لسَّاتني برضع لمَّا هربنا.

هلاً، كلَّ ما بشوف الهلال، بعيد كلماتك الغالية لمين ما كان معي في هديك
اللَّحظة. لسَّاتني محتفظ بخاتم عرسك الَّي مرَّرتيه على جفوني. شاركت
قضتك مع بنتي، الحفيدة الَّي عمرك ما قابلتها، وكل شهر كل ما يظهر
الهلال الجديد، عم بتفكَّر فينا في البلكونة في هديك الليلة.

في أوَّل طفولتي، ما كنت مستوعب الصَّغَط الَّي تحمَّلتيه إنت وبابا بعد ما
هربنا من فلسطين ورجعنا بنينا ثروتنا. لمَّا انتقلنا على القاهرة، حميتوني
اثنينكم من الاضطراب. ما قدرت أعرف إلَّا بعد سنين كثيرة إنَّكم كنتوا
عاملين خطة علشان تحسَّسوا حياة عيلتنا، ونترك الشَّرق الأوسط.

لمَّا اتطلَّع لوراء، بفهم إنَّو الخطوة الأولى في خطتكم صارت لمَّا اتزوَّجت
دوريس خطيبها بعد ما خلَّص كَلِيَّة الطَّب في القاهرة سنة ١٩٥٥. نظَّمتوا
رحلتهم لأمریکا حتى يتمكَّنوا من إنَّهم يبَلِّشوا يأسَّسوا حياة هناك ويمكن
يتكفَّلوا بالباقيين ممَّا في المستقبل.

بابا، فهمت كمان ليش بعثتني أنا و فؤاد لمدرستك، مدرسة الإخوة المسيحيين
الداخلية في القدس، علشان نحصل على تعليم أساسو اللّغة الإنجليزيّة بدل
التّعليم الفرنسي اللّي تعلّماه بالقاهرة. عملت هيك علشان نقدر نحكي
الإنجليزيّ منيح لمّا نهاجر للولايات المتحدة علشان ندرس بالجامعة. بس لمّا
بعثتنا بعيد لمدرسة داخلية في عام ١٩٦٠، ما كنّا عارفين أيّ شي عن خطّتك.
انصدمت لمّا كان لازم أترك الرّفاهيّة اللّي عندنا بالبيت في عمر الثّلاث عشر
سنة. حسّيت إنك كنت عم تعاقبني علشان ما حقّقت اللّي كنت متوقّعو
منيّ بالقاهرة.

ماما، بعرف إنك عيّطتي كثير لمّا رحّت أنا وفؤاد على المدرسة الداخليّة.
اشتقت لأحضانك وقلبك الرقيق وأكلاتك الطّيبة من الدّوالي، للكبّة،
للمعمول، وخصوصي الكنافة. وفوق كل شيء، اشتقت أرواح الكنيسة معك
يوم أحد الشّعانيين، حامل عرق النّخيل المزّين بالورد والقرنفل، تقاليدنا من
فلسطين. لمّا اشوف الهلال كل شهر بفكر فيكي.

بابا، لمّا كنت بالبيت بعطلة صيف سنة ١٩٦٣، خلّيتني أخيرا أفهم اللّي بتمروا
به أنت وماما. عزمتني لدار الأوبرا علشان نحضر سيمفونية القاهرة وهي
بتأدي افتتاح عرض « باربر أوف سيفيل » (Barber of Seville). حسّيت
بالفخر لمّا قعدنا في القاعة والموسيقى حوالينا. كنت شاب وقتها، ولأول مرّة
من فترة طويلة، عرفت إنو بدك تقضي هادي الأمسية الخاصّة معي لحالي.
بعد الحفلة، دلّلتني ببوظتي المفضّلة 'marron glacé' عند «جروبي».

وقت اللّي كنت أشيل الغطا شويّة شويّة، فحصدت الطّبقة السّكريّة اللّي
بتلمع و بتغطّي الكستناء، و بعدين من دون ما أتردّد، أخذت أوّل لقمة، و
تمنّعت بطعم المكسّرات النّاعم الحلو. تكلمنا عن أفضل المقاطع بالنّسبة إلنا
من الأداء، وحكيت لك كيف سحبنى الانسجام والإيقاع والتّشويق، وكيف
كنت أمثني أنو ما تخلص الموسيقى أبدا.

و انت قاعد قدامي في الطّاوله، قرّبت و حطّيت ايدك على ايدي، وقلت،
"جورج، انت فاهم انو إحنا لاجئين؟ الشّرق الأوسط في مرحلة حرجة لأكثر
صراعات، و رح تصير الحياة أكثر صعوبة بالنّسبة إلنا هون. بس قبل ما تروح
لأمريكا، ضروري تنجح بالمدرسة".

تمسمرت للحظة و اطلعت فيك، كنت أحاول أعرف إذا كنت نفس الأب
اللي بهدلني مرّات كثيرة علشان واجباتي بالمدرسة. حرّكت يدك لكتفي
وضغطت عليه. كان وجهك مزعوج بس فيه ملامح الحب. عمري ما سمعتك
بتقول إنو كنّا لاجئين أو إنو كان بدك تبعثني على أمريكا. كنت عم بسأل
حالي إذا كان اللاجئين يعني إنو ما بننتمي لأيّ مكان. لسّاتني بقدر أشوف
القلق على وجهك وأسمع صوتك ممّا حكيت معي. في هذاك المساء، سلّطت
الصّوء على الشّيء اللي ما كنت فاهمو من قبل، وهو إني بحاجة للنّجاح في
المدرسة الثانوية حتّى يقبلوني بإحدى الجامعات الأمريكية. ما زال «باربر
أوف سيفيل» موسيقتي الكلاسيكيّة المفضّلة لأنّه بيذكرني بيومنا الخاص مع
بعض. رجعت على المدرسة في الخريف بطاقة جديدة، و كنت عم بستنّى
أكتوبر، ممّا خطّطت أنت وماما تزوروني أنا و فؤاد في القدس.

بتذكّر هذاك اليوم ممّا سافرتوا من القاهرة للقدس وأخذتونا من المدرسة
علشان نروح نتغدى. أكلنا في كافيتيريا على البحر الميت، وحبّيت كثير إنكم
كنتوا الاثنين معنا في القدس للمرة الأولى في الثّلاث سنين اللي كنت أنا فيها
طالب. الشّعور بالوحدة اللي كنت عم بشعر فيه كل يوم ممّا كنت طالب
في السّكن الداخلي كان غايب ظهر هذاك اليوم. بعد الغداء، حضنا و ودّعنا
بعض ممّا ركبوا في الطائرة علشان ترجعوا على القاهرة.

بابا، ما كان عندي أيّ طريقة أعرف فيها إنو هاي راح تكون آخر مرّة بشوفك
فيها. ماما بعثت برقيّة للمدرسة على طول علشان تخبرهم إنك تمت في
الطّيارة، بس مدير المدرسة خبّي عنّي هاي الحقيقة لبعده شهرين، لعطلة
عيد الميلاد، علشان ما يلهيني عن دراستي. فيك تتخيّل قداش عصبت ممّا
عرفت إنهم استنّوا كثير علشان يخبروني إنك تمت؟ لازم تكون تعرّضت
لضغوط مو ممكن الواحد يتخيّلها ممّا تغدّينا هذاك اليوم جنب البحر الميت.
ما خبّرتني لا أناو لا فؤاد إنك لسّا مستلم برقيّة تخبرك إنك ما رح تكون
المدير العام لشركة «إيستمار ترافل» (Eastmar Travel) بعد اليوم، الشركة
التي أسّستها، علشان مصر كانت بتأمّم الشركات الخاصّة، و تخيّر المديرين
المسيحيين بالمسلمين.

تخرّجت أخيرا في عام ١٩٦٥، و إجت ماما لحفلة تخرّجي. بعد وفاتك، ما
قدرت أحصل على تأشيرة حتّى أرجع للقاهرة، عشان هيك قضيت الصّيف

في بيروت مع ماما وفؤاد في بيت العم رجا. الصَّيف كان هادي بس مضغوط. كنت رح أتشرد مرة ثانية، وانتقل على مكان أجنبي بعيد، من غير ما أعرف إذا كنت رح أشوف القاهرة أو حيفا أو القدس أو بيروت مرّة ثانية. في اللّيلة اللي قبل السَّفرة، طلّعت ماما للبلكونة وعدت لها كلماتها الغالية تحت الهلال الجديد. حكينا عن المستقبل و أملها إنو نرجع في يوم من الأيام لأمریکا ونعيش مع بعض مرة ثانية.

في اليوم اللي بعدو في مطار بيروت، قالت لي ماما، "أنت راجل العيلة هلاً". كان لقب متواضع وما بستاهلو لما فكّرت في إنجازاتك، يا بابا، بس كنت فخور بيها. كنت بطريقي لآيوا سيتي، مكان ما كنت عارف عنه أي شي. كنت رح أسكن مع دوريس وعيلتها، الناس الوحيدين اللي عرفتهم بأمریکا. سجّلت بجامعة آيوا، ودعيت الله إني أنجح علشان ماما.

لما نزلت في آيوا، حسّيت بالحماس بس كمان بالخوف. كانت آيوا سيتي صغيرة مقارنة بحيفا والقاهرة والقدس وبيروت. بس المناظر الطبيعية هدأتني بتلالها الملتوية، و صفوف الدّرة المتوازية اللي غرست شعور بالنظام وسط الفوضى اللي حسّيتها بعد ما اتقلّعت مرّات كثيرة. بالات القشّ وألوان الحقول بتدل على التّغيير المتوقّع في المواسم، على عكس المناظر الطّبيعية الصّحراوية بالقاهرة.

شفت عربات الأميش عم بتجرّها الخيول و بتنقل عائلات بدل عربات بتجرّها الحمير علشان تنقل الفواكه والخضرة للأسواق المفتوحة. سمعت حركة المرور الهادية، وغياب الفوضى والأزمة وتزيمر السيّارات العالي بالقاهرة. شفت شوارع و بيوت واسعة محوّطة بالأعشاب الخضراء. مشيت في التّلج في الشّتاء البارد و أنا لابس أول كندرة شتويّة و بلطو شتوي وطاقية صوف. بتمنى لو جرّبتوا هاي الأشياء معي.

في البداية ما كان مبين إنو الأمريكان بدّهم يتعرّفوا علي. بس لما اختلطت مع الطّلاب بالصفوف و بشغلي في العطلة الصّيفية، لقيتهم حبابين ومرحّبين. عرفت بسرعة إنو الأمريكان بيستخدموا الكلمات بشكل مختلف عن اللّغة الإنجليزيّة الرّسمية اللي تعلّمتها. بمساعدة بنات إختي الثّلاثة، تأقلمت

بسرعة مع اللّغة الأمريكيّة. مثلاً، تعلّمت إنُو «ماد» (mad) غالبًا ما تعني «غضبنا» و مش «مجنون»، و إنُو «قايز» (guys) بتتقال للأولاد و البنات، مش للأولاد بس.

لما سألوني النّاس من وين جيت، تردّدت في الوقت اللّي كانت فيه أفكاري عم تتسارع لتقرّر شو بردّ. كنت خايف أقول «فلسطين». كنت خايف إنُو الولايات المتّحدة بتعتبر جميع الفلسطيينيّين، سواء كانوا مسيحيين أو مسلمين، حاجز قدّام سيطرة إسرائيل على فلسطين. كنتوا دايما بتقولولي إنو إحنا وفلسطينيينّين ثانيين عشنا بسلام بالأرض المقدّسة مع ناس من كلّ الأديان. كان من المخزي إنُو نستمتع لوسائل الإعلام اللّي بتحتفل بإسرائيل في حين تشيطن الفلسطيينيّين لأنهم تجرّؤوا على استعادة أراضيهم وممتلكاتهم.

علشان هيك لما كانوا النّاس بيسألوني من وين أنا، كنت دايما بقول «لبنان» لأنو بلد محايد. كنت بكره حالي بالسّر في كل مرّة رفضت فيها إني أقول، «أنا من فلسطين». في بعض المرّات كنت بجابو بـ «نعم» أو «آه - هاه» وأمرّ في بعض المرّات كان بدّي الأرض تنشقّ و تبلعني علشان أتجنّب الوجع.

ماما، بشكرك على كتابتك رسائل التّشجيع إلي بإخلاص بعد ما تركت الشّرق الأوسط. خبّرتيني دايما إنك رح تستتي متي أحصل على شهادتي حتّى أقدر أجيبك على الولايات المتّحدة وفيينا نعيش مع بعض مرّة ثانية. بس التّأقلم مع ثقافة جديدة أحرّ تخرّجي من جامعة أيوا. أوّلًا، كانت حرب فيتنام مشتعلة، وكان من الممكن يبعثوني لولا عدد بعثاتي الكبير. بعدين أدركت إنو مجالات الهندسة والطّب مو مناسبة إلي. اضطرّيت إترك المدرسة لفترة من الوقت لأنّي كنت برسب. أنا آسف لأنّي رسبت، ماما. لما متّي في ١٩٧٠ في القاهرة بعد سلسلة من السّكتات الدّماغية، كنت لسّا ما تخرّجت. احتفظت بكلّ رسايك ولسّا بحسّ بالرّاحة لما بأقرأ رسايك المفعمّة بالأمل وأشوف خطّ ايدك على ورق البرشمان الرّفيع.

بعد ثلاثة أشهر من موتك، قابلت باربرا من فيربانك، أيوا. فيربانك مدينة صغيرة بيسكن فيها ثمان مائة شخص، بتكفيّ لتعبّي عشر مباني سكنيّة في حينًا بالقاهرة. في يوم زميلتها بالسّكن طلبت من زميلي بالسّكن إذا كان

بإمكان باربرا تستعير الشَّاكوش المطَّاطي علشان تصلِّح بعض الخدوش اللي بسيارتها البيك آب فورد الحمراء موديل ١٩٥١ بعد ما اصطدمت بعمود التِّلْفون خلال عاصفة ثلجيَّة في ديسمبر. كنت بقدر أحصل على الأدوات عشان كنت أشتغل في متجر تأجير. من دون علمي، زميلتها في السَّكن قالت لباربرا إنَّو رح أعمل أيَّ شيء لبننت إذا تكلمت معي بطريقة لطيفة.

أخذت الشَّاكوش المطَّاطي لشقَّة باربرا. لما فتحت الباب، كان أوَّل شيء شفتو هو عيونها الخضراء، بعدين شعرها الأحمر بطول الكتف. قلبي دق، وكل ما إجا على بالي كان «واو». حسَّيت كإني كنت وسط محيط هادئ ومش قادر حتَّى أسمع صوتي. «لازم تكون جورج»، قالت هيك بعد ما شافت الشَّاكوش المطَّاطي بيدي. رفعت راسي حتَّى أصحى من غيبوبتي، و هزَّيت براسي. أخذتني لمكان سيَّارتها البيك اب اللي مروحتها انصدبت بالمبرد. ضحكت وقلت لها إنَّها بحاجة لورشة تصليح بدل الشَّاكوش المطَّاطي.

قضيت الليل بافكَّر إذا كنت رح أتصل بباربرا في اليوم اللي بعدو أو لا. وإذا رفضتني؟ بعد العذاب، أخيرا اتصلت عليها. كنت مستعد للرفض، بس صوتها كان مريح. فرحت إني اتصلت. كانت بداية حلوة، بداية غيرت حياتي للأبد.

إتفاجؤوا أبوها و إمها لباربرا لما طلبتها للزَّواج، بس هاد اللي بيعملوه كل الرِّجال الفلسطينيين المحترمين. إنتو اللي علِّموني هيك، ماما وبابا. حبَّت على طول الطَّبَّخ الفلسطيني، وعلموها إخواني تعمل الكبَّة و ورق الدَّوالي المحشي والبقلادة. أبوها و إمها و عيلتها الكبيرة رحبوا بي رسمياً في عيلتهم لما تزوجنا سنة ١٩٧٢. خبَّرتهم إنَّو من المقبول إنَّو تحضن وتبوس عالخدَّين، وهو تقليد بيتقنوا كلَّ الفلسطينيين الغير معروفين لحدِّ هلا لعشيرتها الألمانية. لما لقيت أنا وباربرا في حارتها، كانت بتأشَّر على الزَّوج والزَّوجة اللي بيبيعوا الخضار في الدَّكان اللي عالكرنة، على الجيران اللي بيلوحوا بأيديهم لما كانت بتمشي مالبيت للمدرسة؛ على المدرسة الابتدائية اللي التحقت بها؛ على محل البوظة وين كانت بتاكل الحلويات الباردة بأيام الصَّيف الحارَّة. كان قلبي عم بيوجعني عشان ما قدرت آخذ باربرا لشوارع طفولتي في القاهرة، لوين أنا كمان لوحت بأيدي لأصحاب الدَّكاكين والجيران والأصحاب.

ما صرت أبداً طبيباً أو مهندساً مثل ما كنتوا بتتأملوا، بس باربرا شجعتني
ارجع أدرس. درست علوم الكمبيوتر، وهو مجال كان لساتو في مهدهو في سنة
١٩٧٢. تخرجت أنا وباربرا مع بعض بنهاية ١٩٧٢، وكانت أول وظيفة مهنية
إلي هي مبرمج كمبيوتر بجامعة أيوا. في الثلاثين سنة اللي بعدهم، شغلت
العديد من المناصب الكويسة في مجال علوم الكمبيوتر.

حببت أيوا سيتي، بس اشتقت لأشياء كثيرة بالقاهرة. اشتقت للبياعين
المتجولين اللي بيعوا الذرة المشوية وعصير التمر الهندي وعصير قصب
السكر. اشتقت لصوت المؤذنين من المآذن العالية. اشتقت للمشي جنب
قهاوي الرصيف وين بيدخن الرلالم الأرجيلة، وتندمج المي الطالعة من كل
أنبوب مع الأنابيب الثانية لحد ما تبين مثل الطبول في قاعة السمفونية.
اشتقت أوقف جنب الحجر الرملي للأهرامات اللي بيهددي، امسح الأحجار
الكبيرة حتى أحس بتاريخها وأنا بفكر في الناس من الماضي اللي مشوا،
كافحوا، وتنفسوا بنفس المكان اللي كنت بوقف فيه. اشتقت لعطلات نهاية
الأسبوع لما تعزفولنا على البيانو بدون نوتات موسيقية، تقولوا «بار أوري»
(par oreille)، والأهم من هاد كلو، اشتقت لريحة ماء الورد وماء زهر
البرتقال وقت صنع المعمول مع ماما وإخواني و تيتا نور في فترة عيد الفصح
وعيد الميلاد. بعملو هلاً علشان اتقاسمو مع الأصحاب و العيلة، وبتذكر داها
كيف ماما علمتني اقرص الجزء العلوي من العجين.

بحياتي ما حلمت بأنو فقدان السمع من جهة ماما من العيلة رح يصير نعمة
متنكرة. في سنة ١٩٨٠ بدأ سمعي يتدهور. العار امتلكني وشلني. كلمة
الأطرش كانت عم بتطاردني وأنا بتذكر كيف كانوا بيتعاملوا مع الخال تشارلي
المنبوذ بفلسطين ومصر لأنو أطرش. بسبب خوفي من إنو ما ضلّيت طبيعي
والناس ترفضني بسبب إعاقتي، طوّلت شعري فوق ذاتي حتى أخبّي المعينات
السمعية. صرت هلاً أخبّي إعاقه سمعي وكمان تراي الفلسطيني!

تدريجياً، و بمساعدة وتشجيع دكاترة السمع، تغيّر موقفي. بلّشت ست
مجموعات دعم في أيوا. كنت مع أشخاص مثلي، وصرت خبير في تكنولوجيا
المساعدة على السمع. في سنة ١٩٩٢، لحيت لاستضافة ورئاسة المؤتمر الوطني
لجمعية فقدان السمع في «سيدار رابيدز» (Cedar Rapids)، اللي على بعد

خمسة وعشرين ميل بس من أيوا سيتي. حضر أكثر من تسعمائة شخص من جميع أنحاء البلاد. كانت هاي أول مرة من وقت ما بلّشت أخط السّماعات اللي بقص شعري فيها. ما عدت أحسّ بالحرّج بالمرة.

بابا، شعرت بوجودك جنبي لما خاطبت الحضور بالملاحظات الترحيبية والافتتاحية. تذكّرت قصصك عن الاتّفاقيات السيّاحية اللي قدتها بفلسطين ومصر وأوروبا. اطلّعت على الجمهور وهمّ عم بيصقّوا، و كلهم متقبّليني بدون أيّ حكم مسبق عليّ. كان شعور جديد بأعترّ بيه لحتّى اليوم.

خلال الحدث اللي استمر خمسة أيام، اتّصل بيّ العديد من الحضور علشان يهنّوني على التّخطيط الجيّد لهاد المؤتمر. بعضهم سألني السّؤال اللي بيذبحني: «من وين أنت؟»

هاي المرة ما تردّدت. جاوبت: «أنا من فلسطين». تمعّنت بوجوههم، متوقّع الرّفص، بس تعابريهم كانت مو انتقاديّة. بعضهم صافحوني، وبعضهم حضنوني. ما خبّيت أبدا تراثي الفلسطيني أو فقدان السّمع من هديك السّاعة.

بفضل تجربتي الحلوة مع المؤتمر، أمنت بحظوظي وأسسّت «ساوند كلاريتي، إنك» (Clarity, Inc Sound)، وهي شركة لتوزيع تكنولوجيا المساعدة على السّمع دولياً. فتحت محلّ في أيوا سيتي، وطوّرت موقع إلكترونيّ، وقدمت عروض تقديمية لأندية الخدمة حول فقدان السّمع، و وظّفت طلاب جامعيّين عشان يساعدوني في إدارة الشركة، وكتبت مقالات في مجلّات مهنيّة.

ماما وبابا، وصلت أخيرا للبيت مش بس بقلبي بس بالحقيقة لما سافرت أنا وباربرا للشرق الأوسط في سنة ٢٠١٨، بعد ثلاثة وخمسين سنة من روحتي. مثل ما حلمت لما باربرا لفتّنتني ببلدتها، كان فيني افرّجها شقّتنا ومدرستي الابتدائية بالقاهرة، ومدرستي الدّاخلية بالقدس، وبيت عيلتنا بحيفا، وكمّان الأماكن المقدّسة بالقدس، بيت لحم وأريحا بفلسطين. بالقاهرة، قدرنا ندخل شقّتنا لأتو ابن الخال تشارلي لسّاتو بيعيش هناك. أثاننا مبّين عمرو، بس طاولة القهوة الرّخاميّة لسّاتها ناعمة زيّ ما كانت. وقفنا على البلكونة وين

كُنَّا بنشوف الهلال. لمسنا مفاتيح البيانو اللي كنتوا تعزفوا عليها لما كنتوا بتغنولنا. مرينا جنب إيست مار، شركة السفر تبعك، وقفنا عند جروي علسان السمارون فلاسي. زرنا كنيسةنا اليونانية الأرثوذكسية و ضوبنا شمعة عند المذبح وبن كل كُنَّا بنصلي كل يوم أحد. زرنا الضريح وبن اندفنتوا اثنيانكم مع بعض أفراد عيلتنا اللي ماتوا.

لقيت في القدس فرير رافائيل لساتو عايش في مدرسة الأخوة المسيحيين. كان نائب المدير لما كنت طالب هناك. اتذكري، وتشاركننا القصص في نفس الممرات اللي مشيت فيها لما كنت مقيم هناك. في ليلتنا الأولى، كان الهلال بيلمع فوق في السماء. حضنت باربرا وكترت طقوس كلماتك الغالية. في الضفة الغربية، شفنا صعوبة الحياة بالنسبة للفلسطينيين اللي عندهم نقاط تفتيش وجدران اسمنتية طولها ٣٠ قدم بتفصل بين العائلات. وقفت باربرا اللي بالعادة ما بتخونها الكلمات في صمت مذهل في كل مرة كانت بتشوف فيها المستوطنات غير القانونية والجنود الإسرائيليين المسلحين في الأراضي المحتلة، عم بتطارد الصور اللي ما عادت مجرد قصص سمعتها مني.

زرنا البيت الحلو اللي بنيتوه النا بحيفا. المبنى بدرجو الرخامي الحلزوني وبلكوناتو المصنوعة من الحديد المقوى لساتو صامد و نجا من حرب ١٩٤٨، وهلا الطابق الأول بتشغلو مدرسة موسيقية للأطفال الفلسطينيين. طلعا للطابقين الثاني والثالث وبن كانت عائلتنا بتعيش قبل الحرب. كانت الشقق فاضية و مسكرة، بس قدرت اتبصص عن طريق جراز الباب في الطابق الثاني حتى أطلع على باب غرفة نوم شقة تيتا نور، وبن انولدت. طلعا للبلكونة وبن كانوا دوريس و أولجا و الأعمام ثيو و راجا يراقبوا ميناء حيفا و يتراهنوا على عدد السفن اللي دخلت مالبحر الأبيض المتوسط. تخيلت روائح الياسمين والورود المعطرة المتعربشة على البلكونات. قصص سعادتكم بيئت في حياتي مع كل خطوة اخذتها. حسيت بوجودكم في كل مكان، وتساءلت كيف كانت رح تكون حياتنا لو ما صارت الحرب و ما هربنا من فلسطين.

خاطرتوا بكل شيء في اليوم اللي هربنا فيه من فلسطين. كان في ٧ يناير ١٩٤٨. خبرتني دوريس أنو هروبنا اتنفذ بشكل مثالي. بابا، جريت على تختي الصغير، وأخذتني بالبطانيات والفرشة وكل شيء، وخبرت الكل يروحوا بسرعة

للباب الورياني للبيت. ركبنا سيارة الإسعاف الّبي عم تستنّانا وهربنا للمطار من دون ما ننكشف، مشينا على الشوارع البرانيّة والرّقايق علشان نتجنّب المناطق الّبي كان فيها القتال ساخن. الحمد لله إنّك كنت تملك وكالة شركة طيران حتى تتمكن من إنّك ترتّب طائرة خاصّة صغيرة عشان تاخذنا للقاهرة. أكيد إنّك كنت متخوّف من فكرة إنّو ما فينا نهرب قبل ما نتعرض للإصابة أو القتل من وراء التّفجيرات.

ماما و بابا، رتبتولي رحلة حياة جديدة، رحلة جابتني أنا وإخواتي لآيوا. اجتمعنا كلنا مرة ثانية ونقلنا تراثنا الفلسطيني لأحفادكم السبعة والخمسة عشر حفيد. أنا محبوب من عيلة باربرا، وكثير ما نزور بيت طفولتها في فيربانك حتّى نتشارك قصص عائلاتنا، بما في ذلك كل الّبي عملتوه علشان تبعثوا أطفالكم لأرض السلام والتسامح والفرص. رح أتذكّر اثنيانكم دائما في بيتي الجديد في آيوا، وهو مكان خصب و دائم الخضرة، عم يلمع فيه الهلال الجديد كأنّو لو كان في القاهرة وحيفا.

بعد ما أخلص هاي الرّسالة إلكم، رح أظّل بمكتبي وأرجع لمذكراتي. هلاّ بداية المساء، و زيّ ما بعمل كل شهر، بتطّلع للغرب وبتمنّى السّماء تكون صافية حتّى أشوف الهلال.

إبنكم الّبي بيحبكم،

جورج

עשרים

SALMA SALAMA

ARTIST STATEMENT

I WAS BORN in Atbara, Sudan, in 1957, the oldest daughter in a family of nine children. My father was steadily employed by the railroad for many years, so my family was better off than many others.

Until I was twelve years old, I lived with my grandmother and my uncles. One of my uncles was a big influence on me because he had so many books. When I was about eight, I began reading his books, the ones that were not for children. My uncle knew it would be impossible to stop me, so he simply asked me to write a summary of every book I read. When I went to high school, that writing habit continued.

It was around this time that I discovered the library. It was amazing, giving me the chance to read writers from so many Arab countries, as well as those in Europe and Asia. Some of my favorite writers became those from Latin American countries, their words translated into Arabic.

At that time, I realized I could write my own plays, short stories, and poems. I would write my own newspaper and post it on my bedroom wall. In all these activities, I was inspired by my mother, who encouraged me to get the education she did not have.

I will never forget one particular professor. When I graduated from college, he gave me a collection of all the student articles I had written, saying, "This was your exam and you passed it."

After I left Sudan in 1991, I worked in Cairo as a journalist and radio broadcaster, until the UN helped me come to the United States. It was hard to move to a new country with another language, but life for a modern journalist in the Middle East was becoming more and more dangerous, and I knew the journey would be worth the risk. My daughter and I were sent to Houston, Texas. In 1999, Iowa City welcomed me and my daughter, giving us a sense of belonging I did not feel in Houston. In Iowa City, I am exposed to writers and other artists. There is a Sudanese community here, and when work permitted, I was active in a Sudanese writers' group.

In the States, however, my career has become history. But that has not made me weak or sad. Iowa has helped me to start over and recover some of my previous life, because reading and writing are the air for my life. I started writing to newspapers in Sudan and Egypt, telling my people about my new home. I told them that life here is not like what we have been shown in movies or TV shows. "No," I wrote, "they are ordinary people like everybody everywhere on this planet."

Every time I tell my story, it changes. I remember some things differently as time goes by. That is why I have to keep retelling it. Writing my story is something I have done all my life. But this time is different, quite different, because I'm writing my story for a new people in a new language, learning a new way of writing. I am thankful for this fellowship, giving me the opportunity to share my story.



THE HOLE IN THE WALL

SALMA SALAMA

*IN COLLABORATION WITH CECILE GODING,
EMAN MOHAMED, AND LUBAB ELTAYEB ELMIKASHFI*

WHERE I COME from, we live within walls. Our walls divide the public space, where we speak to strangers and friends alike, from the private—the world that begins at wooden doors that open onto the street. Knock and be recognized. Be recognized and admitted to the family courtyard, where we sit to drink tea, squat before the cookfire, stand and kneel to pray. In the hotter months, we roll out our mattresses to sleep there, open to the sky, safe behind our walls. The walls also protect us from the dust and wind that blows against every surface.

Mostly, we share walls. By that I mean each wall also belongs to a neighbor. Ever since I could remember, in the wall shared between homes, there would often be a square hole in the wall, perhaps the width of a dinner plate, the height of a clay bowl. If the neighbor's family had fallen on "hard times," as Charles Dickens said, they were usually hungry. We remember, as children, being asked to pass food through that hole to the neighbors. Even when there seemed we had none to spare, mothers passed food to mothers on the other side. The bowl that is passed through to a poorer neighbor is not full of old, leftover food. Rather, it is taken from the pot first, while it is still hot and fresh. That way, the neighbor is honored by eating first, before our own family.

It has been years since I left Sudan, but all my life, all over the world, I have remembered this sharing between neighbors. There is always a way to connect with others through kindness and offering the best we have to give. All we have to do is look for the hole in the wall.

THE DAY EVERYTHING CHANGED

THE DAY EVERYTHING changed, I woke up with a bad feeling, but I did not know why. I was still just a twelve-year-old kid, living in her grandmother's house, sharing her bed. This tradition was not unusual, to have your grandmother take care of you as a mother would, especially if you had a big family.

I was very ill as a baby. My mom thought I might not survive. My grandmother told my mom she would take me to live with her. Maybe I would get better. So I started my life in Omdurman in a house with seven uncles; those were my mother's brothers, who also lived with my grandmother. Others lived there, too, through the years. Some of them were young relatives, while others were friends who needed a place to stay while they were in school. They performed some of the duties of servants, although my grandmother took care of them, just as she did me.

It was not normal for me to stay in bed so late. I remember it was a holiday from school. I started my period that morning for the first time, and when I first woke up, my grandmother joked with me about that. She said, "Get up and get busy!" She told me to clean the kitchen, wash the dishes, and wait for her to come back from the hospital, where she would see a doctor.

"No playing with anyone outside. No hanging around on the street for no reason."

"Yes, Mom," I said, and fell back to sleep, thinking she would be back before I got up.

But she was not there when I woke. I could not hear her in the kitchen as usual. My heart began beating strongly. I could not move my body from the bed; I felt as if I were stuck to it, struggling to get up. All this time, I was asking myself, what is going on? But this question did not matter, because there was no one to hear. I was trying to do something simple, to get up, but I felt it was taking forever. Eventually, though, I got out of bed.

I was still acting like somebody who has been sick for a long time. I went to the restroom, washed myself, and brushed my teeth just as I did every morning. But still, the day felt different, as if

something were missing from it. I put on my clothes and went out for a long walk, with no particular destination.

When I came back home, I was not tired, just lonely. I began to call every name in the house. I called for my grandmother, and then all my uncles, but nobody answered. Then the phone began to ring in the middle of that vast silence. Our family was middle class, with a high income compared to many other families. It was not common to have a telephone, but we did. I picked up the phone, still feeling so strange, as if I were going to be sick to my stomach. I remembered I had not eaten anything since the day before, except for morning tea, but it tasted bad and I had not eaten anything all day. Still I felt like I was going to throw up.

“Hello?” I said. But there was only silence on the other end.

“Salma?” asked a sad voice.

“Yes?”

Then the voice started crying, and asking me through his sadness, “Are you still there?”

“Yes, I am. Speak out—what is wrong?” Then again a long silence, so long it felt like forever. I knew it was my cousin, telling me in a broken voice, “Our mom is gone.” I knew he meant our grandmother, as it was our custom to call her “Mom.”

I repeated the word. “Gone? Gone where?”

Then he gave me the shortest, most shocking answer: “Our mom is dead.” He hung on for my reply, but I threw the phone away. I started to look around me. Though it was hard to move, finally I picked up the phone again and heard nobody. I put the phone away, sat on my grandmother’s comfortable floor with its carpet, and tried to be stronger for a while, breathing deeply and shaking my head. At that time I did not cry or scream; I just sat there. After a long time, I stood up, trying to look for the meaning of her death. How could she die? And why would she die?

Without thinking, I ran out the door and kept running, to nowhere really, just running, running. When I stopped at last, I found myself far from home, and I decided to return. I ran back, pushed open the outer door, and it opened wildly. The house was now full of people! Some of them I knew, and the others I did

not know. I found myself among a big circle of women. They were crying deeply, and a number of them were screaming sharply and sadly. Finally, I understood.

Still, I could not cry. I could not accept it; I had no way to grasp the meaning of my grandmother dying. I began to act as if she would at any minute walk in. It would be morning again, and she would wake me, as she had done for twelve years. She would take me to her chest and play with my hair and wash my face and tell me not to play away from our home, because I would get dirty and dusty. She would take me to the bathroom as if I were a little child and brush my teeth, and we would have tea and cookies, and in the afternoon we would go together to the market and we would do the things we used to do every day.

My grandmother was a tall, fit, lovely woman who was always smiling. She spread love all over the place. We had many relatives, and they came and went freely. We also had servants who came and went. Some of them were refugees, and some were friends of my family. They had their own guest rooms and usually stayed until they finished school. My grandmother always made a big pot of tea mixed with milk every morning. To go with this, she fried a lot of dough, making something like doughnuts. She insisted that everyone—servants or family alike—drink and eat before they left for school.

She and I would go to our neighbors' homes to have coffee with them. So many places we used to go. And in the evening she would make me drink my milk and she would tell me stories till I fell asleep.

Our house was big and had a lot of rooms and bathrooms, more than one kitchen, and a big yard in front and back. I entered the bedroom at the front of the house. I drew back the curtain and walked directly to the bed. My grandmother was sleeping in it again. I held her hand. It was cold and soft. I looked at her face. It was calm and beautiful. I said, "Mom, wake up, talk to me, don't leave me alone, please, Mom." Then I lay down beside her as I had done every night, asking her to tell me all the stories she used to tell.

Everybody was either crying or hiding their sadness. Some of them thought I had lost my mind. They tried to push me off the

bed. Finally, they took me away and locked the door with a key. I could not get in, but I could smell death through the door. Still, I did not cry.

After a few hours, I saw men, strange men, take my grandmother outside her room, outside our home. I asked them to stop, but they pushed me away. That was when I realized the meaning of death. And I started to cry. And I started to scream.

MY FIRST MOVE OF MANY MOVES

AFTER MY GRANDMOTHER passed away, I moved with my mother, father, brothers and sisters to the city of El-Obeid in West Sudan. When my real mom came to the funeral, she said she was taking me home with her. Until this time, I had not really realized that she was my mother; I assumed she was my sister, and that my grandmother was my mother.

I struggled to adjust because at my grandmother's home, I had my own room, my own everything, and now I had to share. The fancy clothes, vacations to the big city, all the fun my grandmother and I used to have—all that was gone forever.

My dad had a good job with the railroad, but his income was not much for such a big family—five boys and four girls. You might wonder where we all slept. It is the custom, still, to sleep outside in the hot summertime, within the outer wall. We actually had two courtyards. My brothers slept together in the back courtyard, while my parents and we sisters slept in the front courtyard. During the short winter, everyone slept in the house, with my father in one room by himself, as is customary.

My mom took care of the household. She studied with us and did all the cooking herself, trying hard to make enough food for all of us. Usually, at the beginning of the month, she would cook two kinds of dishes besides *kisra* (the local bread) and salad, and by the middle of the month, it would shrink to almost nothing. We kids had a small vegetable garden, and that helped somewhat. Mom used to divide the food onto one platter for our dad and the boys, and the rest for her and us girls. But we had to wait for them

to finish before we could eat. Usually the women and girls ate in the kitchen, as was the custom, while my dad and the boys ate at the dinner table in the front room.

There were occasions when there was a lot more food. One was during Ramadan, which lasts about a month. My mom would start cooking in the afternoon, because for Ramadan we fast all day and eat breakfast at sunset. There were special drinks for Ramadan made by drying fruits. She always made them before Ramadan and saved them in boxes. Then for drinking, we put them in water, strained them, then added sugar and ice to cool before it was time to serve them after breakfast. The most popular Ramadan foods were asida (a porridge of corn flour), taglia (a dish of dried meat and yogurt), and gurrasah (flatbread).

Before sunset, the boys took all the big rugs outside so they and my father could sit and eat. Always they called to the people passing by to come and eat with them. On the other hand, all the women and girls ate in an outdoor kitchen attached to the back of the house. This room, called a rocoba, was built of wood with a ceiling of zinc. There were no doors or windows, but it was surprisingly cool and comfy. There were small tables and chairs, a cupboard to save the food, and also we were fortunate to have a refrigerator.

After Ramadan comes Eid al-Fitr. The night before this first day after Ramadan, we cleaned the house and made a lot of kakh, which are sugar-coated cookies. My father always bought candy for the occasion. In the morning, all the men and boys congregated for Salat al-Eid, special prayers for this celebration. While they were out, the girls cleaned up and made the house look different than before. My mom made the traditional breakfast. When my father and the boys got home, it was usual to hug each other and say “Eid Mubarak,” which means “Have a blessed holiday.”

Everyone exchanged this greeting except me. You see, this was my first Ramadan without my grandmother, who had taken care of me. But now, as the oldest daughter of the family, yet still a stranger to them, I was expected to take care of everyone else. It was the worst day of my life. All morning, I was in the bathroom washing the family’s clothes by hand while crying and hungry. My father treated me like a servant, and I could say nothing at all when he was

around. That day, he greeted everyone else, but never me. He was this way with me for a long time.

For years, I wondered why my father was so distant. Why hadn't he treated me with kindness, as he did the other children? What I assume now is that, because I had been raised by my grandmother, I seemed like a stranger to him. I had different ways and I was more independent. He did not know how to talk to me. I assume he felt a bit guilty as well at letting me go as a baby. But later, as my career began, he came to appreciate our differences. Before I left home, he called me to him. He said he was proud of my accomplishments and that he loved me. He was grateful for the way I had helped my mother run the household. I felt it was almost too late for these kind words, but I accepted them.

That is why I have mixed feelings about Eid. I remember how much work it always was for me. At the same time, I appreciate some of its values, especially the next celebration, Eid al-Adha, or the Festival of the Sacrifice. My family usually killed goats or sheep, made a lot of food, and donated the best to the poor.

THE OLDEST DAUGHTER

AFTER EVERY DELIVERY, my mother would suffer from postpartum depression and other illnesses. Sometimes she was bedridden for weeks. Even if she had been well, my responsibilities as the oldest daughter were clear. I was expected to do most of the housework and to take care of the other children. My father and my older brothers were not expected to help. That was women's work.

It is not surprising that my six younger siblings called me "Mom," because I was the one who often bathed and fed them, sang them to sleep, and made sure they did well in school. We had no modern conveniences, like washing machines or disposable diapers. Water had to be heated and all their clothes washed by hand. I met with their teachers, checked their homework, and supervised their play. It is a wonder that I was able to do well in school and feed my passion: reading.

My mother appreciated me as the second mom in the family. She was a good mom to me. She always encouraged me to finish school and to travel. Over the years, when I was working in other countries, my mother and I became friends. She often took my daughter into her home during these years, just as her mother had taken me in.

I remember a conversation right after my divorce. My husband and I separated soon after our baby was born, and he refused to support us. I had to withdraw from my school, the Institute of Music and Drama, to live with my parents. When my daughter was just three months old, Mom came to my room. She held my hand in her hand and said, "Listen, sweetheart. These are hard times; your father can't take care of you and your baby for much longer."

She said I had to think about my own future, that I had to go back to the Institute to continue my education.

"What about my baby?" I asked her.

"I'll take care of her. So please go."

I was more than grateful to her, the woman who made it possible for me to return to school. I was so young and already divorced, but my mother lit the fires of hope inside me. I returned to acting, along with studying theater, philosophy, and the history of ancient Greece, Egypt, and my own country. I read classical theater and Shakespeare, studying art criticism as well. It was because of my mother that I was able to become a writer.

Mom and I were good friends until she passed away in 2006 at the age of seventy-two. At that time, I was in Qatar working as a journalist. But more and more, I felt I did not want to stay there. I had been away from my mother a long time. Many of the stories I have written started with her, as she was a good storyteller. I decided to return to Sudan to care for her. We shared a lot of jokes and stories while I cared for her, keeping her clean and doing everything I could. I kept telling her everything was fine.

Toward the end, she said, "You are my eyes and my heart. Take care of your brothers and sisters. Don't let the fire die out in the house."

MY CAREER BEGINS

BY THE TIME I graduated, I was already well known as a writer in Sudan. When I first came to the radio station in Omdurman to apply for a job in 1988, I felt as if I had come home. I was given many tasks, writing and directing programs. They were mainly talk shows with music in between, so I had to wake up early in the morning to read the newspaper and listen to the news, to prepare for the talk shows later. I remember the first time I was allowed to record my own program. The director of the studio asked me to write, direct, and record a program about the increasing political power of the Muslim Brotherhood. I went to the library to research and get the music I needed and was ready to record with my partner that evening. My parents listened to my first program and were very proud. The next day my boss congratulated me, shook my hand, and said, "From now on, you will direct and broadcast your own show, Good Morning Sudan." I was the first woman to direct that show.

I became a well-known name in the country. Everywhere I went, people recognized me. When I directed a series of dramas, total strangers would come to my home and ask, "What's going to happen next?" I received awards, which made me more confident. I wanted to inspire others to ask hard questions and to encourage the people to make a stronger country for all.

LEAVING IT ALL BEHIND

GOOD MORNING, SUDAN reached the top ranks of radio programs. The show focused on a positive message, how all of Sudan's people—North and South—should work together to build a strong nation. I stressed the importance of education for all as a path to our future. In 1989, however, when the Muslim Brotherhood took over, the station began to be pressured by the government. My show was investigated, and military representatives tried to intimidate me. People told me I should be careful about politics, but I continued to broadcast the truth. I recalled what my mother taught me: "You don't have to be on the safe side. Tell the truth, and don't be afraid. God will protect you."

The military dictatorship, which was in control of the government, continued to pressure people like me. They even tried to bribe me with cash and a new car if I would broadcast what they wanted, but I refused to accept. I was arrested and put in jail more than once. I was even beaten and raped. Investigators came to my parents' house and tried to take my radio scripts, but my father gave them nothing. Each time I was released from jail, I was threatened. These experiences left me emotionally traumatized. Finally, I decided to leave the country before it was too late.

I will never forget the day I left—January 13, 1991. When I went to say goodbye to my father, he was curled up on his bed, crying. He said, “You have my blessing.” I never saw him again, as he died four years later.

I went to Cairo first to obtain a visa to Greece. I thought I might live there, where I had friends and relatives who mentioned many journalistic opportunities in Athens. I have good memories of Greece, but also frustrating ones. The altitude and climate aggravated my health, so I went on holiday to the island of Crete. For many people in Crete, I was the first black woman they had ever seen. They were quite curious but pleasant, especially the children. They liked to rub my face or arm, to see if my skin color would come off on their hands. When they started calling me “chocolate,” it made me smile. Later, in Athens, I met an African American translator who spoke Greek, and she helped me learn how to operate a computer for the first time. I did some reporting from there. Yet the language barrier and the high altitude were both problems for me, so I had to leave that beautiful country.

When I arrived back in Cairo that same year, I truly felt I had come home. The weather was milder than in Greece, and of course, I could talk to everyone since we spoke the same language. Soon I was working at a radio and TV station as a program editor. Then, after a month or so at the station, I started writing for a comedy show in the local Egyptian dialect. I also wrote for Good Morning, Wadi Nile, which had both a Sudanese and an Egyptian audience, and it aired in both countries. I had so many Egyptian friends, I did not feel homesick. Family members visited from Sudan, and I could freely travel back home to see my daughter.

I began working for a Sudanese newspaper in Cairo, and I also wrote for a radio program that was critical of the authoritarian government in Sudan. We would record the program and then send it to nearby Eritrea for broadcasting. This job caused problems later, when I went to renew my passport at the Sudanese embassy. Instead, my passport was confiscated due to my political activities. I was afraid I was being watched when I went out in public. My friends started to help me find a more secure place to go. Through the United Nations office in Cairo, I was able to obtain U.S. refugee passports for myself and my daughter, who was excited to be moving to the United States.

I had been in Cairo for almost ten years. I was well established and held a weekly meeting with other writers in my home. During one of these salons, my mother, who was visiting me, said, “Salma, are you going to leave this fancy life you have made and go somewhere where nobody knows you?” I told her I was concerned for my daughter and her future in Sudan. I needed to figure out a different life.

She said, “Okay, but my heart is telling me this is where you should stay.” For the first time in my life, I ignored my mother’s advice. It was hard to say goodbye to the place and people I loved, but on May 25, 1999, we left for the United States.

NO ONE KNOWS MY NAME

WHEN WE ARRIVED in Houston in 1999, I was forty-one and my daughter was fifteen. With help, we found an apartment, and after our paperwork was processed, I started looking for a job, the kinds of jobs one can get with English as a second language. After a week, I started working as a maid at a Hilton hotel. Immediately, when my boss read my CV and saw what I had been doing in Sudan and Cairo, he became very interested in me. He wanted me to tell everyone we met, over and over, about my education and my former career. Why didn’t he know how that made me feel?

“I’ve had enough,” I told him one day. I was not there for his entertainment. That stress was added to the hard work of being a maid. I was supposed to clean many rooms, and to work from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. I had never had such a hard job.

On top of the work, I had to deal with racism. Once a friend asked me to go to a restaurant, but when we arrived, he said, “We can’t go in the front; we have to order at the back door.” I asked him why. “Because we are black.”

“No way,” I said. “That is not for me.” I had experienced enough discrimination back home, when my reporting clashed with views held by the government.

I was curious about this big restaurant. I wondered what it looked like inside. What would happen if I simply went in? But my friend convinced me to leave.

A Sudanese friend in Iowa City started calling me. She said we could stay with her while we looked for a home. “Sure, it’s cold here,” she said. “But it’s better than Texas.” So we moved to Iowa City, where there was less racism.

I was full of hope that I might get my career back, but I only found the same kinds of work available to most new immigrants. I started working at the University of Iowa hospital in food service. But everything is material for a writer. As I pushed heavy carts, delivering meals to patients, I got to know them and the health professionals. I had a new subject to write about. I began writing for a newspaper in Egypt, sending them articles about life in the United States. I wrote about the patients: “Sometimes they’re in pain. Sometimes I cry with them, just let my tears go, or else I run from the room. Hospital workers have to be strong to face the tragedies they see. Sometimes you feel sorry, sometimes you feel sad, but no matter the circumstances you have to deal with it, because it’s your job.”

That year, a friend told me about a new writing workshop for the Sudanese community. He gave me the number of the teacher, Cecile. When I called her, she said she would pick me up at the hospital on her way to the workshop. “How will I know you?” she asked.

“Well, I’m black,” I answered, because in Iowa that might be enough to spot me. Then I asked her, “What color...” trying to find the words. It was still difficult to speak English over the phone.

“I’m white,” Cecile said.

“No, your car!”

“Oh. It’s white too.”

We both laughed. From then on, we were friends. She respected me as a writer, and she asked me to help with the other writers in our group, encouraging them and translating for them.

After a while, though, I wanted to try again for my previous career. I went to a school in Minneapolis that had a radio program in journalism there. I loved the program, where I spoke into a microphone in English for the first time. I went to classes and lived in a dorm with younger women. We got along fine, and I tried to be like a mom to them.

A TIME OF HUNGER

I CANNOT REMEMBER ever being hungry in Sudan. We knew that if we ever fell on hard times, we could always count on our neighbors sharing through the hole in the wall. In Minneapolis, though, as I waited for the bus next to a busy highway, there were no walls to protect me from the wind, a wind so cold that my sisters back home could never imagine it. I was going to a restaurant called Country Buffet, where I hoped to get a job. And I was hungry. I was hungry in a way I never was back home.

Soon after I arrived in Minneapolis, I had eaten a meal at Country Buffet, paying one price to take as much as I wished from the salad bar and steam tables, constantly replenished by servers. I could afford to go to restaurants. But my savings soon disappeared, and there was some problem with my cashing the money orders I received from Iowa. We can’t help you, said one teller after another. You need a Minnesota ID.

I did my best. I had taken the bus to the DMV. But to get a Minnesota ID, I was told, one must have documents proving a permanent address.

“Does a dorm room count?” I asked. For that little room, in a hall of much younger women, was the only address I had.

“How should I know?” said one teller after another. “Ask somebody else.” I was not sure whom to ask or how to phrase the question in good English.

As I waited for the bus in Minneapolis, I felt like one of those who search the ground for dropped bread. The clouds turned into sheep prepared for slaughter; the memory of the roasting meat made my stomach contract painfully.

Sometimes I simply sat in the dorm cafeteria, where no one spoke my language. They devoured their meals and left, not asking how I was doing. I used to wait for their departure so as to lick what remained from their plates. When I told my friends back home that I used to go through the rubbish, looking for scraps, they did not believe me. I was ashamed. What is the sense of life if we do not love ourselves?

When I walked into Country Buffet, I asked to see the manager. She was originally from Guatemala, and I was amazed how she could switch from English to Spanish so quickly as she greeted customers. After I was interviewed, I was told to call back later to see if I was accepted. I was surprised; I thought I would get the job right away, and I still had no money.

I am not sure why, but I approached a young woman who was having lunch. Her name was Khadija, I found out. "I'm so hungry," I told her. "Can you help me?" She immediately got up and prepared a plate of food for me. While we ate, I began explaining my problem, talking to her as if she were a longtime friend. She nodded and then said she could help me.

I sat on a chair in the huge dining room, watching the workers in their clean uniforms. One sat quietly near the kitchen, eating his lunch. When Khadija was ready, we went outside in the chilly weather and got in her car, saying, "Okay, let's go to my bank and cash your money order."

The bank teller asked me to sign the check over to Khadija. He gave her the cash, and she immediately handed it to me. I could not thank her enough since I could now pay my bills. Before Khadija left, I asked her if she was from Iowa. She said, "Yes, how did you know?" I told her that Iowans are helpful people, that's how I knew.

Her kindness warmed me. It was as if a window had been opened in a cell of isolation. My luck changed that day, for soon after this time, I met a woman who was originally from Egypt. She

lived in a small apartment near my school. Of course, she could speak Arabic, which helped my other hunger, to converse in my first language. She took me to her home, where she served me bread and sweets. Then she invited me to leave the dorm and move in with her, splitting the rent. I was of two minds. I needed peace and quiet to study and to write. On the other hand, I needed to save money, so I left the dorm and moved in with her.

After a while, though, it was clear I could not survive there, working two jobs, paying off my loans, and still hungry. I hungered, too, for my daughter in Iowa. I hungered for the friends I had left behind. So I decided to leave at the end of the semester. I came back to Iowa City and found employment at a day care center. I began writing more, and I also reunited with my friend Cecile.

What if every person befriended one new immigrant? Both would be enriched so much. Cecile has become part of my family, and when my daughter had her babies, my grandchildren became part of her life, too. She picks them up from school when their parents are working and takes them to parks and libraries. She says that being around them is magical and makes her see everything in a fresh way.

When I was still working at the hospital, her husband had to stay there for a long time. I made a habit of going to see him on my breaks, to say hello and to see how he was doing. Whenever Cecile has a medical test or procedure, I go with her, asking my daughter or son-in-law to drive us. Sometimes I cook food for her family so she won't have to cook. I call her up and say, "Come get your dinner."

Once I traveled with her to the deep South, to stay with her sister and meet her parents. I met her brother as well. Everyone welcomed me and asked me about my family. I remember it was her mother's ninety-fifth birthday, and I was so honored that I got to be at her party.

Usually though, we take road trips exploring the Midwest. In 2016, I returned to Minneapolis with Cecile. This time, I was a tourist—shopping, walking through the Como Park Conservatory, attending a production by the Minnesota Opera.

Everything was much the same: wide open spaces, wide open highways, a cold spring wind. But this time, I was not among the people shivering on the corners, looking for work. I was greeted by a hotel receptionist, who showed us where we could eat breakfast, exercise, and sleep. The wide streets around the city were alive with cars, each full of entirely other lives. We, within the steel walls of our own car, were both protected and isolated from the others. Our hotel room, next to a busy interstate, was safe but also strange. No one knew us from Eve.

I called a former high school classmate who lived nearby, and he took us to a Chinese restaurant, where we filled up on food and friendship. As he dropped us back at our hotel, he said, "In Sudan, we don't have hotels, we have friends. Same in Minneapolis. Next time you come, you will stay with me and my wife." He repeated this in Arabic so that it was quite understood. I am sure he remembered, as I do, the walls of Sudan. He remembered the holes left in the walls for sharing with those around us.

COMING HOME

ALWAYS, wherever I start my life in a new place, I talk to people. I ask a lot of questions about their lives, how they came to live there, and what they think of the weather. Because I ride the bus to work and to shop, I have met a lot of new people that way. I have met Native Americans, African Americans, people from all over Europe and the Middle East, and Sudanese I did not know back home. Almost always, people on the bus are friendly and glad to talk. One time I went to a birthday party with Cecile, and there was Doug, my favorite bus driver. We recognized each other right away. On the bus after that, I would always ask Doug about his friend, the one celebrating his birthday. Later, that same friend interviewed me for the local newspaper, writing about my experiences as a new immigrant.

In 2004, after fifteen years away from home, I obtained my American passport. I decided I could safely visit Egypt and Sudan, as there was relative peace that year. I reconnected with many friends in Cairo, then left for Sudan.

When I went to the radio station where I had worked, it was almost empty. A former coworker explained, “It’s not like it used to be. Now people work only during their shifts, and do not stay around to talk.” The place had a sad, gloomy atmosphere. The whole country was very different. The long civil war and the fundamentalist military dictatorship had both visible and invisible effects. There were soldiers and police officers everywhere. Many of the benefits I had enjoyed growing up—universal education, public transportation, health care, even the post office—had disappeared. There were few professional jobs, and I saw so much poverty.

At the same time, it was nice to be recognized again as a journalist and broadcaster. I remember one day when a young woman called out, “Salma Salama! Is it you?” This woman was selling shoes on the sidewalk. She was so excited, telling me how I had made a big difference to her. I had shown her what a woman from Sudan could do. We exchanged information, and later I heard that she had graduated from college. I was very proud of her and glad I was still influencing people from far away.

The last time I went home was in 2017. We had a family reunion, and my brothers came from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, where they worked. We all stayed in our family home with my sisters. I saw the renovations and improvements they had made with the money I sent home regularly. I was proud of my niece, whose education I was able to finance. It was good to spend time with the family. I missed getting together every Friday, having a big meal together, singing and dancing, with all the kids running around playing games.

Soon, however, I wanted to return to Iowa City, my home. I know every inch of Iowa City now. I have made a lot of friends, but I’ve also been welcomed by strangers. I especially love Two Rivers Bank, where I started my first checking account. Even though I have to take two buses to get there, it is worth it. When I enter, everyone says, “Hey, Salma’s here.” They give me hugs and offer me drinks and snacks.

One thing I would like to improve about Iowa City is public transportation. The buses don’t always run according to my work schedule, and taxis are expensive. Often I have to walk in the freezing cold or rain. However, many Iowans have stopped along

the road to offer me a lift. They don't even know me, but they will go out of their way to take me to work or home. Once, a woman saw me coming out of the grocery store with heavy bags, heading for the bus stop. "Can I take you somewhere?" she called out from her car. "Come on." That is just one example of help I have gotten from complete strangers.

Since 2012, I have been working with disabled people in group homes. It's a new experience, meeting those with different abilities. They can be smart and active, enjoying the same things we all do, making a home with each other. When I see differently abled people around town, eating out or doing their jobs, I always greet them, and often we have a conversation.

In my home country, the disabled are hidden away, and they don't often go to school. Some of the families care for them, but others are treated with shame and abuse, as if they were not fully human. I love my clients. I love the way most of the families support and visit them. Occasionally, I have experienced racism in my job, but usually people are grateful. This career reminds me of the bright side of life, and how good it is to help people who need you. It gives me meaning, because I feel like a mother to all my clients, no matter their age.

One time, taking a work break outside on the sidewalk, I was frightened by a dog that was being walked by a couple in the neighborhood. I have never liked dogs.

"I'm so sorry," the man said, as he pulled the dog away from me.

"That's okay, honey," I said.

"Oh, I can't remember when I've been called 'honey.' Thanks!" he said. His wife laughed.

Such small things can make a person feel part of a place. I may have lost my career in a way, but I have come to think of careers in a different way. Perhaps we are larger than the work we do; we are more the home we make.

Here in Iowa, I have found home. The walls are different from those in Sudan, but the way we share is the same. We help our neighbors when they are hungry, or when they are in the hospital longing for visitors, or when they simply need a ride home. We offer what we have to give by opening the walls between us.

الفتحة داخل الجدار

SALMA SALAMA

تُرجمت إلى العربيّة من قبل أسماء بن رمضان

من حيث أنيت، نعيش عبر الجدران. تقسّم جدراننا المساحة العامة، حيث نتحدث إلى الغرباء والأصدقاء على حد السواء من العالم الخاص - العالم الذي يبدأ من الأبواب الخشبية التي تفتح على الشارع. اطرق الباب وعرّف بنفسك. سيتم التّعرف عليك و استقبالك في الفناء العائلي، حيث نجلس لشرب الشاي، ونتربّع قبل الشروع في الطهي، ونقف ونركع للصلاة في الأشهر الأكثر حرارة، أو نبسط فراشنا للنوم هناك قبالة السماء، حيث نشعر بأمان خلف جدراننا. كانت هذه الجدران تحميّنا أيضًا من الغبار والرياح التي تهب على كل سطح.

كنا في الغالب نتشارك الجدران. أقصد بذلك أن كل جدار ينتمي أيضًا إلى أحد الجيران. إن لم تخنّي الذاكرة، غالبًا ما كان هناك ثقب مربع في الجدار المشترك بين البيوت، ربما كان في عرض طبق العشاء، وارتفاع وعاء من الطين. كانت عائلة الجار إذا مرت «بأوقات عصيبة»، كما قال تشارلز ديكنز، فإنها عادة ما تشعر بالجوع. نتذكر عندما كنا أطفالًا، أنه كان يُطلب منا تمرير الطعام عبر تلك الفتحة إلى الجيران. حتى عندما لم يتبقى لدينا أكل، كانت الأمهات يمررن الطعام للأمهات في الجانب الآخر. كان الوعاء الذي يتم تمريره إلى جار أحوج منا ليس مليئًا ببقايا الطعام البائتة، بل كان يتم أخذه من القدر أولاً، بينما كان لا يزال ساخنًا وطازجًا. وبهذه الطريقة، كان يتم تكريم الجار بأن يأكل أولاً قبل عائلتنا نفسها.

مرّت سنوات منذ أن غادرت السودان، و لكنني طوال حياتي، في أيّ مكان في العالم، كنت أتذكّر هذا التّشارك بين الجيران. كانت هناك دائماً طريقة للتواصل مع الآخرين من خلال الطّيبة و تقديم أفضل ما لدينا. كان كلّ ما علينا فعله هو البحث عن الفتحة الموجودة في الجدار.

اليوم الذي تغيّر فيه كل شيء في حياتي

استيقظت ذلك اليوم وكان هناك شعور سيء يعتريني. لكنني لم أعرف السبب على وجه التحديد. يومها كنت في الثانية عشر من عمري، كنت ما أزال في عداد الأطفال. كنت ما أزال طفلة في الثانية عشرة من العمر، تعيش في منزل جدتها، وتتقاسم سريرها. لم تكن هذه العادة غريبة، أي أن تقوم جدتك برعايتك كما تفعل الأم، خاصة إذا كان لديك عائلة كبيرة.

كنت مريضة جدا عندما كنت رضيعا. اعتقدت أمي أنني لن أنجو. أخبرت جدي أمي أنها ستأخذني للعيش معها. ربما سأكون أفضل. لذا بدأت حياتي في «أم درمان» في منزل يسكنه سبعة أحوال. كان هؤلاء أشقاء أمي الذين عاشوا أيضًا مع جدي. عاش آخرون هناك أيضًا على مرّ السنين. كان بعضهم من الأقارب السُّباب، في حين كان البعض الآخر أصدقاء يحتاجون إلى مكان للإقامة أثناء وجودهم في المدرسة. كانوا يقومون ببعض مهام الخدم، رغم أن جدي اعتنت بهم، كما فعلت معي.

لم تكن من عادتي أن أبقى في السرير حتى وقت متأخر جدًا. أتذكر أنها كانت عطلة مدرسية. بدأت دوري الشهرية في ذلك الصباح لأول مرة في حياتي، وعندما استيقظت، مازحتني جدي بشأن ذلك. قالت، «استيقضي واعملي!» طلبت مني أن أنظف المطبخ، وأغسل الصحون، وانتظرها حتى تعود من المستشفى، حيث ستذهب إلى الطبيب.

«لا تلعب مع أي شخص في الخارج. لا تخرجي من دون سبب.»

قلت: «أمرك يا ماما»، وعدت إلى النوم، ظنًا مني أنها ستعود قبل أن أصحو. لكنها لم تكن هناك عندما استيقظت. لم أستطع سماعها في المطبخ كالمعتاد. بدأ قلبي ينبض بقوة. لم أستطع تحريك جسدي من السرير. شعرت كما لو أنني ملتصقة به، أجاهد من أجل النهوض. كنت طوال هذا الوقت أتساءل، ما الذي يحصل؟ لكن هذا السؤال لم يكن مهمًا، لأنه لم يكن هناك من يسمع. كنت أحاول القيام بشيء بسيط، وهو النهوض، لكنني شعرت أن الأمر يستغرق وقتًا طويلًا. وفي النهاية، نهضت من السرير.

كنت لا أزال أتصرف كشخص طريح الفراش لفترة طويلة. ذهبت إلى الحمام واغتسلت وغسلت أسناني تمامًا كما أفعل كل صباح، و لكن مع ذلك ، بدأ اليوم مختلفًا، كما لو كان هناك شيء ينقصه. ارتديت ملابسني وخرجت أتمشي طويلا دون وجهة معينة.

عندما عدت إلى المنزل، لم أكن متعبة، كنت فقط وحيدة. بدأت أنادي كل اسم في البيت. ناديت جدتي، ثم كل أخوالي، لكن أحدا لم يجبني. ثم رنَّ الهاتف في وسط ذلك الصمت الهائل. كانت عائلتنا من الطبقة المتوسطة، ذات دخل مرتفع مقارنة بالعائلات الأخرى. لم يكن من الشائع وجود هاتف، ولكن كان لدينا واحد. رفعت السَّماعة، و كنت ما أزال أشعر بالغرابة الشديدة، كما لو كان سيكون لديّ مخص. تذكرت أنني لم أتناول أي شيء منذ اليوم السابق، باستثناء شاي الصباح، لكن طعمه كان سيئًا ولم أتناول أي شيء طوال اليوم. كنت ما أزال أشعر وكأنني سوف أتقياً.

«ألو؟» جاوبت. ولكن لم يكن هناك ردٌّ من الطرف الآخر.

«سلمى؟» سُئِلت بصوت حزين.

«نعم؟»

ثم بدأ الصوت بالبكاء ويسألني في غمرة من الحزن «هل مازلت هنا؟»

«نعم أنا. تكلم - ماذا حصل؟» ثم مرة أخرى صمت طويل، طويل لا ينتهي. كنت أعرف أنه ابن عمي، وأخبرني بصوت مكسور، «أمنّا ذهبت». كنت أعرف أنه يقصد جدتنا، حيث كان من عادتنا أن نسُميها «ماما».

كررت الكلمة. «ذهبت؟ إلى أين؟»

ثم أعطاني أقصر إجابة وأكثرها صدمة: «أمنّا ماتت». كان ينتظر ردّي، لكنني رميت السَّماعة بعيدًا. بدأت أنظر حولي. على الرغم من صعوبة التحرك، أخيراً التقطت السَّماعة مرة أخرى ولم أسمع أحداً. وضعت الهاتف بعيدًا، وجلست على أرضية جدتي المريحة بزربيتها، وحاولت أن أكون أقوى لفترة من الوقت.

وأنتفس بعمق وأهز رأسي. في ذلك الوقت لم أبكِ ولم أصرخ. جلست هناك فقط. بعد فترة طويلة، وقفت محاولة البحث عن معنى لموتها. كيف يمكن أن تموت؟ ولماذا تموت؟

من دون أيّ تفكير، ركضت خارج الباب وواصلت الركض دون وجهة معيّنة. ركضت فقط. عندما توقفت أخيراً، وجدت نفسي بعيدة عن المنزل، وقررت أن أعود. عدت راكضة ودفعت الباب الخارجي ففتح على مصراعيه. أصبح المنزل آنذاك مليئاً بالناس! كنت أعرف بعضهم، ولا أعرف البعض الآخر. وجدت نفسي بين حلقة كبيرة من النساء. كنّ يبكين بحرقة، وكان عدد منهنّ يصرخن بحدة وحزن. أخيراً فهمت.

رغم ذلك، لم أستطع البكاء. لم أستطع تقبّل ذلك. لم يكن لدي أيّ طريقة لاستيعاب فكرة موت جدتي. بدأت أتصرف وكأنها ستدخل في أي لحظة. سيقبل الصباح مرة أخرى، وستوقظني، كما فعلت لمدة اثني عشر عاماً. كانت تأخذني على صدرها وتلعب بشعري وتغسل وجهي وتطلب مني ألا ألعب بعيداً عن منزلنا لأنني سأكون متسخة ويغمري الغبار. كانت تأخذني إلى الحمام كما لو كنت طفلة صغيرة وتنظف أسناني، وتتناول الشاي والبسكويت، وفي فترة ما بعد الظهر نذهب معاً إلى السوق ونقوم بالأشياء التي اعتدنا القيام بها كل يوم.

كانت جدتي امرأة طويلة ورائعة وجميلة، دائمة الابتسامة. نشرت الحب في كل مكان. كان لدينا العديد من الأقارب الذين كانوا يزوروننا متى شاؤوا. كما كان لدينا أيضاً خدم أتوا وذهبوا. كان بعضهم من اللاجئين والبعض الآخر كانوا أصدقاء لعائلتي. كان لديهم غرف ضيوف خاصة بهم وعادة ما كانوا يمكثون حتى الانتهاء من الدراسة. كانت جدتي كل صباح تحضر دائماً قدرًا كبيرًا من الشاي ممزوجة بالحليب. كشيء يتماشى معه، كانت تقوم بقلي الكثير من العجين، وصنع شيء مثل الكعك. كانت تصرّ على أن يشرب و يأكل الجميع - الخدم أو أفراد العائلة على حد السواء - قبل ذهابهم إلى الدراسة.

كنا نذهب أنا وهي إلى بيوت جيراننا لتناول القهوة معهم. اعتدنا على الذهاب إلى الكثير من الأماكن. وفي المساء كانت تجعلني أشرب حليبي وكانت تروي لي قصصاً حتى أنام.

كان منزلنا كبيراً ويحتوي على الكثير من الغرف والحمامات، وأكثر من مطبخ واحد، وساحة كبيرة في الأمام والخلف. دخلت غرفة النوم في الجزء الأمامي من المنزل. سحبت الستارة إلى الخلف واتّجهت مباشرة نحو السرير. كانت جدتي تنام فيه مرة أخرى. أمسكت بيدها. كانت باردة وناعمة. نظرت إلى وجهها. كانت هادئةً وجميلة. قلت، «أمي، استيقظي، تحدّثي معي، لا تركيني وحدي، من فضلك، يا أمي.» ثم استلقيت بجانبها كما كنت أفعل كل ليلة، طالبة منها أن تقصّ عليّ كل القصص التي كانت ترويها.

كان الجميع إما يبكون أو يخفون حزّهم. ظنّ بعضهم أنني فقدت عقلي. حاولوا دفعي من على السرير. أخيراً، أخذوني بعيداً وأغلقوا الباب بمفتاح. لم أستطع الدخول، لكنني استطعت شم رائحة الموت من خلال الباب ومع ذلك لم أبك.

بعد بضع ساعات رأيت رجالاً، رجالاً غرباء يأخذون جدتي خارج غرفتها، خارج بيتنا. طلبت منهم التوقف، لكنهم دفعوني بعيداً. عندها أدركت معنى الموت. وبدأت في البكاء. وبدأت في الصراخ.

رحلتي الأولى من ضمن العديد من الرّحلات

بعد وفاة جدتي، انتقلت مع والدي و والدي وإخوتي وأخواتي إلى مدينة العبّيد في غرب السودان. عندما جاءت أمي الأصليّة إلى الجنازة، قالت إنها ستأخذني معها إلى البيت. حتى هذا الوقت، لم أكن أدرك حقاً أنها كانت أمي، ظننت أنها أختي، وأنّ جدتي هي أمي.

وجدت صعوبة في التّأقلم لأنه في بيت جدتي، كانت لديّ غرفتي الخاصة، وكل شيء خاص بي، والآن أصبحت مظطّرة على التّشارك. الملابس الفاخرة، والإجازات في المدينة الكبيرة، كل المتعة التي اعتدنا أن نحظى بها أنا وجدتي - كل ذلك ذهب إلى الأبد.

كان لدى والدي وظيفة جيّدة في السكك الحديدية، لكنّ دخله لم يكن كافياً لعائلة كبيرة كهذه - خمسة أولاد وأربع فتيات. قد تتساءلون أين ننام

جميعاً. من المعتاد، حتّى هذه السّاعة، النوم في الخارج في الصيف الحار، عبر الجدار الخارجي. في الواقع كان لدينا فناء. كان إخوتي ينامون معاً في الفناء الخلفي، بينما ينام والديّ وشقيقاتي في الفناء الأمامي. خلال فصل الشتاء القصير، كان الجميع ينامون في المنزل مع والدي في غرفة واحدة بمفرده، كما جرت العادة.

اعتنت أمي بالبيت. درست معنا وقامت بطهي كل شيء بنفسها، وحاولت جاهدة أن تعدّ ما يكفي من الطعام لنا جميعاً. عادة، في بداية الشهر، كانت تطبخ نوعين من الأطباق إلى جانب الكسرة (الخبز المحلي) والسلطة، وبحلول منتصف الشهر، كان كلّ شيء قد نفذ تقريباً. كان لدينا نحن الأطفال حديقة نباتات صغيرة، وقد ساعد ذلك إلى حد ما. كانت أمي تقسّم الطعام على طبق واحد لأبينا والفتيان، والباقي لها ولنا نحن الفتيات. لكن كان علينا انتظارهم حتى ينتهوا قبل أن نتمكن من تناول الطعام. عادة، كانت النساء والفتيات يأكلن في المطبخ، كما جرت العادة، بينما كان والدي والأولاد يأكلون على مائدة العشاء في الغرفة الأمامية.

كانت هناك مناسبات توفّر فيها الكثير من الطعام. إحداها كانت في شهر رمضان الذي يستمر حوالي شهر. كانت أمي تبدأ في الطهي بعد الظهر، لأننا في رمضان نصوم طوال اليوم ونتناول الإفطار عند غروب الشمس. كانت هناك مشروبات خاصة لشهر رمضان يتم إعدادها بتجفيف الفاكهة. كانت تقوم بتحضيرها دائماً قبل رمضان وتحفظها في الصناديق. ثم للشرب، نضعها في الماء، و نصقّيها، ثم نضيف السّكر والثلج لتبرد قبل أن يحين موعد تقديمها بعد الإفطار. وكانت أشهر الأطعمة الرمضانية عصيدة (عصيدة من دقيق الذرة)، وتاجليا (طبق من اللحم المجفف واللبن)، والغراسة (خبز مسطح).

قبل غروب الشمس، كان الأولاد يأخذون جميع البساطات الكبيرة إلى الخارج حتى يتمكنوا هم وأبي من الجلوس وتناول الطعام. و كانوا دائماً يدعون الناس المارة ليأكلوا معهم. و من جهة أخرى، كانت النساء والفتيات يتناولن الطعام في مطبخ خارجي متصل بالجزء الخلفي من المنزل. كانت هذه الغرفة، التي تسمى بالـ«روكوبا»، مبنية من الخشب بسقف من الزنك. لم تكن هناك أبواب أو نوافذ، لكنها كانت رائعة ومريحة بشكل مذهل. كانت هناك طاولات وكراسي صغيرة، وخزانة لحفظ الطعام، وكنا محظوظين أيضاً بامتلاك ثلاجة.

بعد رمضان يأتي عيد الفطر. في الليلة السابقة لهذا اليوم الأول بعد رمضان، كنّا نقوم بتنظيف المنزل وصنع الكثير من الكعك، وهو عبارة عن كوكيز مغطى بالسُّكر. كان والدي يشتري دائماً الحلوى لهذه المناسبة. في الصباح، كان جميع الرجال والصِّبيان يتجمَّعون لصلاة العيد، صلاة خاصة بهذا الاحتفال. أثناء خروجهم، كانت الفتيات تقمن بالتنظيف وجعل المنزل يبدو مختلفاً عن ذي قبل. كانت أمي تعدُّ الإفطار التقليدي. عند عودة والدي والأولاد إلى المنزل، كان من المعتاد أن يعانق كل واحد الآخر و يقول «عيد مبارك»، أي «أتمنى لك عطلة سعيدة».

تبادل الجميع هذه التحية إلا أنا. كما تعلمون، كان هذا أول رمضان لي بدون جدتي التي اعتنت بي. لكن الآن، بصفتي الابنة الكبرى للعائلة، و على الرِّغم من أنني مازلت غريبة عنهم، كان من المتوقع مني أن أعتني بالآخرين. وكان أسوأ يوم في حياتي. طوال الصباح، كنت في الحمام أغسل ملابس الأسرة بيدي بينما كنت أبكي وممتلكني الجوع.

عاملني والدي كخادمة، ولم أستطع قول أي شيء على الإطلاق عندما كان في الجوار. في ذلك اليوم، هنأ الجميع إلا أنا. كان يتصرف معي على هذا النحو لفترة طويلة.

لسنوات، كنت أتساءل لماذا كان والدي بارداً معي. لماذا لم يكن يعاملني بلطف كما يفعل مع الأبناء الآخرين؟ ما أفترضه الآن هو أنه، بما أنني ترعرعت عند جدتي، بدوت غريبة بالنسبة له. كانت لدي طرق مختلفة وكنت أكثر استقلالية. لم يكن يعرف كيف يتحدث معي. أظن أنه شعر بالذنب بعض الشيء لأنه سمح لي بالذهاب عندما كنت لا أزال طفلة رضيعة. لكن لاحقاً، عندما بدأت مسيرتي المهنية، أصبح يتفهم اختلافاتنا. قبل أن أغادر المنزل، اتصل بي. قال إنه فخور بإنجازاتي وأنه يحبني. كان ممتمناً للطريقة التي ساعدت بها والدي في إدارة شؤون المنزل. شعرت أن الأوان قد فات على هذه الكلمات الطيبة، لكنني قبلتها.

لهذا السبب لدي مشاعر مختلطة تجاه العيد. أتذكر مقدار العمل الذي كان على عاتقي دائماً. وفي نفس الوقت أقدر بعضاً من قيمه وخاصة الاحتفال القادم وهو عيد الأضحى أو عيد النحر. عادة ما تذبح عائلتي الماعز أو الأغنام، وتطبخ الكثير من الطعام، وتبرع بالفضل للفقراء.

الابنة الكبرى

بعد كل ولادة، كانت والدي تعاني من اكتئاب ما بعد الولادة وأمراض أخرى. في بعض الأحيان كانت طريحة الفراش لأسابيع. حتى لو كانت على ما يرام، كانت مسؤولياتي كأبنة واضحة. كان من المتوقع أن أقوم بمعظم الأعمال المنزلية وأن أعتني بالأطفال الآخرين. لم يكن من المتوقع أن يساعدني والدي وإخوتي الأكبر سنًا. كان هذا عمل المرأة.

ليس من المستغرب أن يلقبني إخوتي الستة الأصغر سنًا بـ «أمي»، لأنني كنت الشخص الذي غالبًا ما كان يحممهم ويطعمهم، ويغني لهم للنوم، ويحرص على أن يقوموا بعمل جيد في المدرسة. لم يكن لدينا وسائل راحة حديثة، مثل الغسالات أو حفاضات الأطفال. كان لابد من تسخين المياه وغسل ملابسهم باليد. قابلت معلمهم، وفحصت واجباتهم المدرسية، وأشرفت على لعبهم. إنه لأمر مدهش أنني تمكنت من القيام بعمل جيد في المدرسة وإشباع شغفي: القراءة.

قدّرت والدي كوني الأم الثانية في الأسرة. كانت أمًا جيدة بالنسبة لي. لقد شجعتني دائمًا على إكمال الدراسة والسفر. على مر السنين، عندما كنت أعمل في بلدان أخرى، أصبحت أنا وأمّي أصدقاء. غالبًا ما كانت تأخذ ابنتي إلى منزلها خلال هذه السنوات، تمامًا كما استقبلتني والدتها.

أتذكر محادثة بعد الطلاق مباشرة. انفصلت أنا وزوجي بعد وقت قصير من ولادة طفلتنا، ورفّض إعالتنا. اضطرت إلى مغادرة معهدي، معهد الموسيقى والدراما، للعيش مع والدي. عندما كانت ابنتي تبلغ من العمر ثلاثة أشهر فقط، جاءت أمّي إلى غرفتي. أمسكت يديّ بين يديها وقالت: «اسمعي يا حبيبتي، هذه أوقات عصيبة. لا يستطيع والدك الاعتناء بك وبطفلتك لفترة أطول.»

قالت إنه يجب أن أفكر في مستقبلي، وأنّ علي أن أعود إلى المعهد لمواصلة تعليمي.

«ماذا عن طفلتي؟» سألتها.

«سأعتني بها. لذا اذهبي من فضلك.»

كنت أكثر من ممتنة لها، المرأة التي مكنتني من العودة إلى الدراسة. كنت صغيرة جدا ومطلقة بالفعل، لكن والدتي أشعلت نيران الأمل بداخلي. عدت إلى التمثيل مع دراسة المسرح والفلسفة وتاريخ اليونان القديمة ومصر وبلدي. قرأت المسرح الكلاسيكي وشكسبير ودرست النقد الفني أيضا. تمكنت بفضل والدتي من أن أصبح كاتبة.

كنت أنا وأمّي صديقتين حميمتين حتى توفيت في عام ٢٠٠٦ عن عمر يناهز الثانية والسبعين. في ذلك الوقت، كنت في قطر أعمل صحفية. لكنني شعرت أكثر فأكثر بأنني لا أريد البقاء هناك. كنت قد ابتعدت عن والدتي لفترة طويلة. بدأت في نشر العديد من القصص التي كتبتها معها، لأنها كانت راوية قصص جيدة. قررت العودة إلى السودان لأعتني بها. تشاركنا الكثير من النكات والقصص بينما كنت أهتم بها وأبقيها نظيفة وأفعل كل ما بوسعي. ظللت أخبرها أن كل شيء على ما يرام.

قالت في النهاية، «أنت عيني وقلبي. اعتني بإخوتك وأخواتك. لا تدعوا النور ينطفئ في المنزل.»

بداية حياتي المهنية

بحلول الوقت الذي تخرجت فيه، كنت معروفة بالفعل ككاتبة في السودان. عندما جئت لأول مرة إلى محطة الإذاعة في «أم درمان» للتقدم لوظيفة في عام ١٩٨٨، شعرت وكأنني عدت إلى البيت. تم تكليفي بالعديد من المهام، برامج كتابة وإخراج. كانت في الأساس برامج حوارية مع الموسيقي في الأثناء، لذلك كان علي أن أستيقظ في الصباح الباكر لقراءة الصحيفة والاستماع إلى الأخبار، للتحضير للبرامج الحوارية لاحقا. أتذكر المرة الأولى التي سُمح لي فيها بتسجيل برنامجي الخاص. طلب مني مدير الاستوديو كتابة وتوجيه وتسجيل برنامج عن القوة السياسية المتزايدة للإخوان المسلمين. ذهبت إلى المكتبة للبحث والحصول على الموسيقي التي أحتاجها وكنت مستعدة للتسجيل مع زميلي في ذلك المساء. استمع والداي إلى برنامجي الأول وكانا

فخورين جدا بي. في اليوم التالي، هنأني مديري وصافحني وقال، «من الآن فصاعدا، ستخرجين وتبئين برنامجك الخاص، «صباح الخير يا السودان». كنت أول امرأة تخرج هذا البرنامج.

أصبحت اسماً معروفا في البلاد. أينما ذهبت، كان الناس يتعرفون علي. عندما أخرجت سلسلة من الأعمال الدرامية، كان أناسٌ غرباء يأتون إلى منزلي ويسألون، «ماذا سيحدث بعد ذلك؟» لقد تلقيت جوائز جعلتني أكثر ثقة. كنت أرغب في إلهام الآخرين لطرح الأسئلة الصعبة وتشجيع الناس على بناء دولة أقوى للجميع.

ترك كل شيء ورائي

بلغ «صباح الخير يا السودان» أعلى مراتب البرامج الإذاعية. ركز البرنامج على رسالة إيجابية، كيف يجب أن يعمل جميع سكان السودان - الشمال والجنوب - معا لبناء دولة قوية. شددت على أهمية التعليم للجميع كطريق إلى مستقبلنا. لكن في عام ١٩٨٩، عندما تولى الإخوان المسلمون زمام الأمور بدأت الإذاعة تخضع لضغط الحكومة. تم التحقيق في برنامجي وحاول ممثلو الجيش تخويفي. قال لي الناس إنني يجب أن أكون حذرة بالمسائل المتعلقة بالسياسة، لكنني واصلت نشر الحقيقة. تذكرت ما علمتني إياه أمي: «ليس عليك أن تكوني في الجانب الآمن. قولي الحقيقة ولا تخافي. سيحميك الله.»

استمرت الديكتاتورية العسكرية التي كانت تسيطر على الحكومة في الضغط على أشخاص مثلي. حتى أنهم حاولوا إرشائي بالمال وبسيارة جديدة إن أذعت ما يريدون، لكنني رفضت ذلك. تم اعتقالي وسجني أكثر من مرة. حتى أنني تعرضت للضرب والاعتصاب. جاء المحققون إلى منزل والدي وحاولوا أخذ نصوص الراديو الخاصة بي، لكن والدي لم يعطهم شيئا. في كل مرة كنت أخرج فيها من السجن، كنت أتعرض للتهديدات. تركتني هذه التجارب مصدومة نفسيًا. قررت أخيراً مغادرة البلاد قبل فوات الأوان.

لن أنسى أبداً اليوم الذي غادرت فيه - ١٣ يناير / كانون الثاني ١٩٩١. عندما ذهبت لأودع والدي، كان مرمياً على سريريه وهو يبكي. قال: باركك الله. لم أره مرة أخرى، إذ مات بعد أربع سنوات.

ذهبت إلى القاهرة أولاً للحصول على تأشيرة دخول إلى اليونان. فكّرت أنني قد أعيش هناك، حيث كان لدي أصدقاء وأقارب ذكروا أنّه هناك العديد من الفرص الصحفية في أثينا. لدي ذكريات جيدة عن اليونان، ولكن ذكريات محبطة أيضاً. أدى الارتفاع والمناخ إلى تدهور صحتي، لذلك ذهبت في إجازة إلى جزيرة كريت. بالنسبة لكثير من الناس في جزيرة كريت، كنت أول امرأة سوداء يروها على الإطلاق. كانوا فضوليين للغاية ولكنهم لطيفون، وخاصة الأطفال. لقد أحبوا فرك وجهي أو ذراعي ليروا ما إذا كان لون بشرتي سيتلاشى على أيديهم. عندما بدأوا ينادونني «بالشوكولاتة»، جعلني ذلك أبتسم. لاحقاً، في أثينا، قابلت مترجمة أمريكية من أصل أفريقي تتحدث اليونانية، وساعدتني في تعلم كيفية تشغيل الكمبيوتر لأول مرة. قمت ببعض التقارير من هناك، ومع ذلك، كان حاجز اللغة والارتفاع العالي يمثلان مشكلتين بالنسبة لي، لذلك اضطررت إلى مغادرة هذا البلد الجميل.

عندما عدت إلى القاهرة في نفس العام، شعرت حقاً أنني عدت إلى البيت. كان الطقس أكثر اعتدالاً مما هو عليه في اليونان، وبالطبع كان يمكنني التحدث مع الجميع لأننا نتحدث نفس اللغة. سرعان ما كنت أعمل في محطة إذاعية وتليفزيونية كمحررة برامج. ثم بعد شهر تقريباً في المحطة، بدأت في الكتابة لعرض كوميدى باللهجة المصرية المحلية. كتبت أيضاً لمجلة «صباح الخير يا وادي النيل»، التي كان لها جمهور سوداني ومصري، وتم بثها في كلا البلدين. كان لدي الكثير من الأصدقاء المصريين، ولم أشعر بالحنين إلى الوطن. زارني أفراد عائلتي من السودان، وكان بإمكانني العودة بحرية إلى الوطن لرؤية ابنتي.

بدأت العمل في صحيفة سودانية في القاهرة، وكتبت أيضاً لبرنامج إذاعي ينتقد الحكومة الاستبدادية في السودان. كنا نسجل البرنامج ثم نرسله إلى إريتريا القريبة للبث. تسببت هذه الوظيفة في مشاكل فيما بعد، عندما ذهبت لتجديد جواز سفري في السفارة السودانية. وبدلاً من ذلك تمت مصادرة جواز سفري بسبب أنشطتي السياسية. كنت أخشى أن أكون مراقبة عندما كنت أخرج في الأماكن العامة. بدأ أصدقاؤني في مساعدتي في العثور على مكان أكثر أماناً للذهاب إليه. عبر مكتب الأمم المتحدة في القاهرة، تمكنت من الحصول على جوازات سفر للاجئين إلى الولايات المتحدة لي ولابنتي التي كانت متحمسة للانتقال إلى الولايات المتحدة.

عشت في القاهرة حوالي عشر سنوات. كنت مستقرّة و مندمجة جيّدا وعقدت لقاءً أسبوعيا مع كُتاب آخرين في منزلي. خلال أحد هذه الصالونات، قالت والدي، التي كانت تزورني آنذاك، «سلمى، هل ستغادرين هذه الحياة الرائعة التي صنعتيها وتذهبين إلى مكان لا يعرفك فيه أحد؟». قلت لها إنني قلقة على ابنتي ومستقبلها في السودان. كنت بحاجة لإيجاد حياة مختلفة.

قالت، «حسناً، لكن قلبي يخبرني أن هذا هو المكان الذي يجب أن تبقي فيه.» لأول مرة في حياتي تجاهلت نصيحة والدي. كان من الصعب عي أن أقول وداعا للمكان والأشخاص الذين أحببتهم، لكن في ٢٥ مايو ١٩٩٩، غادرنا إلى الولايات المتحدة.

لا أحد يعرف اسمي

عندما وصلنا إلى هيوستن عام ١٩٩٩، كان عمري واحد وأربعون عاما وابنتي في الخامسة عشرة. مع قليل من المساعدة، وجدنا شقة، وبعد ترتيب أوراق العمل بدأت في البحث عن وظيفة، إحدى تلك الوظائف التي يمكن للمرء الحصول عليها باللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية. بعد أسبوع، بدأت العمل كعامله نظافة في فندق هيلتون. وعلى الفور، ما إن قرأ رئيسي سيرتي الذاتية ورأى ما كنت أفعله في السودان والقاهرة، أصبح مهتماً جداً بي. أراد مني أن أخبر كل شخص التقينا به، مرارا وتكرارا، عن تعليمي ومهنتي السابقة. لماذا لم يكن يعلم كيف كان يشعرني ذلك؟

قلت له ذات يوم: «كفى!». لم أكن موجودة هناك من أجل التسلية. ذلك الضغط كان إضافة إلى العمل الشاق كعامله نظافة. كان من المفترض أن أنظف العديد من الغرف، وأن أعمل من الساعة ٧ صباحا حتى ٧ مساءً. لم يكن لدي مثل هذا العمل الشاق من قبل.

علاوة على العمل، كان علي التعامل مع العنصرية. طلب مني أحد الأصدقاء ذات مرة أن أذهب إلى مطعم، لكن عندما وصلنا، قال: «لا يمكننا الذهاب إلى الأمام، علينا أن نطلب من الباب الخلفي. سألته لماذا؟ «لأننا سود.»

قلت: «مستحيل!». «لن أقبل بهذا!» لقد عانيت من التمييز بما فيه الكفاية في بلدي عندما تعارضت تقاريرتي مع الآراء التي تتبناها الحكومة.

كنت أشعر بالفضول حيال هذا المطعم الكبير. تساءلت كيف يبدو في الداخل. ماذا سيحدث إذا دخلت بكل بساطة؟ لكن صديقي أقتعني بالمغادرة.

بدأت صديقة سودانية في أيوا سيتي بالإتصال بي. قالت أنه يمكننا البقاء معها بينما كنا نبحث عن منزل. قالت «بالتأكيد الجو بارد هنا». «لكنها أفضل من ولاية تكساس.» لذلك انتقلنا إلى مدينة أيوا، حيث كانت هناك عنصرية أقل.

كنت آمل كثيرا في أنني قد أستعيد مسيرتي المهنية، لكنني وجدت فقط نفس فرص العمل المتاحة لمعظم المهاجرين الجدد. بدأت العمل في مستشفى جامعة أيوا في قسم خدمات الطعام. لكن كل شيء مادي بالنسبة لكاتب. بما أنني كنت أقود عربات ثقيلة، و أوصل وجبات الطعام للمرضى، تعرفت عليهم وعلى العاملين في مجال الصحة. كان لدي موضوع جديد لأكتب عنه. بدأت الكتابة لإحدى الصحف في مصر، وأرسل لهم مقالات عن الحياة في الولايات المتحدة. كتبت عن المرضى: «أحيانا يكونون في حالة تألم. أحيانا أبكي معهم، فقط اترك دموعي تنهمر، أو أهرب من الغرفة. يجب أن يكون عمال المستشفى أقوياء لمواجهة المآسي التي يرونها. في بعض الأحيان تشعر بالأسى، وأحيانا تشعر بالحزن، ولكن بغض النظر عن الظروف، يتعين عليك التعامل معها لأنها وظيفتك.»

في ذلك العام، أخبرني أحد الأصدقاء عن ورشة عمل جديدة للكتابة مخصصة للمجتمع السوداني. أعطاني رقم المعلمة سيسيل. عندما اتصلت بها، قالت إنها ستصطحبني من المستشفى في طريقها إلى ورشة العمل. «كيف سأعرفك؟» سألت.

أحببتها «في الحقيقة، أنا سوداء»، لأنه في ولاية أيوا قد يكون هذا كافيا لتمييزي. ثم سألتها: «أي لون...؟» محاولة العثور على الكلمات. كان لا يزال من الصعب عليّ التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية عبر الهاتف.

قالت سيسيل: «أنا بيضاء.»

«لا، سيارتك!»

«آه! إنها بيضاء أيضا.»

ضحك كلانا. ومنذ ذلك الحين، أصبحنا أصدقاء. لقد قدّرتني ككاتبة، وطلبت مني المساعدة مع الكتاب الآخرين في مجموعتنا، وتشجيعهم والترجمة لهم.

بعد فترة، أردت أن أجرب حظي مرّة أخرى في مسيرتي السّابقة. ذهبت إلى معهد في مينيابوليس لديه برنامج إذاعي للصحافة هناك. أحببت البرنامج، حيث تكلمت في ميكروفون باللغة الإنجليزية للمرّة الأولى. ذهبت إلى الفصول الدراسية وعشت في مبيت مع شبّات. كانت علاقتنا طيّبة، وحاولت أن أكون بمثابة أمّ لهنّ.

وقت الجوع

لا أستطيع أن أتذكر لوهلة أنّني أحسست بالجوع في السودان. كنا نعلم أننا إذا مررنا بأوقات عصيبة، فيمكننا دائما الاعتماد على مشاركة جيراننا من خلال الفتحة الموجودة في الحائط. لكن في مينيابوليس، بينما كنت أنتظر الحافلة بجوار طريق سريع مزدحم، لم تكن هناك جدران تحميني من الرياح، ریح شديدة البرودة لدرجة أن أخواتي في موطني لا يمكن لهنّ تخيلها أبدا. كنت أذهب إلى مطعم يُدعى (Country Buffet) «كاونترى بوفيه»، حيث كنت أرغب في الحصول على وظيفة فيه. وكنت جائعة. جائعة بطريقة لم أعهد لها قطّ في بلدي.

بعد فترة وجيزة من وصولي إلى مينيابوليس، كنت قد أكلت وجبة في «كاونترى بوفيه»، ودفعت سعرا موحّدا لأتناول قدر المستطاع من بوفيه السلطة و طاولات الأكل الساخن التي يتم تعبئتها باستمرار من قبل النُذُل. كان يمكنني تحمل تكاليف الذهاب إلى المطاعم لكنّ مدخراتي سرعان ما اختفت. وكانت هناك مشكلة في صرف الأموال التي تلقيتها من ولاية أيوا. قال لي الصراف الواحد تلو الآخر، «لا يمكننا مساعدتك. يلزمك بطاقة هويّة مينيسوتا.»

بذلت قصارى جهدي. كنت قد ركبت الحافلة إلى قسم المواصلات (DMV) لكن قيل لي أنّه للحصول على هوية مينيسوتا، يجب أن يكون لدى المرء وثائق تثبت عنوانا دائما.

«هل يمكن احتساب غرفة المبيت؟» سألتُ. كنت أقصد تلك الغرفة الصغيرة المتواجدة في قاعة بها الكثير من النساء الأصغر سنا، فهي كانت العنوان الوحيد الذي لديّ.

«كيف يمكن لي أن أعرف؟» قال الصّراف الواحد تلو الآخر. «اسألني شخصا آخر.» لم أكن متأكدة من الذي يجب أن أسأله أو كيف يمكنني صياغة السؤال باللغة الإنجليزية الصحيحة.

بينما كنت أنتظر الحافلة في مينيابوليس، شعرت و كأني واحدة من أولئك الذين يبحثون في الأرض عن الخبز. تحوّلت الغيوم الى خرفان معدة للذبح. ذكرى اللحم المشوي جعل معدتي تنقبض بشكل مؤلم.

أحيانا كنت أجلس في كافيتريا السكن الجامعي، حيث لا يتحدث أحد لغتي. كانوا يلتهمون وجباتهم ويغادرون دون أن يسألوا عن أحوالي. كنت أنتظر رحيلهم حتى ألعق ما تبقى من أطباقهم. عندما أخبرت أصدقائي من البلد أنني كنت أقلب ما في القمامة بحثا عن القصاصات، لم يصدقوني. شعرت بالخجل. ما معنى الحياة إذا كنا لا نحب أنفسنا؟

عندما دخلت إلى «كاونترى بوفيه»، طلبت مقابلة مديرة المطعم. كانت أصيلة غواتيمالا، وقد اندهشت كيف كان يمكنها التحول من الإنجليزية إلى الإسبانية بهذه السرعة عندما كانت ترحب بالحرفاء. بعد مقابلتي، قيل لي أن أتصل لاحقا لمعرفة ما إذا تم قبولي. كنت متفاجئة، اعتقدت أنني سأحصل على الوظيفة على الفور، وما زلت لا أملك المال.

لست متأكدة من السبب، لكنني اقتربت من امرأة شابة كانت تتناول الغداء. اكتشفت أن اسمها خديجة. قلت لها: «أنا جائعة للغاية.» «هل تستطيعين مساعدتي؟» نهضت على الفور وأعدت لي طبقا من الطعام. بينما كنا نأكل، بدأت في شرح مشكلتي، والتحدث معها كما لو كانت صديقة قديمة. أومأت برأسها ثم قالت إنها تستطيع مساعدتي.

جلست على كرسي في غرفة الطعام الضخمة، أشاهد العمال بزيهم النظيف. جلس أحدهم بهدوء بالقرب من المطبخ يتناول غداءه. عندما كانت خديجة

جاهزة، خرجنا في الطقس البارد وركبنا سيارتها. قلت: «حسنًا ، دعينا نذهب إلى البنك الذي أتعامل معه ونصرف حوالتك المالية.»

طلب مني صراف البنك توقيع الشيك لخديجة. أعطهاها النقود، وسلمتها لي على الفور. لم أستطع أن أشكرها بما يكفي لأنني أستطيع الآن دفع فواتيري. قبل أن تغادر خديجة، سألتها إذا كانت من ولاية أيوا. قالت: «نعم ، كيف عرفتِ؟» أخبرتها أن سكان أيوا أناس فاعلو خير، هكذا عرفت.

طيبتها أثلجت صدري. كان الأمر كما لو أن نافذة فتحت في زنازة منعزلة. تغير حظي في ذلك اليوم، فبعد وقت قصير، قابلت امرأة من مصر. كانت تعيش في شقة صغيرة بالقرب من معهدي. بطبيعة الحال، كانت تستطيع التحدث باللغة العربية، مما ساعد تعطشي إلى التحدث بلغتي الأولى. أخذتني إلى بيتها، حيث قدّمت لي الخبز والحلويات. ثم دعنتني لمغادرة المبيت والانتقال معها، و تقاسم الإيجار. كنت في حيرة من أمري. كنت بحاجة إلى الهدوء والسكينة للدراسة والكتابة. ومن ناحية أخرى، كنت بحاجة لتوفير المال. لذلك تركت المسكن وانتقلت للعيش معها.

بعد فترة، كان من الواضح أنني لا أستطيع العيش هناك، أعمل في وظيفتين، وأسدّد قروضي، وما زلت جائعة. كنت أيضا أتوق لابنتي في ولاية أيوا. وأتوق لأصدقائي الذين تركتهم ورائي. لذلك قررت المغادرة في نهاية الفصل الدراسي. عدت إلى مدينة أيوا ووجدت عملاً في مركز للرعاية النهارية. بدأت في الكتابة أكثر، والتقيت بصديقتي سيسيل.

ماذا لو أصبح كل شخص صديقاً لمهاجر جديد؟ كلاهما سيستفيد كثيراً من الآخر. أصبحت سيسيل جزءاً من عائلتي، وعندما أنجبت ابنتي أطفالها، أصبح أحفادي جزءاً من حياتها أيضاً. كانت تأخذهم من المدرسة عندما يعمل والديهم وتأخذهم إلى الحدائق والمكتبات. تقول إن التواجد حولهم أمر سحري ويجعلها ترى كل شيء بطريقة جديدة.

عندما كنت لا أزال أعمل في المستشفى، كان على زوجها البقاء هناك لفترة طويلة. اعتدت الذهاب لرؤيته في فترات الراحة، لألقي التحية و أطمئن عليه.

كلّما كانت سيسيل تخضع لفحص طبي أو إجراء، كنت أذهب معها، وأطلب من ابنتي أو زوج ابنتي أن يوصلانا. كنت أحياناً أطبخ الطعام لعائلتها حتى لا تضطر إلى الطهي. فكنت أتصل بها قائلة: «تعالي وخذي عشائك.»

ذات مرة، سافرت معها إلى أقصى الجنوب لأبقى مع أختها وألتقي بوالديها. قابلت شقيقها أيضاً. رحب بي الجميع وسألوني عن عائلتي. أتذكر أنه كان عيد ميلاد والدتها الخامس والتسعين، وقد تشرفت للغاية بحضوري في حفلتها.

كنّا عادة ما نقوم برحلات برية لاستكشاف الغرب الأوسط. في عام ٢٠١٦، عدت إلى مينيابوليس مع سيسيل. هذه المرة، كنت سائحة - تسوق، مشيت في كومو بارك كونسرفتوار (Como Park Conservatory)، وحضرت حفلة لأوبرا مينيسوتا.

كان كل شيء كما هو: مساحات مفتوحة واسعة، طرق سريعة مفتوحة واسعة، رياح ربيعية باردة. لكن هذه المرة، لم أكن من بين الناس الذين يرتجفون في الزوايا ويبحثون عن عمل. استقبلني موظف استقبال في الفندق، حيث أوضح لنا أين يمكننا تناول الإفطار وممارسة الرياضة والنوم. كانت الشوارع الواسعة في جميع أنحاء المدينة مفعمة بالحياة بالسيارات، وكل منها مليئة بحياة أخرى تماماً. نحن، كنا محمّيتين و معزولتين عن الآخرين داخل الجدران الفولاذية لسيارتنا. كانت غرفتنا في الفندق، المتواجدة بجوار طريق سريع مزدحم، آمنة ولكنها غريبة أيضاً. لم يعرفنا أحد.

اتصلت بزميل سابق في المدرسة الثانوية كان يعيش في مكان قريب، وأخذنا إلى مطعم صيني، حيث استمتعنا بالطعام والصدقة. عندما أوصلنا إلى الفندق، قال: «في السودان، ليس لدينا فنادق، لدينا أصدقاء. نفس الشيء في مينيابوليس. في المرة القادمة التي ستأتين فيها، ستبقيين معي ومع زوجتي.» كرّرها باللغة العربية حتى يضمن أن كلامه مفهوم جيداً. أنا متأكدة من أنه تذكر مثلي أسوار السودان، و تذكّر الفتحات الموجودة في الجدران حيث كنا نتقاسم اللقمة مع الجيران الذين حولنا.

العودة إلى المنزل

دائمًا، أينما أبدأ حياتي في مكان جديد، أتحدث إلى الناس. أ طرح الكثير من الأسئلة حول حياتهم، وكيف أتوا للعيش هناك، ورأيهم حول الطقس. بما أنني أستقل الحافلة إلى العمل والتسوق، فقد قابلت الكثير من الأشخاص الجدد بهذه الطريقة. لقد قابلت الأمريكيين الأصليين والأمريكيين الأفارقة، وأشخاصا من جميع أنحاء أوروبا والشرق الأوسط، وسودانيين لم أكن أعرفهم في بلدي. في الغالب، يكون الأشخاص في الحافلة ودودين ويسعدون بالحديث. ذات مرة ذهبت إلى حفلة عيد ميلاد مع سيسيل، وكان هناك دوغ، سائق الحافلة المفضل لدي. تعرفنا على بعضنا البعض على الفور. في الحافلة بعد ذلك، كنت دائمًا أسأل دوغ عن صديقه، الشخص الذي احتفل بعيد ميلاده. لاحقًا، أجرى نفس هذا الصديق مقابلة معي في الصحيفة المحلية، وكتب عن تجربتي كمهاجرة جديدة.

في عام ٢٠٠٤، و بعد خمسة عشر عامًا من مغادرة بلدي، حصلت على جواز سفري الأمريكي. اتخذت قراري بأنني أستطيع زيارة مصر والسودان بأمان، حيث كان هناك سلام نسبي في ذلك العام. أعدت الاتصال بالعديد من الأصدقاء في القاهرة، ثم غادرت إلى السودان.

عندما ذهبت إلى محطة الراديو حيث كنت أعمل، كانت شبه فارغة. أوضح زميل عمل سابق لي، «الأمر ليس كما كان من قبل. الآن، الناس يعملون فقط خلال نوباتهم، ولا يبقون في الجوار للتحدث.» كان جو حزين قاتم يعمّ المكان. كان البلد كله مختلفا جدا. كان للحرب الأهلية الطويلة والديكتاتورية العسكرية الأصولية آثار مرئية وغير مرئية. كان هناك جنود وضباط شرطة في كل مكان. لقد اختفت العديد من الميزات التي كنت أستمتع بها أثناء نشأتي - التعليم العام، والنقل العام، والرعاية الصحية، وحتى مكتب البريد. كان هناك عدد قليل من الوظائف المهنية، ورأيت الكثير من الفقر.

في الوقت نفسه، كان من الجيد أن يتم الاعتراف بك مرة أخرى كصحفي ومذيع. أتذكر ذات يوم عندما صرخت شابة، «سلمى سلامة! هل هذه

أنتِ؟» كانت هذه المرأة تبيع الأحذية على الرصيف. كانت متحمسة للغاية، وأخبرتني كيف أحدثت فرقًا كبيرًا في حياتها. لقد أريتها ما يمكن أن تفعله امرأة من السودان. تبادلنا معلومات الاتصال، وسمعت فيما بعد أنها تخرجت من الكلية. كنت فخورة جدًا بها وفي غاية السعادة لأنني كنت لا أزال أوثر على الناس من بعيد.

كانت آخر مرة عدت فيها إلى البيت في عام ٢٠١٧. كان لدينا اجتماع عائلي، وجاء إخوتي من قطر والمملكة العربية السعودية، حيث كانوا يعملون. بقينا جميعًا في بيت عائلتنا مع أخواتي. لقد رأيت التجديدات والتحسينات التي أجروها بالأموال التي أرسلتها إلى المنزل بانتظام. كنت فخورة بابنة أخي التي تمكنت من تمويل تعليمها. كان من الجيد قضاء الوقت مع العائلة. اشتقت إلى اللّمة كل يوم جمعة، وتناول وجبة كبيرة معًا، والغناء والرقص، حيث يركض جميع الأطفال في جميع الأنحاء وهم يلعبون الألعاب.

ومع ذلك، سرعان ما أردت العودة إلى بيتي بمدينة أيوا سيتي. أعرف كل شبر من مدينة أيوا الآن. لقد كوّنت الكثير من الأصدقاء، لكنه أيضًا تم الترحيب بي من قبل الغرباء. أنا أحب بشكل خاص «تو ريفر بانكز» (Two Rivers Bank)، حيث فتحت حسابي الجاري الأول. على الرغم من أنه يجب عليّ أن أستقل حافلتين للوصول إلى هناك، فإن الأمر كان يستحق العناء. كنت عندما أدخل، يقول الجميع، «مرحبًا، سلمى هنا.» كانوا يعانقونني ويقدمون لي المشروبات والوجبات الخفيفة.

إذا كان هناك شيء واحد أود تحسينه في مدينة أيوا سيتي فسيكون النقل العام. إذ أنّ الحافلات لا تعمل دائمًا وفقًا لجدول عملي، وسيارات الأجرة غالية الثمن. غالبًا ماكنت أضطرّ إلى المشي في البرد القارس أو المطر. ومع ذلك، كان العديد من سكان أيوا يتوقّفون على الطريق ليعرضوا عليّ الزكوب معهم. على الرغم من إنهم لا يعرفونني حتى، كانوا يبذلون قصارى جهدهم ليوصلوني إلى العمل أو المنزل. ذات مرة، رأيتني امرأة أخرج من محل البقالة بأكياس ثقيلة متوجهة إلى محطة الحافلات. «هل يمكنني اصطحابك إلى مكان ما؟» نادت من سيارتها. «يلاً!» هذا مجرد مثال واحد على المساعدة التي تلقيتها من غرباء كليًا.

منذ عام ٢٠١٢، أعمل مع أشخاص معاقين في منازل جماعية. إنها تجربة جديدة، مقابلة ذوي القدرات المختلفة. يمكن لهم أن يكونوا أذكيا ونشطين، ويستمتعون بنفس الأشياء التي نقوم بها جميعا، ويصنعون منزلاً مع بعضهم البعض. عندما أرى أشخاصا ذوي قدرات مختلفة في جميع أنحاء المدينة يأكلون بالخارج أو يؤدون وظائفهم، أحييهم دائماً، وغالباً ما نتبادل أطراف الحديث.

في بلدي الأم، يتم إخفاء الأشخاص ذوي الإعاقة، وغالبا لا يذهبون إلى المدرسة. بعض العائلات تعتني بهم، بينما يعامل البعض الآخر بالعار والانتهاكات، وكأنهم ليسوا بشرا بشكل كامل. أنا أحب زبائني. أحب الطريقة التي تعتمدها معظم العائلات من خلال دعمهم وزيارتهم. من حين لآخر، كنت أتعرض للعنصرية في وظيفتي، لكن عادة، كان الناس يكتفون لي كلاً الامتنان. تُذكّرني هذه المهنة بالجانب المشرق من الحياة، وكم هو جيد أن تساعد الأشخاص الذين يحتاجون إليك. إنه يعطيني معنى لحياقي، لأنني أشعر وكأنني أم لجميع زبائني، بغض النظر عن أعمارهم.

ذات مرة، أثناء استراحة العمل في الخارج على الرصيف، شعرت بالخوف من كلب يرافق زوجين في الحي. لم أحب الكلاب قط. قال الرجل: «أنا أسف للغاية»، وسحب الكلب بعيداً عني.

قلت: «لا بأس يا حبيبي».

«أوه، لا أستطيع أن أتذكر متى تمت مناديتي بـ «حبيبي». شكراً!» قال. وضحكت زوجته.

مثل هذه الأشياء الصغيرة يمكن أن تجعل الشخص يشعر بأنه ينتمي إلى مكان. ربما فقدت مسيرتي بطريقة ما، لكنني فكرت في المهنة بطريقة مختلفة. ربما نكون أكبر من العمل الذي نقوم به، نحن بالأحرى البيت الذي نشيده.

هنا في آيوا، وجدت بيتي. تختلف الجدران عن تلك الموجودة في السودان، لكن الطريقة التي نتشارك بها واحدة. نحن نساعد جيراننا عندما يكونون

جائعين، أو عندما يكونون في المستشفى مشتاقين للزوار، أو عندما يحتاجون ببساطة إلى من يوصلهم إلى المنزل. نقدم ما علينا أن نعطيه من خلال فتح الجدران فيما بيننا.

GLOSSARY | SAID

Al-Ba'ath Party—Officially the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party was a political party founded in Syria in 1947. The party espoused Ba'athism, which is an ideology mixing Arab nationalist, pan-Arabist, Arab socialist, and anti-imperialist interests. Hafez al-Assad was the leader of the military committee in the party that was a major player in the Syrian political life in 1963 before initiating a coup d'état in 1966.

Assad family—Although in theory Syria is a republic, it has been ruled by the same family for the past forty years. Both Hafez and his son Bashar are extremely corrupt. They have created a system where many of their relatives and extended family members are in control of almost all economic facilities.

Bab Tuma—*Bab* means “door” or “gate” in Arabic. The gates to the old city of Damascus were first built by the Romans, and this gate was dedicated to Venus. However, it was later renamed by the Byzantines to commemorate Saint Thomas the Apostle.

backgammon—Ancient board game originating in the Middle East; along with cards and hookahs, one of the main reasons I spent an average of four nights per week in coffee shops with my friends until early morning hours. It was cheap and clean fun.

City of Angels—A 1998 romantic movie starring Nicolas Cage and Meg Ryan. The soundtrack featured U2, Alanis Morissette, and Sarah McLachlan, among others.

Eid al-Adha—The celebration after Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Similar to Eid al-Fitr, the cycle of late-night shopping–morning prayers–dessert repeats. There is one difference, though. *Adha* in Arabic originates from the word *odhia*, meaning “sacrifice,” and the Eid al-Adha sacrifice is the lamb, so we always ate roast leg of lamb to celebrate.

Eid al-Fitr—Holiday for breaking the month-long dawn-to-sunset fasting of Ramadan and celebrating the good deeds, sacrifices, and charity performed during the holy month of giving. It is a huge social event, the Islamic equivalent to Christmas.

finjan—Metal Turkish coffee pot.

Free Syrian Army (FSA)—A short-lived army that was formed by officers and soldiers who defected from the regime's army after refusing to kill civilians. They were later joined by civilian volunteers who wanted to fight alongside them. In later years, other armed groups who were funded by some countries appeared, and the FSA dissolved into them.

Gitanes cigarettes—French cigarettes that were popular in Syria before the crisis because they were affordable compared with other imported brands.

I-20—Form provided by universities in America to show a foreign student has been admitted, along with information about any waivers and scholarships if applicable. U.S. embassies use this form to check whether the student applying for a visa has any sort of income while in the United States.

iftar—The meal with which Muslims break their fast at sunset. Many mosques will host iftar so people can eat together, or for those in need to find a hot meal without feeling embarrassed. It is also a time for families to invite relatives and friends to their homes.

kousa—One of the jewels of the Syrian cuisine crown. *Kousa*, also known as gray Mexican zucchini, is stuffed with rice and ground beef and then cooked in tomato sauce with herbs.

Mukhabarat—Syrian military intelligence forces. They have unlimited authority to detain whomever they deem an enemy of the ruling party.

molokhia—Also known as *mulukhiyah*, this dish is prepared with the leaves of the jute mallow plant. In Damascus, it is sautéed with beef stew, lemon juice, coriander, and salt and pepper.

old city houses—In contrast with American ones, the backyard is actually inside the house in the form of a courtyard. The different rooms tower around the courtyard. Most houses have a big water fountain in the center of the yard. This is where families will have meals and welcome guests during nice weather. Many houses in the old city were turned into restaurants that kept the same design.

olives—Must-have item on any Syrian table, especially for breakfast. Syria is known for its olives. They are usually sold unpitted and by the kilogram in grocery stores.

Pete the Cat—Fictional cartoon cat created by illustrator James Dean.

Qasem Souleimani—Iranian major general and commander of the Quds Force division that was Iran's military arm outside its borders. He led Iran's military operation in Iraq and Syria and was a strong ally to Assad. He was killed on January 3, 2020, in Baghdad by a U.S. drone air strike ordered by President Donald Trump.

Ramadan—For an entire month, Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset and perform good deeds. The idea is to build character and learn how to be a good human even when feeling starved and exhausted. Paradoxically, it is also a time when Syrian households tend to spend more money on food as they break their fasts.

subor—Meal eaten just before fasting starts at sunrise. Some like to keep it low-key and light, but others prefer to cook or even go out with friends. I used to have chicken shawarma with my high school friends at 4 a.m.

Sunnis and Alawites—Two of Syria's many sects and religions. Sunni Muslims made up about 65 percent of the total population, while Alawites made up around 9 percent and Christians about 10 percent. These percentages have been dramatically affected by the ongoing crisis.

Teitei—"Grandmother" in Syrian dialect; also used by grandmothers to call their grandkids. For example, a grandmother might call out, "*Teitei*, can you help me? My walker is stuck," and the grandchild would reply, "Coming, *Teitei*!"

Umayyad Square—Main square in Damascus. One street leads to downtown, and another leads to a fancy neighborhood, Malky, at the foot of Mount Qasioun, where one of the presidential estates is.

zalabia—Sudanese fried dough, similar to beignets.

GLOSSARY | JARMAKANI

Allah—God.

Al Mayadeen—Pan-Arabist news broadcasting agency based out of Lebanon.

Al-Suwayda—Both a city and one of the fourteen governorates (similar to counties or provinces) of Syria. Located in the southwestern portion of the country, it is also the site of the 2018 massacre in which ISIS militants entered the city, killing at least 258 people mostly belonging to a religious minority and kidnapping fourteen women.

Baba—Father.

dar—House. Sometimes the last name of the family that lives in the house will be added to the word *dar* to further denote the residing family.

fatayer—Savory pies that can have a variety of filling, including meat, spinach, cheese, and others.

FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation)—U.S. domestic intelligence agency given expanded powers under the second Bush administration to conduct surveillance operations in Muslim and Arab communities under the pretext of 9/11, which effectively violated the constitutional rights of those in the aforementioned communities.

ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria)—Terrorist group of Salafi-jihadists that emerged from the remains of Al Qaeda and the destabilization of the Middle East following the involvement of Western and Gulf countries, particularly in the Iraq War. The group was both directly funded and trained and indirectly funded by the West through its partnership with other Salafi-jihadist groups and a number of Gulf countries as a part of a proxy war in Syria that first began in 2011. Also known as ISIL, IS, or Daesh.

labneh—Strained cow's milk yogurt with the consistency of cream cheese; best served with a drizzle of olive oil.

Lilo and Stitch—Animated Disney movie from 2002 about an alien who becomes part of a Hawaiian family and is threatened by an agent reminiscent of the FBI or CIA.

maté—A popular drink similar to hot tea made from naturally infused caffeine leaves from a type of holly tree. It originated in South America but spread to portions of Lebanon and Syria through migration in the 1970s. It is a communal drink served among family, friends, and guests.

saHa—Downtown area of Salkhad where cars zoom around the roundabout and citizens flock through the surrounding streets to visit small family-owned businesses.

Salkhad—Small city within the Al-Suwayda governorate with a population of about fifteen thousand. For outsiders, it is distinguished by its rich history and the citadel that sits atop the highest point in the city. For my family, it's home. It is where both my parents grew up. It is where the white gate still stands.

GLOSSARY | JASTI

Andhra Pradesh—State found in southeastern India; its capital is Hyderabad and its official language is Telugu.

culture—Synonymous with language; shaped by fables and myths told through oral traditions; has the potential to break or become diluted when the violence of assimilation occurs; can be an overwhelming force that some would like to escape.

English—The most widely spoken language worldwide, thanks to the colonizing activities of English-speaking countries such as England and the United States. Particularly for those who were colonized, it can be a language that tastes like blood, greed, power, and ego.

idli—Soft, savory rice cake frequently served with coconut chutney, a type of Indian sauce.

literature—Bridge between cultures; a tool used by the silenced voices.

monsoon—Seasonal change in wind direction that leads to a rainy season.

mother tongue—The language that protects the cells growing in a mother's womb, eventually becoming the barrier between the child and the world. Mother tongues are nurturing and protective. When faced with the outside world, mother tongues can become mutilated or forgotten.

Shalini—Girls' name meaning "modest"; my parents named me after the characteristic they wanted me to maintain.

Telugu—South Indian language (there are twenty-two major languages spoken in India). Tastes like green tea mixed with honey; is smooth, sly, and wise.

GLOSSARY | ESPINOZA

abuelos, abuelitos—Grandparents. Abuelitos is an endearing way to say grandparents. In Mexican culture, they are your second parents. It is custom to kiss the hand of your grandfather as a sign of respect when you see him and to give a kiss on the cheek and hug your grandmother.

además—Besides.

aguantar—To endure. My people have endured a lot and continue to do so in their pursuit of happiness.

American Dream—A false promise or belief that if you work hard enough (pull yourself up by your bootstraps), you can have upward mobility, regardless of social class or race and ethnicity. This concept does not acknowledge the systemic barriers embedded in today's society that help prohibit people like me from making it. When my parents dreamed of coming to the United States, they did not know how hard they would work to barely get by.

ancestros—Ancestors, typically one more remote than a grandparent, from whom one is descended. They are the ones who look after us and guide us. They are our guardian angels. We have a love and respect for the deceased. We believe that they have a continued existence and are able to influence the fortune of those who are still living. As a way of honoring them, we try to live life to the fullest. Our existence is resistance and a testimony of the strength we inherited from our ancestors.

angelitos—Endearing way to say “angels.” Before we would go to sleep, my mom would always tell us *que duermas con los angelitos panzones*, may you sleep with the fat angels. We believe our angels are our ancestors who protect us. We also refer to children who have died as *angelitos*.

apellido—Surname. According to Mexican naming conventions, a person's first surname (e.g., Espinoza) is the father's first surname, and the second surname (e.g., Madrigal) is the mother's first surname. Traditionally, Mexican women don't lose their maiden names when they marry. However, some women add their married name to the

end of their other names, often separated by the word *de*. A married woman's name might look like the following, with "Avila" being her husband's first surname: Vanessa Espinoza Madrigal *de* Ávila.

a pesar de todo—Despite all.

atiriciado/a—Missing someone or something you loved very much.

atole—Traditional thick, hot beverage made of cornmeal.

barañas que se te hacen cuando no te peinas—When your hair tangles when you don't comb it.

bisabuelitos, bisabuelas—Great-grandparents, great-grandmothers.

bolitas de masa—Little balls of corn flour used to make tortillas.

braceros—Mexicans who are hired to work temporarily in U.S. fields. The Bracero Program was an agreement between the U.S. and Mexican governments from 1942 to 1964 that allowed Mexican laborers to come to the United States for short-term work, mostly agricultural. Following the Great Depression and World War II, the United States needed a way to pay agricultural and railway workers in an inexpensive way. The program was supposed to be temporary, but it was extended to two decades. Often, braceros worked in horrible conditions and were paid very little for their labor.

calladita te ves más bonita—"You look prettier when you're quiet," or "Be pretty and shut up." In Mexican culture, womxn are supposed to be seen, not heard. They are not supposed to be outspoken; they must be quiet, submissive, and obedient. Silencing womxn takes away their power.

camisetas de Las Chivas—Club Deportivo Guadalajara S.A. de C.V., otherwise known as Las Chivas or El Guadalajara, is a Mexican professional soccer team from Guadalajara, Jalisco, México. It is the only football club in México that doesn't allow non-Mexican players. Soccer is very popular in Mexican culture.

carnitas—Mexican version of pulled pork. This traditional dish is made by braising or simmering pork in lard until tender. Often carnitas are made for birthday parties, quinceañeras, baptisms, or other special events.

Catrina—Female skeleton with a big hat and elaborate dress, created in the early 1900s by artist José Guadalupe Posada. He drew *calaveras* (skeletons) to remind people that, whether we are rich or poor, at the end of the day we all die anyway.

cempazúchitl—Mexican marigold flowers, also known as *flor de muerto*. Marigolds are bright orange or yellow and have a distinctive scent. Their vibrant color represents the sun, which guides spirits on their way to the underworld. We use them during Day of the Dead because their strong aroma attracts the spirits of our ancestors to help them find their way to us.

chicharrones—Pork rinds.

Chichimecas—First Nations people from central México who were nomadic farmers.

chiles relLENos—Stuffed, roasted poblano peppers dipped in egg batter and fried. It is a traditional dish we eat along with other dishes that make up *las siete cazuelas*, “seven casseroles” that mean abundance and are eaten during Lent.

colonizadores—Colonizers, invaders that came from Spain and other European countries.

copete—Hair bangs or fringe.

Día de los Muertos—Day of the Dead, a sacred Mexican indigenous holiday on November 1 and 2. People honor their ancestors by visiting their graves to clean and decorate their tombstones. Additionally, families create *ofrendas* (offerings) on an altar to honor those who have departed from this world. Our dead are never dead to us until we have forgotten them.

dulces—Artisanal, traditional crystalized candy made out of fruit or milk and caramel. The origin of these traditional sweets dates back to precolonial times.

el baúl de los recuerdos—Trunk of memories; a walk down memory lane. Often, mementos like pictures of items invoke memories of certain times.

el calor de la gente—The warmth of our people.

el nopal—The cactus plant, a common ingredient in Mexican cuisine. We use the entire plant, eating the tuna fruit, *corazones*, and *nopales* and burning the wood in the boiler that heats our water.

el norte—The United States. People who live in the U.S. are called *norteros*. Everyone wants to go to *el norte* because the grass looks greener there.

el rancho—The farm or farming rural community.

el Santo Niño de Atocha—The Holy Infant of Atocha. Every time my family went to México, we would make the pilgrimage to the shrine of Baby Jesus in Plateros, Zacatecas. He is our patron saint and would grant us miracles. Millions of people visit his shrine every year, leaving votive offerings of letters, braids, pictures, and so on, all thanking the Baby Jesus for granting a miracle. In our house, we always had a replica of Baby Jesus.

esperanza—Faith in a better tomorrow or that things will turn out okay. *Esperanza* is what keeps my community moving forward.

familia—Family, including extended family, godparents, and at times neighbors. *Familismo* is a cultural value that refers to identifying strongly with and being loyal to your nuclear and extended family. Every important decision we make is made while thinking of family. Family always comes first.

gorditas de horno—Mexican bread made from corn flour, dairy products, butter, and sugar. They are cooked in a wood-fired oven, unlike *gorditas*, which are cooked on a *comal* (griddle) or fried in a pan. My grandma had an adobe oven and our aunts would gather around it and chat while making *gorditas de horno*.

guayabas, postre de guayaba—Guava fruit. There are several varieties of guava around the world; the variety in Zacatecas is yellow. *Postre de guayaba* is a guava dessert.

hasta mañana—Until tomorrow.

huaraches—Mexican sandal dating back to precolonial times. Traditionally, this type of footwear has been associated with country life, worn by farm workers and indigenous people. Generally, *huaraches* today are made of braided leather straps woven into soles made out of a tire.

buevo con chile a mano—Eggs in red sauce. My grandma did not have electricity, so she would make the red sauce by hand, squishing the red chilies and tomatillos. We swear this dish doesn't taste the same if the sauce is blended in the blender.

India—Indian womxn, as in Native American. In the Mexican community, it is a racist and classist insult. First Nations peoples in México continue to be treated poorly and do not have access to education, health care, or resources. When folks are called indios, the underlying message is that they are dirty, uneducated, poor, dark-skinned, and undesirable.

La Migra—Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE); U.S. law enforcement agency responsible for immigration and customs, including deportations. It has become notorious for rounding up immigrants, separating families, and putting children and adults into cages or detention centers with horrible living conditions.

la Revolución Mexicana—The Mexican Revolution was an armed conflict in the early 1900s that led to the end of dictatorship and the establishment of a constitutional republic. The three main causes were the dictatorship rule of Porfirio Díaz for over thirty years, exploitation and poor treatment of workers, and great disparity between rich and poor.

la soledad—Feeling of sadness, loneliness, or melancholy caused by the lack, absence, or death of a person.

Latinx—Gender-neutral alternative to Latino (male) and Latina (female) used to refer to a person of Latin American descent. Traditionally “Latino” has been used to refer to groups of mixed genders.

machismo—The idea that men have to be manly and self-reliant and that they are superior to womxn and should dominate and control them; toxic masculinity that perpetuates gender norms.

mantener los pies firmes en la tierra—To have your feet firmly on the ground; to not lose sight of the possibilities that a situation presents, to be aware of the variables that are involved in a circumstance; to be realistic; a cautionary reminder to never forget your roots and to stay humble.

mis padres—My parents. Mexican parents are strict and overprotective. Above anything, children are expected to respect their parents and care for them when they are elders.

mis tatarabuelos—My great-great-grandparents.

molcajete—Mortar made of stone, mainly volcanic, which is carved in a concave shape and in which spices, grains, and vegetables are crushed or ground in small quantities. Mexican kitchens are not complete without a *molcajete*. Traditionally, *molcajetes* are often inherited, and one *molcajete* can last for several generations.

mole—Sauce originated in the Oaxaca and Puebla regions consisting of a mixture of chiles, spices, fruits, and seasonings. There are many varieties distinguished by their ingredients and flavors. My family makes the *pipián* variety when we make tamales.

mujerista—Latinx womanist; different from being a feminist. *Mujeristas* strive for their own liberation as Latinx womxn in their community.

ollas—Pots and pans.

padrinos—Godparents. They baptize you, and if your parents die, they become your legal guardians. It is a big responsibility and an honor to be asked to be a *madrina* or *padrino*. The *padrinos* become your parents' *compadres*, their close friends, and are like an aunt or uncle to you.

pan de muerto—Bread that represents the dead. It is typically in a round shape that represents the cycle of life and death, with four diagonal pieces that represent the bones and tears we have cried for those who are dead.

papel picado—Decorative craft made by cutting elaborate designs in sheets of tissue paper. It is often used at parties and during Day of the Dead, where it represents the element of wind.

pelo malo—Bad hair, often seen as hair that does not look like the hair of white people (straight).

pelos de la nariz—Nose hair.

permanent residency—Also known as a green card, it allows you to live and work permanently in the United States, though it is not the same as U.S. citizenship. Both processes are long and expensive.

pitayas—Fruit from several cactus species.

platos de barro—Plates made of clay.

pollo en naranja—Popular Mexican orange chipotle chicken dish containing potatoes, onions, tomatoes, and other spices.

Pueblo Mágico—Magic Town; status granted by the Mexican government to towns with “magical” qualities such as beauty, historical importance, or natural wonders. There are currently 121 Magical Towns in México.

punte—Bridge. We have to be bridges for people in the highway of life.

sopa y frijoles de la olla—Soup and beans from the pot made of clay. Most Mexicans have an olla de barro in which they make beans. Beans taste different when cooked in these pots.

sucia—Dirty. Also used to describe a Mexican womxn who may be in tune with her sexuality. A Mexican womxn is supposed to be like the Virgin Mary, pure, obedient, submissive, and faithful. When she acts differently, she is labeled a *sucia*.

tamarindo—Tamarind.

tía—Aunt.

toro—Bull.

tortillas a mano—Tortillas made by hand at home.

trailas—Mobile homes. We lived in one for a couple years before my parents bought a house.

trenzas—Braids.

un taco de queso con chile al molcajete—A taco with cheese and roasted chili sauce that is made on the *molcajete* (stone mortar).

veladora—Candle. Lighting a candle is a sacred gesture in Mexican communities. Whether it is to light the darkness when there’s no electricity, raise a prayer to a patron saint or *la Virgen de Guadalupe* (the Virgin of Guadalupe), or strengthen our purposes, *veladoras* are an important item in a Mexican home.

verduras—Vegetables.

welita—Endearing way children say “grandma.”

womxn—As my friend Carolina Rosario said, language tends to favor men and men’s experiences. For example, history has always been told through a man’s perspective. I intentionally spell the word *women* using the x as a way to disrupt sexist language. Additionally, I use the x as a way to recognize Black and Brown womxn, their experiences, and the systemic barriers, disrespect, and erasure we continue to face in this country. For example, when headlines say that womxn earn just 79 cents for every dollar men make, they fail to acknowledge that it is white womxn who make 79 cents to the dollar, while Black and Brown womxn make even less than that.

yo soy más vocal—I am much more vocal; I speak up more.

Zacatecas—One of the thirty-two states of México, its name means “where there is abundant *zacate* (grass).” Located in north-central México, it is home of the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range and the elephant tree. It is best known for its rich deposits of silver and other minerals, its colonial architecture, and its importance during the Mexican Revolution. It takes my family around thirty-six hours to get to our hometown in Zacatecas if we drive or take the bus.

GLOSSARY | TAWIL

Arab—Originally, Arabs were people from tribes in Yemen and the South Arabian region now known as Saudi Arabia; in addition, historically many Jews came from the South Arabian region. For years, Israeli passports marked someone as Semitic or Arab. In Israel, Arabs are seen as foreigners who come from another tribe or land, and the label is often used in a negative way, as if they are barbaric. Palestinians (Christians and Muslims) are marked as Arab, whereas Jews are marked as Semitic. However, *Semitic* means anyone who relates to the languages of Arabic or Hebrew, which all Palestinians speak. Thus, this labeling is an active, controversial political-ethnic cleansing.

Assalamu alaikum—Traditional Islamic greeting meaning “Peace be upon you.”

diversity—Acceptance of and respect for all regardless of socioeconomic status, race, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, and so on. I think it is fair to say that the word diversity and identity go hand in hand for they are both individual and socially construed concepts that change over time. Diversity has become a controversial concept. In its modern sense it has become a double-edged sword because it tends to fixate on appearance (e.g., skin color, clothing, what can be perceived with the eyes only). I prefer the word *identity* when it comes to celebrating individual uniqueness because it doesn't carry the stigma of *diversity*. Everyone can relate to having an identity. I believe that if everyone is able to see the uniqueness in themselves, then we will have more love and acceptance of one another. Institutionalized racism is real and racism is real, but I believe one of the best ways we can combat racism is to remove the institutionalized categories, which make it difficult to talk about racism and limits growth as a society. In the end we are all one human race.

fatwa—Interpretation or formal ruling on Islamic law given by a credible and authoritative scholar.

Hadith—Collection of sayings and traditions of the prophet Muhammad. The Hadith constitute the major source of guidance

for Muslims apart from the Qur'an. The "authentic" Hadith are the Forty Hadith al-Nawawi.

hijab—Headscarf that is traditionally worn with long, loose-fitting clothing. Some Muslim women wear the hijab to cover their head and hair, while others wear a burka or niqab, which also covers their face. Although the hijab predates Islam, it has become a way to show submission to God, and there are verses in the Qur'an and Hadith that talk about the concept of hijab and dressing modestly. A person who wears a hijab is known as a hijabi.

imam—Individual who leads prayers in a mosque.

Levant—The Levant is a biblical and ancient word used to describe the cultural region of Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon before the British divided it in 1916 into the countries we now know as Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and so on.

mabram—Person with whom sexual intercourse is forbidden (i.e., father, brother, uncle) who can accompany a woman in traveling a distance of usually more than three days.

Mother Mosque of America—The first surviving mosque (Muslim place of worship) in North America, a simple white two-story building with a green dome that sits inconspicuously in a residential neighborhood of Cedar Rapids. The Mother Mosque of America is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and honors the extensive history of Muslims in Iowa, especially those who arrived from the Levant region, specifically around Lebanon. It was in Cedar Rapids where Abdullah Igram wrote to President Eisenhower to ask for an *M* for Muslim as an option on dog tags after his service in World War II. Eisenhower granted his request.

otherness—Marker of difference that is imposed rather than accepted.

Palestine—Often called the Holy Land; historically considered to include Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and parts of Jordan. In 1948 Britain and its allies created a country from the Palestinian region, the state of Israel, as a refuge for European Jews after the horrific Holocaust in Europe where millions of Jews were murdered. Today in Israel Palestinians are required to carry identification papers with them at all times, and there are constant checkpoints where the identification papers are reviewed.

Qur'an—Islamic sacred book that is the word of God sent to Prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel.

Semitic—See the definition for *Arab*.

Surah Al-Nur, verse 31—Also known as “the light” chapter; contains the clearest verse in the Qur'an on modesty, which tells women to guard their private parts and to cover their bosoms. Many Islamic scholars would say that the verse specifically pertains to the women of that era who would wear a headcover but leave their chest exposed. The verse commands the women to take a piece of clothing from their head to cover their chest. This makes perfect sense to me and a majority of Islamic scholars. What I couldn't understand is why Allah kept the verses subject to Islamic scholarly interpretation rather than speaking on them directly. For example, one of the biggest sins in Islam is the association with a god or deity other than Allah. The Qur'an makes it clear that associating other gods with Allah is a deal-breaker. The rules on modesty are much less clear.

Wahhabism—In most religions, there is a group of people, or fundamentalists, that takes religion to extreme levels, and Wahhabism is an ultraconservative movement that takes a puritanical form of Islam to the maximum. It interprets everything in a literal sense and requires others to adopt a very strict form of behavior and dress based on their interpretation of how the Prophet dressed and acted. The majority of Muslims denounce Wahhabism, and it is practiced by a very small number of people. It was made known to the world through the power of social media and after 9/11.

GLOSSARY | KHAL

1948 Arab–Israeli War—The 1948 Palestine War, also known as the War of Independence by Israelis and the Nakba (disaster) to Palestinians, was a war between the new state of Israel, Palestinian Arabs, and the states around Israel. The war actually began in 1947 following the announcement of the end of the British Mandate in Palestine.

Assumption of the Virgin Mary—Commemorates the death of Mary and her bodily assumption into Heaven before her body could begin to decay; a foretaste of our own bodily resurrection at the end of time.

atrab—Deaf.

Baba—Father.

Black Saturday—On January 26, 1952, rioters burned and looted over seven hundred buildings because British occupation troops killed fifty Egyptian policemen in the city of Ismailia the day before. Britain wanted control of the Suez Canal shipping lanes, but the Egyptians refused.

baklava—Dessert made of layers of filo dough filled with chopped walnuts or pistachios and sweetened with syrup.

***The Barber of Seville* overture**—Overture of the classical comedic opera by Rossini.

Christian Brothers Boarding School—Worldwide Catholic schools run by Christian Brothers who dedicate their lives to teaching; also known as College Des Freres.

Egyptian revolution—On July 23, 1952, the Free Officers group led by Gamal Abdel Nasser and Mohammed Naguib overthrew King Farouk.

Groppi—Famous Italian café and delicatessen offering French and Italian desserts and baked goods.

Haifa—Northernmost city in Palestine, now in Israel.

Jerusalem, Jordan—Before 1967, East Jerusalem was part of Jordan.

kanafeh—Palestinian dessert made of shredded filo dough and stuffed with sweets and mozzarella cheese, baked and then soaked in sweet sugar syrup.

kibbeh—Middle Eastern dish made of bulgur, minced onions, and ground beef or lamb with spices and pine nuts.

maamoul—Cookie made with dates, semolina flour, orange blossom water, and rose water.

marron glacé—Chestnut candied in sugar syrup and glazed.

muezzin—One who calls Muslims to daily prayer.

mujaddara—Lentils cooked with rice and onions.

par oreille—By ear.

Sham el-Nessim—Egyptian national holiday celebrated on the day after the Eastern Orthodox Christian Easter. The holiday is not Christian but is celebrated by Egyptians of all religions. People picnic everywhere there is green space, on the Nile, or at the zoo.

shisha—Water pipe with a long flexible tube for smoking tobacco; also known as a hookah.

Teta—Grandma.

tarboosh—Felt cylindrical hat, often with a silk tassel.

warak enab—Grape leaves stuffed with rice and ground beef or lamb and spices

ya habibi—My love.

GLOSSARY | SALAMA

asida—Porridge made of corn flour.

Eid al-Adha—The Feast of the Sacrifice, based on the story of Ibrahim and Isaac.

Eid al-Fitr—Holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan and the end of the fasting period.

gurrasab—Disk-shaped bread made of wheat flour.

hijab—Veil worn by some Muslim women covering the head and chest.

kabk—Sugar-coated cookies.

kisra—Flatbread made of sorghum flour; the most common type of bread in Sudan.

Muslim Brotherhood—Conservative religious and political organization dedicated to the establishment of a nation based on Islamic principles.

Ramadan—Holy month of fasting, introspection, and prayer for Muslims. It is the month during which Muhammad received the initial revelations of the Qur'an.

rocoba—Small outbuilding, usually a temporary kitchen.

Sudan—Country located in Northeast Africa at the southern edge of the Sahara. It attained independence from British rule in 1956 and was known officially as the Republic of the Sudan. An Islamist military dictatorship, led by Omar al-Bashir from 1989 to 2019, was marked by human rights abuses, torture, imprisonment, curtailment of freedom of speech, persecution of religious minorities and ethnic genocide. By area, Sudan was the largest country in Africa and the Arab world before the secession of South Sudan in 2011.

taglia—Dish of dried meat and yogurt.

CONTRIBUTORS



PHOTO BY MIRIAM ALARCON AVILA

EYAD SAID was born in Damascus, Syria. He lives with his family in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He earned a master's degree in banking and finance from the University of Damascus, Syria, before getting a PhD in mathematics from Louisiana State University. A husband and father of two, he is an assistant professor of mathematics at Mount Mercy University. He hopes to explore the wounds caused by the terrible tragedies that have taken place in his country and to be able to tell more Syrian stories to the people of Iowa.



PHOTO BY MIRIAM ALARCON AVILA

HIBBAH JARMAKANI is an Arab American born of Syrian immigrant parents. She was four when her family moved to Sioux City, Iowa, where she grew up. She writes poetry and lyrical nonfiction as a form of resistance to existing American media narratives of the political landscape within the Middle East. More recently her writing has confronted issues of identity and anti-Arab sentiment amid the ongoing war in Syria. She graduated from the University of Iowa with a degree in international studies focusing on issues in the Middle East. She has been published in *Fools Magazine* and hopes to continue both her education and her work as a writer challenging stereotypes wherever they may arise.



PHOTO BY MIRIAM ALARCON AVILA

SHALINI JASTI was born in Chirala, India, but was brought to the United States by her parents when she was only six months old. Raised to understand the many cultures of India while in the United States has led her to seek out her bicultural identity as she hopes to be equally Indian and American. With the goal of becoming an educator, Shalini hopes that her piece about her relationship with her mother and literature will open a door for authors of South Asian heritage to feel confident claiming their identity as writers.



PHOTO BY MIRIAM ALARCON AVILA

VANESSA “CUEPONICIHUATL” ESPINOZA was born in Villanueva, Zacatecas, México, and grew up in El Rancho La Hoya, Jerez, Zacatecas, in her paternal grandparents’ home. She migrated as a toddler to the United States and grew up in rural Conesville, Iowa. She obtained her MED with an emphasis in student affairs at Iowa State University and a BA in Spanish teaching at the University of Northern Iowa. She currently works at the University of Iowa as an academic coach. CueponiCihuatl has a podcast titled *Confessions of a Latina in the Midwest*. Her work with the BIWF explores belonging, traditions, and identity. Her goal is to share testimonios of Latinx immigrants in the Midwest because often their stories are never told.



PHOTO BY MIRIAM ALARCON AVILA

DHUHA TAWIL was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to Palestinian parents. She is a small-business owner in Johnson County in property management. Her work with BIWF explores her journey with the hijab in eastern Iowa. Her goal is for her experience to help people better understand how every journey of life is different for every Muslim woman.



PHOTO BY MIRIAM ALARCON AVILA

GEORGE KHAL was born in Haifa, Palestine. When he was one year old, his family escaped the 1948 war and settled in Cairo, Egypt, where they became refugees. With the continued unrest in the Middle East, his parents sent him and his four siblings to Iowa City, where they settled. He earned a computer science degree from the University of Iowa and founded Sound Clarity, Inc., to dispense assistive hearing technology worldwide. He is writing his memoir to document his family's history and hopes to shed light on the plight of Palestinians in the diaspora. He lives in Iowa City with his wife of forty-eight years.



PHOTO BY MIRIAM ALARCON AVILA

SALMA SALAMA emigrated from Sudan in 1991, and she has made her home in Iowa for over twenty years. She was a journalist, radio producer, and writing teacher before moving to the States as a political refugee. She currently works as a caregiver in a group home for differently abled adults. Her translated work has appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *Daily Palette*, *Fourth River*, and *Real Conditions: Writings from the Sudanese Community*. Five collections of her short stories have been published in Arabic.

EDITORS



PHOTO BY SARAH SMITH

ANDREA WILSON is a writer, the founder and Executive Director of the Iowa Writers' House, and the series editor of *We the Interwoven*. She grew up in Columbus Junction, a small Iowa farming community experiencing a cultural shift from the meatpacking industry and seasonal agricultural work. She is dedicated to working with underrepresented voices and creating greater empathy in the world through storytelling.



PHOTO BY BEN PLANK

ALISHA JEDDELOH is a writer, the associate director of the Iowa Writers' House, and an editor of the *We the Interwoven* series of bicultural anthologies. She grew up on a farm outside Fairfield, Iowa, home to both cornfields and the golden domes of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and the transcendental meditation movement. The culture clash between groups led her to see difference as a catalyst for creativity and new ways of being, and that experience continues to inform her work as a writer and editor today. She lives in Iowa City, Iowa, with her family.

TRANSLATORS

ASMA BEN ROMDHANE is a Tunisian Fulbright Foreign Language (Arabic) Teaching Assistant alumna. She received her PhD in foreign language and ESL education from the University of Iowa in 2019. She has extensive experience with translation and interpretation to Arabic and French, including working as a translator for the UI International Writing Program and Between the Lines. She is currently a lecturer of Arabic language at the University of Iowa and is helping with translating and interpreting for the UI College of Law immigration clinic as well.

LUBAB ELTAYEB ELMIKASHFI is a professor of applied linguistics and English literature at the University of Gezira in Sudan. As a visiting professor in the UAE, Oman, and Jordan, she has supervised over seventy dissertations and translations of fiction and nonfiction texts.

CECILE GODING is from South Carolina, where she worked in adult literacy for some years. Formerly an adjunct instructor at Mount Mercy University, she teaches for the Iowa Summer Writing Festival and the Free Generative Writing Workshop in Iowa City.

EMAN MOHAMED, previously an agricultural engineer in Sudan, immigrated to the United States in 2004. A preschool teacher for the last sixteen years, and one class away from completing her MS in curriculum and instruction, she also teaches Arabic to Arab American children in her Iowa City community.

PEDDABABU is the father of the author of “Mother Tongue.” With no previous experience in translation, he has translated her essay in order to help his daughter on the journey to understand her culture. When he is not being an amazing father, he works as a computer engineer.

RESOURCES

The following resources for readers are available at

WWW.WETHEINTERWOVEN.COM



TESTIMONIALS AND REVIEWS

We would like to hear from you about your experience as a reader. Tell us what you discovered by reading this book or how it affected you.

DISCUSSION GUIDES

This book was created to start conversations. If you'd like to form a discussion group, we've created free guides that are available at our website.

TELL US YOUR STORY

If you or your family members have a story to share of migration and starting a new life in America, we'd like to hear it. We want you to know that your story matters, and that the process of writing our stories can be a way of understanding our own place in the human experience.

