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THE SKY IS CONCAVE

A MEMOIR *of* PALESTINE *and* MATHEMATICS

MAJEDA AWAWDEH



Praise for *The Sky Is Concave*

‘*The Sky Is Concave* is a story of ultimate courage. Like so many Palestinians, Majeda Awawdeh has endured a life of deprivation and violence. Her story is also one of remarkable success. Majeda’s personal story is inspiration for all of us who seek justice for the Palestinian people. *The Sky Is Concave*, written with eloquence and dignity, is also an act of inspiration for all women demanding the basic human right to determine the life of freedom they wish to live.’ **Tony Birch**

‘Rarely has a memoir held my attention with such magnetic force. By turns heartbreaking and fist-pumping, this rough diamond of a book shimmers with pulsating, page-turning energy. I was fully immersed in Dr Majeda’s double-bound world: the oppression and discrimination of being a Palestinian living in post-Nakba Israel, and the violence of being a wife trapped in an abusive marriage. Would she – could she – find her way out? And at what cost, to her colonised community and her subjugated self? *The Sky Is Concave* is at once a woman’s tale as old as time and a story of absolute political currency and specificity, written by a fresh and fearless new voice. Simply breathtaking.’ **Clare Wright**

‘This book defies both taboo and censorship, providing an intimate insight into the ways in which the lives of Palestinian women and girls are defined by layered uprisings: uprisings against fear, uprisings against patriarchy and uprisings against occupation. With the mind of a mathematician, Majeda unpicks the equations that direct the lives of women and girls under siege and maps the counterforces they employ to shape their own futures.’ **Amani Haydar**

‘A powerful, forensic memoir about resisting erasure. Dr Majeda’s story

unfolds in stunning, unsparing detail as she outwits and ultimately overcomes the narrowing, violent constraints of patriarchal religion, family, marriage and state power. I found myself cheering out loud as time and again she outmanoeuvred those who sought to dominate her. Ultimately, this really is a testament to the extraordinary psychic power that's required to protect your mind – and your love – under relentless pressure. And it is a triumph: brave, incandescent and certain to resonate with anyone, especially women, who sees their own survival and defiance reflected in its pages.'

Jess Hill

'What does freedom mean when your body, your land and your faith are all contested? In her memoir, Majeda Awawdeh answers that question with breathtaking honesty. Set against the backdrop of occupied Palestine and the outbreak of the First Intifada, her story confronts Indigenous and colonial patriarchy alike, taking its place in the transformative tradition of Arab feminist writing. Awawdeh reframes her experience not as victimhood but as survival – of religious patriarchy, colonial violence and the hostile border regimes that police Palestinian bodies. Her migration is no escape; it is an act of radical dissidence and a gift to the generations that follow. Read it. You will cry, you will laugh and you will remember that no woman faces systemic violence alone – not while we still have each other's stories.'

Lucia Sorbera

'A remarkable sociopolitical memoir. *The Sky Is Concave* tells the incredible life story of Majeda Awawdeh, who grew up in a volatile context of social and political upheaval as a Palestinian citizen of Israel, navigating Israeli settler-colonial violence and patriarchy. The book does not shy away from discussing topics like domestic violence, state and religious violence, and identity and immigration, and it does so with deep empathy. Majeda's storytelling is imbued with humour, wit and sharp political insights, with mathematics serving the purpose of metaphor and structure, allowing Majeda – and us – to make sense of the world. This is a book you will read in one breath.'

Lana Tatour



Dr Majeda Awawdeh is an award-winning academic, entrepreneur and advocate for women's education based in Sydney, Australia. Born in the 1948 region, one of two million Palestinians with Israeli citizenship living under occupation, her early life was shaped by patriarchy, civil discrimination, the rise of Islamic conservatism and the complex realities of being a Palestinian citizen of Israel. Majeda holds a bachelor's degree in Mathematics, a master's in Mathematics Education, and a PhD in Mathematics Education and Cognitive Load Theory. She is also a winner of a Telstra Business Women's Award.

THE **SKY** IS
CONCAVE

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CONCAVE**

MAJEDA AWAWDEH

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This book is dedicated to all women for whom rising was not a choice but a calculated decision.

To my three vectors: my anchors, my true north and my reasons.

Memoirs are collections of dots scattered across a life. Each dot offers a glimpse of truth. But truth itself is the line formed when those dots are connected.

Prologue

Some people are born into softness, into homes where warmth cushions the fall and love raises you up. I was not.

From a young age, I learnt that to survive I had to harden. I was shaped by poverty and hardship first, and by expectations, silence and control next. Softness, the kind that belonged to girls, had no place in a world that demanded obedience and endurance. So I froze some parts of myself and buried others. I hid my fire and grew a heart of rock.

Freedom was never handed to me. It had to be bargained for. I had to fight for simple things: what I read, what music I listened to, where I went and what I wore. The things boys were freely given – and some girls, too, but only those from other religions or more ‘permissive’ backgrounds – were luxuries I could only dream of.

As a teenager, my life was mapped out for me. The rules were not to be questioned. But, inside, questions stirred. My refuge was mathematics, reading, writing and my inner strength. I believed that education would guide me out. I saw it as a key to liberation. But, instead, it led me to another cage: marriage and motherhood.

I had to harden even more, freeze more parts of myself just to breathe; but, deep within, the fire kept burning. When I finally broke free, I found myself bound again. The people changed. The setting shifted. But the pattern remained. I told myself this time would be different. That I had grown. That I had learnt. But the truth is that I had not. I was orbiting the same pain, the same decisions and the same fear. Until I wasn't.

If you've ever felt trapped by rules, by fear, by the weight of your culture or your past, this book is for you. If you've ever felt ashamed of where

you've been, or how low you have fallen, or how tough you had to become just to make it through, this book is for you. If you've had to turn your heart into stone to protect yourself, and now it aches for softness, this is for you.

Where I was born, even the sky felt flat, pressed low, like a lid on what a girl could dream. This is my story of pushing through walls, not once, not twice, but over and over. Until I reached what was meant to be mine. A life of freedom and liberation – not just for me, but to echo across generations.

This is a journey of carrying the bruises of more than one layer of occupation, identity loss, grief and betrayal. It's also a journey of discovery, of unearthing parts of myself I had buried deep. It's a story of returning to my essence and my fire. To the girl I never got to fully be, and to the woman I became.

1

Axioms

My childhood in Canna (a town near Nazareth) was built on three axioms: that a daughter must obey, that imposed authority must be accepted and that religion must govern. In mathematics, axioms are truths we are told to accept without question – no proof required and no debate allowed.

I was not born into love, nor was I born out of love. My parents' marriage wasn't a union of hearts; it was a transaction, a plain deal. My seven aunts had become a heavy burden on my grandparents, my father's parents, and marrying them off was the family's desperate priority. With only one son, my father, they saw an opportunity: to trade his future for one of his sisters'. A cross-marriage arrangement: *your son marries my daughter; my son marries your daughter*. Love was never part of the equation. This kind of exchange was not uncommon back then. One marriage often carried the weight of the other. If one crumbled, the other usually followed. Sometimes, couples stayed not for love, not for themselves, nor for their children, but to keep their siblings' marriages from falling apart. The threat of bringing shame or sorrow to one's sister became the glue that held everything together.

I am part of a minority called the 1948ers. My father was born in 1945. He was three years older than the state of Israel. My mother, a few years younger than him, was born in what became known as Israel in 1948, which we call the year of Nakba. They both lived their childhood, teenage and early adult years under the military rule that Israel imposed for twenty years on occupied Palestinian cities, towns and villages to control the population, their movements and their land, and to prevent internally displaced people from going back to their homes. Like my parents, I am one of the two million Palestinians to date who were born inside the 1948 borders with Israeli citizenship: a citizenship we did not ask for but had to accept if we wished to stay in our homeland, otherwise we would have become refugees

somewhere else.

My childhood bedtime stories were not fairytales about beautiful princesses or knights on white horses. Rather, they were drawn from my grandparents' lives and spread out from the Nakba – telling of life before (under the British Mandate) as well as after.

In Arabic, the word *Nakba* means *catastrophe*. It refers to the mass killing, displacement and dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians that took place during the establishment of the state of Israel. As a result of the Nakba, Palestinian communities were forcibly displaced from their ancestral lands, leading to the loss of homes, livelihoods and cultural heritage. Palestinians who survived the Nakba and remained within the borders of the newly established state faced significant challenges to their existence.

My parents, my siblings and I lived in one room annexed to my grandparents' two-bedroom house. I was already five years old before the construction of our three-bedroom house on top of my grandparents' started, and that took another five years to complete. Until then, there were five of us children and my parents in that one room.

In that single room attached to my grandparents' house, my mum used to put a few mattresses on the floor and the five of us children would lie next to each other and sleep, feeling safe – except on cold winter nights, when my toes and fingers swelled and I cried in itching pain. I would then be passed into my aunties' care. My aunties, four out of seven of them still single and living at home at that time, were very loving and entertaining. With no heaters, they soaked my feet in hot water and salt, and they told stories to distract me from the pain.

Five years later, my parents decided to have another two children – as if five were not enough of a financial burden. It was not until later that I understood their decision.

There was a story that my dad used to tell us about building our house. It was a slightly above-average house for someone who was considered poor, and my dad had planned to complete and use only half of it to begin with, and then do the rest later when he had saved enough money. It was only

because one of the wealthier neighbours made fun of him and his house that he insisted on completing the two building phases at once, placing himself under substantial financial pressure and debt.

Did I count?

The first axiom

Mathematically, coordinates have their place, but they don't have direction of their own. In my family, we children were seven coordinates. Our position was determined by two factors we did not have the chance to choose: our birth order and our gender. We were numbered points on the family map, from one to seven. I am the eldest, Coordinate 1, followed by my six siblings, Coordinates 2–7.

When my oldest brother, Tareq, was born a couple of years after me, my dad became known as Abu Tareq. In the community, the name of a married man changed to a higher position – to *Abu* followed by the name of his first male child – when his first male child is born. In this regard, female children did not count. I felt inferior to my younger brother, and I was not allowed to question it. It was a given. More accurately, it was the first axiom I felt before I understood.

The first axiom was not just at home; it was all around me. I saw it when one of my aunts kept having children until she had a boy, then kept going to give him a brother. She ended up with eleven daughters and one son. I noticed it when my neighbour came home from work to rest while his working wife started making dinner. I lived it when my brothers chatted while we girls cleared the table, cleaned the dishes and made them coffee. I observed it when I saw many women, including my mum, give up their inheritance, which was rightfully theirs under both law and religion, to not be loathed by their own brothers. I saw it when my mum, aunts and most women in my community treated their daughters as less than their sons and themselves as less than their brothers or partners. I knew it when I noticed that our town sheikh was a man, our town mayor was a man, the school principal was a man, the maths teacher was a man, and the most loved child

was the firstborn son.

Patriarchy was not just all around me; it was at the core of life as I knew it.

My first memory of school

The second axiom

It was a Tuesday morning and I woke up to a lovely spring day. I was almost six years old, and life was simple: all about school, my kindergarten classroom and the familiar comfort of my favourite teacher, Ms Maha. I adored her, but I wasn't sure if she felt the same about me. In class, my four cousins and I all competed for her attention, and I worried that their prettier hair might have given them an advantage. I had no idea that my happy little world would be shattered that morning.

Everything changed on 30 March 1976. That day became imprinted in history after Israel's decision to seize more than 30 per cent of the land owned by Palestinians – even those who were citizens of Israel and supposedly protected by law – to 'develop the Galilee'. In response, the local councils of Palestinian towns in the 1948 regions announced a complete strike. Protests erupted across most towns. Our town, on the main road from Nazareth to Tiberias, became a focal point of demonstrations.

I was sitting in my usual spot in the classroom when the first unfamiliar noise pierced the air. A loud, sharp sound that made my heart pound. Fear spread like a wave through the classroom. Ms Maha moved quickly, gathering us into a chaotic circle around her and trying to soothe us with her voice. But panic has a way of spreading faster than comfort, and madness broke loose. Children ran in every direction, their cries blending with the growing commotion outside.

It felt like a scene from a cartoon fight, the ones we used to watch at 6 pm on TV. I couldn't understand what was happening, but I knew I must follow Ms Maha. My small hand clung to hers as we were swept along with the rushing crowd of screaming students and teachers, trying to escape. When we reached the schoolyard, a terrifying scene unfolded. Hundreds of

people had flooded the narrow streets surrounding the school, their faces full of panic. Screams filled the air. People ran blindly, desperate to get away from something that I could not see but was clearly dangerous.

I didn't see the bullets fly, but I heard the gunshots. Sharp cracks split the air, louder and more terrifying than anything I had ever heard. The smell of sweat and dust replaced the smell of pickles and falafel coming from the shop nearby. It clung to everything, making it hard to breathe. My legs felt weak, but I held on tightly to Ms Maha's hand. She led us off the school grounds, moving quickly through the crowd. Her strides were long; each one of hers felt like many of mine. I struggled to keep up, my little legs aching as we made our way to her house. It wasn't far, but the distance felt endless.

Somehow, my mother found me. She must have heard the noise and come searching. I was relieved when she took my hand, but even her presence couldn't erase the fear. I clung to the hem of her red dress as we hurried home. On the way we saw soldiers in olive-green uniforms, wearing helmets and combat boots that were as high as my shoulders, carrying long guns moving through the town. Their presence was frightening. They were nothing like the cartoon figures I saw on television. Reality was much scarier.

That night, fear lingered. News spread quickly: a fifteen-year-old boy from our town had been shot dead, along with four young men from nearby towns and villages, and another from the West Bank who had been visiting the 1948 region, and hundreds more had been injured. No-one slept much that night. Families gathered at the boy's home, trying to make sense of the senseless.

At home, my four younger siblings and I huddled together, too frightened to close our eyes. My mother did her best to comfort us, promising that no-one could hurt us if we pulled the covers over our heads. That was the only way I could fall asleep that night, buried beneath the blankets, hoping the world couldn't reach me. It became a habit, one that my younger sister still follows to this day.

That day that I witnessed as a six-year-old child became known as Yawm

al-Ard, *Land Day*. It marked a turning point in the relationship between us – Palestinian citizens of Israel – and the state.

Even now, fifty years later, I still feel a jolt of fear when I walk down that street near the school during my visits home. The echoes of that spring day remain vivid. It was my first memory of school, and the day my childhood innocence began to slip away. On that day, I learnt my second axiom: I was living under occupation, a second-class citizen in my homeland. A citizen who can be suppressed, stripped of their own land and shot dead if they protest.

I don't remember much about life after that incident in 1976, except that we lived simply and humbly. But there was a story that haunted me and made me scared of a fruit – cactus pear – to this day. The story was told by my grandfather after my grandmother pushed him to.

My grandfather used to get embarrassed when we asked him about his left foot, which was slightly deformed, until one day my grandmother encouraged him. 'Don't be embarrassed,' she said with an angry, sad voice. 'Tell them what the British have done to us. Tell them so they don't forget or forgive.' He was hesitant to tell the story, but finally he had the courage.

He was barely twelve when it happened. Along with other boys from the town, he was forced to cut down the thick cactus hedges that lined the side streets and to drag them onto the main road. Then came the order: walk over them barefoot. The thorns were merciless; some fine and hairlike, burrowing deep into the skin, others long and rigid, stabbing like needles and snapping off inside the flesh. They ran, feet bleeding, while British soldiers stood at the roadside, whips ready for anyone who slowed or tried to escape. By the time he reached the end, his feet were torn and raw. Infection set in, and his left foot never healed. He walked with a limp for the rest of his life. Yet he grew into a man who fought back. He never spoke about his foot other than that one time, but the limp was a quiet reminder of pain and agony, mixed with anger, endured too young.

I also remember that during the long, hot summer holidays, our family, including my grandparents and single aunties, would go camping – not the fun type – in an almond field, close by in Yamma, and pick almonds for the landlord in exchange for money. Our days started at dawn, and we would finish picking by early afternoon. After a brief rest and a meal prepared by my mother or grandmother, we would then peel the almonds until after midnight. We often spent a month or more away from home without complaint. With no running water at our family camp, our skin often felt itchy, as tiny worms from the almond peels crawled over our bodies.

I once asked my dad about the red-haired man who used to drive up in his truck to collect the bags of peeled almonds. He spoke another language with my dad and, at times, with my grandfather. My dad said he was the landowner, a Jew who came from Europe and lived in the nearby kibbutz. His name was Yuda. He was friendly with us.

‘This land belonged to Palestinians before,’ Dad continued with resentment in his voice. ‘You know Yamma was a Palestinian village before and the Palestinian landowners had their land taken by the Zionist groups before the Nakba.’

‘Ah wlaad el-sharmootah akhadoooha,’ my grandfather said, with a sad voice full of rage. *Sons of bitches took it.*

My grandfather used to wear a khaki shirt with matching trousers, resembling a military uniform, as if he were still living in the late 1930s or ’40s, ready to be called back into the ranks of the resistance at any moment.

‘How did these groups take the land?’ I asked with my ten-year-old innocence and ignorance. I was thinking, *Could they just drag land somewhere else?*

Later, I discovered that much of the land in Yamma was acquired through legal manipulation and administrative ambiguity during the late Ottoman and British Mandate periods. In many cases, land belonging to deceased Palestinian owners (whose heirs were often minors) was re-registered or sold without the families’ knowledge or consent, bypassing their rights. Even the mayor, Mukhtar Fadhel Essa, appealed directly to the Ottoman Sultan to halt these transfers, but his petitions were ignored.

Additional parcels of land were transferred under questionable documentation, and ultimately many Palestinian residents were forcibly displaced to make way for new settlements.

Yamma was not the only land that was taken. I used to overhear conversations between my dad and our neighbour, who would complain about not being able to build on the other half of their land. My father told me that this piece of land was categorised as Amwal Matrookeh, *abandoned property*, a term imposed and popularised by the Israeli government.

‘No-one abandoned their land,’ he said, his voice thick with pain, as though he were reliving the Nakba. ‘They were forced to leave. It’s the land of absentees.’

Many years later, I learnt what *the land of absentees* meant. It refers to the land and property owned by the Palestinians who were displaced or forced to flee during the Nakba and were not allowed to return. They were legally designated by the Israeli state as ‘absentees’ under the 1950 Absentees’ Property Law. The ownership of their land, properties, possessions and businesses was transferred to the state. In this way, more than a million acres were confiscated. These lands were later used to build Jewish towns, moshavim, kibbutzim and other infrastructure. Our neighbours were able to keep half of their land because their aunt stayed while their father fled to Jordan.

After each exhausting summer, my dad would buy us a small reward as a thankyou for our hard work. Most of them have faded from my memory, but one stands out: three bicycles for the seven of us to share.

Later, around the time I was twelve, we stopped going to the almond field to camp, and my dad opened a falafel shop in Haifa, about an hour’s drive from home. I think he was encouraged by one of his friends who had a successful restaurant, also in Haifa. We loved falafel. Everyone did. It is one of the most traditional Palestinian dishes. My grandmother and my mum used to make it at home from scratch. They used to say it is one of the easiest dishes to make – after mujadara (lentils, bulgur and onion) and shakshuka (tomatoes, eggs and onion). With just a few simple, inexpensive

ingredients, you can make a delicious meal, perfect for breakfast, lunch or even dinner.

All you need is dried chickpeas (soaked overnight), a handful of parsley (chopped), some garlic, onion and a few chillies. Don't forget the secret ingredient: lots of cumin. Blend everything together until smooth. That's your beautiful falafel base. Add a sprinkle of baking powder and a bit of flour to help the mixture hold its small ball shape. Season with salt and more cumin, then deep fry until golden and crisp. The smell alone is enough to gather people to the kitchen. And when you take that first bite, crunchy on the outside and soft and herby inside, you remember that there is no taste like the taste of the homeland.

It was a relief not to go to Yamma anymore and to enjoy the summer holiday at home. I know it was hard for my dad, as he had to leave very early every day to prepare to open before midday. Some days, my mum would leave with him. Other days, she'd follow by bus to help and one or two of my siblings and I would accompany her on weekends or school holidays.

I cherished the moments spent working with my dad. We washed the vegetables, sorted the chickpeas, washed the small dishes and the bench, and accompanied him to the Wadi al-Nenas Market located between the Hadar neighbourhood and downtown Haifa to get the fresh vegetables. It was more than a job; it was fun: a chance to bond with my dad, whom everyone adored. His sense of humour and his reputation as a good-hearted person who always strived to do right by others made me proud to be his daughter. The days we stayed home while he and my mum were in Haifa, we had our grandparents and many aunties, who filled our days with joy and love. We had many cousins and neighbours, and we kids played outside until sunset. We were never alone or lonely.

We learnt the importance of diligence and frugality early on. Toys, new clothes and shoes weren't handed to us on a silver platter; we learnt to earn them through hard work and saving. This upbringing instilled in me an appreciation for the value of money and the realisation that material possessions aren't acquired effortlessly.

However, regardless of these financial limitations, our childhood was rich in joy and adventure. Our days were spent playing outside until dusk without a care in the world, enjoying the opportunity to explore and create fun. We used to spend Eid in the olive fields, not caring about our new clothes and shoes. We made tabbouli, smuggled some sweets and walked for an hour to eat under the olive trees where we made swings out of old tyres. We cherished these moments of innocence and simplicity.

When I turned fourteen, life in the town took an unexpected turn. After a second mosque was built, a new, very young sheikh was appointed. He was very different from the kind, precious old sheikh we all knew and loved. This new sheikh brought new ideas and practices to the people of our town, most of which were restrictions on women. Later I learnt that he was a representative of the Islamic Movement that had started in Egypt in the 1970s and started to spread through the Middle East, including to Palestine, in the 1980s.

My dad, who was always a simple but liberated man, found himself conforming to the new norms. 'It is haram, *forbidden*, for girls to work, Majeda,' he said. 'You need to be home and help your mother around the house. You cannot come to Haifa and work in the falafel shop anymore.'

'You cannot do this to me. I love going to the falafel shop. I hate cleaning at home,' I protested in vain.

'I am closing it anyway,' he said, ending the conversation.

I am not sure why he closed the shop. He probably had some health issues. He was frequently in hospital in those days.

Despite his more pronounced, tribal kind of pride in my male brothers, I had a special relationship with my dad as his firstborn. He treated me differently: slightly more pocket money, more positive comments, and more warmth and love. He used to call me 'Doctor' at a young age, praising my intelligence and love for learning. He was as proud of me as I was of him.

However, his new-found assertiveness and transformed attitude changed me more than it did him. It was a side of him I had never known, and it marked a shift in our relationship. The years that lay ahead would strip me of my identity, shape my future and define the person I would become. The

new bearded young sheikh had a lot to do with it.

Sheikh Shafiq

The third axiom

We started to hear about this new movement that aimed to help disadvantaged people who could not, for example, complete the building of their house or build a fence around their home. They did well at the beginning helping in-need members of our community. There were many poor people at that time. The Lajneh (*committee*) – as they used to be called – started to collect donations from financially capable followers; they started a fund and used it to help the less capable and to build a library that was adjacent to the new mosque. They also built a house for the newly appointed sheikh and furnished it.

The young sheikh, barely in his twenties, had a heavy monobrow and a stern, almost angry expression that made me uneasy. There was something about his face I couldn't quite read. Maybe it was my own resistance, or maybe it was the way he carried both authority and judgement in his gaze. At least this is how I felt as a teenager. I avoided looking for too long, unsure whether it was him or what he represented that unsettled me. Perhaps I was reading too much into it. Or perhaps, deep down, I already sensed that this man would leave a mark on my life.

He wasted no time. He started preaching the Sharia Law – it was called Daawa (meaning *Islamic outreach*) – and pressuring everyone in our community to follow this way of life. He wasn't alone in his ambition; his wife actively reinforced his message with the women in the community.

When the new sheikh's wife visited our home for the first time, my mother tried to coerce me into sitting with her and listening to her educate us on the changes that needed to happen. My sister and my aunts sat to hear, but I refused. I hid in my room and dived into my books. There was no way I wanted to listen to a woman telling me what rules I must now adhere to. The gall of this woman – acting like she was a messenger from Allah, telling my mum what she could and couldn't do in her own home. She

criticised everything and demanded to know why there were photos that included people or animals hanging on the walls, why we hadn't discarded the few simple decorative sculptures in the house, and why there were some books on the shelves that had nothing to do with Islam. Above all, she couldn't fathom why we weren't wearing the jilbab – a long, loose-fitting garment, almost a coat, worn over regular clothing.

The visit left a chill in the house. My mum swiftly obeyed her instructions and removed all the pictures from the walls.

I was outraged. 'What are you doing? Why are you taking them down? She can't tell you what to do in your own house. This is wrong.'

My mother dismissed me as she continued to go through the house: 'You are fourteen, Majeda. You know nothing about right and wrong.'

She didn't stop there. After she placed all the photos in a box, she grabbed the sculptures, including the dolls we used to have in the display cupboard in the guest room. The dolls that we were not allowed to play with. They just sat there. My sister and I used to dust them every Sunday when we cleaned the house. We would spend more time dusting that particular cupboard while we shared thoughts of our favourite dolls. Mine was blonde and wore a red dress, and my sister's wore a purple dress and had brown hair.

Before I could protest, she said, 'Sculptures are haram.' *Forbidden.*

I was dumbfounded. 'Why? What is wrong with dolls?'

'On Judgement Day, you will be asked to give them a soul. And since you can't do that, it's haram to have them.'

This nonsense was engulfing our home and spreading like wildfire across our town. My mum, a stubborn lady, never listened to anyone, so I was surprised she allowed the sheikh's wife to dictate what she should do and, worse, how she should behave and live. In her outrage, she took all of the dolls to the backyard and smashed them into pieces before throwing them away. I cried for my doll in red, despite being fourteen years old. She was like an estranged daughter, and there was no hope now of her coming back.

The restrictions got worse. We were no longer allowed to watch the

Egyptian movies that were broadcast every Friday night at five o'clock following the Jordanian radio program *Salamat*, which broadcast greetings from Palestinian refugees from all over the world. We could only watch the television for the news from then on. This meant that, though it had been a cherished family tradition, TV time was one of the many happy times with my family that I lost.

My mum used to listen to Umm Kulthum, a famous Egyptian singer, when she was cleaning the house every morning. But that also stopped, because we weren't allowed to listen to music anymore – let alone sing, which my mum loved doing when she was in the kitchen. We were only allowed to listen to the Quran. Sometimes she'd forget and start singing while cooking or cleaning the dishes, but then she would stop when she remembered and start asking God to forgive her.

Books were also censored, and so the attic became my go-to place to read. For someone who only completed Year 8, my dad had a lot of books, but as soon as they were forbidden, he moved them to the attic. I was glad he at least never threw them out. In the attic there were also some old vinyl records that had lived there well before the books. I used to look at them and wonder whether my dad had had to give up that side of himself to provide for us. After all, he was the sole provider for the seven of us and my mum. The pretext of going up to clean the attic was the only way I felt I could access my old life. The low ceiling made it impossible to stand up, so no-one else bothered to spend time there. I was fortunate to have a haven all to myself.

We were no longer allowed to leave our homes after sunset, and girls were no longer allowed to play outside in the street with the neighbours and community boys who often gathered there after school. When we finished school, we needed to head straight home. To ensure we didn't detour anywhere else, some of the teachers (the religious ones who followed the sheikh – we used to call them *fassadeen*, *snitches*) informed our parents when we left school and what time to expect us home. It felt like we were under surveillance.

The extreme measures extended to the prohibition of celebrating

birthdays, an activity that once brought joy to our home. My mum would not make her delicious, simple orange cake for our birthdays – which were spread, luckily, over different months. She now would make it a couple of days after a birthday passed. The strangeness of these restrictions intensified our discomfort as siblings at home, especially us girls. And I couldn't help but wonder: had the sinister influence of our community twisted my parents into unrecognisable people? I felt that the essence of who I was and what my family once stood for was slipping away in the face of an oppressive transformation.

The Movement was gaining strength and popularity among the 1948ers. In addition to the festivals they held, they also hosted followers of the Movement from all over the country. I remember when my mum and aunties, for example, used to cook for tens of men, if not a hundred, whom my dad opened his home to. He was not the only one; the whole community acted like this.

With the Movement's strength and popularity came more restriction. The forbidden list was growing. Fridays' enjoyments – movies, singing, laughter, picnics at Tiberias Beach – were all gone. Now Fridays focused on the formal routine of my parents' mosque visits for Friday prayer and the sheikh's khutbah, the sermon delivered before the prayer. Strangely, they returned with not a sense of peace but of irritation. It seemed absurd for individuals who had supposedly spent hours in prayer.

Attendance was mandatory for the family, more for the boys than for the girls. My brothers were compelled to attend Friday prayers, a commitment they resented. Additionally, every summer, my brothers were forced to attend camping trips, exclusively for boys, designed to teach them more about religion. Though my brothers were young, they weren't naive enough to unquestioningly accept what was imposed on them – they detested it. But compliance was their only choice in the environment we found ourselves in.

'The sheikh seems fixated on suppressing women and denying us education,' I moaned. 'He preaches about covering ourselves completely, silencing our voices and expecting us to follow blindly. How can someone who claims to fear God sow such conflict in our once peaceful homes? I

refuse to listen to such a man.'

My dad's response was stern, his hand instinctively tugging at the beard he had grown only recently to show he was one of them. 'I won't entertain this debate again. If you choose not to join us, then stay home. But I won't tolerate my fifteen-year-old daughter talking ill of such a devoted sheikh.' Then he sent me to my room, which I shared with my two sisters.

His beard aged him. The longer it grew, the greater the religious devotion it symbolised. Still, I dared to voice that observation.

'Dad, please,' I said, trying to reason with him. 'Can't you see something's wrong? You used to admire Gamal Abdel Nasser, just like everyone else. How can you suddenly turn against him, just because the sheikh says so?'

I had read books about Nasser, in the attic. He wasn't just another leader; he was the hope for the Arab world. As the leader of Egypt's nationalist movement and the country's second president, his charisma and vision captivated millions. My father used to idolise him, just like everyone else did.

When Nasser took personal responsibility for Egypt's defeat in the Six-Day War in 1967, he did something unprecedented: he resigned from the presidency. The nation was in shock, and protests erupted across Egypt. Eventually, Nasser relented and resumed his presidency until his untimely death in 1970. His passing was mourned far and wide. Every town in Palestine held a funeral for him – a testament to the love and admiration he commanded, which was similar to the global appreciation for Nelson Mandela. His photograph adorned the walls of countless homes, including ours.

However, those aligned with the rising Islamic Movement harboured animosity towards Nasser. His strained relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt became a point of contention. Anyone displaying his photo was instructed to take it down. The Movement's leaders tarnished Nasser's reputation, labelling him a disbeliever who persecuted and imprisoned members of the Brotherhood. The influence of the Movement was immense. People in Palestine came to believe that Nasser had betrayed

Islam. Sadly, his once sterling reputation was destroyed, and his legacy was distorted by those with their own agendas.

My dad opened his mouth to reply, face angry, but quickly shut it. I watched as he turned and walked off, probably realising he would be late for prayer if he continued arguing with me. I wondered whether, on some level, he believed I was right.

Yet, he took the photo down. It irritated me how deeply he was immersing himself in the changing currents around us. Watching my dad's transformation from an open-minded person to someone easily influenced by others was truly disheartening.

At a larger scale, I witnessed firsthand the profound shift the Movement created in the Palestinian community. It wasn't just a religious movement; it became a social and cultural force. For many, especially in towns and villages long neglected by the state, the Movement filled critical gaps in infrastructure – including social and welfare. It fixed streets, opened kindergartens and childcare centres, ran after-school programs, and offered health services like clinics and ambulances. Followers also created youth activities, such as festivals and school holiday camps. Suddenly, mosques weren't just places of worship; they had become community hubs. I could see it was offering a sense of belonging in the void created by the old passing away, and the young were distracted by deliberate policies. And through its service in the community, the Movement gained popularity and, consequently, influence – not by confrontation but methodically and quietly.

At the time, and continuing into later years, the Islamic Movement was deeply committed to strengthening and preserving cohesion between Muslim and Christian Palestinians in the 1948 region, despite the Israeli government's strategic, systematic attempts to sow division. The Movement also played a critical role in protecting Al-Aqsa Mosque from ongoing threats, including government plans to excavate beneath its foundations in search of the site where they believed the Ark of the Covenant once stood. In addition, they organised hundreds of buses each week to transport worshippers, many of whom could not afford the journey to Jerusalem or faced logistical obstacles, enabling them to pray at Al-Aqsa. This

continuous presence helped bolster protection for the mosque as a symbol of resilience and unity.

Yet women, particularly teenagers, paid a heavy price. Our everyday behaviours were questioned, and our freedom was narrowing. I felt suffocated. I was a girl growing into myself while the space around me was shrinking.

As soon as my parents left for the mosque, I would seek refuge in the attic with my books, immersing myself in reading and losing track of time. The sound of my family pulling up outside the house alerted me to their return. My heart raced, and whichever book I clutched stuck to my fingers, damp with sweat. I braced my mind and heart for another fight, as was the usual routine following the Friday prayer. They returned home with a new rule each time, influenced by the preachings at the mosque.

‘Majeda, I need you to come here now.’ My father’s rare summons sounded serious.

When I climbed down the ladder, I dusted myself off, saying that I was up there cleaning the attic, though I had spent the whole time reading.

I didn’t notice my mum emerge from the kitchen until she asserted, simply, ‘Liar.’

Her voice cut through, sharp and humiliating. I froze. The word echoed in my chest louder than it did in the air. She didn’t look at me. Or maybe she did, but it wasn’t the kind of look a mother gives her child. It was the kind of look someone gives a problem. There was something about the finality in her tone that told me it wouldn’t matter if I argued against her words. It never had.

I knew I was lying at that moment but, even if I were not, she wouldn’t have been on my side. She never was. Not when I was silently begging for her love. Not when I told the truth. Instead, she turned back to the kitchen, back to the stove, as if the word had been just another step in her recipe.

My sister, Rawan, was already sitting on the couch. My other siblings were excused from the room.

‘Mum and Dad are in one of their moods,’ my brother Tareq whispered as he passed me.

‘Sit down next to your sister,’ my mum said, leaving the kitchen to sit rigidly next to my dad. It was evident that something serious had transpired at the mosque.

‘Today we were reminded how crucial it is for girls to dress like true Muslims,’ she said, her voice sharp and her teeth clenched.

The blue scarf

Fundamental demand

In mathematics, the fundamental demand establishes the baseline assumptions that govern all outcomes in the system. So too did the scarf that I had to wear.

I hated my hair and the pain that it brought me. It was a constant source of contention. Even when I was a child, my mother’s relentless efforts to tame its wild curls, her hands firm as they forced my locks into painful ponytails, haunted my memories.

‘Leave her alone, I will do her hair,’ my grandmother used to say whenever my mum held me between her strong legs so I could not escape while she combed my knotted hair. It was a mission performed daily, despite my screams and my sister Rawan’s weeping. She tried to tie it into one or two ponytails so it looked straighter. My mother hated our curly hair with passion.

Before I had my first haircut at the age of eleven, she subjected me and my sister to hours of combing and styling, her methods bordering on torture in their intensity. The haircut was disastrous and caused my hair to be frizzier. Kids in my school called me ‘Einstein’, not for my intelligence, though I was smart, but because my wild hair looked just like his in those famous photos. It continued until my mother surrendered and purchased a hair straightener. But the damage had been done. I was called Einstein for many years to come. Yet I was not ready to cover it. Their demand was not just about our hair. It was the control.

‘From now on, you need to cover your hair when you leave the house,’

my father affirmed.

‘I will *not*!’ I said before I got up and left the room. There was no door to slam.

I was their firstborn. My parents did not really know how to deal with me. I was not a bad child, but I was not an obedient one. I was the one who questioned everything – even the things we were not allowed to.

My upbringing, as for many of my generation, was deeply influenced by the dynamics of our Palestinian community and the values held by my parents and grandparents. They prioritised community cohesion over individual needs, even in times of personal adversity. I remember struggling to study for my end-of-year exams while the town echoed with loud microphones whenever someone celebrated their son’s wedding or engagement, celebrations that lasted for days (though these celebrations became less frequent as the Movement grew stronger). Yet no-one ever spoke up to moderate the noise for the many students trying to focus. We all learnt the hard way that community cohesion outweighed everything else. Navigating the tensions between tradition and personal autonomy, I found myself challenging that norm.

‘Majeda! Where are you? It’s time to go.’ I heard my dad grab his keys to start his blue Ford Cortina and warm up the engine.

I felt a wave of gratitude knowing I didn’t have to endure the five-kilometre walk to high school. There was no local or school bus in the town. Carrying my heavy books on that walk was daunting. My dad’s willingness to drive me every day felt like a small anchor, allowing me to momentarily trick myself into thinking things were like they used to be. However, he stopped turning on the cassette player in the car: no more Abdel-Haleem, no more Umm Kulthum to soften the rides. Even our small talk vanished, replaced by either a fight or silence.

I had been awake since dawn, eager to delve into Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet* to kickstart my day before heading to school. My academic excellence was a source of pride for my parents, who used to speak of me with admiration and share positive stories about their overachieving daughter. However, as part of their transformation, I sensed a change in the

way my parents perceived my achievements. Their pride, once obvious, now seemed mixed with dissatisfaction, and their conversations suggested they were not happy with me. *Yes, she gets high scores, but she's not following things in the way we want her to follow*, was now my mum's answer whenever she was asked about how I was doing at school.

'Majeda! Come on,' Rawan urged me to put down my book. 'I don't know why you like to read instead of getting ready to go.'

'I'm coming,' I shouted, angry but keen to go to school as soon as I could.

I looked for my bag, and I dreaded that it might be in the living room, where my mum was sitting. I did not want her to see me before I left for school. I was dreading a resumption of the scarf conversation.

I loved my sister despite how different we were. She was the obedient one, rarely stirring up trouble for herself. Not that our mother loved her more.

My mum, despite always being good with numbers, only completed Year 6. She married my dad at sixteen; he was twenty-four. Life hadn't been easy for her, but she didn't make it any easier on herself and that strained our relationship.

Expressing her emotions or showing vulnerability wasn't her strength, and any attempt to challenge her resulted in harsh consequences. She did not like seeing me reading or studying. There were times when I would be completely immersed in my books, only to be forced to set them aside for more chores.

Housework was strictly the girls' responsibility; we cleaned daily, we made dough, and baked bread once a week. I was never good at making dough. The khubz kmaj, Palestinian bread, in my hands ended up in any shape but round, which made my mum angrier every time. She accused me of doing it on purpose. She was probably right. I think I deliberately did it poorly – something that I have somehow kept up until this day. We also had to wash the sheets and quilts, which meant emptying the wool stuffing, washing it, spreading it under the sun for an entire day, then reassembling the quilt and sewing it shut on all four sides, long before easy-to-button

quilt covers were available to us.

I'll never forget having to pause my studies, even during exam season, to help plant, harvest or tend to the vegetables my mother grew in the backyard. We were not self-sufficient, but we produced some potatoes, onions, garlic, beans, wheat and other essentials. I wouldn't have minded the work if it hadn't pulled me away from my books – as if studying were something to be punished for.

As young parents, they struggled raising a teenager who immersed herself in the works of Kahlil Gibran and Friedrich Nietzsche and excelled in subjects like mathematics and science. In my mother's defence, she was just a teenager when she had me. In my own defence, I often felt like I was born in the wrong place and time, and mostly to the wrong parents. I envied my friend Sana for her mother; she was fun and welcoming whenever we stopped by after school. She made us lots of snacks, including delicious hummus, labneh, pickles and olives. And I envied my friend Jana for her parents, too. Jana's mother was our primary school teacher, and her father was a school principal. They were educated, open-minded: everything I wished my own parents could be.

Don't get me wrong – I loved my parents, especially my father, but these days he seemed a stranger to me. When I was a younger child, he had been the kindest, most caring father. As a teenager I needed him to be more accommodating and tolerant.

To his credit, as a survivor of the Nakba, he did very well in life: providing for a family of seven children, building a house for the family and later for his four sons (no houses for daughters), establishing a business, and being financially comfortable after many years of inherited poverty. He was always kind, generous with the last shekel he had in his pocket and also, just like his mother, he never spoke ill of anyone. But sometimes, when no-one was watching, he would sit in the kitchen, sipping his coffee, staring out the window into nothing, and mutter, 'Wlaad el-sharmootah.' *Sons of bitches*. I didn't know who he meant, not until much later.

I resisted conforming to their rigid beliefs, and advocated for a more

progressive interpretation of Islam. Despite my young age, I reminded my parents that proper devotion to Islam meant embodying principles of humanity and peace rather than fixating on superficial rituals. Our family dinners grew heated as I tried to explain and emphasise the importance of education and personal growth, urging them to focus on my intellectual development rather than dictating my appearance and behaviour.

I was also a bookworm. I was reading and analysing the Quran, synthesising texts, books and whatever was made with ink. I feel that while my parents raised my body; it was books that raised my soul and shaped my mind. Books opened windows in the walls that seemed to be closing in on me. Books gave me a voice when I was expected to only listen. They raised me to question the norms, to think, to feel, to dream beyond the limits set around me.

In my disagreement with them, I highlighted the rich history of Islamic civilisation, emphasising the Golden Years of Islam, characterised by advancements in science, mathematics, medicine and astronomy. I said that the Quran itself started with the word ‘Read’. It urged Muslims to seek knowledge and learning. I argued that the essence of Islam lay not in outward appearances, such as wearing a jilbab or growing a beard, but in one’s contributions to society and personal character. All this fell on deaf ears. It was like they were hypnotised.

‘Why aren’t you wearing your headscarf?’ my mum snapped as I walked from my room, still looking for my bag.

I didn’t recognise the person she had become. Now she would dress from head to toe, including an unattractive jilbab – that didn’t seem necessary – covering her already-long clothes. There was nothing wrong with her previous attire.

I remembered how she dressed when I was younger: respectfully, with a scarf covering half her hair, wearing three-quarter-sleeve blouses and below-knee-length skirts. Not like what she wore in her teenage years. In old photos, she appeared vastly different, wearing just above-the-knee skirts and sleeveless tops.

When I asked her once about how she used to dress, she said, ‘We didn’t

know about religion then. It was the sixties!’

‘Excuse me! Prophet Muhammad was sent over fourteen hundred years ago. How did you not know?’ I had responded, frustrated.

‘Because nobody told us that it is haram to dress that way,’ she snapped, her temper flaming, leaving me with more questions than answers. Every attempt to seek clarity seemed to lead to more confusing responses. No-one wins an argument with my mum.

Now, my mum waited for me to speak.

I braced myself and said, ‘I’ve got the ugly scarf in my bag. I will wear it in the car.’

I grabbed my bag and left.

My mother seemed generally pleased that, for once, I was complying with their expectations – in this case by wearing the scarf and covering most of my hair. However, my compliance only intensified my own anger.

Until this point, my family hadn’t been particularly religious. Our practices were limited to fasting the month of Ramadan, celebrating Eid twice a year, paying zakat and being good people. Although fasting during Ramadan was challenging, I could accept it. However, the logic behind abstaining from water for twelve hours or more, especially during scorching summers, confounded me.

My refusal of practices that made no sense to me bothered my parents quite a lot, and I wouldn’t comply until compelled. My dilemma lay in the fact that my choices were gradually diminishing. This clash between my questioning nature and the increasing restrictions imposed by my changing environment signified, to me, the compromising of my identity.

‘If you don’t wear it and cover your hair, then you are not allowed to go to school,’ I heard her saying before I slammed the door behind me and walked down the stairs. ‘Sooner or later, you will wear the jilbab,’ she continued, popping her head out of the window to look down the stairs.

My dad was waiting in his car. Luckily, he did not hear the door slamming. Not in the mood to argue with him, I retrieved the dark, navy-blue scarf from my bag. I draped it over my head, covering most of my short dark curls, and secured it at the back of my neck. I did not look like

my fifteen-year-old self, but I couldn't be bothered at this point. My priority was getting to school.

When my dad dropped me and Rawan at school, he waited in the carpark to ensure I went to class wearing it. I did not dare to take off the ugly thing while he watched. My friends were gathered in the hallway near our classroom. They gasped in disbelief when they saw me. My head looked different. My face looked like an old woman's, not a teenager's. The scarf looked ugly on me mainly because I did not wear it with grace.

I entered the classroom and saw the big blackboard, soon to be covered with the lessons of the day. The first period was mathematics with Mr Walid. I couldn't wait to dive into the equations he'd assigned us for homework. I enjoyed the challenge of balancing the calculations and seeing how all the variables ultimately fell into place. Our allocated seats were neatly arranged into three rows. We sat in pairs. I sat next to Mona for two years during high school.

Seated at my desk and preparing for the day to begin, I couldn't believe how quickly the end of Year 10 was approaching. Despite the pain of being forced to do something I loathed, I did not let the scarf issue distract me, I was determined to stay focused and finish at the top of the class as usual.

As I was arranging my books on the desk, my friend Mona walked in. My mouth dropped open. Her face was covered in bruises, and she had two black eyes. That wasn't all that took me by surprise. It was her attire that shocked me the most. Not only was she wearing her headscarf, now tied at the front to hide her neck, but she was also dressed from head to toe in a dark grey jilbab that completely concealed her not particularly tall, slightly curvy body.

After she had sat down and organised her books and stationery, Mona turned to me. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'It's not as bad as it looks.'

Mona didn't seem to care that everyone in the class was staring at her when she walked in. She was smiling bravely, as if nothing had happened to her.

'Did your dad do this to you?' I asked, my heart aching for her.

'At least I put up a good fight, which probably annoyed him more,' she

said with a cynical giggle.

Her dad, once known as a symbol of liberalism in our town, had transformed into an intense follower of the Movement. The change was disorienting and unsettling.

The school bell rang as Mr Walid entered the classroom, but I was finding it hard to focus. The encounter with Mona shook me to my core. Mr Walid looked at her and said nothing. The Movement was too strong, and its influence had reached the school. Most of our teachers watched in silence. Some were followers of the Movement. Others, like Mr Walid, did not dare to speak up.

I couldn't shake the fear gnawing at me. I didn't want to become another casualty of this warped ideology. But seeing Mona bearing the scars of her defiance made the fear too real. Was I going to be next? Would my body itch under this grey fabric as hers probably did? That was all I was thinking about.

The jilbab

Fundamental control

In mathematics, the fundamental control refers to the mechanism or rule that regulates how a system behaves. The control acted as an overriding rule in my world; it determined responses and influenced outcomes. Every action, every choice, was constrained by it, leaving little room for deviation. Its effect was so fundamental that it robbed me of my identity.

The year after my friend Mona was forced to wear the jilbab it was my turn. I was three months into Year 11.

My dad, followed by my mum, came to the bedroom that I shared with Rawan. The door was open as usual. We rarely closed doors in our home. I was reading while my sister folded some clothes and put them away in the drawers.

The tension in the room thickened, and my father said, 'Tomorrow, your

mum and I are taking you to choose a jilbab. You'll wear it every time you leave the house. Enough is enough. This is Allah's way – no more living in sin and bringing shame to the family.'

Rawan and I exchanged a glance, a silent plea passing between us. I couldn't figure out if she was urging me to speak up or begging me to stay silent.

My dad's words left me shocked. Feeling desperate, I had to challenge the order that threatened to suffocate my body.

Wearing a headscarf was as far as I was willing to go. But now, they wanted us to wear the jilbab. I couldn't stomach the thought. It went against the very essence of Islam. I had read the Quran a few times and had collected my facts. My anger surged, a fiery knot tightening in my chest. Rising to my feet, I fought to keep my voice steady.

'I will not wear it. It's haram to force us,' I declared, my fists clenching at my sides. 'No! I will not go shopping with you tomorrow.' Then, turning to a more logical and rational argument, I said, 'Jilbab is not mentioned in the Quran as a new dress code. It was already in use before Islam, and it was instituted for the simple purpose of being identified and protected.' Panic coursed through me as I rejected their demands, my entire body trembling with defiance.

My dad paused, then said, 'I want to protect you,' trying to align himself with my argument, but failing to clarify from whom he was protecting me.

'But even the word *hijab* is mentioned with a completely different meaning,' I continued.

I had done my homework. I knew that the one time it was mentioned in relation to women, it referred to a kind of divider, like a curtain. Men were required to speak from behind it when they visited Prophet Muhammad's home to consult with him. God instructed them not to simply walk in but to address his wives and daughters from behind a hijab, a divider, to give them privacy.

He knew my words were accurate, and he could not equal my argument. Instead, he burst out in anger: 'You are coming tomorrow and that's it. No more arguments.'

‘No! It’s ugly. I hate it.’ My voice trembled with emotion. I was ready to challenge it all – all the axioms.

‘How dare you raise your voice at me?’ My dad’s voice struck like a whip.

I cringed, remembering Mona’s bruises, her black eyes.

‘You will come tomorrow, even if I have to drag you by the hair. I will not tolerate this nonsense from you any longer,’ he said, his tone unforgiving and harsh.

My dad had never resorted to violence with us before, so his outburst was frightening. I knew he was facing immense pressure from the community, their expectations bearing down on him like a suffocating blanket. He and my mum had said many times already, ‘Everyone is expecting us to be able to control our daughters.’

I looked desperately at my mum, hoping she would intervene, but she remained silent. Cold. Her silence was louder than any words.

When she finally spoke, her voice was cold and judgemental. ‘You’ve disrespected your father, our family and me,’ she said. ‘I will not have my daughters be the talk of the town any longer. All girls now wear it except for you two.’

With those words, she walked away, my dad following in her footsteps.

Rawan began to cry, her tears a mirror of how I felt – only I did not show it. I pulled her close and urged her to stay strong.

‘We must fight this. They can’t force us to wear it,’ I whispered, my voice trembling with doubt.

But I knew Rawan wouldn’t defy our parents. She was the obedient daughter. That left me to wage this battle alone against the oppressive norms that threatened to suffocate us.

The following day, as first light filtered through the curtains, casting soft shadows across the room, I prayed silently – for a couple of hours, which felt like days – that my parents had softened, their hearts perhaps swayed by my sister’s tears. But my mother’s curt command shattered the still

morning.

‘Be ready in fifteen minutes,’ she declared. Her tone had not changed overnight. ‘We’re leaving then.’

Desperation heaved within me as I confronted the inevitable. ‘This isn’t fair,’ I said. ‘I will not go. Please, Mum, I’ll wear the headscarf, but don’t make me wear the ugly jilbab. You know I hate the scarf more than my hair, but I promise to wear it every day.’

I pleaded and begged, but my parents remained set in their decision, their ears deaf to my reasoning.

‘I thought God was kind and merciful,’ I continued, voice rising. ‘When did he become superficial, waiting for girls to show their hair or arms to torture them? The whole idea is stupid.’

‘Majeda, enough!’ yelled my dad. ‘We are going. I don’t want to hear anything more from you. You will do as we say.’

‘No, I won’t!’ I had begun to shout, disregarding the consequences. ‘It’s my life; this is my body. I will not do something that isn’t my choice. You do not have the right to tell me what to do or how to dress!’ My words rang out.

My father’s face went red, his forehead creased and his lips tightened. His nostrils flared. With only this warning, he removed his belt in a fraction of a second, held it by the buckle and raised it at me. I stood rooted to the spot, stunned into silence, my body tense with disbelief as I instinctively turned to shield my sister, who shook with fear behind me, tears streaming down her cheeks. My back felt like it was on fire when the belt landed on it. I felt the reverberation through every fibre of my being.

Never before had I felt the sting of my father’s fury against my skin. The sudden violence confused me. I had always relied on his kindness and love; I never imagined he was capable of this. It was an unbearable moment to see the father I knew, the man who had always been a pillar of patience, perish. I stood there, struggling with the pain and confusion.

Conflicting emotions played across my father’s face. I caught a glimmer of tears welling in his eyes, a silent acknowledgement of the gravity of his deeds. ‘I will wait for you all in the car,’ he muttered, before turning away

with his shoulders slumped. Beside him, my mother stood silently, her features drawn and solemn, then followed him out wordlessly.

Like two defeated soldiers, my sister and I were too ashamed to make eye contact as we silently prepared to leave. The air seemed thick with unspoken questions and unfulfilled answers. I thought I heard Mona's voice from a year ago. *At least I put up a good fight*, she had said.

As we were driven to the store, tears streamed down my face. I was praying that we would have an accident on the way and I would die. When we reached the store, I couldn't bring myself to step out of the car. In a final attempt to resist, I pleaded and cried, but it was all for nothing.

'If you don't get out of the car, you will not be allowed to go to school anymore. Your choice,' said my dad.

What kind of choice were they giving me? The ultimatum hit me like a physical blow. I could not bear the idea of not going to school.

Dragging my heavy legs, I complied, exiting the car and entering the store with my mum and sister while my dad stayed behind in the car.

'Stop crying and try this on to see if it fits,' my mum commanded, handing me a long, loose, dark grey jilbab with buttons all the way down the front, designed to conceal my body. It felt like a shroud of shame, as if my womanhood was something to be hidden away. She also passed me a matching headscarf, adding more dreary grey to my misery.

'I don't need to try it on. I will take this one.' I didn't care how the ugly jilbab looked on me. In my mind, it would always look ugly – no matter what.

My sister, in contrast, was more compliant and much easier to manage. She was willing to follow my mother's instructions without protest. Seeing her silent acceptance made me feel more isolated. Maybe I no longer had the right to speak on her behalf.

'I can't believe you're wasting your money on this rubbish,' I muttered bitterly when my mother went to pay. I couldn't let it go, the resentment boiling within me, but my mother ignored my protest.

'No need to pay. The first one is on us,' the store owner said proudly. 'I see this is your first. Mashallah!'

Everywhere we went, someone tried to make us feel like this was the only right thing to do. They all sounded the same: brainwashed.

‘You’ll get used to it by the time the school term starts,’ my mother insisted, handing the bag to me as we walked back to the car. The bag felt as though it was dragging me, rather than the other way around.

During the school holidays, I remained holed up at home, unwilling to venture outside. Home became my asylum, the one place where I didn’t have to submit to the confines of the jilbab. I searched desperately for any excuse to avoid wearing it, and the day before school was due to start again, I concocted a scheme. I faked a fall, pretending to injure myself and lapse into unconsciousness. I had hoped that my mother would take pity on me and spare me from the dreaded garment. However, our family doctor, who came to the house to assess my condition, found nothing physically wrong with me.

Medically cleared to go to school, I faced a dilemma. I yearned to return to my studies, yet the thought of wearing the jilbab filled me with dread. It was a tug of war between my desire to go to school and my refusal to obey, even though it seemed like every other Muslim girl wore it without complaint. I just could not get myself to conform.

‘I can’t move, can’t breathe,’ I said to myself, trapped beneath the heavy fabric on the morning I would return to school.

Tears streamed down my cheeks, blurring my vision under my glasses. I felt disconnected from myself, like a stranger inhabiting my own body. I refused to face my reflection in the mirror, fearing I wouldn’t recognise the person staring back at me.

‘Are you happy now, God?’ I said, looking at the ceiling that I had been staring at most of the night.

That day, 6 January 1986, I declared myself dead. It was a survival mechanism, acknowledging the loss while vowing to fight for what remained of me. We all lose parts of ourselves along the way, but to lose one’s identity is brutal beyond measure. Determined to reclaim what was

mine, I buried these parts deep within me, promising to survive the hurricane and to stand firm during the chaos of surviving.

‘It’s already seven-thirty,’ my mum said, rushing us to the car where my dad was waiting. I sat in the back seat next to my sister, refusing to sit in the front seat, which was always reserved for me when our mother was not in the car. As my dad drove us to school, the silent tension in the car was interrupted by my weeping, sobs that I could not control.

‘Stop crying,’ he demanded, but the tears kept flowing.

I didn’t look to see if my sister was also crying.

‘If you don’t want to wear it, that’s fine,’ he said. ‘But then you can’t go to school. I will turn around and drive you back home now.’

What he said cut through my tears like a blade, and I stopped crying.

The fifteen-minute drive felt like forever. When we finally arrived at the school, I hesitated before stepping out of the car. When I did, the world seemed to shrink.

Taking a deep breath, I mustered all the strength I had left and entered the school building. The narrow corridor leading to my classroom was a temporary respite from the world outside. As the seconds crawled by, I steelled myself for what lay ahead.

With trembling hands and a heavy heart, I eventually opened the door of my classroom, the weight of my dead soul dragging behind me like a leaden anchor. The fear of being late for the English quiz propelled me, urged me forward.

When I swung open the door, a hush fell over the room. All eyes were on me, including the teacher’s, Ms Saaba. It was clear they were trying to figure out who I was. Given that I was all covered up, recognition seemed to elude them.

I hurried in, finding everyone already settled and prepared for the quiz. To reach my seat across from the door, I had to walk past all my classmates, feeling their eyes stinging my back just as much as my dad’s belt had.

I sat down beside my Christian classmate and friend, Jana. Everyone lowered their shocked gazes, which were suddenly filled with sympathy as the pieces came together in their minds.

I scored full marks in that English quiz. My friends, being sad for me and confused by what had happened, did not.

On that day, I felt I was an orphan. I felt the axioms forming a rock in my throat, another around my heart.

Before I slept that night, I opened my journal and wrote down my feelings. It was my first poem.

My beloved died today

*My beloved died, he died before he could say goodbye.
He forgot to farewell my tears, to kiss my eyelids.
He died before granting me the final farewell.
He forgot to see me.*

*My beloved died, yes, he died.
He died while chasing ghosts and the dust of the tribe.
He died standing, without a shroud, without prayer.*

*My beloved died, and what could bring him back to me?
Do the dead ever return?
He died without a warning, at the most beautiful hour.
He did not ask permission for my leaving,
nor the permission of my days, nor my blossoms.*

*He left sorrow to grow in my heart,
and bitterness settled in my chest,
a thousand-year-old bitterness.
A bitterness that floods me and rules over my seasons,
until I no longer know spring from autumn,*

nor winter from summer.

And my life continues, while my history remains silent.

My beloved died, and I have no hope of his rising.

He dies in front of me every day,

until he became a body without a heart, a being without a soul.

My beloved died, until he became like smoke,

evaporating with every breath,

leaving behind only a scent

that once was there.

اليوم مات حبيبي

مات حبيبي، مات قبل أن يودّعني.

نسي أن يودّع دموعي، ويقبّل جفوني.

مات قبل أن يمنحني الوداع الأخير.

نسي أن يراني.

مات حبيبي، أجل، مات.

مات وهو يركض خلف الأشباح و غبار القبيلة.

مات واقفاً، بلا كفّن، بلا صلاة.

مات حبيبي، وأي شيء يعيده إليّ؟

وهل يعود الموتى؟

مات بلا ميعاد، في أجمل وقت.

لم يستأذن ذهابي،

لم يستأذن أيّامي ولا أز هاري.

ترك الحزن يكبر في قلبي،
وتسكن صدري مرارة،
مرارة عمرها ألف عام،
مرارة تغمرني وتسيطر على فصول حياتي،
حتى لم أعد أعرف ربيعًا من خريف،
ولا شتاءً من صيف.

ويظل عمري قائمًا، وتاريخي صامتًا.
مات حبيبي، ولا أمل لي من قيامه.
يموت أمامي كل يوم،
حتى أصبح جسدًا بلا قلب، وجسمًا بلا روح.

مات حبيبي، حتى غدا كالدخان،
يتبخّر في كل نفس،
ولا يترك وراءه إلا رائحة
كانت يومًا هناك.

2

Equation

My only way to challenge the axioms – or, more honestly, to run away from them – was to escape into a new field with its own set of rules and operations. At seventeen, marriage appeared to be a neat solution to my problem. If education was contingent on freedom and freedom was contingent on marriage, then marriage seemed to be the variable that would balance my life equation and solve it for happiness. However, when I stepped into it, I learnt that not all equations can be solved – especially when they simplify to false statements or unravel into contradictions.

‘Hello, Majeda.’ My Aunt Reem’s voice greeted me as I entered the house after school.

Due to the strict zoning and building codes, as well as the severe restrictions on land development in Palestinian communities within Israel, many families are forced to build their homes on top of their parents’ houses, often in the form of additional floors or rooftop extensions. The limited availability of land and the refusal of municipalities to allocate space for expansion leave families with little option but to create multi-generational homes, stacking their living spaces vertically in order to accommodate their growing families. This overcrowded, sometimes informal construction, reflects the ongoing struggle of Palestinian citizens to secure basic housing while contending with systemic obstacles that prevent them from developing their land legally or expanding their homes to meet their needs.

As my parents’ home was built on top of my grandparents’ house, we all used the same entrance – only we’d either go up the stairs to my parents’ living space or continue through the ground floor to my grandparents’. This design provided structure for the extended family but, on the other hand, restricted privacy. Still, my aunt’s presence always brought a sense of warmth and comfort. I adored her.

My Aunt Reem was more than just family; she was a source of joy and laughter in my life. I remembered her as a vibrant, carefree woman, with long, straight black hair that I envied. But I hadn’t seen that version of Aunt Reem since she got married, at eighteen, when I was just ten. It was a stark

contrast to the person she was now. Though I was young when she married, I noticed and remembered the shift in her appearance.

When the Islamic Movement began, Aunt Reem, and many other women in the community, seemed to embrace the changes wholeheartedly. Whether it was by choice or expectation or just to fit in, I couldn't say for sure. Aunt Reem's husband, according to her, treated her with kindness and respect. But I couldn't shake the feeling that she was a 'yes' woman, agreeing to his wishes without question. She transformed into a devout and conservative woman, wearing the jilbab, which aged her beyond her years. Despite our close bond, we had very different personalities.

'Hi, Aunty. I'll be back. I want to get this ugly thing off my body,' I responded.

I did not hide my dislike of it. I was exhausted. I made my way upstairs to my bedroom, eager to shed this heavy cloak that had consumed me all day. Going up the stairs, I started stripping off the layers, grateful to be free from its confines for the rest of the day.

To my surprise, when I reached the top of the stairs, I turned to find Aunt Reem following me, concern across her face.

'Your parents tell me that you have been defiant and not accepting wearing the jilbab. Why are you so stubborn about it?' she asked gently, in a tone of genuine curiosity.

'I'm angry that we no longer have the right to choose how we want to live, that I must wear something I hate. It's not like we were walking around in bikinis, singlets or shorts – we still dressed conservatively,' I explained, walking to the room I shared with my sister. 'It makes no sense. I'm not against our religion; I do my prayers and fast during Ramadan like everyone else. But I'm upset that my parents threatened to not send me to school if I don't wear the jilbab.' I sank onto my bed.

Aunt Reem joined me on the edge of the bed, her presence offering much-needed support. 'My dear,' she said. 'It's not all bad, and it will get better, I promise you.' She was trying to reassure me, her voice soft with empathy.

'How will it get better? Have you looked around and seen how bare our

home is now? My parents aren't who they used to be; they've changed, and they expect that I do the same. I can't live like this.'

I struggled to hold back tears as she placed her hand on mine.

'Aunty, can you be honest and tell me that you are truly happy to be dressed and covered like this?' I asked, searching for insight.

'Yes, I am,' she replied, meeting my gaze with conviction. 'I feel honour in how we dress and that the only person who can see my body is my husband.'

My heart sank. My beloved aunt had succumbed to the changes, finding peace in the very thing that suffocated me. Unable to bear the disappointment, I changed the subject. 'What is it like being married?'

'My husband is a good man and comes from a good family who treats me well,' she replied.

She hesitated, rose from the bed and quietly closed the door, making sure we had privacy.

'My husband has a younger brother who's actually three years older than you,' she whispered, as if afraid someone might overhear. 'He seems like a decent guy. He's interested in getting to know you better. Maybe marriage could be an option for you. He's not particularly religious, so I believe you could build a life together. What do you think?'

'I'm only sixteen, too young for marriage. Plus, my parents wouldn't allow me to meet him. You know we're not supposed to talk to boys.'

I was being pragmatic. If my dad got upset over a harmless conversation with a classmate from school, I couldn't imagine his reaction if he found out I was meeting someone for a potential relationship.

'I'll arrange everything at my place,' she countered. 'We won't tell anyone, especially your parents. They don't need to know now. And you won't have to consider marriage until you're eighteen. It's just about getting to know each other.'

Trusting my aunt, I reluctantly agreed. I was only agreeing to meet him, though; I didn't have to commit to anything. There would be no harm if I didn't like him.

For the next few days, when I finished school and walked home, I

noticed a young red-haired man standing outside the school gates almost every day. He was always alone, smoking cigarettes. He was short but had a strong build. He looked rather ordinary to me. Though I wasn't sure why, he did look vaguely familiar.

After a week or two had passed, my aunt paid me another visit, bubbling with excitement.

'Musab, my husband's brother, is keen on meeting you,' she announced. 'If this works out, we'll be closer than ever!'

While I understood the sentiment, I couldn't show the same level of excitement. The logistics seemed daunting – convincing my parents to let me go to her house alone would be no small feat. But my aunt was undeterred, presenting a well-thought-out plan.

'I'll take care of everything,' she said. 'I'll tell your parents that I need your help doing a big clean-up at home. So you'll come to my house straight after school the day after tomorrow.'

To my surprise, my parents agreed, and two afternoons later, my dad pulled up outside my school to drive me to my aunt's house. Nervous knots twisted in my stomach. The prospect of meeting Musab filled me with anxiety. I was not one to entertain thoughts of romance, and the fear of getting caught talking to a boy was enough to cause me stress.

When I walked into her house, my aunt reassured me that she was on my side, wanting nothing but my happiness.

'His family is wonderful. They'll treat you very well,' she said, her eyes sparkling with genuine joy as we waited for him in the kitchen.

I allowed myself to believe her, lifted by her enthusiasm.

When he entered, I recognised him instantly as the red-haired man outside the school grounds. The realisation slightly shocked me – what reason could he have for lingering around my school, especially considering how far it was from where he lived?

As he stood in front of me, I noticed he was reasonably handsome. His features possessed a certain charm, perhaps because of his hazel eyes.

'Hello, Majeda,' he greeted me with a warm smile, his voice sending butterflies to my stomach.

It was my first date. I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment, suddenly overcome with shyness. Though I had briefly seen him once or twice during gatherings at my aunt's in-laws' home, I hadn't quite noticed him until now.

My aunt gracefully excused herself, leaving us alone in the kitchen.

Musab was quite talkative, sharing his aspirations of studying at university. That eased some of the tension coiled within me.

'I want to go to university too,' I said, excited that we shared similar dreams.

As our conversation delved deeper, I mentioned my passion for reading, and he eagerly shared his fondness for books. His suggestion of exchanging letters when we couldn't meet in person surprised me, but I found myself intrigued by the idea.

'I love writing,' I said nervously.

'I'll write to you too,' he promised, with a sincerity that touched me.

With no phones in our town, letter writing seemed like the perfect solution to stay connected. My aunt returned to the kitchen just as we were finalising our plans.

'I think that's a wonderful idea,' she said. She beamed, satisfied as she envisioned the blossoming connection between us. She offered to serve as our intermediary.

And so, we began our exchange of letters, each carrying with it a piece of our hearts. It felt romantic, pouring out my thoughts about life and my feelings about how my parents treated me onto paper, knowing he would read them and respond in kind. With each letter, our bond grew stronger, and I found myself opening up to him in ways I never thought possible. I shared my love for Kahlil Gibran's writing, my frustrations about how my parents had changed. I shared some of my short stories I used to write. I spared nothing.

We shared our favourite books and magazines, engaging in lively discussions spurred on by their contents. Once, I sent a copy of *My Magazine* – a magazine for young adults passed down from my aunts when they were at school – that I thought he might find interesting. However, when my aunt handed me his letter along with the returned

magazine, I found that he had only underlined typos that he had noticed in the magazine – without sharing his views. I didn't know why he chose to do that, but I didn't question him at the time. I was so engrossed in the moment of what we were doing that I didn't think of it much. I was just happy for the distraction and the possibility of freedom.

Whenever we secretly met at my aunt's house, the hours seemed to melt away. These were precious moments in which we unravelled the layers of each other's personalities privately, shielded from prying eyes.

'Thank you for sending me the books of Gibran,' he said. He seemed sincere in expressing his gratitude, but he remained mysterious about his thoughts on the philosophy contained within those pages.

He appeared to be an intelligent man, and I longed to delve deeper into his mind, to unravel what was hidden within. Though he was impenetrable, his charm was a captivating force. It drew me. There was an undeniable chemistry between us. And in those moments when my aunt was out of the room, his stolen touches filled the quiet spaces with promises of affection and desire.

For many months, he continued to wait outside the school gates for me to finish and find subtle ways for us to run into each other, creating an air of serendipity. It all felt surreal. He was cheeky and sweet, and he displayed genuine interest in me. Whenever I visited my aunt's house, he dropped everything to spend time with me. He seemed like the ideal future husband.

When I asked why he wasn't working, he explained he was preparing to study at university, returning to his aspirations. Then he would swiftly shift the conversation by showering me with affection, complimenting me on my intelligence and my success at school, and expressing his desire to spend the rest of his life with me.

Our beginning felt like a love story in a theatrical production. It genuinely seemed as if he was going to rescue me from my sorrowful existence. Whenever I vented about the pressure to conform or my mother's attempts to hinder my education, he empathised with sadness in his eyes. He became the first person, aside from my friends, who shared my discontent with the changes that were happening around us. He promised to

allow me not to wear the jilbab and to never force me to do anything I didn't want to do.

A few months later, he declared his marriage intentions to my aunt. Trusting him, I believed it was the best choice to reclaim my identity – that marriage to him was what I needed to balance the equation of my life.

The proposal

Initial condition

Every equation begins with given conditions; these conditions are assumed, not questioned. If these conditions are sound and align with reality, everything goes smoothly. When they are not sound, when they do not align with reality, everything that follows must work hard to correct what was wrong from the beginning.

Soon, on a hot summer afternoon, after I had trudged home wearily from school, my mother intercepted me at the front door.

‘We have your Aunt Reem and her family-in-law coming over tonight,’ she informed me briskly. ‘I need your help with making coffee and some finger food. And I need you to dress properly. They might want to see you.’

I knew exactly why they were coming, but I kept my thoughts to myself, offering a simple, ‘Yes, Mum.’

The impending meeting played on my mind as I waited for their arrival, stirring a whirlwind of nervous apprehension within me. Was this the right decision? Was I rushing into something without truly understanding the consequences? We didn't really know each other that well; yet here we were, on the brink of a critical decision.

Busying myself with tedious tasks, I couldn't help but wonder about a future unencumbered by the confines of the jilbab. I dared to dream of pursuing my passions, of stepping onto the hallowed grounds of a university campus in attire that reflected my true self. The idea of gazing into a mirror and seeing my authentic reflection staring back at me filled me with longing.

At the sound of their arrival, I looked out from the balcony upstairs – where no-one could see me, except for him. He knew where exactly to look in between the shutters. Our eyes met. My heart bounced with excitement and fear. I went inside, running as if I had been caught in a sin.

The men sat in the formal lounge room, while his mum and Aunt Reem sat with my mother, my grandmother and me in the living area where we could hear the men talking. True to her words, my aunt maintained the impression of innocence, orchestrating the evening as if it were our first encounter. It was a secret shared only between us. Small talk flowed until Musab's father broached the purpose of their visit with a directness that left no room for ambiguity.

'We have come here today to ask for Majeda's hand in marriage on behalf of our son, Musab,' he said.

'It is our honour to tie our already well-established relationship with another marriage, but we need to ask our daughter,' my dad replied.

I was surprised that I was permitted to make my own decision on this matter, and I felt conflicting emotions swirling within. The right to choose my attire had been stripped away long ago; however, it was deemed that I could consent – or not – to marriage at the tender age of seventeen. It was a paradox that pleased me at the time, but it still leaves me utterly puzzled to this day.

When my dad asked me the next morning, I seized the opportunity to assert my desires before making such a significant life-altering decision.

I found my courage and began, tentatively at first, 'I would like to say yes ...' My parents' expectant gazes bore down on me. 'But there is one thing I need Musab to promise me first.'

I ignored my mum's open mouth of surprise and my dad's regret, clear in his eye, for giving me the opportunity to speak.

'I'm eager to continue my studies – and at university level,' I declared, my voice gaining strength with each word. 'So I want Musab to agree to allow me to complete my university education.'

I decided not to mention the part that he and I had already discussed and agreed to – that I would be able to not wear the jilbab.

My dad agreed to deliver the message of acceptance the next day. Looking back, I think they just wanted to shift liability away from themselves. In those days, daughters, sisters and single women in the family were seen as burdens: something to be handed over, less responsibility for them.

The engagement

Assumption

When the assumptions are wrong, the model no longer describes reality. Ours was built on assumed futures, unexamined agreements and promises not yet tested: words spoken, not lived.

A few weeks later, Musab's family were ready to start the engagement process, beginning with buying gold and clothes for the bride. It was the tradition, the costume, for generations. Yet I rejected it.

'Please, do not buy me any gold for the engagement or wedding,' I said to them.

They had arrived in two cars – Musab and his parents in one car and my Aunt Reem and her husband in another – to collect me and my parents for the big shopping day.

'I have no interest in wearing jewellery,' I continued.

My mum frowned and bit her lower lip while pouring cups of coffee for everyone to enjoy before heading out.

The room fell silent, and then Musab's mother, a picture of traditional grace, addressed my unconventional request.

'It is customary for the groom's family to gift and dress the bride with gold. We cannot forgo this tradition entirely,' she explained gently. 'Allow us to give you a few pieces. It would be frowned upon if we were to deviate from this tradition.'

Reluctantly, I consented to accept the bare minimum, conceding to the tradition while quietly asserting my independence in the face of societal expectations. Though my parents shook their heads in disapproval, they

accepted my wishes, allowing me a small victory in a battle of wills that long raged between us.

Our engagement, which took place in the school holiday after Year 11, just one week before I started Year 12, was a significant milestone for me and for my parents. I was their firstborn and first daughter to be engaged and the first of all my same-age cousins.

In a modest ceremony, we intertwined the seriousness of our engagement with the legalities of marriage, a practice known as *Katib Kitab* which translates literally to *signing of the book*. In other words, signing a register. This custom bound us together in the eyes of religion and law. Just like that, with a signature, Musab and I were forever bound, our fates intertwined in the eyes of Allah.

Though unconventional to some, the combining of our engagement with the legal formalities of marriage was a testament to my parents' devotion to their religious beliefs. It was a sacrifice Musab and I willingly made, knowing that it would grant us the privilege of sitting together without me having to wear the jilbab. We were legally and religiously married, but in the eyes of the community we were only engaged. We were not allowed to live with each other until our wedding day a year or so later.

For our engagement ceremony, I wore a black long-sleeved dress, a garment more suitable for a woman my mum's age than for a young bride-to-be. I am not sure why I chose this dress. I felt relieved at not having to bear the weight of the jilbab.

As the small gathering convened to celebrate our engagement, I couldn't help but feel a sense of relief that it wasn't a grand affair. The intimacy of the occasion suited me just fine, sparing us from the pressures and expectations that often accompany larger celebrations. My mother's homemade lunch was a symbol of family warmth and hospitality extended to our guests. The only people invited were family, which included aunts, uncles and cousins, our neighbours, and my closest friends – at least seventy people.

When Musab's family arrived, Zahra's face stood out. She was his youngest sister, a figure from my past whose presence stirred a mixture of

resentment and indifference within me. We had been classmates in primary school. I remembered that she had had an issue with me then. I always felt that she hated me.

Over the next thirteen months, Musab and I still needed to be careful about being seen together, so we spent a lot of time at my parents' home. We were never allowed to sit on our own on his weekly visits to my parents' place, but at least we got to see each other without the subterfuge of visiting my Aunt Reem. When we wanted to go out, we had to have a chaperone – we weren't permitted to go out alone. But when no-one was watching, he would caress my hand.

Musab sought every opportunity to steal moments with me, which to me was proof of his devotion and longing. His secret gestures – a touch, a quick kiss – showed how much he desired me. It went beyond mere physicality, resonating with a childlike innocence and longing.

Deep down, I did not want to get married so young, but my parents left me no choice. I wanted education, but I wanted to wear my true identity and live by my beliefs. I could not have both under their wing. I had to get out. Musab, with his charisma and seemingly unquestionable suitability, became my route of escape from the confines of convention. As the days turned into weeks and the weeks into a year, I found myself adrift in a sea of uncertainty.

Mirror, mirror

Mirror image

*Reflection is supposed to be accurate. Only orientation may differ.
When I looked in the mirror, I saw a distortion of me.*

Finally, after studying very hard for months, the agonising end-of-Year-12 exams came to an end. In addition to the compulsory Arabic, English and Hebrew, I had completed five units of mathematics and five units of

physics. I also chose to do three units of chemistry, but only because the chemistry teacher was very handsome. All girls did chemistry for the same reason.

The day before my graduation, I sat in my room, organising and tidying up my schoolbooks. They were supposed to be passed down to my sister – all except the physics books, as she chose biology instead. I cherished my books and treated them as precious gems. I put each subject's textbooks and notebooks in a big box and labelled them. The box that contained all the maths textbooks and notebooks I labelled *Might need for university*; the physics box I labelled *Read for fun in the future*.

I sighed deeply, thinking of the next day. It would be my graduation day. Graduation marks the end of an era. It should be a day for celebrating achievements. But it was a chapter I couldn't wait to close – despite my love of school and learning. After months of gruelling study, I should have been thrilled. Yet my excitement was hollow, weighed down by memories I couldn't escape and the jilbab that I would have to wear to the ceremony.

For the two years that I wore it, I did not have one photo taken in the jilbab. I refused to memorialise that period of my life. I was not truly living those years of my life, so why would I immortalise them in a photo? It was not *I* who wore that grey prison – only the person they wanted me to be.

When I accepted my graduation certificate the following day, I gripped it tightly, my hands trembling. Graduation wouldn't mean freedom; it was merely an end to a long, suffocating chapter. I did not pose for a photo. The applause died away as I left the stage.

Just as my heart ached from suppression, trapped, like it was locked in a prison, so did my people's. We were all in the same boiling pot, pressure rising, ready to overflow. It just needed a trigger.

The First Intifada

Acceleration

Mathematically, acceleration shows that motion is defined not only by

speed but also by direction. The Intifada worked as an acceleration to our assumptions; it added new dynamics.

On one biting winter's day in December 1987, an Israeli truck driver callously mowed down a group of Palestinian workers in their parked car at the Erez checkpoint (the border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Israel). This moment triggered the First Intifada.

What began as spontaneous protests rapidly transformed into a widespread, grassroots uprising across Gaza, some 180 kilometres from Canna, and the West Bank, just about 30 kilometres away. Despite the physical distances, the unifying sense of one nation, one people and one pain, prevailed. Geography felt irrelevant.

I heard my dad explaining the meaning of the word *intifada* when he was asked by my young sister, who at only seven years old had no idea what was going on. She kept hearing the word on the news as we glued ourselves to the TV every night.

‘The meaning of *intifada* is actually *shaking off*,’ he said. ‘We are shaking the occupation off our land.’

The atmosphere in our community was electric: a mix of passion and apprehension. There was a collective swell of anger and frustration as we mourned the senseless loss of our brothers and sisters in Gaza and the West Bank. Yitzhak Rabin, Israel's Defence Minister at the time, reportedly ordered Israeli soldiers to break the bones of protesters – particularly those throwing stones – as a deterrent. Images of soldiers brutally beating Palestinian children flooded our screens and newspapers, igniting a wave of protests in the 1948 region that surged through our towns and villages. We stood united in our rejection of such cruelty, boldly challenging the oppressive policies of the government.

For decades, the Israeli authorities had sought to assimilate us, the 1948ers – to erase our identity and history. From being forced to sing the Israeli national anthem in school to witnessing our language moving to a mixture of Hebrew and Arabic until it developed to a deformed dialect, all while enduring decades of marginalisation, we bore the weight of

oppression. But the First Intifada served as a wake-up call, a defiant reminder of our resilience and unity as Palestinians: a united people. Though we in the 1948 region weren't standing at checkpoints or throwing stones, the uprising seeped into our lives in quieter, more insidious ways.

The Islamic Movement had already been gaining influence in our town, but its reach deepened during the First Intifada. It wasn't just about prayer or faith anymore; it was about identity, discipline and control. Sermons – both in and outside mosques – grew more political and more urgent. I started hearing the slogan: *Islam is the solution*. Many years later I realised it was similar to the slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood. Although the Islamic Movement did not present itself as a political movement, it had significant influence in shaping the community's political direction, particularly later on.

During the Intifada, the community became one tight body. Every now and then, there were even some protests in our town running parallel to the protests in the West Bank and Gaza. Still, the real shift in my world was happening at home.

One day, when I heard the crowds chanting, I suggested to my father that we should join the protest.

'Women must stay at home,' he said firmly – ignoring the fact that women were an integral part of the protests all across Palestine, including in the 48.

The Intifada didn't just awaken political consciousness; it was also a social transformation that leaked through our walls. My father no longer tolerated my questions, my clothes, my tone. The shift in him was total. He wasn't yelling anymore; he didn't need to. The community stood behind him and his decision. He had become its messenger, the sheikh's obedient follower. And it was not only *my* father: many of my friends' fathers, uncles, the fathers of friends of friends. It seemed that everyone was joining the Movement. A whole generation.

I was a teenager, caught between my own becoming and a movement that demanded I shrink. I needed to get out.

The wedding

Formalisation

Formalisation in mathematics turns ideas into fixed symbols.

Weddings, in reality, formalise assumptions and put them to the test.

Despite the pain we endured during the First Intifada, life did not come to a halt. We carried on. We worked, pursued education, built homes and celebrated milestones. Even in uncertainty, we travelled when we could. We got engaged, we married and we raised children, finding joy in small moments despite the turmoil. We looked after small farms, gathered with family, shared meals, told stories and supported one another. We fought in silence, when the media was not there and we did not make the headlines. The 1948ers' struggle is distinctive and our resistance is different. Our existence is our resistance. We dreamt of better days and found ways to laugh. No matter the difficulties, life had to move forward as we had to exist.

'The wedding date is set for September sixteenth,' said Aunt Reem, thinking she was revealing great and exciting news to me.

'Wait, we cannot do that, Aunty! Please, let's choose another date,' I said angrily. 'It's the sixth anniversary of the horrific Sabra and Shatila massacre, don't you know? Don't you remember September 1982?'

It still feels like it happened only yesterday. I truly cannot forget how my dad jumped out of his seat, screaming and swearing when he watched the news that day. I cannot forget what I saw on the TV screen as the massacre by the Lebanese Lahed Militia, supported by the Israeli army, continued. The images depicted a level of savagery that shook us to the core. It was terrifying. The slaughter continued from Thursday until Saturday of that week. Testimonies describe horrific acts of slaughter, mutilation, rape and mass graves. Images from the aftermath were aired on television worldwide and caused global outrage.

'Don't you remember how our neighbour gave birth to her twin girls on that day and named one of them Sabra and the other Shatila?'

My aunt did not have much to say. Of course she remembered, but she was helpless. She was just a woman. A voiceless one.

I found myself earnestly pleading with Musab to consider changing our wedding date, but he gently explained that it wasn't feasible. He reminded me that his brother's wedding was already set for the same day as ours, meaning there would be logistical issues if we decided to alter our plans.

It was not uncommon for families to adopt a cost-saving approach by hosting weddings for multiple siblings on the same day. While I understood the practicality behind it, my heart longed to mark our beginning together on a date devoid of the memories associated with the anniversary of a tragic event. Yet there was nothing we could do to change the wedding date. I had a strange feeling in my stomach that day. Perhaps it was a sign.

The months passed so quickly that year. Suddenly, the wedding was only two days away, and the henna night was tomorrow, and there were still so many details to arrange and finalise. That night I needed to sleep, but it was nearly impossible. I lay in that shadowy space between waking and dreaming until the early hours, haunted by images of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. The photos I saw on the TV screen six years earlier had been burnt into my brain. They were as vivid as my father's screams. That sound, that pain, had never left me.

As I finally drifted off to sleep, just a couple of hours before I would need to wake again, all I could feel was sorrow for the cruelty of it all, and for the strange dissonance of a wedding planned in the shadow of so much grief.

Feeling nothing

I feel nothing. My body, my heart, and my mind are numbed.

*I see nothing, but hundreds of bodies of children crushed or
slaughtered together.*

*I only can hear their screams in the last attack, and their mothers'
cries trying to reach them while they die together.*

*I smell nothing but smoke, dust, blood and forever-hot elements.
Forgive me as I don't feel happy, and I cannot sing with you.
I tried!*

*Maybe I can borrow your eyes to see what you see
or borrow your ears to hear the wedding songs.
Lend me your nose, and I may smell the fragrance of za'atar or rain.*

*Lend me your feet, and I may walk with you,
and on our way, I may say hello to the kids who were left running around
the house. Maybe they are still playing there
for six winters and summers.*

*I cannot dance with one arm.
Maybe I can use your arm for balance.
Maybe a martyred unborn child can hold my hand in a dabkeh.*

*Lend me your voice, and I may hum songs of henna and martyrs with
you.
Maybe an unnamed baby would join us from above,
oh, how much she loved to sing.
If only she could sing once.*

*Lend me your heart; I may be able to feel
something!*

أشعر بلا شيء

أشعر بلا شيء. جسدي مخدر. قلبي مخدر. وعقلي مخدر.
أرى لا شيء، بل مئات من الأجساد المسحوقة لأطفال سحقوا معاً، أو ذبحوا معاً.
لا أسمع إلا صرخاتهم في الغارة الأخيرة وصرخات أمهاتهم يحاولن الوصول إليهم
وهم يموتون معاً.

لا أشم إلا رائحة الدخان ، الغبار، الدم والأسطح الحارة. والعناصر الحارقة إلى الأبد.
سامحني. لا أشعر بالسعادة. ولن أستطيع أن أغني معك.
حاولت!

ربما أستطيع أن أستعير عينيك لأرى ما ترى،
أو أذنك لأسمع أغاني العرس.
أعربي أنفك. ربما أستطيع أن أشم رائحة الزعتر والمطر.

اعرني قدميك ربما أستطيع السير معك.
وفي طريقنا ربما أحيي الأطفال الذين تركوا يتراكمون حول البيت.
ربما ما زالوا يلعبون هناك
لستة أصياف و شتاءات.

لا أستطيع الرقص بذراع واحدة.
ربما أوازن رقصتي بذراعك.
ربما يأتي طفل شهيد لم يولد بعد ويمسك بيدي
في حلقة الدبكة.

أعربي صوتك. ربما أذندن معك أغاني الحنة والشهداء
ربما سيأتي طفل بلا اسم من السماء وينضم إلينا.
آه... آه... كم أحببت الغناء.
آه، لو تستطيع أن تغني ولو لمرة واحدة.

أعربي قلبك، ربما أستطيع أن أشعر

‘Are you still asleep? Hurry up! Get ready. Your aunties will be here soon!’ My mother’s voice pulled me from my bed, urging me to get ready for a very special day – a ceremony, really, not just an event.

That morning, I embarked on the ritual of waxing. It was an unfamiliar and surprisingly agonising ordeal for me, especially in the most sensitive of areas.

As my aunties gathered, their excitement and chatter filled the room. They exchanged knowing glances and winks with my mother when, as the strips of wax were torn from my skin, I couldn’t help but exclaim, ‘It hurts so much!’

Their loud laughs accompanied sexual hints and jokes that I could not fully understand. It was a side of my mother and aunties that I never even thought existed, let alone witnessed. It was a strange scene that, just months ago, would have been hidden from my virgin eyes. Now, here I was, a somewhat willing participant in this intimate ritual, preparing for a future that felt both thrilling and uncertain. Just like a scene from one of Dr Nawal El Saadawi’s books.

Later that evening, it was time for henna. As is customary the night before a wedding, both bride and groom have henna applied to their hands – in two separate parties, each at their parents’ place. The groom does not participate in the bride’s party; neither does she participate in his.

We only invited the family and a few of my friends. Though there was some discomfort and strange feelings, there were also moments of consolation. My brother, Tareq, wise beyond his fifteen years of age, was chosen to delicately trace intricate patterns of henna onto my hands. He was the eldest of my four brothers, and the most like my dad in his kindness and generosity – but also his naivety.

‘I’ll miss you, but I’m happy for you,’ said Tareq. ‘Musab seems like a good man.’

As the ceremony began, my aunties and the few relatives we had invited started singing the traditional henna song, ‘Sabal Uyunuh wa Mad Idoh’:

He lowered his eyes and stretched out his hand.
A little gazelle, they wrapped him in a handkerchief.
Who is this gazelle passing by our home?
His waist is slender, and his lips are drenched in honey.

سَبَلْ عَيُونُهُ وَمَدَّ إِيدَهُ يَحْتَوِلُهُ غَزَال
صَغِيرٍ وَبِالْمَنْدِيلِ يَلْقَوُلُهُ وَشْ هَالْغَزَالِ اللَّي
عَنْ دَارِنَا مَارِقْ خَصْرُهُ رَقِيقٌ وَبُوزُهُ بِالْعَسَلِ
غَارِقٌ.

Tears welled in everyone’s eyes, including mine. ‘This song always makes us cry. Let’s sing something happier,’ someone suggested. But I insisted we continue.

Many Palestinian songs carry the weight of sorrow, reflecting a history of resistance and suffering. Yet this one is especially emotional, not only because of its lyrics or its mournful melody, but also because it was chosen to be sung as a farewell to martyrs as well as at weddings. Its sadness runs deeper, entwined with loss, memory and the unyielding spirit of our people.

Aunt Reem and her husband Karam picked me up the following morning and, along with Musab’s two sisters, we were dropped off to get our hair and make-up done. It all felt strange; Musab’s sisters, especially Zahra, didn’t seem particularly interested in talking to me, opting to converse between themselves instead. I was grateful for my aunt’s presence, as she helped fill the silence. It was a little awkward between us, but getting pampered was a pleasant distraction.

My hair took the longest to finish, leaving everyone else waiting. As the hairdresser spun my chair and sprayed hair spray to complete the look, I caught a glimpse of Rania, the older sister, married with two kids, glancing

around before picking up a ring that had been left on the counter beside me. A moment later, she slipped it into her handbag.

For a second, I questioned myself. Maybe I misread it. Maybe she was holding it for someone. Or maybe I saw only part of the movement. She did not say anything, though – just zipped her bag quietly. My stomach turned. I wanted to speak up, to ask her about what I'd seen – or thought I'd seen – but uncertainty stopped me. I stayed silent, confused and ashamed, and we left the salon.

When I returned home, the atmosphere buzzed with anticipation. Tradition dictated that Musab's family would celebrate separately from mine, each in our respective circles. I found myself enveloped in a whirlwind of activity as we prepared for the wedding festivities. Despite the excitement surrounding me, my focus was singular – I longed for the comfort of familiar faces, particularly those of my closest friends.

'Majeda, why don't you and Yasmine head to your room?' my mother suggested. 'She can help you with the final touches while your aunties and I handle the cooking.'

With a guest list of more than eighty, there was much to be done in the kitchen. Traditionally, it was the groom's family's responsibility to provide the mansaf (rice cooked with lots of meat and yogurt, decorated with a generous amount of roasted golden pinenuts on top) to the bride's home and guests. However, I insisted on doing it differently. I wanted the food that I loved, cooked by my mother (a fantastic cook), to be served. She graciously granted my wish, and spent days preparing the dishes she knew I loved.

As Yasmine assisted me in putting on the heavy layers of my wedding gown, I was numb. I expected to feel excited and happy as most brides do, but I did not. I was too cold, frozen in the heat of September. Had I made a huge mistake? Instead of sharing my feelings with my friend, though, I set them aside and put on a steady, emotionless face. But when I looked at Yasmine, sadness clouded her expression. It was a stark contrast to the joyful buzz unfolding outside the confines of my room.

'Are you okay?' I asked.

She hiccupped through her sobs, which she tried to hide, before blurting

out, 'Why are you marrying him?'

I was momentarily stunned. 'What do you mean?' I asked, my voice sharper than intended. 'You know why I'm marrying him.'

Deep down, though, fear gnawed at me. I knew I wasn't marrying out of love. Rather, I was marrying to make a desperate escape. I truly believed Musab's love for me seemed reason enough to proceed.

Yasmine's eyes bored into mine. 'How much do you really know about him and his family?' she asked. Her words mingled with a gravity that made my stomach churn.

A jolt of recognition passed through me. Why had I not asked her about him? Yasmine's aunt shared a bond through marriage to the same family, granting her insights into his family that I never possessed. My knowledge of Musab's family was limited to the glowing praise my Aunt Reem bestowed on them.

In time, I would come to realise that Yasmine knew more than she could reveal on my wedding day. In any case, if she had told me then, I am not sure I would have listened.

'I know he loves me,' I said, although the uncertainty in my voice contradicted the confidence I was trying to display. 'And my aunt speaks highly of his family. I trust her judgement.' The words sounded hollow, even to me.

Yasmine's silence was louder than anything she could have said.

'I'll be fine. You'll see,' I insisted, more for my benefit than for hers.

With a final pat on my shoulder, Yasmine stepped back. 'You look beautiful,' she said. Her words soothed an ache in my heart.

'Thank you,' I replied, reaching out to wipe the tears from her face. 'Come on, let's go downstairs.'

Walking into the crowded space where everyone was waiting for me to join for lunch, I couldn't shake the sense of sadness I was beginning to feel. When I turned to look at my mother, her tear-streaked face marred the impression of composure she strived to maintain, my heart ached with new-found empathy. She was only seventeen years older than me. I couldn't imagine how she felt watching me marry at such a young age.

Though my parents never voiced their opinion on this particular topic, I could sense something of their anguish. I couldn't help but wonder what they were feeling, what they really wanted to share and say to me but didn't – or perhaps couldn't. Looking back, they were very young; my mum was thirty-five, and my dad was forty-three years old when I left their house for Musab's.

Because music was declared haram – it was the peak of the Islamic Movement after all – we only just dared to use a tape player to listen to some traditional songs quietly. However, one of my aunts kept complaining that the music was still too loud, and we eventually switched it off. This did little to please her. She only began complaining that we were all being too loud, and so we tried to be mindful of our chatter.

Lunch was ending, and it was time for me to get ready to leave my parents' house. There were tears from everyone. Rawan and I cried when we hugged. It was a hard thing for her, but I knew she would be okay. My eight-year-old sister, Aseel, was too little to understand what was going on. Wearing a long white dress, she looked like a princess from the book *One Thousand and One Nights*.

When I was packing the last of my belongings, my mother entered the room and her gaze fell on the neatly folded jilbabs resting on my bed.

'Are you not going to take them with you?' she asked.

'No.' I shook my head firmly. 'There's no point since I won't have to wear them ever again.'

'You need to put them in your bags,' my mother insisted.

But I couldn't bring myself to comply. The thought of carrying those garments with me, like burdens from my past, was intolerable.

'No, I won't take them with me,' I said, my tone resolute.

My mother fell silent, resigned to the fact that she couldn't tell me what to do anymore.

After I zipped up my bags, a feeling of autonomy swept through me. I felt buoyed by the knowledge that my parents' dictates no longer bound me. I was in a new field, a field that had new rules – not their rules. I was a married woman now, with a status that held significance, and I embraced it

with pride and defiance.

When I stepped out of my room, it was time for the zaffeh – a joyous procession marking the bride's transition from one family to another. Outside, a crowd, made up of my family preparing to say goodbyes and Musab's family come to escort me, was gathered, their faces a mosaic of love and sorrow. I felt a pang as I said goodbye to my parents. Their tear-streaked faces betrayed my own conflicted emotions and the complexity of our relationship. Hugging my mother, who rarely showed affection, was very emotional. At that moment, I didn't want to let go.

After waving farewell to everyone, I climbed into the waiting car with Rawan, Aunt Reem and her husband Karam. The engine hummed, ready to set off towards my new life. My heart pounded with a blend of excitement and trepidation. I was both exhilarated and apprehensive at the prospect of taking back the reins of my future.

Then, through the window, I saw my grandmother smiling and waving for me. I smiled and waved back, and searched for my grandfather. As we drove away, I saw him sitting at the end of the designated area for men. He did not look at me, so I could not wave goodbye.

How hard could marriage be? I remembered my grandmother's stories about her and my grandfather's early years of marriage. *But that was many years ago, I thought. It must be easier these days.*

My grandmother was married at fourteen years old. She did not know or love my grandfather before they married. The respect and love we witnessed was different. It is called 'ishreh, the love that develops with time and from going through the hardships together. I know she loved everyone: her only son (my father), her seven daughters, her neighbours. She never spoke ill of anyone, not even her sister-in-law, who used to weave evil plots around her. She was always on the peace-offering side.

I cannot picture her in her twenties or even her forties; in my mind, she exists eternally in her eighties. Though I knew her when she was younger – after all, I grew up in the next room while my father built our house on the

floor above – I always pictured her as a soft old lady. In my mind, she is forever dressed in her white ankle-length dress with a matching white hair cover, her distinctive fake ponytails extending from either side and tied into a single knot at the back, peeking out beneath her headscarf. Her attire was more a reflection of tradition than of religion, aligning with the customs of her generation in Palestine.

I did not realise the fire in her, nor the power she held inside. Probably it was masked by her petite body. Yet I witnessed how strong willed and firm she was, despite her ill health – particularly after her kidney failure, which meant she had to go through twice-weekly dialysis. Her wrinkles told countless stories; some were happy, and most were sad. She had her first child, my father, at seventeen and her second three years later. ‘It was not an easy birth,’ she told me when I was young. Later, when I heard more of her stories, I learnt what she meant.

My reverence for her deepened when I learnt that my grandfather had left their home when she was heavily pregnant with her second child. When word spread in February 1948 that al-Shajarah, a town not far from ours, had been attacked and might fall, he took up his rifle and joined al-thowar, the resistance groups, answering a call he felt was stronger than that of his young family and his almost blind, ill old father. So, with other young men from our town and others in the surrounding area, he walked out the door. He would later tell us about his cousins, Ahmad and Saleh, who accompanied him and with whom he was bound by a vow: if one fell, the others would raise his children as their own.

That February, the rain came in steady and heavy. Unpaved roads turned to mud, a curfew – under military rule – closed the streets, and there was no way for my grandmother to reach her family in the neighbouring town. There could be no mother, no sister to lift her up. No-one to hold her hand or tell her to breathe or to push. She also had her father-in-law to care for: a small, bent man whose wellbeing was another labour she carried each day. There was no mother-in-law, no aunt to call – just a toddler, my dad, who was just as scared as she was.

At almost midnight, with no running water or electricity, she lit a little

fire in the kitchen and warmed the water she had managed to fetch earlier that day from the well two kilometres away. When her contractions became more frequent and more painful, she knew the baby was pushing to come to this world. She squatted and leant against the wall where her ghurbal – a large round wooden wheat sieve – was hung, its curved wood familiar beneath her hands. Inside the house, the world narrowed to the small circle of light, the hiss of the fire and the rhythm of her breathing. She remembered what she did three years earlier when she had my father. She added more prayers this time and lessened her screams.

When my grandfather returned to her, after al-Shajarah fell and most of its people were displaced to Lebanon, he found a baby daughter already named Hamdeh. She had tiny features, olive skin and fuzzy brown hair, and she was cooing loudly, demanding attention that no-one was able to give her. There was no time for affection. It was the Nakba year.

My grandparents did not have much opportunity to celebrate their new baby. There was another catastrophe in the making. In the small hills and olive fields that engulfed most towns and villages, fighters used to stay away from their families to protect them from the soldiers. Soon after the birth of my aunt, my grandfather's newlywed younger brother, Ameen, sat after a long tiring day with a few fighters around a small fire they had made to help them stay warm. Around his waist, he had his belt heavy with cartridges. Hearing one beginning to hiss, Ameen must have known what was happening. Without stopping to think, he ran from the group as fast as he could and curled himself around the belt. The blast killed him instantly, and no-one else was hurt.

I did not know my grandfather had been a fighter. We knew about his brother but not about him. All these stories stayed with me. I packed them in my heart and took them to my new home, my new field, as if I knew I needed to be a fighter to survive.

At this point, I thought I was solving my equation for happiness – or at least for freedom. I didn't know that my equation would simplify to false promises and agonising imbalance.

3

Inequality

Mathematics teaches us that inequalities indicate imbalance: one side always smaller, always lesser. In my marriage, I lived inside such inequality.

His power > mine.

His anger > my safety.

His madness > my sanity.

His silence > my voice.

And yet, hidden within the symbols of inequality breathed my resistance. I refused to be reduced to less than.

Karam and my Aunt Reem drove me to Musab's family home, where the celebration was in full swing. When I arrived, my brothers, who were driven in another car, took my hand to help me out of the car. My sister Rawan disappeared, blending in with the many women who surrounded us.

Musab's family were very welcoming and happy to see me when I arrived. The atmosphere at their home, which was filled with traditional music, singing and dancing, was vastly different from the one I left behind. They saw their son getting married as a joyous occasion and celebrated in the way they wanted. Their spirit instantly made me smile.

My Aunt Reem and a group of other women escorted me to the place designated for the bride and groom. I sat on a lavishly decorated couch while women danced in front of me. There were a lot of people, many of whom I didn't recognise, but I finally spotted Rawan's face at a distance. She looked sad. Traces of tears were still visible in her eyes.

A few moments later, men escorted Musab to join me in the same area. He lifted the tarhah, *veil*, off my face. We exchanged rings, moving them from the ring fingers on our right hands to our left – a symbol of our marital union. We then had our first dance as a married couple. While he appeared happy, I was confused. It hit me that we were now married. I couldn't mirror his joy.

Finally, Musab and I were in a taxi. We were on our way to Tiberias for our first night. The plan was to then travel to Haifa for the rest of our honeymoon. His brother, Karam, had taken it upon himself to book the

hotels for us for a week. I was excited about no longer having to answer questions about my whereabouts or activities to my parents. We held hands, alone together at last with no chaperone and no-one to tell us we couldn't touch.

Then he whispered: 'I can't wait to make love to you.'

His words made me nervous. The whole situation did. It would be our first night together, the sealing of our marriage. The prospect of being with a man for the first time made me nervous. I was unsure of what to do.

I was exhausted when we eventually arrived at the hotel, and I couldn't wait to take off the heavy make-up and have a shower.

In the bathroom, I was confronted by a large mirror. It reminded me of the years I'd avoided looking at myself because I was scared to see the dead parts of me – the parts I had buried. But tonight was different. Tonight, I faced the mirror with determination.

My heart raced, and my hands trembled as I removed my clothes. This marked a turning point – the end of an era. I embraced the prospect of pursuing my studies and being with a loving husband who cherished me. In the mirror, I saw me: the live parts of me.

When I came out of the bathroom wearing only a robe, he was lying on the bed, already undressed. I had never seen a man completely naked before, I wasn't expecting to see him in full with the lights turned on. I didn't know where to look or what to say. Although curious, I felt embarrassed.

I found my courage and mustered the words, 'Would you mind if we turned off the lights?' I wasn't ready for him to see me naked. I sat on the edge of the bed; in the only space he hadn't taken. He didn't move to make room.

'There is nothing to be shy about.' He smiled as he held my face and turned it towards him. 'Feel free to look at me, as I want to see you.' He was trying to reassure me, but I still felt vulnerable.

I hesitated, not quite ready to embrace this level of intimacy. 'Please, just for tonight.'

Irritation flashed in his eyes, swiftly replaced by that warm smile that

had initially captivated me.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘For tonight.’

When he turned the lights off, the streetlamp’s glow filtered through the curtains. I was okay with that. He removed my robe and kissed me from my neck down to my shoulders and eventually my mouth.

I was nervous. These kisses felt different from the ones we’d stolen during our engagement. He was directing, taking control. I focused on the sensations, trying to let go of my racing thoughts. Here we were: husband and wife, about to consummate our marriage.

‘You belong to me now,’ he kept repeating. As he continued to kiss me, I could feel him grow hard. ‘Are you ready?’ he asked.

It felt strange to have a naked man on top of me. He cautiously entered, mindful of my virginity. I tried not to wince the deeper he went and attempted to suppress my discomfort. It seemed he was trying to be gentle, but the more excited he became, the faster he went. I wanted to enjoy it and move my body with his; we had waited for a long time to be physically intimate, and it was finally happening. I moaned quietly, and it was all over.

He withdrew and lay next to me on his back. ‘You are mine,’ he said. Then he rolled away and, as quickly as he came, drifted into deep sleep.

It seems to me now that I, and all girls and women in my culture, were expected to remain hidden, cocooned and shielded until our wedding day. Then suddenly we were all supposed to transform into experts on wifely duties, including sex and intimacy. Perhaps there was meant to be a magic wand that would touch us overnight and we would convert into proficient wives.

During our honeymoon, Musab demonstrated open-mindedness, and we had a delightful time together. We explored the city of Tiberias, then took a taxi to Haifa. There we took leisurely walks, indulged in shopping sprees and savoured meals at inviting restaurants. We also visited Haifa University where, having been accepted just a few days before our wedding, I would soon embark on my bachelor’s degree in mathematics.

We toured the campus, situated on the picturesque Mount Carmel (470 metres above sea level), and took an elevator to the thirtieth floor, emerging to a breathtaking panoramic view of Haifa. From there, we could see the entire city, including the old mosque, the bustling port, the Bahá'í World Centre with its terraced gardens – a combination of the old city and the new. Embraced by the Mediterranean and its graceful beaches, everything in Haifa told two stories: on one hand, a story of multi-faith multiculturalism; on the other, a story of segregation. The story you read in that city depended on the angle you chose to look from. At that exact point in time, I chose to see my future education, my freedom and my liberation in Haifa. Yet the history of my people – the mass exodus in 1948, the chaos of families leaving in fear and terror, the lost love stories that concluded in separations and displacement – kept surfacing within me.

A couple of hours after checking out of the hotel in Haifa, I found myself in Musab's house, which consisted of two separate levels, one for his parents and one for us. We would temporarily share the upper floor with his brother Saleem and wife Fay, who also shared our wedding date but had not finished building their new home. Saleem was a religious man with a long beard, and his wife wore the jilbab. It was clear that they would live with us until their house was ready.

The house was quite old and small. It needed a considerable amount of renovation, and I was surprised that, although Musab's family were relatively comfortable financially, they didn't spend any money trying to fix things. Additionally, it bothered me that the front entrance was shared with Musab's parents and their household. It meant my family and friends needed to get permission from his parents to enter through the big iron gate and then cross their yard before reaching our home.

Most of Musab's siblings were already married, leaving only two of his sisters living with his parents. Their family lived quite traditionally. I was surprised when, unlike what I was used to at my parents' home, we all sat on the floor when we dined with them on that first day. They had minimal

appliances in the house, including in the kitchen. It felt more like my grandparents' house than my parents'. It was like I had gone back in time. Though they weren't as conservative as my parents, most of the women of the household wore the jilbab by choice.

Their residence, positioned on a bustling street, provided an interesting vantage point on daily life. I could observe the ebb and flow of people, both on foot and in vehicles. It was an animated tableau that brought a vibrant energy to their home, different from the atmosphere of the quiet cul-de-sac I was accustomed to.

One particular aspect of our living arrangement proved to be a nuisance. The room where Musab's father welcomed guests was situated directly beneath our bedroom. The space was a lively hub at odd hours, where he gathered and socialised with his male friends. Card games, boisterous conversations and loud disagreements echoed up to us at all hours, disrupting my sleep and interrupting my reading. What troubled me the most, though, was the use of the fireplace to prepare traditional coffee. The thick smoke felt stifling in our bedroom, regardless of the hour.

I decided to address the situation with Musab's father, hoping to find a solution that would allow for more harmonious coexistence. When I nervously approached him, he was stirring his coffee while sitting on a low chair that made him look even shorter than he was.

'Ami,' I said, using the respectful term to address a father-in-law. 'I was hoping we could talk about the gatherings in the guest room and the smoke from the fireplace.'

He lifted his head slightly when he heard me.

'It's been affecting my sleep,' I continued, 'and I'm having difficulty breathing. Our washing on the line smells of smoke. I have to rewash it many times.'

With a smirk, he said: 'What's there to talk about? This is my house, and I do as I please. You will get used to it.'

'But ...'

He scoffed at me. 'You young ones think everything should revolve around you.'

‘I’m not asking you to change everything,’ I said, starting to feel defeated. ‘I just want to find a compromise. Maybe we can adjust the timing of the gatherings or find a way to minimise the smoke.’

He waved his hand dismissively. ‘I don’t have time for these discussions. You need to adapt to our way of life.’

With that, I retreated upstairs, realising the challenging road ahead in bridging the gap between our generations. On my way to the room I shared with my husband, I saw Fay.

‘Hey, Fay, doesn’t the smoke coming from downstairs bother you?’ I asked.

‘No.’ She shrugged and went to her room.

Maybe it is just me, I thought to myself.

‘Musab, we need to talk about your father’s friends coming at all hours of the night. The smoke that is suffocating me. I really need your support,’ I said.

‘Why are you making a big deal out of this?’ he asked. ‘No-one else has a problem with it. Just leave it. My father has always had his friends over to play cards, and he has always used the fireplace. No-one has a problem with it and, as far as I know, it’s not going to change. Get used to it.’

Though his words cast a gloomy shadow over me, I refused to let it go. In time, I was able to create a solution myself by installing an air-conditioning unit in the window frame. It was loud, but I didn’t mind. It dripped water on men sitting there, but they didn’t mind. The white noise covered the racket coming from downstairs and it was what I needed.

In this new field I had stepped into, and within this mix of relationships, Musab had positioned himself as the dominant term. And I believe it started long before he first said, ‘You are mine.’

The language of the universe

‘The universe is written in the language of mathematics.’

—Galileo Galilei

I finally found my language: mathematics. It felt like heaven for my brain.

Less than a month after our wedding, I walked into Haifa University, as a student, for my first day of classes, feeling light with no headscarf or jilbab – just in a blue half-sleeve t-shirt and jeans – despite carrying a heavy bag of textbooks. My heart, full of my childhood dreams, carried me forward. My pride was utmost. The campus buzzed with the lively chatter of students from various backgrounds, their voices mingling in a mixture of languages: mainly Hebrew and some Arabic. As I navigated the crowded hallways, I overheard fragments of conversations in quick, fluid Hebrew that I struggled to keep up with.

As a 1948er, my education unfolded primarily in Arabic. Like all the other children, I learnt Hebrew as a second language from Year 3, followed by English a year later. Consequently, proficiency levels in both languages were modest.

The first time I visited Haifa University was to do the eight-hour psychometric test – a prerequisite for any university degree – towards the end of Year 12. In addition to sections on quantitative reasoning, verbal reasoning and English proficiency, there was a section for Arabic-speaking students to determine our Hebrew proficiency. I remember that test vividly, mainly because it looked and felt like gibberish. We had no idea what we were doing. The schools in our Palestinian towns were significantly underfunded and unable to prepare us as well as our counterparts in cities with both Jewish and Palestinian residents (known as mixed cities), let alone those in Jewish-only cities.

There was another reason the psychometric-test memories stayed with me. A group of six of us young, hopeful and anxious girls had planned to travel to university the day before the test. Some of my friends had older siblings living in the student dorms, and they arranged for us to stay the night. It was practical with the test starting early the next morning.

When we arrived, though, instead of resting, we were drawn into the shelves of books: big, thick and noticeably broad. They looked different

from the books we were used to. It was there, almost by accident, that we found something that would mark us far more deeply than the test the next morning: a complete collection of Naji al-Ali's cartoons.

Al-Ali was driven from Palestine, along with his family and his entire village, to Lebanon following the al-Shajarah battle in 1948. It had been a few months since al-Ali's assassination in London – bullets that silenced a man whose pen was more dangerous than any weapon – and the pain of his death still hung in the air, especially for me. I knew that my grandfather had fought in al-Shajarah, that he had probably witnessed the ten-year-old Naji leaving his home.

We sat cross-legged – some on the floor, some on the bed – and examined page after page, immersed in al-Ali's fierce, aching world. His drawings spoke the pain that we didn't know how to name. Handala – the ten-year-old boy, always with his back turned, barefoot, refusing to grow until justice returned – appeared again and again. In this recurring motif I saw, through my own grandfather's eyes, al-Ali's back as he was forced from his village.

Al-Ali's absence was an open wound, raw and unjust, in the heart of our people. There were no speeches that night, no lectures, yet I felt I had attended the most important lesson of my life. At seventeen, I thought I understood injustice, identity and occupation, but that night, through the ink and silence of al-Ali's art, I truly felt it. His creations didn't just educate me; they cracked open a part of me that hadn't yet found its voice.

That night was my first visit to a university, but in many ways it was also my first real education. Despite staying awake all night, we sat the test the next morning. None of us did well in that test. I repeated it a few months later.

Navigating through this academic landscape in a culturally diverse city was a new experience for me. In my first year, my proficiency in English was so low that I had to pay someone to translate reading list papers from English to Hebrew, just so I'd have a chance at understanding it. It was a hurdle that

none of my Jewish classmates had to face. Communicating in Hebrew was also a daunting task. My accent unmistakably marked me as an Arab, and consequently discrimination surfaced. It was condensed in a weird look or a roll of an eye – the type of looks that sometimes leave you feeling small and most times as if you do not belong.

I tried as best as I could to shrug off the racism, but it was difficult to ignore. I had grown up in a town where everyone was Palestinian, and that had shielded me to some extent from the harsh realities of prejudice. The university environment, however, exposed me to the complexities of intergroup relations, shedding light on the not-always-subtle, impactful biases that Jewish students enjoyed: from the alignment between language and curriculum with their home environment to everyday interactions with administrative staff, where they were treated as equals, whereas we were often regarded as inferior.

The First Intifada had a significant impact on our daily lives. I commenced my studies a year after the Intifada began, and the campus atmosphere was charged with the energy of protests and gatherings. It was a challenging period, as we constantly heard disturbing stories of people being killed and villages being raided in the West Bank, yet we felt powerless to intervene.

Since the Nakba four decades earlier, the Israeli government had implemented policies that marginalised Palestinians who became citizens of Israel and erased our Palestinian identity. One of the manifestations of this erasure was labelling Palestinians ‘Arabs of Israel’ and ‘Israeli Arabs’ – terms that sought to deny our Palestinian belonging and reduce us to a generic ethnic category. By associating Palestinians solely with the state, Israel sought to sever our connection to the land, to erase our belonging to the Palestinian people, and to deny our historical and cultural roots. Then the First Intifada wrecked all desired outcomes of these policies; one of the consequences was the uniting of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza with those inside the 1948.

Many of the Palestinian students on campus were engaged in activism, uniting under the common goals of advocating for human rights and

equality. As young people hailing from villages and towns, we yearned to make our voices heard and contribute in meaningful ways. The First Intifada was characterised by the rise of children and women, who fought for freedom and justice. Like many other students, I participated in meetings and was involved in discussions about what actions to take and what to avoid.

However, balancing my desire for activism with the constraints of marriage and my academic commitments was a delicate process. Although I cherished no longer having to wear the jilbab and the chance to pursue my education, there were moments when I felt a distinct lack of connection with my husband. I yearned for him to be genuinely interested in exploring life together. Politics was an integral part of life. But that was not the only hurdle.

University of Haifa was the closest university I could attend. There was no university near to any of the Palestinian towns inside the 1948 region, and the daily commute presented an obstacle. It involved a laborious process of walking downhill from home for half an hour to reach the bus stop, followed by a bus ride to Nazareth, another bus to Haifa, then a taxi to reach the university on Carmel Mountain. Moreover, the taxi wouldn't leave until it was full, which could take up to thirty frustrating minutes.

The trek home was more complex. After reaching Hadar by bus or a taxi from the university campus, I walked down a set of about sixty stairs from Neveem Street in a Jewish neighbourhood into a lower socio-economic part of the city. The atmosphere along these steps was often grim. This was just to reach a taxi to the main bus station and then take a bus to Nazareth, then from Nazareth there was a bus to Canna before walking uphill for half an hour to reach home.

After a few months of this demanding routine, Musab and I reached a practical solution. We agreed I would stay in Haifa for three nights a week, finding it safer, less stressful and also more economical than commuting daily. To facilitate this arrangement, I strategically organised my timetable

to focus my studies into four days, from Sunday to Wednesday. It enabled me to return home on Wednesday night before repeating the cycle the following week.

At first, balancing my roles as a married woman and a university student was tough, but over time I established a more comfortable routine. Through perseverance, I gained a new-found sense of independence, relishing the opportunity to pursue my academic and personal aspirations and embrace the woman I was becoming.

During my first year at university, I shared an apartment in Haifa with three friends. However, as they were singles and studied lighter courses, they had fewer academic demands and responsibilities. I opted to live separately from them in my second year for an environment more conducive to my needs. My sister, who was allowed to start her study at university provided she wore the jilbab, joined the same university a year after me, and so she and one of her friends became my flatmates.

After a full day of lectures, my Sunday afternoon routine consisted of making rice and listening to music before starting lengthy homework and going over my notes of the day. From my small window in the flat on Remez Street in Haifa, I could see the sun dipping below the horizon. In the small, cosy kitchen, I'd put the radio on, and sometimes Abdel Halim Hafez would be singing my favourite song, 'Mawood'. The gentle sizzle of the small pot and the rich aroma of rice, olive oil and seven spices would fill the air. With a contented sigh, I'd stir the rice for one minute and add some water – two cups for each cup of rice, as Mum had taught me. Cooking was a ritual I'd refused before getting married, but it became a source of comfort among the lectures and assessments. The kitchen, though modest, felt like a shelter where I could unwind.

When the rice had finished cooking, I would plate my meal, the satisfaction of creating something enjoyable for myself a small but significant pleasure: in sitting to eat I felt a deep sense of independence. There were no approvals needed, no compromises to be made. Later, I would be sprawled across my bed with textbooks open and notes scattered around, balancing the academic demands and mathematical equations with

moments of happiness. The rhythm of these small decisions – whether to study now or later, when to eat and when to shower – was the freedom I had always longed for.

Returning home to Musab, I would always need to clean before hitting the books; I had to bring some order to the mess. Strangely, I found myself appreciating my mum's spotless place and her emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene. Nevertheless, every Wednesday night I embraced the opportunity to live away from home for a few days each week – even if it meant that I had to clean and tidy up before anything else.

My experience at Haifa University was transformative, even though the beginning was challenging. I dived into my studies, into political and social discussions too. I found a deeper knowledge of myself and my purpose. But my most profound discovery was the beauty of mathematics.

The purity of the mathematics I encountered at university fascinated me in a way nothing else ever had. I had always loved mathematics in school, but pure mathematics was different. It wasn't just numbers anymore; it was a language of truth, of patterns that felt eternal. My brain lit up when I worked through logic, deductions, inductions and proofs. It was as if I'd stumbled into a secret world designed for me. For my brain, it felt like home. I understood why mathematics was called 'the language of the universe'.

My favourite subject was probability. With all its complexity and elegance, probability showed me that life's uncertainties could still be shaped by reason. Though I didn't realise it, I needed that certainty. In a world where rules could shift without warning, where faith, family or culture could be used to suppress me, mathematics gave me something untouchable. It was a place where no-one's opinion could change the truth, where clarity existed without fear.

In many ways, mathematics became my quiet rebellion: I could think freely, trust my own mind, and begin to imagine a life beyond the limits imposed on me. It felt as though the universe was finally on my side. What

I didn't know was that it had other plans for me, a path I could neither see nor imagine.

Wolf in sheep's clothing

The hidden variable

His behaviour seemed normal in the first few months of our marriage. However, his true character would be the hidden variable that governed the course of our lives together.

Musab was three years older than me. He did not have any tertiary education. He said he would study after I finished my degree. Meanwhile, he worked on and off with his brother on some property renovation projects, but it never lasted. He would only work for a day or two before finding an excuse – usually related to his brother not having enough work for everyone – to stop. But then the same would happen with other employers.

In addition to his on-and-off employment, I couldn't help but notice unsettling aspects of his behaviour, particularly his tendency to adopt different facades in the presence of specific groups. In front of some people he was charming, open-minded and progressive, while for others he was a traditional, almost religious man. It was exhausting to keep track of.

One day, after returning from university, he followed me into the bedroom.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked sharply.

‘I'm just unpacking and getting ready to wash our clothes.’

When I retrieved a pair of knee-length shorts from my suitcase, purchased hastily for a mandatory sports activity, he scrutinised them with an intensity that surprised me.

‘Look how big they are,’ I said, half laughing, trying to diffuse his mood. ‘They are actually two sizes larger than my usual fit. I wanted them as loose as possible and as long as a pair of shorts could be.’

‘Ah, really?’ he said sarcastically.

‘Yes, really! Why are you acting weird?’

‘Why are you wearing shorts?’

His harsh tone surprised me, and I considered responding with cheek, to question his authority over my wardrobe choices. Instead, I opted for a more casual reply.

‘So?’ I shrugged, genuinely puzzled by the sudden scrutiny. What followed was beyond anything I had anticipated.

His hand struck my face with force, sending me reeling. I lost my balance and hit the ground.

Before my brain could process the pain and confusion, he was at my side, his attitude transformed from aggression to concern. He gently brushed my hair back, apologising profusely. ‘I’m so sorry. I don’t know what came over me.’

His voice, now filled with remorse, clashed with the violence of his actions. Panic clouded my thoughts. Shock had frozen me in place, my body momentarily unresponsive.

He continued: ‘Why did you make me hit you? Don’t you know how much I love you? I don’t want other men looking at you.’

I couldn’t find the words to respond, the sting of the slap still fresh on my face. Shame crept through me as his explanation sank in.

He pulled me into a tight embrace, showering me with kisses, saying: ‘It won’t happen again.’

I believed him.

I wanted to.

I needed to.

Nodding, I remained silent, fearing that speaking up might trigger another outburst.

‘I promise you, it won’t happen again,’ he reassured me, holding me close.

It did happen again. The cycle of violence, apology and forgiveness became a disturbing pattern, leaving me trapped with fear and uncertainty.

A few months later, an invitation for a wedding arrived: our first official appearance as a married couple. The soon-to-be-wedded pair belonged to the activist group we were involved in: Abnaa al-Balad, *Sons of the Homeland*.

Our connection with the group came through university for me and the town for Musab. The diverse mix within the group was fascinating, boasting the presence of some highly educated individuals, both Jews and Palestinians. I was very busy with my study, so my involvement was limited to attending some of their public events. Still, I found comfort and inspiration in being part of a community that shared my vision for the future. The intellectual conversations and interactions with academics on that level were invigorating.

Musab had stepped into the activist realm a few years earlier at the start of the First Intifada, following in the footsteps of one of his brothers. While he portrayed himself as an activist, there was a noticeable gap between his commitment and that of most members. During group engagements, I could sense his jealous gaze fixed on me each time anyone spoke to me directly. When we left the gatherings, he would be silent and refuse to talk to me. In time, he began coming up with reasons why I couldn't attend, preventing me from accompanying him to group gatherings.

Although he tried to stop me from spending time with the group, he seemed to be willing for me to attend the wedding of two of the group members with him. I was looking forward to it, anticipating with excitement the chance to reconnect with everyone and engage in meaningful conversations again. However, he had different plans.

After investing time and effort in carefully dressing up, styling my hair and applying make-up, I eagerly headed to the living room where he was indulging in a cigarette. Although I wanted to remind him how I felt about him smoking in the house, I knew it was not the right time.

'I'm ready,' I said. 'We can leave now.'

Dressed up in a new outfit that I'd bought for the occasion, I felt liberated and good about myself – a small yet significant step in embracing my married life. However, my positive energy was abruptly shattered.

‘You’re not going. I’m going with my brother,’ he said, his tone dripping with hostility.

‘The invitation is in *our* names, not your brother’s,’ I said.

I couldn’t understand what had triggered this about-face. He was fine while I was getting ready.

‘I don’t care! You will stay home,’ he shouted. He stubbed out his cigarette and rose from his seat. ‘This isn’t for you to attend. I want to have a good time tonight on my own.’

‘What is it? Is it the dress? What made you change your mind?’

‘I don’t want you to go. That’s it. I don’t have to have a reason,’ he said, announcing the end of any debate.

If he was going to stop me, then he needed to know I wouldn’t go quietly. I would fight, not merely to go to a wedding but for deeper things: for my choices, for my voice, for the right to decide. That was my thinking then.

Though he did stop me from going, I put up a good fight.

The next morning, I woke up around dawn and found him asleep next to me, still wearing his suit and stinking of alcohol. It was Sunday: time for me to return to my temporary sanctuary, Haifa University.

I tiptoed around the bedroom and got dressed as quickly as I could. I was thankful he was still asleep. My body bore the agonising evidence of the previous night’s violence, the red marks concealed beneath my clothing. Trying not to make a sound, I picked up the bag that I had packed the night before and crept from the room.

At the bottom of the stairs, I found his sister Zahra. Her cold eyes bore into mine.

‘I heard you screaming,’ she said. ‘It’s because you wanted to go to the wedding, right?’

There was a cruel smirk on her face that made me wince. I knew she disliked me, but not to this extent.

‘Get out of my way,’ I demanded, and pushed past her to the gate.

With each step, I remembered the sound of the belt hitting my body. Was this the loving husband to whom I'd escaped my parents? Was this the love and freedom I'd been promised? A part of me wanted to scream, *What have I done?* – but the rest of me was full of holes.

I fought back tears, trying to make sense of Musab's violence. I began to wonder if I'd made a huge mistake in marrying someone I barely knew. How much had we really got to know each other? What had we known before marrying, other than that we both liked reading and wanted to go to university? He was doing neither, so had he been lying to manipulate me? To make me believe he was in love with me? I wanted to cry, but the thought of anyone seeing me this distraught helped me hold them back.

Later on, in one of the classes, I encountered set theory. The lecturer explained that when you remove elements one by one from a finite set, the set becomes smaller; you can say you are creating a 'subset' of the original set. If you continue this process, you eventually reach a set with no elements, known as an 'empty set'. This is denoted by the Greek letter Φ , pronounced *fai*. Hearing that, I could feel how I was shrinking in this relationship.

In our marriage, I could feel how jealous Musab was – how possessive. Was it just a phase? Not really. Like a pattern, it kept repeating. And with every repetition, I lost a part of myself: like a finite set being reduced element by element. Elements of myself were taken away, making me a subset of myself.

I feared becoming an empty set. So I kept all the pieces stolen from me. I poured them into my journal, which I made sure he never saw. Writing became an almost daily practice.

All these words

All these words were written in pencil, to show the erosion of time and its

effects.

These words carry no title, for they are titleless, and I want them to have none.

*They bear no date, for I do not wish for a date to remind me of myself then.
It was written to be forgotten.*

They will float across seas, travel through the ether.

They were never his, and they will never be yours.

They will not belong to anyone, for no-one owns them.

If you read their lines, it is as if you have not read them at all.

For they were not written to be read for their lines, but for what lies between them.

هذه الكلمات

كل هذه الكلمات كتبت بالرصاص. لتظهر تآكل الزمن وآثاره.
هذه الكلمات تخلو من أي عنوان. فلا عنوان لها، ولا أريد لها أي عنوان.
تخلو من أي تاريخ، فلا أريد لها تاريخاً يذكرني، بنفسني حين سطرتها.
فما كتبت إلا لتنسى.

ستطفو في البحار، وتسافر عبر الأثير.
لم تكن له، ولن تكون لك.
لن تكون لأي شخص كان، فلا مالك لها.

إذا قرأت أسطرها، فكأنك لم تقرأها.
فهي لم تكتب لتقرأ أسطورها، وإنما ليقرأ ما بين السطور.

The empty set

Φ

An empty set is a set that has no elements: a space defined not by what it holds, but by what it has lost. I needed to fight not to be defined by my loss. I was not a Φ .

Once I returned to Haifa, my sole focus became my studies. My course was challenging and required my undivided attention, leaving no room for thoughts about the violence of the night before. I immersed myself in theorems and equations, attempting to find comfort in the world of numbers and order – where there is no place for feelings, just absolute beauty. My mind occasionally betrayed me, though, returning to the still-raw memories that made my entire body numb.

That Wednesday afternoon, when my last lecture ended, a knot of nerves twisted in my stomach at the thought of facing Musab. But I couldn't avoid going back, even though I was dreading it. When I finally arrived home late at night, he wasn't there. I was relieved, but I didn't know if I should unwind, especially since I wasn't feeling well, or stay on edge: ready to defend myself if he showed up and decided to continue where he left off.

I reached for some painkillers and decided to get some rest. The physical discomfort I had avoided admitting to myself for most of the week was now impossible to ignore; a throbbing ache in my stomach seemed to intensify by the minute. Finally, I heard Musab's voice downstairs in his father's guest room, and I asked his mum to send him upstairs urgently so he could take me to a doctor.

As it was night-time and the town clinic was closed, we headed to the emergency department in the closest hospital in Nazareth. After the doctor conducted a few tests, he quietly said: 'I'm sorry, but you have miscarried. It has been a few days since the baby was alive, so we must act immediately and remove it.'

When I heard these words, I was unable to find my breath. We weren't ready to have children – I was taking the birth control pill, afraid of falling

pregnant while studying – but losing a baby I hadn't known I was carrying felt cruel. I was stunned and heartbroken. How could such a fragile life have endured the stress I was experiencing every day? I looked at Musab and, for the first time, he had nothing to say.

At the doctor's recommendation, I was checked in to the hospital for an operation early next morning. I told Musab I wanted to sleep, so he left me alone.

The next morning, I woke up to activity bustling around me. It seemed distant, almost as if I was in a dream. Nurses and doctors moved with purpose, their voices muffled. I followed their instructions mechanically, not fully aware of what was happening. Before I knew it, I found myself in the sterile environment of the operating room, surrounded by bright lights and the humming of machinery.

The next thing I remember is waking up with a throbbing sensation in my abdomen. The hospital room smelt of antiseptic and something stale, like wilted flowers forgotten in a vase. Fluorescent lights buzzed over my head, too bright, too harsh.

I don't need this, I thought. I want to vanish.

I lay still on the stiff white sheets, my hands resting on the emptiness of my abdomen.

My mother sat beside me, her fingers knotting and unknotting in her lap. 'Should I call your father?' she asked. 'He is having a cigarette with Musab on the balcony.'

I shook my head. My throat felt dry, my body heavy. My father wouldn't know what to say; he matched my mum in this.

A nurse walked in, adjusting the drip without meeting my eyes. Then Musab walked through the door. He reached for my hand in front of the nurse and my mother. I moved mine as far from his as possible, letting it rest on the bed instead.

Mum sighed. 'You'll be okay,' she said awkwardly. 'It is not a big deal.'

I turned my head away and stared at the beige wall, willing myself not to cry. They didn't know. Couldn't know. I was their first to marry, their first to lose a child before even holding one. How could they understand the

hollowness inside me?

I opened my mouth to speak, to say, *I am not okay – and it is not just because of a lost baby*, but no words came. Instead, I pulled the sheet tighter around me, sinking deeper into loneliness and silence.

Just an hour before I was discharged, Musab's mum arrived and tried to offer some comfort in her own way: 'You're young; you'll have more chances to fall pregnant again.'

I wanted to scream, to cry, to yell at her, at him. I couldn't tell him: *This was all your fault!* Even though we were experiencing the same loss, it was like we were in two different worlds. There was no-one to talk to. *Not a big deal*, my mother had said. It was as if I was just ill, like I had the flu, or maybe recovering from a cosmetic procedure, like a nose job. Nobody really understood how much I was hurting. I was not prepared for this loss. I was not prepared to be defined by a void. I was not prepared to be a Φ .

At home, I lay down exhausted, wanting to sleep and hoping I wouldn't wake up. I wasn't sure where Musab disappeared to after having breakfast, but I was relieved to have time alone. I heard his laugh. He was downstairs with his family. It was safe to check on my sanity.

I opened the drawer where I kept all the letters that Musab and I had exchanged before our marriage. I felt the need to re-read them. Each page held broken promises and shattered dreams. I was married to a stranger. I placed the letters back. I needed to keep them as a reminder that I hadn't hallucinated the person I believed I was committing to.

As time passed, my sadness deepened. Each minute felt worse than the last. The loss was not just the miscarriage; it was also the loss of innocence, trust and a once-promising future. Each heartbeat throbbed with the ache of betrayal; the person I had trusted with my future was the cause of this devastating loss. The walls of our home seemed like a prison's, suffocating me with painful memories. I mourned my dreams and my good memories with him.

The next day, I woke up to his snoring. I wasn't as sore, and, although I had

a wounded heart, I wanted to get up and face the world.

I found Musab's mother in the backyard, where she was tending to her garden. I could smell the freshly turned soil and the promise of delicious fruits and vegetables. She was a stout woman who didn't mess around, and she was already knee-deep in her gardening.

'Good morning,' I greeted tentatively.

I wondered if she would say anything more about the miscarriage or if she would acknowledge the fight Musab and I had had before I left for university the week before. Zahra had heard my screams, so I was sure she had too.

She looked up at me, said, 'Good morning,' and then continued with the task at hand.

Sensing an opportunity to mend the tension between us, I talked to her about the garden. However, ignoring much of what I said and not bothering to look at me, she asked, 'Did you want some vegetables?'

I hesitated for a moment. I preferred to purchase my fruit and vegetables from the grocer in town, but I realised the importance of the peace I was trying to create between us.

'Yes, please.'

'Tell me what you want, and I will pick them for you,' she offered, her stern expression softening slightly.

I knew better than to intrude on her sacred gardening space, so I let her take the lead, especially since she didn't like anyone in her garden.

After carefully selecting an assortment of vegetables, she expertly arranged them in a basket. My gratitude was short-lived as she reached into her apron pocket, pulling out a small calculator. She pressed a few buttons and looked up from the calculator and, with no hesitation, told me what I needed to pay.

'For the vegetables, you owe me twenty shekels.'

I was taken aback, my eyes widening at the unexpected demand. Reluctantly, I accepted. 'Alright, I'll get the money.'

I marched back upstairs to bring her the money. This family certainly didn't fit the image my aunt had painted.

For a few weeks, Musab didn't torment me or demand anything of me. He let me focus on my studies and chores at home, and I didn't question him much about his comings and goings. I grieved alone.

One day, we joined our activist group for a rare social picnic. I had dressed carefully, not wanting to trigger Musab's possessiveness. The park buzzed with heat, laughter and the scent of grilled meat and cigarette smoke. He thrived on the attention, leaning back with a beer in hand, boasting about his alleged wealth and liberal values – the same man who'd condemned alcohol days earlier to my father. Nods and praise followed him, especially for 'letting' me study in Haifa.

I sat quietly, bottle of water sweating in my hand, surrounded by his hypocrisy. Unable to stay silent, I challenged him just enough to expose the contradiction. I asked him to pass me a can of beer – not that I wanted to drink. I just wanted to expose him and he knew it.

His response was swift and cruel: 'You should be quiet and shut your mouth.'

The tension boiled over, ending with him throwing an empty beer can at me. No-one said a word. Shame and rage burnt through me. At least now they saw him.

I was silent on the bus ride home, my face streaked with tears. Meanwhile, he chatted to everyone on the bus like nothing had happened, keeping up appearances. But to me he whispered threats and asked: 'Why do you always make me want to hit you?' His words cut deep.

The argument exploded at home. Feeling cornered, I finally called my father for help and, when he asked to speak to Musab, I watched my husband switch personas in an instant.

'She got upset over a beer,' he lied calmly. 'She wanted to drink beer.'

That moment cemented what I had been trying to ignore: Musab's violence was targeted, strategic and manipulative. And the more I spoke up, the more dangerous he became. But silence was never in my nature.

Life persisted in its familiar pattern. Musab continued to wield control over me, navigating his way without decent employment and dedicating most of his time to socialising with his brothers, uncles and friends. Meanwhile, I moved cautiously, acutely aware of the need to avoid provoking his unpredictable reactions.

As the annual memorial of Land Day, 30 March, approached, my excitement soared at the prospect of actively participating in the upcoming protest. My friend Yasmine and I immersed ourselves in the preparations, spending hours at the university, crafting flags and posters that would convey our solidarity with the cause.

The atmosphere was charged with determination and purpose, and there was a sense of urgency that pushed us to extend our efforts late into the night. Given the proximity of the protest to our residence, a practical decision was made to store all banners, flags and other paraphernalia at our house. It not only simplified the logistics but also allowed others interested in merely observing the protest a vantage point from which to watch the unfolding events. Musab surprised me with his encouragement and activism in front of Yasmine when she joined me at home to create additional posters on the eve of the event. His support, although possibly insincere, added an unexpected layer to our preparations. I was both intrigued by and cautious about his sudden involvement.

As the morning of the protest arrived, I found myself awake and alert, ready to embark and participate in this meaningful day. To my surprise, he rose soon after. The change in his routine heightened my anxiety, especially when he followed me into the bathroom.

Nervously, and avoiding eye contact, I showered hurriedly. I hoped that his uncharacteristic early rising indicated a positive temperament rather than a potential obstacle to my plans. I prayed silently that his mood would remain supportive, allowing me to participate in the protest with undisturbed enthusiasm and determination. But when I began to dry off, he moved closer to me and dashed my hopes.

‘You are not going,’ he said aggressively.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked. ‘I’ve already made the flags and posters,

and Yasmine is expecting us to go together. So I am going.'

I attempted to stand my ground, but the familiarity of his tone chilled me. Feeling desperate for some safety, I hurried to get dressed, hoping it would create some distance between us, but he came closer. He left almost zero room for my breath.

'This is not a protest for women,' he said, his voice louder with every word. 'Especially not my wife!'

Choosing silence over confrontation, I stepped around him and put on the rest of my clothes. I needed space, but he followed my every move.

'I don't care what you think,' I declared. 'I am going!'

I went to the bedroom to get my bag. Again, he followed me. I knew why he was angry. The protest was about bringing men and women together for a common goal. Whenever other men came into the picture, his jealousy would soar.

Suddenly, he seized my throat, a vice-like grip constricting my airways. Panic set in and I clawed at his hands, attempting to break free.

'I decide what you can and can't do.'

These were his last words before he left, locking the bedroom door behind him.

The girls who tried to escape

Challenging the boundaries

They challenged the boundaries, pushed against the system's constraints, testing the limits set by its governing rules.

My existence was dominated by fear and hopelessness. Each day, I clung to the hope that he would transform back into who I thought he was when I married him. But my prayers were never answered. Faced with an unchangeable situation, I sought comfort in my education. Meanwhile, many of my friends were still trapped by their parents' conservative control.

Mona, Sana, Zena and I were all very close friends. Mona was strong-headed, and she knew what she wanted. Just like mine, her dream was to go

to university, but she felt trapped. Sana shared that aspiration and was facing the same restrictions, but her mum was a bit softer so she had some space to breathe. As the eldest children in our families, we faced the strictest treatments. We used to call ourselves ‘parenthood guinea pigs’. Zena had an easier life. She was the youngest in her family. Her parents were much older – traditional and kind. She was not forced to wear the jilbab or cover her hair. It helped that many of her older brothers and sisters were educated or had married educated partners.

The three girls had one thing in common: they all wanted to study and experience life outside the town. They were looking at me living part-time in Haifa and studying at the university as an achievement. They did not know what I suffered behind closed doors.

Towards the end of my first year, Musab and I were woken up by a persistent but reserved knock on our door.

‘Majeda, wake up! Someone is knocking on the door and asking for you,’ Musab said, annoyed to be woken up so early.

My eyes flew open, worried some disaster had happened. ‘It is still dark,’ I replied. ‘Who would come this early?’

I put my robe on and rushed to the living area. That’s when I saw Nesreen, Zena’s older sister. Though petite, Nesreen seemed enormous as panic took hold of her.

‘Good morning,’ Nesreen said nervously. ‘Where is my sister Zena? You must know where she is.’ Though she was whispering, her tone had become angry, accusing.

I could not comprehend what she was asking or why she was asking me. *Why me?* That was the only thing in my head. *Why ask me?*

‘I have not seen Zena for over six months,’ I said sharply. Though I had nothing to hide, I felt defensive when I saw the blame in Nesreen’s eyes. ‘What happened?’

‘Zena, Mona and Sana have disappeared,’ she said. ‘We know they must have come to you in Haifa, either to the university or the flat you’re renting

with the other girls.’ Her eyes filled with tears and fear. But it seemed that her dread of the information spreading outweighed her concern for the terrible danger her younger sister might be in.

‘What do you mean “disappeared”? I came from Haifa yesterday but did not see any of them. Why would they even go to Haifa? How can you be sure they went to Haifa?’ I was trying to be logical.

‘I’m not. But you are the only one who lives out of town and has a close relationship with them. If they have not come to you, they must have told you where they are,’ she said, her voice trembling.

‘I have not seen or spoken to any of them for months,’ I replied honestly.

Nesreen seemed to believe me at last. ‘Please, don’t tell anyone about their disappearance,’ she said. ‘We will find them.’

Her pleading eyes darted between Musab and me, and a cold wave of fear flowed through my veins. I could perhaps understand why Mona and Sana would escape, but not Zena. Her parents were not the same. They were more moderate and did not force her to wear the jilbab as Mona’s and Sana’s parents did.

When the girls were found safe a few days later, their families put them through a hymen examination by a female gynaecologist who confirmed they were still virgins. Still, they were beaten, threatened with being killed and put under a house curfew.

Mona was interrogated by Sheikh Shafiq himself. She was driven by her dad to his house and was questioned there. He suggested that having Mona marry an older man – in his forties – would be a solution for the shame she had brought on her family. The girls were not allowed to communicate with anyone, including each other and me, and no-one knew where they’d been or how they were found.

Later that year, Mona accepted marrying a cousin her age (a common practice back then) who lived in another town. She just wanted a way out of her parents’ prison. It was only her wedding day that finally broke the curfew her parents had enforced after the incident.

As for Sana, she started university a couple of years later. She then married and lived in another town. She still wears the jilbab and became a

devoted religious woman.

Zena, who was not forced to wear the jilbab, chose to wear it after she finished her university degree and was married. She also became a devoted wife and mother.

All three girls ended up working in good positions and having productive lives. A couple of years later, Mona explained to me that they just wanted a few days of freedom. They needed to breathe. The extreme restrictions their parents had enforced were suffocating them. Zena just went along for the adventure.

The shape underneath

Topology

Topology is the study of shapes and spaces that remain unchanged under continuous deformations – like stretching or bending but not tearing. It asks not what a space looks like, but what it fundamentally is, beneath all transformation.

In my second year of university, I decided to add a major in education to my degree in mathematics. The subject of education posed no significant challenges, and I revelled in the work and swiftly completed my studies.

Despite what was happening during those years, I loved being at Haifa University. I still remember the activities arranged by the Arab student union. One of them was the live performance by Rim Banna, a Palestinian singer and activist from Nazareth who sang from her first album *Jafra*, but the highlight of the night was Rim singing Tawfiq Zayyad's poem 'Unadikum' (أناديكُم). I had to come up with a good excuse to stay on campus that night and not to return to my town as arranged. It was an unforgettable evening – one that left us suspended between the fire of resistance and the weight of helplessness.

In my third year, I secured a part-time position as a mathematics teacher at

the same high school I attended as a student. Returning to the school stirred a peculiar mix of emotions. I went to the classroom where I had been a Year 12 student only three years earlier, adjacent to the teachers' room. Struggling to recall the specifics of my past, I found myself unable to pinpoint where I had sat for a whole year. My memories of my entire Year 12 experience had been completely erased.

I loved my job as a teacher. I was able to teach the subject I adored, manage a class of up to forty students and change many students' lives. But for Musab it was different. His interpretation of my job was as twisted as his understanding of our relationship. It wasn't a team effort – we weren't partners in this marriage. It was all about what he thought he was entitled to. He manipulated the financial side, believing my paycheque was his reward for funding my education. In truth, he'd paid only a small fraction of my first-year fees. He used that against me, tried to keep me under his thumb. 'I funded your studies, so now I own every shekel you earn,' he'd say.

He could have earned his own money, but Musab couldn't sustain a job for long. Maybe he didn't want to. He acted as if he was entitled to roam freely without taking any responsibility for the future we were trying to build. My father, in a gesture of goodwill, offered him a job at his stonemason's company. After a mere ten days or so he quit, as he always did, and returned to existing as the dreamer he was, conjuring grand ideas in his mind that never materialised.

Part of me missed the warmth and affection he had once displayed, but those moments had been brief and were now lost – as if our beginning was all a dream. In public, and in rare instances when he was in a good mood, I caught glimpses of the man I had married. However, those moments became increasingly scarce.

He chose a life empty of any personal development. The decision to forgo university and to instead 'work' allowed him to create elaborate lies about business trips, only to return home empty-handed after days at a time. During his unexplained disappearances, I maintained my routine, including going to the hairdresser to keep up appearances. Once, when I had finished

at the salon, I decided to visit my parents, and the topic of Musab's absence arose because, yet again, he had disappeared for several days without telling me where he was going or when he'd be returning.

'You were at the hairdresser?' my mother asked. 'Aren't you worried about him? That something may have happened? That he could be dead?' Concern was written all over her face.

My response was pragmatic, bordering on insensitive: 'Well, if he is dead and we have a funeral, do you want me to attend with curly hair? Or would you prefer my hair to be styled in the way everyone expects it to be?'

In that moment, I faced an undeniable fact: the love I once felt for him had vanished. It wasn't a flicker of doubt but a recognition of the irreparable harm he had caused me. Thereafter, I abandoned the hope that he would change and focused on my studies.

I had become fascinated with topology, the study of shapes that could bend, stretch, twist and stay intact as long as they had no tearing. I would immerse myself in these concepts and see my own life reflected in them. I had been pulled thin, folded into corners I never chose, and yet, like a topological space, my essence remained intact. I was whole until I experienced loss.

His verbal abuse dug a hole in me. His financial control, his possessiveness punctured me with small yet numerous holes. The first time he laid a hand on me, a deeper hole was formed. When he kicked me in my stomach and I miscarried, a void lived inside me. But the first hole was made by my father's belt. All these holes formed a tear and converted me into someone else. A different topological space.

Bring the camera

Equilibrium point

I hoped for my graduation to become my equilibrium point. In mathematics, equilibrium is the point where opposing forces balance each other out. The moment where four years of imbalance, struggle

and inequality found a counterweight, if only for a while, in my life.

My graduation date was set. I had passed all my exams with good scores. Waves of pride, relief and fear embraced me. I was proud of my achievement; a bachelor's degree in mathematics is never easy to complete, let alone while juggling a dysfunctional marriage, an abusive husband and the added challenge of being a Palestinian woman in a discriminatory environment, suffocated by three axioms. I was relieved to be done with the many gruelling exams I had studied for, each requiring a month or more of preparation. And although going to Haifa had been an escape for me, the burden was heavy. Yet I was afraid that I would not even be able to go to my graduation to celebrate my achievement, and that added a bitter layer to it all.

I had no car, no driver's licence. I needed Musab's permission to go and, with scarce transportation in the afternoon, I needed him to drive me to the graduation ceremony at the university. Luckily, he agreed. At that moment, I allowed myself to hope that maybe, just maybe, life would be better once he saw what I had accomplished. And maybe it would inspire him to pursue his own degree.

I put on my nicest clothes, a beige long-sleeve shirt and a pair of black trousers, flat shoes. I straightened my hair and pulled it up into a style that felt perfectly nineties. My make-up was simple, understated. No nail polish. When I looked in the mirror, I saw myself. I smiled at my reflection, but I avoided my own eyes. I wasn't ready to face the sadness hiding behind my pride. Still, I would take photos this time.

'Bring the camera,' I requested before we left for Haifa.

When my name was called, I saw his face turn red, then pale. I ignored him and walked to the stage confident, secure and grounded in myself. This was my moment. My hard work. My achievement. I could hear my heart pounding, the sound of a long-forgotten joy and pride. The photos he took did not capture that.

Now I had graduated, and had not reached anything near an equilibrium

point, I was eager to transform our house into a place that at least *physically* felt like a home. This was probably to compensate for the growing chaos in my life and my thirst for warmth, but all I wanted was to feel like it was *my* place. I wanted it to look like mine. Maybe, I told myself, new walls and a polished floor could erase the chill embedded in the old ones and hold a newborn who bore no fault in coming to this mess. I was a couple of months pregnant.

The prospect of renovating our aged house was a desperate attempt to infuse comfort into the fabric of our daily lives, maybe even give it some purpose. After all, he was wasting money on himself and his trips anyway. It would be better to use my steady income as a teacher on something useful.

The first order of business in my ambitious renovation plan was the front gate. It was currently used by both households, blurring the boundaries between our living spaces. Determined to establish a semblance of independence and privacy, I envisioned the installation of two gates. One would gracefully guide our visitors directly upstairs to our part of the house, while the second would lead to his parents' house, ensuring a clear border between the two spaces – and spare me from seeing Zahra's face every time I left the house.

Making this happen was far from straightforward. Musab agreed to the concept of renovation, but it became another battleground in our marriage. Our house demanded a comprehensive overhaul, but the prospect of change was used against me. He weaponised the renovation and turned it into a prolonged ordeal, a means of asserting control and inflicting suffering.

What began as a hopeful endeavour quickly transformed into a breeding ground for new tensions. The inequality kept tilting in his direction, despite my resistance. In my fight against being reduced further, I sometimes created tools for him to diminish me even more. But deep down my power was directed somewhere else.

4

Vectors

A vector (v) in mathematics is more than just a number. In addition to its magnitude, it has direction.

My children were vectors. They originated from me, they have their personalities, their strengths, but they also have their own directions.

Unlike my siblings and me, considered coordinates in the family, my vectors run outwards with their own force on their own path, claiming their own territories and destinies.

The beginning of motherhood coincided with the final stretch of my bachelor's degree. The news of my pregnancy brought forth a variety of emotions: a delicate balance between joy and anxiety. Although the timing seemed convenient, I was still faced with the difficulties of a shaky marriage, and my husband's escalating unpredictability cast doubt over our future.

Sharing the news with my parents revealed a stark contrast in perspectives. They were ecstatic because they had urged me for years to embrace motherhood and have a child. They believed it would cure the challenges in my marriage. In their well-intentioned but misguided optimism, they assumed that the impending arrival of a child would miraculously transform a beast into an ideal husband and responsible father.

'Now that you have a baby, he'll become a good father, a good husband. You will see,' my mother stated proudly. 'He'll start working, settle into a job and take care of you and the baby.'

I wanted to believe her.

'You'll see,' she kept repeating. 'You will be a happy family.'

Motivated by my parents' encouragement, I pinned my hopes on my unborn child as a catalyst for positive change. Miserable and dissatisfied, I was hopeful that my baby could salvage my marriage, which had been failing for almost four years.

A huge responsibility on you, my little yet-to-be-born child, I found myself thinking.

Musab's initial happiness did little to alter the toxic dynamics of our

relationship. He continued in his pattern, and I continued in mine. I hesitated about confronting him too frequently, fearing that he would hurt me and our child. Handling our day-to-day was a delicate process, a careful navigation of when to question and when to remain silent.

I busied myself in preparing for the arrival, transforming the spare room, once a neglected space, into a haven for my baby. I immersed myself in decorating, meticulously selecting clothes and gathering all the essentials for the birth.

Both my parents and Musab's family deemed what I was doing excessive, but I brushed their opinions aside. After all, his family never extended a helping hand, leaving me to manage the preparations alone. To their credit, my parents paid for most of the furniture we needed.

During this pregnancy, at the age of twenty-one, I decided to learn how to drive. I did this without telling Musab. His frequent trips provided the perfect opportunity for me to begin empowering myself, even though I knew I would face severe consequences if he were to find out.

Fully aware of the risk I was taking, I was determined to stand up for myself and do what I needed to do. Choosing a female instructor was a strategic move to deflect any questions or suspicions or allegations he might use against me. I navigated the narrow roads of our small town with the purpose of carving out a space for autonomy in my life.

However, in a town where everyone knew everyone's business, maintaining any semblance of secrecy was a useless undertaking. When he returned from one of his trips, he confronted me about my secret endeavour.

'When did you start learning to drive?' he demanded.

Rather than succumbing to fear, I maintained my composure, sensing that a strategic approach was essential. I responded calmly, 'What's the problem? The driving instructor is a female, and I'm paying her with my own money. I need to go to work, and where I'm teaching is too far to walk.'

I was highly aware of how to appeal to his self-interest. Sensing his

frown could turn into something sinister, I instinctively placed a protective hand on my growing belly, recognising the vulnerability that pregnancy brought. My next move would be crucial, I knew. With a change of tone, I continued to elaborate on the practicalities.

‘I don’t want to keep waking you up to take me to school. And when you aren’t home, I still need to go to school, work and make money for us,’ I reasoned, addressing his concerns about inconvenience.

Reluctantly, he consented.

As the pregnancy progressed, I maintained a sense of routine, working at the school diligently until the final weeks. I put on barely any weight during pregnancy, and I used to lose a few kilos after each fight. My mum used to call it ‘the Musab diet’. I had a mixture of feelings; I was happy about becoming a mum but also worried about pinning my dream of fixing my failing marriage on a baby.

Beautiful hazel eyes

Vector 1

When the contractions began, I was thirty-eight weeks pregnant. Musab drove me to the hospital. We barely spoke to one another. We were about to welcome our first child into the world, but that had done nothing to change the dynamic of our relationship. He focused on driving while I concentrated on managing each breath.

Once we reached the hospital, the doctor, noting the increasing frequency of contractions, promptly ushered me into a delivery room. Men weren’t allowed in this area unless they were a doctor or a nurse. Consequently, Musab was confined to the waiting room while I endured giving birth alone – not that I wanted him to be with me.

The birthing experience was far from straightforward. Each moment felt like an eternity, and the labour lasted more than eighteen hours. Time seemed to crawl, and I yearned for relief after being induced without being asked or consulted.

After a strenuous final push at 6:20 am, I heard the tender cry of my

newborn. As the baby was examined to ensure his wellbeing, I was not sure what to feel.

‘He’s a beautiful, healthy boy,’ a nurse said, and gently placed the tiny, vulnerable 2.7 kilogram newborn on my chest.

Our eyes met for the first time, and I fell in love. I’ve never seen such beautiful eyes before: hazel and almond-shaped with long, sweeping eyelashes. Thin, light-brown hair covered his soft skull, and I noticed his long fingernails when he scratched my neck.

At almost twenty-two years old, I found myself in uncharted territory, despite my attempts at preparation through reading. The depth of the experience far outweighed any academic knowledge I had gained, and I felt I was lacking guidance.

A nurse took my baby for some more tests while a doctor placed forty stitches to repair the tear I had sustained. I was overcome by feelings of vulnerability and wonder at these new-found emotions. When the nurse returned my baby and guided me through breastfeeding for the first time, the sensation flooded me with tears.

‘Hello, habibi,’ I whispered to the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.

On that day, I promised him his own life, force, path, decisions and direction. This is why I consider him my first vector, Vector 1.

I didn’t really like the idea of picking a traditional name and, since Musab was the youngest of his brothers, we didn’t have to name our son after his grandfather. We had the freedom to choose any name we wanted for our baby. Looking down at this precious boy cradled in my arms, the name that resonated most with me, of the few we had shortlisted, meant *rebellious*. The name felt unique and meaningful, and it was a name that I loved from a song that was popular during the First Intifada. I wanted our son to have a name that stood out and had its own significance, not just a name passed down out of tradition. I couldn’t be happier with my choice.

Musab joined us in the room after an hour or so. He spoke gently as he admired our son: ‘He is beautiful.’ Observing his tenderness towards our child, I couldn’t help but ponder the common belief that having a baby could mend the fractures in a strained marriage. His genuine admiration and

the shared joy over our newborn hinted at the possibility of a renewed connection. Well ... perhaps I wanted to believe that.

The hospital stay stretched over five days, a period of intensive learning and adjustment. Immobile for the initial days, I dedicated myself to mastering the essentials of caring for my baby. The nurses assisted in changing his nappies and bathing him until my strength returned. Each task I was able to take on was a small achievement, a step towards embracing the challenges and joys of motherhood. As I learnt to breastfeed, change nappies, bathe him and hold him close, the bond between my son and me deepened. The vulnerability I felt in those initial moments transformed into a great sense of responsibility and unconditional love. Becoming a mum was like starting a whole new life – if only I could erase the past one.

After I was discharged from the hospital, the dynamics at home brought my hopes for a change to an end. It only took my husband one day to shatter it all. While my mum generously assisted me during the initial couple of days, Musab seemed uninterested. When our baby cried in the dead of night, he was unmoved – sleeping or pretending to – and refused to lend a hand. The loneliness crept in, and it was now apparent that I was essentially a single mother raising a newborn. It did not come as a surprise that his family offered no help during this challenging period.

Interestingly, part of me remained indifferent to Musab's and his family's attitudes. My focus had shifted to this tiny, dependent being who needed me more than anyone else. Despite feeling lonely, I embraced my role as a mother with determination. My baby became my driving force, propelling me forward.

I did not understand that one could feel so much love but not be able to show it until I had my first child. Although my love for my son was mighty, I could not show it as much as I hoped to. Was it the hole in my heart? The one that transformed me? Most people assumed I just wasn't 'used to it' yet.

They did not know topology.

At the end of the three months' maternity leave, I decided to take an additional three months. These six months – full of baby vomit and drool,

washing, cleaning and cooking, and lots of baby talk and baby language – passed very sluggishly. My vector did not sleep well for many months, either. Paediatricians had run out of answers, but then someone suggested a soy-based baby formula. When, as a result, he started eating and sleeping better, we figured out that my son had a dairy intolerance.

In these six months, I almost forgot my name. I was *Mum*, *Mummy* and sometimes *Mother* – but the hardest of all was being called *Em* ... In my culture, once parents have their first male child, they stop being called by their first names out of respect. They start being called *Em* (for mothers) or *Abu* (for fathers) followed by their child's name – as if they cease to exist as a person and continue to live only as parents. I missed my name. I was looking forward to adults' conversations and using my brain. I missed mathematics.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Musab decided to visit his brother, who lived in Australia. Despite my objection, he left me in charge of our four-month-old baby and went. Although I was relieved that he was away, to have a chance and space to breathe, I was furious. He was not working, did not give birth, was not exhausted from caring for a baby twenty-four hours a day; he did not go through many sleepless nights or changes to his body and his hormones. He simply had not earned the right for a trip.

The absence of childcare facilities in the town posed a significant obstacle to my return to work. I would not leave him with Musab's mum, not that she would have agreed to that anyway. Leaving my son with my mother was the only viable option. And that would mean that either Musab would have to drive me to my parents', to drop off our son, and then to the school, or I would need to buy a car so I could do it all myself.

'Yeah ... in your dreams,' he said, when I presented this reality, and then he went back to sleep.

Three days a week I faced the daunting task of walking downhill to my parents' house carrying my son, his baby bag and my work bag. The physical challenge was intensified during adverse weather conditions, especially on cold winter days. Only when it was raining heavily would Musab give me a lift. With all the trials I was facing, I was still determined

to fulfil my responsibilities as both a mother and a teacher.

The return trip mirrored the morning ordeal, with the increased pressure of climbing back up the hill. Occasionally, my father was available to drive us home, providing some relief. However, when he wasn't around, there was no choice but to make the trek. I was losing weight and sinking deeper into a sense of gloom with each passing day. My wardrobe turned grey and black. The tension in my life was accelerating.

I recall one particular night when my baby was finally asleep after a tiring evening routine. Suddenly there was a pounding at the door. It was late, probably 9 or 10 pm.

'Please open the door before the baby wakes up,' I called to Musab, who to my knowledge was watching TV in the living area.

The bangs on the door kept coming, more forcefully. No response from him. I put on my robe and walked to the door, fearing the worst and wondering where he had vanished to. I was shocked to be faced with five male Israeli police officers, guns at their sides, at the front door.

'Hey, what do you want? Why are you here?' My voice shook, but I pretended to be brave. *Maybe someone reported his violence against me? Really? Someone finally cared!* My hope was shattered by their answer.

'Khepoos,' said their leader in angry Hebrew. *Search.* 'Tazoozi!' he demanded. *Move!* 'Where is your husband?'

'I don't know. He is not here,' I said, my blood boiling. Confusion surrounded me. I gathered all my strength to hide my shivering and asked, 'What are you searching for?' I had never been in a confrontation with the police until then.

Providing no explanation, they started in the main bedroom, opening cupboards, emptying drawers. The bedsheets were taken off and the mattress was lifted. Nothing stayed where it was. I rushed to check on my son as I heard a soft, restless whimper coming from his room. Two of the officers followed me.

'Be quiet, please,' I pleaded naively. 'My son is asleep. Search the other

rooms, not this one.'

'Move the baby now, or I will move him!' an officer yelled.

Feeling defenceless and violated while five men in uniform raided my baby's bedroom, I quickly lifted him into my arms, holding his soft body as a piece of my own flesh. I left them searching his bedsheets seriously and inconsiderately. I watched them desecrate my baby's sheets, my baby's bed, my baby's toys and everything innocent and pure in this room, in this troubled house. And all I could think was: *Where the hell are you, Musab? You are never around when I need you.*

They finally left the house in a mess that was less painful than the mess inside me. They had found nothing.

I tried to settle my baby. His cries filled the house; piercing, desperate wails mixed with my silent tears of fear and confusion. I rushed to the kitchen to make his bottle, and a noise coming from the attic, which was part of the ceiling of the kitchen, almost gave me a heart attack. I gathered what was left of my shattered courage and looked up. What I saw was the last thing I expected: Musab.

'Did they go'? he asked casually.

'You bastard!' I yelled before collapsing on the floor. 'You were here this whole time, leaving me to face all this alone? What are you made of? You call yourself a man? Are you even a human being?'

'Shush! They will hear you. They are still around; they are looking for weapons,' he said after he hopped down from the attic to the kitchen floor, then jumped from the window to the neighbour's roof and disappeared.

'I just hate you!' I screamed, unleashing years of rage in a single, shattering burst.

My chest felt like it was being ripped open, my heart a ball of thorns. I stood, finished making up the bottle and returned to my crying baby. My fear had been replaced by bitter disappointment.

Why would he own a weapon? I wondered. *It was not like he would ever use it.* I wondered if he was in a middle of a deal buying or selling it. Or had they come looking in the wrong house?

This type of search was (and still is) a common practice in the 1948

region. The authorities turned a blind eye to the violence that spread in the community, except for the frequent searches for weapons that they would then collect, write a fine for and resell or distribute. As a community, we knew we were only counted as citizens for taxation purposes and to serve the propaganda of ‘the only democracy in the Middle East’. When it came to our safety, the government never cared. It still doesn’t.

My mum looked after my son for a year or so, while I worked part-time at the school, until the first childcare centre was opened in the town. It was a great opportunity, mainly because I could afford to pay for a few days of professional care for my son instead of relying on my mother’s support. But life took an unexpected turn: I discovered I was pregnant again. Naively, I hoped that Musab would offer a helping hand. I was looking after a toddler, working, taking care of the mess at home because of the renovation and on top of that dealing with his abusive nature. I was exhausted. I needed to breathe.

So when an all-expenses-paid work trip to Spain came up, I was excited. It was a rare opportunity for my career, and my mother had agreed to take care of my son. But when I shared the news with Musab, his mood turned dark. I pleaded with him to understand. ‘My mum will have the baby. You won’t need to do anything,’ I said.

He still refused.

Frustrated, I asked, ‘Why are you allowed to go overseas and I’m not?’

The air between us felt toxic, thick with cigarette smoke and resentment.

His response was brutal: ‘Because I’m better than you. The Quran says men are superior.’

Trying to explain the true meaning of what he was referring to was pointless. He would interpret it as he wished. As many Muslim men do.

When I challenged him, reminding him how he’d used my money for his own trips to I didn’t know where, he snapped. Without warning, he kicked me in the stomach.

I dropped to my knees in pain, clutching my belly.

He shouted, 'You're not going, and I'll tell the tradespeople not to come back until you start listening.' He had weaponised the renovation, turning its cessation into a threat he used all the time.

Days later, another pregnancy was lost. In hospital, I lay hollowed out and heartbroken. He showed no remorse, no emotion.

A few months later, I learnt I was pregnant again. I was fearful, scarred from the two miscarriages. Every moment was filled with both anxiety and hope. I was angry, my resentment aimed at myself more than at him. I kept asking myself: *Why did I choose this person to be my husband, to be the father of my children?*

As a natural problem solver, I viewed my situation as a puzzle I couldn't work out. It was a revelation, admitting that I utterly despised the man I chose to share my life with. This realisation marked a turning point, a statement of my worth and a refusal to accept the toxicity that had become my living nightmare.

Admitting to such intense contempt felt like acknowledging a fracture in my own identity, in who I believed myself to be. It wasn't just the anger that overwhelmed me; it was also the sadness that accompanied it.

In the midst of all this, my son was growing up to be a beautiful and smart boy. He was able to read by the age of three. First, I thought he had just memorised the stories I was reading for him, but then he surprised me by reading new ones. We used to read every night and a few times a day.

One night, my son's bedtime story seemed to be for me. *The Elephant and the Rope* talks about a baby elephant that was tied to a tree with a thin rope to keep her from running away. The baby elephant tries to break free but fails time after time. Eventually, she stops trying. Years pass and she grows bigger and stronger, yet she is still tied with the same thin rope. Even though she could now break free in one step, she does not. Because the hardest rope to break is the invisible one inside her mind. It was a very clear and powerful message.

In time, my son would grow to be a self-reliant young man. It seemed,

even when he was very young, that he was content with himself, as if he knew he needed to be strong and independent. I was sure that he would turn many heads when he was older.

New Year's surprise

Vector 2

On New Year's Eve, I was the mother of a toddler at just twenty-four years old and had been miserably married for seven years when I found myself contending with the pains of labour for the second time. As I was only about thirty-two weeks into my pregnancy, the situation was far from ideal.

When we arrived at the hospital, Musab argued with a nurse to get me admitted immediately.

'She doesn't look like she's in much pain,' she said, glancing at me but speaking to Musab.

'She is,' he replied. 'She just doesn't show it.'

You pig, I thought. You knew. All these years, you knew when I was in pain. You just didn't care.

The labour was intense, leaving me physically exhausted and unable to walk for days after; however, the joy of welcoming a baby girl into the world outweighed the challenges. She was my Vector 2: a tiny and underweight premature baby who needed extra care.

Heartache marked the early days of her life as she remained in the hospital for two weeks under close observation. I found it very difficult to leave the hospital without my newborn daughter in my arms. It was a daily struggle and, even though he drove me to the hospital daily to breastfeed her, Musab neglected to acknowledge how much pain I was in whenever I walked or tried to get in and out of the car.

Seeing how fragile she was made me furious. I felt helpless to do anything for her; it was my duty to protect her, and I couldn't even do that. I couldn't take her home, but I couldn't stay in the hospital with her, either. I felt isolated and lonely, with neither my husband nor my parents comprehending the extent of my distress. I was always assumed to be a

strong woman. It was tough for me to flip that image and show how fragile I was. *Vulnerability* was not in my vocabulary.

My parents stepped in to take care of my son during my daily visits to the hospital; however, this support only extended so far. I was left to cope with the mental pressure alone.

After two weeks of anxious waiting, my newborn's health stabilised, and I was overjoyed to finally bring her home. However, the joy didn't last long. As a baby, my daughter had problems with her ears for a long time; they were constantly infected. It became a continuous source of distress for her and for me, depriving us of sleep night after night. Her relentless crying was matched only by Musab's frustration, and our days were filled with tension. No number of hospital visits or rounds of antibiotics helped, and eventually surgery was recommended as a solution. Musab refused, however, adamant that she was too young. I understood where he was coming from, but he didn't deal with the discomfort she felt or the stress I was under.

At six months old, she started attending the same childcare as her brother. My son was so happy he had his sister with him all day. He acted like her bodyguard, his teachers used to tell me. He never showed any signs of jealousy, as many children do when they have a new sibling. He was too confident for that, I guess. I was a proud mother but far from a happy one.

Musab remained steadfast in his decision regarding the ear surgery until she turned three. After the surgery, she was finally able to sleep through the night and no longer cried all day. I was finally able to have a peaceful night's rest. My baby girl was petite in the first three years, way below the recommended average height and weight for her age. Only following her operation did she start to develop at the expected rate.

In time, I saw in her a remarkable emotional intelligence. I'll never forget the day she asked me, with a hint of sadness in her voice, 'Why does my father love my cousins more than me?' She was only around four years old, and she had seen him playing with them in the frequent occasions we visited my parents or when my brothers and sisters visited us with their children. He was acting and pretending to be the cool, nice uncle. He did

not fool me, but my poor daughter was obviously saddened by his behaviour. I was taken aback, but I tried to find the right words to comfort her.

Pulling her close, I wrapped my arms around her and whispered, 'He does love you. He wants to make sure our extended family feels loved, too.'

She became an assertive, strong child. She was as smart as her brother and as pretty as him, her head full of dark-blond curly hair. She was never a princess, and later she became my furious warrior.

Tired of being left short of cash, despite having returned to work, I took the bold step of opening a personal bank account. I diligently deposited my monthly salary into that account, instead of putting it in our sock drawer or our shared account. I was determined to secure a financial lifeline for myself and my children. Unfortunately, my efforts didn't make much difference.

In a town where everyone knew everyone, Musab would walk into the bank and claim he had my permission to access my account. Of course, the tellers believed him, no questions asked. No paperwork. No verification. The law, rarely enforced in our Palestinian towns and villages, was more of a formality than a protection. He abused his access to the funds, despite my efforts to shield them, and confrontations over unauthorised withdrawals became routine.

Desperate for comfort, I turned to my parents, pleading for permission to divorce Musab. Surprisingly, they didn't oppose the idea, but their suggested conditions revealed a disregard for the wellbeing of my children. They proposed that I leave them with their father, naively believing that Musab's new-found single parenthood would either compel him to step up and take on the responsibility of raising them or, failing that, he would appreciate me more and hence treat me better. What a theory!

I knew him better than anyone; there was no way he would invest time or effort in caring for the kids if they stayed with him. Instead, and without a second thought, he would delegate the responsibility to one of his sisters.

It was an impossible choice, forcing me to navigate between the yearning for personal freedom and the maternal instinct to shield my children from neglect.

The constant abuse and lies only intensified my desire for change. I needed to breathe, and my oxygen was learning. So when an opportunity presented itself, I seized it. Every six years, the teachers' union provided a sabbatical that covered professional development through an accredited one-year course or the first year of a university degree. I chose the path of a master's in mathematics education. Though it was a three-year commitment, Musab did not object because, as he put it, it would distract me from annoying him.

Undeterred by his lack of support, I plunged back into the world of academia. I earned a paid scholarship for the second year of the master's, further fuelling my determination to continue. As the third year approached, I received another scholarship and used my part-time teacher's salary to cover the remaining expenses. I was working, studying, raising two children and dealing with a broken marriage, but the logistics of attending university had improved at least; a convenient bus service now connected our town directly to the university. Then, by the third year, I was able to buy a second-hand car and be more independent.

The pursuit of my master's became a means of reclaiming a sense of liberation and purpose. Nothing was changing or getting better with Musab, and I knew that I needed to keep upskilling. I needed to fight the helplessness and worthlessness he made me feel. As he used to spend most nights out, I used that time to study, write and breathe. Meanwhile, my daughter was growing into an independent, strong, smart and single-minded five-year-old vector with her own defined path and direction.

Out of the blue

Vector 3

In the second year of my master's studies, I fell pregnant again. I met this

revelation with a heavy heart. I had come to terms with the inevitable demise of my marriage, but the prospect of bringing another child into the toxic environment seemed unbearable.

I welcomed another precious daughter, Vector 3, into the world in the early months of 2000. However, instead of the softness expected to blossom in a mother's heart, the rock that had begun to form years earlier grew layer by layer, hardening with each child. I wasn't becoming gentler; I was becoming stronger. I had to be. For me, for them.

My new baby also faced health challenges, experiencing gastro-esophageal reflux until she was about seven months old, and she struggled to sleep. Sometimes in the day she would turn blue, and I would scream in panic. I remember more than once that Musab's mother had to run upstairs, turn her upside down and tap on her back until she started breathing again and her colour returned to normal. I found myself staying awake throughout the night to ensure she did not suffocate. Regrettably, my memories of those early days are dominated by the events that followed. Musab's frequent absences continued, and he became both more aggressive and increasingly abusive.

Following my daughter's birth, I sought help from a cousin who was happy to care for the kids. She not only babysat the two days I went to university; she also shouldered the responsibility of cooking them the food I had prepared beforehand and putting them to bed if I was late getting home. Their father wouldn't do any of this. Aunt Reem also understood the gravity of my situation and stepped in to help, offering a supportive hand in managing the children's care during this crucial period. My mother, while willing to assist, had her plate full being a grandmother to my siblings' children. Moreover, her disapproval of my decision to return to study and not stay at home as a mother strained our relationship.

My third baby was only a couple of months old when I submitted my thesis and completed my master's degree: a moment that was meant to be a celebration of academic achievement and personal resilience. I graduated

with a final mark of 92 per cent, qualifying for an outstanding achievement certificate. Once again, I savoured the rare sweetness of accomplishment.

Musab refused to come with me to the graduation ceremony, but I didn't care. My father, who by then had become less conservative, came instead, quietly supportive in his own way. I wore a nice white half-sleeve top and a pair of black trousers. I straightened my hair and put on light make-up. I looked in the mirror and saw myself: bearing more scars, a quiet storm and deeper sadness within, but also with more pride and a clearer understanding of my situation. Most importantly, I was a step closer to freedom.

When they called my name, I turned to my father and asked him to take as many photos as he could. I wanted to remember this moment, not just as an achievement but also as a reclaiming of myself. I walked up to the stage, my heart full. I had done it all, working, raising three children and studying late into the night, and I was full. Full of pride, full of strength, full of the quiet power that comes from rising against all odds, the power that was boiling in secrecy inside me.

Many women realise their dreams with the support of a husband, a father or both. I realised mine *despite* them. Despite the emotional weight, the resistance, the silence. I stood alone, but I stood strong. In the quiet presence of my father that day, I saw a glimpse of the man I had known in my childhood. He was proud of me.

Despite my love for my children, I knew that bringing another child into a home ruled by fear and violence was not a great idea. But as a '48 Palestinian, I also knew that every child born was an act of resistance. It was our way to hold on to our land, our presence, our future. A couple in our neighbourhood went to the extreme of having seventeen children. They were highly educated and financially capable, and they had made the conscious decision to educate all of their children. In comparison, having only three children was not considered a real family in our community; it was small, almost shameful and questionable.

After the birth of my third child, though torn between personal survival

and collective expectation, I decided to stop. I carried the weight of that decision in silence and began taking contraceptive pills – without Musab’s knowledge or approval. To conceal my choice, I strategically stashed the pills in my closet among my shoes, just as I did with my notebooks, confident that the beast would not stumble upon them. Given how frequently he disappeared, it was relatively easy to avoid another pregnancy.

The years that followed were full of agony and despair, and that affected my collection of memories. Sadly, most of the events – both happy and less happy – of the first five years of my youngest’s childhood are inaccessible to me. I don’t remember her first, second, third, fourth or even fifth birthday. I don’t remember her first word, her first steps, when she was teething, her first days at childcare or even how she looked – I only have a few photos that I was able to collect from my family later on. I remember her at a few months old, and then she was five and a half. The memories of those years are locked somewhere deep and far away. I cannot reach them to this day.

There is just one event in this period, however, that I will never forget. It gives me shivers to this day. One day, when my youngest was a few months old, Musab suggested that we take a family trip to Jordan. His idea took me by surprise, and though I was reluctant, I thought that it might be a good opportunity for the children to bond with their father. After my initial hesitation, I agreed, hoping it would be a positive experience for all of us.

Despite the boiling heat of August, we packed up and drove to Jordan, and for the first time in a long while, it felt like we were going to enjoy a family holiday. I was thrilled that it would just be us, without any distractions, and that he was willing to spend time with us and focus on our family. It made me feel hopeful that we could, even for a few days, be a normal family.

We had set off bright and early at six in the morning. The journey felt like it would never end – especially with the prolonged security check at the

border. Our car was thoroughly inspected, even lifted to be checked beneath. Despite the 1994 peace agreement between Jordan and Israel, the regional tension did not subside. To mitigate the risks of attracting unwanted attention, vehicles with Israeli numberplates were required to be fitted with Jordanian plates upon entry, and this switching of plates only added to the hassle.

After an additional and tiring four-hour drive, we finally reached our hotel. While we were checking in, we spotted Musab's uncle and his family sitting in the lobby. The moment Musab saw them, he suggested that I take the kids and the luggage to our room while he had coffee with his uncle. *What a coincidence, I thought. Or is it?*

I managed to get the kids and our bags to the room, but I couldn't shake the feeling of being let down. I was utterly drained, and the children were exhausted too. I swiftly ushered them into the bathroom for much-needed showers, starting with the older two. Once they were clean, they settled in front of the television in their robes, giving them time to unwind and for me to bathe my youngest daughter.

I was interrupted by a persistent knock at the door. To my surprise, Musab's nephew was standing outside, sent by Musab himself to fetch the coffee pot. They were eager to brew some coffee downstairs and so they sent me rifling through our luggage, adding to my mounting exhaustion and irritation.

My attention momentarily diverted, it was only a sudden pang of realisation that jolted me back to my senses: my baby was still in the tub. Panic surged through me as I dashed back to the bathroom. The sight was chilling. She was floating, and her delicate features had turned a frightening shade of blue. Time stood still, my mind reeling with fear and disbelief.

Frantically, I scooped her from the water, my screams piercing the entire hotel. The world around me blurred as I cradled her limp body in my arms, every fibre of my being consumed by sheer terror. In a haze of panic and desperation, I found myself in the back of an ambulance, clutching my baby with all the strength I could muster.

At the hospital, doctors conducted scans on her brain to assess the extent

of any damage and we spent several tense hours awaiting updates. Miraculously, the scans revealed that she was alright. They explained that had she remained in the bathtub for even a little longer, had her resuscitation been delayed any further, the consequences could have been dire. The relief that washed over me when the doctors finally gave us the all-clear is still indescribable.

To my surprise, Musab's behaviour through the crisis didn't involve the fury or accusation I had anticipated. Instead, he was concerned. In my haze of disbelief and guilt, Musab was composed. It was as if nothing had happened. When we returned exhausted to our hotel room, he went to see his uncle and did not come back until the early hours of the following morning. I felt like I was stuck in a deep, dark hole with no way to climb out. It felt like there was a volcano inside me that could erupt at any moment.

But this volcano was causing an implosion rather than an explosion. I was collapsing under pressure. Inwards. No-one saw it, but my vectors surely felt it. I was determined that despite all implosions and explosions, they remained vectors.

Did I say *despite*? I meant *because of*.

5

Convergence

Mathematically, convergence is when a sequence of points draws closer to a single value or a state over time – in other words, to a limit. It is when moving in a direction is not random or accidental; it is a change that seeks clarity and meaning. I needed him. My brain could not function in chaos. My heart could not survive the meaninglessness. We were two souls converging into the same limit – a point of being.

My mornings were a frantic rush to get the children ready for school before I headed off to work, and then I had to make sure I finished work early enough to pick them up. Without their father's support, I needed to end my teaching schedule by one o'clock, which did not sit well with my school principal. The arguments I had with the principal from time to time formed just a fraction of the mounting tension in my life. I could not share why I needed to leave so early. I was embarrassed to let anyone know what I was going through.

Returning home with the children around 2 pm, I often found Musab still sleeping. When he did wake up, he wanted to have breakfast while we were eating lunch. His inconsistent routine always upset me. Almost every night he went out, indulging in extended gatherings with brothers, cousins and uncles, playing cards until the early hours of the morning. They took turns hosting, but I refused to have them at our place. We argued about it often, but I stood my ground and wouldn't back down. None of their wives worked or had to wake up early, so I had a valid reason. Eventually, they stopped pushing.

The dynamics of our relationship took a darker turn. Musab's lack of interest evolved into overt disregard, and he no longer hesitated to unleash verbal and physical abuse of me in front of our children. The realisation that their young minds might retain these distressing moments intensified my anguish. Powerless, all I could do was scream in response to the trauma inflicted on them. My screams would hurt my throat, and I would go voiceless for a couple of days. I would lose a few kilograms in a space of a

few days or a week. My visceral pain was rising from somewhere buried deep in my soul.

They killed my student

Challenging the second axiom

Authorities made it impossible to live in peace. It wasn't just me feeling this way; everything around me was boiling like a volcano that is about to explode. The second axiom was about to be challenged.

After the hot summer of 2000, the Second Intifada erupted. My Vector 3 was only a few months old. The Intifada was fuelled by years of pent-up frustration and injustice. The tipping point came close to the start of the month of Ramadan, when Ariel Sharon, then the head of the opposition Likud Party, accompanied by his personal security and about a thousand armed riot police, walked around Al-Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem. It provoked anger among thousands of Muslims and the Palestinians who were praying there. People were enraged: not only because of what Sharon did but also because the 1995 Oslo Agreement had eventuated into nothing for Palestinians. Some years after the Agreement, we realised that it was a trap instead of a promise of peace and justice.

The Intifada took its toll on all of us, not only those in the West Bank or in Gaza. The protests in the 1948 region during the Intifada were demonstrations of solidarity with Palestinians in the occupied territories and of opposition to the use of force. Everyone participated.

One day, during this time, I called Musab in a hurry. 'Hey, can you please pick up the kids today?'

'Why? Get them on your way home from school. I am busy,' he answered coldly.

'I am going to the protest. Everyone is going, teachers and students,' I said quickly. 'We are leaving the school and marching to the main street soon. I won't have time.'

I hung up, without giving him time to respond. I couldn't leave my

students to go by themselves, even though it was meant to be a peaceful protest. I was responsible for about twenty teenage students. They needed me.

I didn't trust that Musab would remember or bother to pick up our children, so before leaving with the students for the protest, I called my sister to ask her to take the children to our parents' house.

'I don't think I can,' she said with a quivering voice. 'The streets are full of people, and the soldiers are everywhere. Please get someone else to take your students to the protest, pick up the kids yourself and meet us at our parents. We are all here. We need to stay safe together.'

It was unusual for Rawan to hesitate or reject a request like this. *What do I do?* I asked myself. *Oh God, don't put me through this test.* Then, another teacher, who had overheard my calls, suggested that we could combine our classes and that she could accompany them all.

Relieved, I ran to my car and drove directly to childcare then to school to get my three vectors. Luckily, I picked them up before the streets began to close. Musab was nowhere to be seen.

That afternoon, we received distressing news from the protest: one of my previous students was shot in his knee. I remember teaching him in Year 10. Ahmad was a quiet student. Even though he did not demand much of my attention during class, I still remembered his wide, hazel-coloured eyes, which had a natural line of kohl inside them, as if God had applied the most beautiful eyeliner before Ahmad left his mother's womb. Ahmad died of his injuries a day later in hospital after serious bleeding. Twelve other people from surrounding towns were also shot dead. It was heartbreaking. It shattered forever the illusion of equal citizenship.

During the Second Intifada, the line between 'citizen' and 'security threat', already fuzzy, blurred even further. When entering a shopping centre, a bus, a bank or any institution, particularly in mixed cities, we were searched, flagged and treated as a threat. We were profiled by the police even more and arrested for minor suspicions.

I don't remember specific events during these years. Many of these memories seem to be locked away – probably in the same drawer as my

Vector 3's first words, steps and looks. But I remember how it felt to live in this place in this time – the constant tension in the streets, how every glance felt loaded, how we learnt to move more carefully, speak more softly, lower our heads in mixed spaces. But inside, the rage was growing. Not just at the killings, but at the double lives we had been forced to live: Israeli by an ID card, Palestinian by boiling blood.

The night I learnt my student had died, I felt incomprehensible pain. I wrote this poem and hid it under my pillow.

The don'ts of the homeland

Don't walk.

Don't stop.

Either way, you raise suspicion.

Don't sleep.

Don't wake.

They'll still find you accused.

Don't fall in love.

Don't have children.

They'll call it terror.

Don't read.

Don't write.

They want you illiterate.

Don't speak.

Don't hear.

Don't see.

They want you silent.

Don't name your child Ahmad.

Don't call him Mohammad.

Names like these break their hush.

Don't breathe too deep.

Not here.

As you are just an Arab

in the Jewish state.

لاءات الوطن

لا تمش.

لا تقف.

فأنت في كلتا الحالتين مشبوهاً.

لا تنم.

لا تصح.

في أي حال أنت في عيونهم متهماً.

لا تعشق.

لا تنجب.

سيقولون: « عملا إرهابياً ».

لا تقرأ.

لا تكتب.

يريدونك امياً.

لا تتكلم.

لا تسمع.
ولا تر.
يريدونك أبكم، أصمّ، وأعمى.

لا تسمّ ابنك «أحمد»
ولا «محمد»
فحروف الحاء والميم والdal تزعج صمتهم.

لا تتنفس بعمق.
ليس هنا.
فأنت في دولة اليهود،
لست الا عربياً.

A month later, a Commission of Inquiry into the Clashes Between Security Forces and Israeli Citizens in October 2000 (known as the Or Commission) was set up to investigate the killing of these thirteen citizens. Three years later, the Commission handed down its findings. Though it criticised the police for using excessive force, it did not recommend criminal charges against officers – and this brought back all the memories of Yawm al-Ard in 1976 and left another deep scar on the already ruptured relationship between the Palestinian citizens of Israel and the state.

The uprising and the killings, then the disappointing results of the commission, exposed the fragility of our status as citizens. We were citizens merely for tax and propaganda purposes. For many, it was a moment of political awakening or reawakening. For me it was an empty space where my soul was dying of hollowness.

More than twelve years into this marriage and I was still gasping for air. I needed a lifeline. I used to write most nights and let the ink wash my sorrow. Around that time, I began working at a new school where I met a

fellow teacher called Yousef.

At first, we clashed – minor disagreements that somehow opened the door to deeper conversations. There was something steady about him. Respectful, honest, persistent and quietly intelligent. His green eyes reached deep into my soul, almost pulling me into a shared point of convergence I had not known before. For the first time in a long while, I began to feel a trace of safety in a man's presence.

One day, after a clash with him over a timetabling issue, he looked at me and asked, 'Why are you always angry and sad at the same time?'

I had no answer. Just tears welling silently in my eyes. How can he see through my soul? I thought. Many people see the anger, but not many see the sadness.

The next day, he asked again. And again, I couldn't speak. I carried that silence like a second skin. I was ashamed, afraid, and deeply alone. Instead of answering, I handed him one of my journals. There were no explicit events or facts about what was happening, just my feelings.

The following day, he returned my journal without meeting my eyes.

'Not all men are like that, you know,' he said gently.

From that day on, Yousef became my confidant. I needed someone I could talk to, someone who would listen, understand, and not judge.

But it added another layer of fear. I dreaded the thought of the beast at home noticing any of it. He could easily accuse me of having a forbidden relationship, and he was more than capable of doing far worse than he was doing already. I constantly minded my actions, words, looks and even my breath, as if crossing a minefield, fearing that he might end my life at any moment – or worse, harm our children.

The void within me and the devastation of my people continued until 2005, when there was a shift within both me and the broader landscape. The Second Intifada was officially declared over at the Sharm El-Sheikh Peace Summit in February of that year. Still, the promise of no military action against Palestinians remains unfulfilled to this day.

Amid the rubble of that era of broken trust and unhealed wounds, life quietly insisted on moving forward. And, in the stillness that followed, Yousef's soul and mine continued to quietly converge to the same limit – just our point of being, not more. But it was my two sisters who became my grounding force. Their stories, their lives and especially their relationships with our parents were shaped by a different kind of closeness, one I often stood outside of, watching, questioning and trying to understand.

The three sisters

The sister coordinates

Like coordinates, my two sisters did not change my path, but they were fixed reference points in my life.

My sister Rawan and I shared a unique bond that had been shaped by the similar expectations imposed on us through our teenage years. We shared not only a room in our childhood but also the rhythm of our hearts. With her, the bond was deeper than sisterhood; it was unspoken and unbreakable.

We breathed the same restrictions. We spoke in glances instead of words, in whispers instead of actions. I could read her as she could read me.

At times, I was harsh, struggling to understand her quiet obedience, even when I knew she resisted within herself. But now I see Rawan's strength was not mine to measure or judge; it was different, not fiery and restless like mine but calm, steady and profoundly emotional. She carried her courage in silence, while I burnt with mine in flames.

Rawan was forced to wear the jilbab, too. She was in Year 10 then. She wore it until she completed the first year of her bachelor's degree at Haifa university. She also made a life-altering decision to marry at an early age. I knew that her choice was not driven solely by love but also by her desire to escape my parents' stifling rules and practices.

Our parents, deeply entrenched in traditional beliefs, had presented her with an ultimatum: if she wanted to continue her university studies, she couldn't get engaged. So, at the age of nineteen my sister left university

after she completed her first year to enter marriage and exit academia forever. It was sad to see how our love for education was used against us by the very people who were supposed to encourage it.

Fortunately, her marriage turned out significantly different from mine. Her husband was a good man, who not only supported her career aspirations but also showered her with love and care. Their relationship flourished, and they were blessed with five children.

Her decision not to wear the jilbab or headscarf after marriage, though supported by her husband, was bold. Still, as the more obedient daughter, she managed to keep a peaceful relationship with my parents. I believe that because her marriage caused them less concern, they were willing to overlook her choice of attire. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, she chose to cover her hair and dress in long-sleeved and long, modest clothes after a few years – of her own will, which I respect.

My youngest sister Aseel did not have to endure the same battle Rawan and I did. Being ten years my junior, our parents' stance had softened by the time she entered adolescence. They allowed her to choose her own path. As if we were raised by different parents, she was able to seize the opportunity to pursue higher education. She became a teacher without having to wear the jilbab or even cover her straight, chestnut-coloured hair, which my mother loved.

As she blossomed in her tension-free relationship with our parents, it was clear that our father also changed. He was financially more comfortable then. He, I guess, recognised the flaws in the rigid beliefs of the movement he had once championed. While he didn't ultimately return to his former liberal self, he stepped away from the extreme views of the Movement, admitting the shortcomings in some of its core ideas.

Aseel ended up marrying the next-door neighbour who treated her with utmost respect and adoration, earning the approval and affection of our father.

My sisters' lives unfolded with comparative ease, and their connection with my father was strong. Was it stronger than my connection with him? I am not sure, but I do know that the bond between my father and me was

different. It was more complex: a mixture of love, guilt, disappointment and the unspoken grief of unfulfilled expectations – from both sides.

The last straw

Critical threshold

Critical threshold is a precise term from mathematics and physics: once crossed, the system changes state. For me the critical threshold was what he did in Romania.

Not much changed for a few years. I was holding everything together for my children. In the meantime, Musab was just living his life – practically as a single man without responsibilities and travelling as he liked. His frequent trips – the ones I knew about in advance, and the ones when he just disappeared – ignited my suspicions. They left a bitter taste in my mouth. I was not jealous, as he claimed. Rather, I was burning with a feeling of injustice. I deserved better.

One of these mysterious trips was to Romania, supposedly to support and check on his nephew Adam, who was studying medicine there. When he came back, his mood was unusually cheerful, and he brought me a gift: a pair of red Fila sneakers. I was alarmed, because not since the beginning of our marriage had he surprised me with a gift. He even wanted to talk about his trip and share the details, including photos.

Among the landscapes and mundane, touristy snapshots, one photo caught my attention. Musab was standing alone; it was not a selfie. The look in his eyes reminded me of how he looked at me during our engagement: full of love, lust and desire. It was a look that had faded from his eyes after our marriage. It could not have been his nephew who took this photo.

You simply cannot have this spark in your eyes when you look at your nephew, I thought.

My heart sank, and I started to feel angry. Silently seething, I plastered a smile on my face, concealing the storm of emotions inside. I needed more

concrete evidence of what I suspected.

After he finished showing me the photos, he said he wanted to unwind and watch television. I seized the opportunity.

‘Since the kids are already at my parents’ house, they’ve invited us for dinner. I need to get there early and help my mum prepare,’ I said, attempting to maintain my composure. ‘My car is getting a service. Do you want to drop me off and come later?’

I anticipated his reluctance and, just as I expected, he declined.

‘Why don’t you take my car this time? I’ll get my brother to drop me off when I wake up,’ he said.

He used to leave his car at the airport when he needed to take a flight. This was the chance I needed to see if I could find anything that suggested he was on the trip with another woman. With trembling hands, I searched the car. I felt each second was getting me closer to the evidence. And there it was. I found the negatives of the camera roll hidden under his car seat. There were more photos than the ones he showed me, but I could not see them clearly. Without stopping to think, I drove straight to the town film developer, filled with anticipation and dread. Thankfully, there was no-one else in the store, and the developer happily agreed to print the film for me while I waited.

Each passing minute felt like an eternity, dragging out all the hurt I had experienced over the years. The clock on the wall seemed to mock me with its deliberate slow ticking, the sound filling the room. Finally, when the photos were ready, the developer handed them to me with a look in his eyes that said a lot. It’s a small town. He knew the person in the photo was my husband. I ignored his look, paid him and walked back to the car and took a deep breath before I opened the envelope.

There were many photos of him and another woman. In some of them, he was sitting on her lap; in others, they were lying on the grass, looking at the sky together like two lovebirds.

In the confines of the car, I felt cold sweat dripping down my back. *What do I do now? Do I confront him? He won’t care. Do I leave him? My parents will want me to leave the kids with him.* I sped to my parents’

house, clutching the damning evidence in my hands.

Before he arrived at my parents' house, I placed all the photos on their dining table.

'Look at these,' I said. 'Can you believe, on top of how he treats me, this is what he is doing behind my back? It's humiliating!'

I was pleading for compassion, hoping they would now sympathise with my situation. But my mum shattered my expectations.

'All men do that,' she said, simply.

There was so much more I wanted to say to my mum, but now I knew I was never going to have her support.

My dad remained quiet. After all, my mum had already spoken on their behalf. I really wished he would protect me from Musab.

Sadly, from the start of this marriage, he had not stood up to him. My father's insecurity at being the only son in a family of seven sisters – compared to Musab's family, which was dominated by many male figures who also owned several pieces of land – created a belief within him that he was of lower status. I couldn't accept it as an excuse. I was his firstborn. Surely I deserved more.

During dinner, no-one mentioned the photos. Musab did most of the talking. My mind was consumed by the impending responsibilities of the next day. He settled into his routine when we got home, indifferent to the storm brewing within me.

I hid the incriminating photos. Confronting him about his cheating without a safety plan was not the right thing to do. After putting the kids to sleep I took a shower, hoping the flow of the water would wash away all that I was feeling.

Before getting into bed, he stood in the doorway.

'Come to me,' he commanded.

He attempted to pull me into an embrace, but I resisted, adamant about not letting him touch me.

That familiar look I had feared throughout our marriage flashed across his face, signalling the start of the battle for my wellbeing. It was clear this wasn't going to be another argument; it was the prelude to a fight for my

life.

Silent screams rang within me as I fought the urge to unleash the anguish building up. My grip on the edge of the queen-size bed tightened. The pillow, where my face was buried, concealed the commotion that threatened to consume me.

All I could do was wait, counting the agonising seconds until he finally zipped up his pants, lit up a cigarette and left me to wrestle with my violation once again.

In this intense stillness, I mustered every ounce of strength to remain silent, to stop *I hate you* from screaming out of my core – a sound that would have woken the whole town, not just my three innocent sleeping children.

‘Did you say something?’ He was crouched down beside me, his voice cutting through my thoughts.

Fearful I might act on the urge to spit in his face or scratch his eyes out, I kept my head down, and shook it, no.

‘I thought so. Now make me a cup of coffee.’

His voice infuriated me. My hands clenched into fists to hit his face, but they remained hidden in the crumpled grey sheets. It was the first time I had loathed anyone so much.

My trembling hands fumbled with the ornate coffee pot. I measured the dark, finely ground coffee beans mixed with cardamom. Each spoonful served as a gatekeeper to the storm of emotions raging within. The water I poured from the kettle into the pot was as hot as the tears I held back; each drop was a silent reminder of the feelings I couldn’t express.

The pain of broken promises. A type of pain that never heals.

The flame beneath the pot flickered to life, casting a sick bluish glow across the kitchen walls. I watched the water heat up with the coffee beans. I couldn’t tell if the bubbling noise was coming from the pot or my boiling blood.

The coffee, a symbol of tradition and endurance, brewed slowly, unaware of my searing pain. The aroma of coffee is meant to envelope us with the smell of warmth and homeland. This is why we Palestinians take a pot and ground beans wherever we travel – even if we’re staying in five-star hotels. It casts the feeling of calm, except in my house.

I set down the pot and the demitasse cup before him, the steam rising like a veil between us. When he took the first sip, I felt a strong connection, but not with him – with this precious brown liquid and its piercing aroma. I pitied it for enduring the harshness of his lips, the rasping of his throat and the acidity of his stomach. He would transform it from a cardamom-scented essence of homeland and warmth into sweat, saliva and urine. I felt that the coffee and I were one entity. We both endured the same destiny.

I resisted the urge to scratch my skin so that maybe I would wake up and find that it was just a nightmare – one that had lasted many years. Realising it was my reality, for now, I left him to take a shower.

Alone in the bathroom that I was not allowed to lock, I could finally wash off his repugnant scent, which had clung to my worn-out, yet young, body for far too long. I was trapped, humiliated and in excruciating pain.

If there was a word to encapsulate the torment I was enduring, it would be *qaher*.

This term is challenging to translate into English, but it was deeply rooted in my reality. It embodies the feeling of being a victim, yet feeling compelled to apologise. It was in the look on my grandfather’s face when he told us about his semi-deformed foot. I saw it in the look my father had when he used to gaze through the kitchen window when sipping his coffee and, to no-one, repeat, ‘Wlaad el-sharmootah.’ *Sons of bitches*.

It’s the defeat that closes your throat, the anger that simmers beneath the surface; it’s what paints on a smile and forces you to portray the image of a dutiful wife and contented citizen. It’s the gradual erosion of your identity, the experience of becoming a faded version of the person you once were or could be.

There was nothing left of me, only the echo of waiting. But what was I waiting for? Was it Godot, that elusive saviour who never arrives? I was beginning to see the futility in waiting for a rescuer, for an earthquake that would change everything or a magic wand that could turn my beast into a nice, kind prince. If my saviour would not arrive, then I would have to become my own Godot.

I could not accept that there was ‘nothing to be done’. The phrase simply was not in my vocabulary. It always felt like a lie told to keep broken people in place. There *was* something to be done. There had to be.

And so, I chose to rise. Not just above him but above all those who had turned away when I’d needed protection, those whose silence clogged my heart. The only way I knew how to rise was through learning, because knowledge could not be taken away from me. It was the only thing I could have control over. Learning would be my rebellion, my resurrection, my way of becoming.

I started looking into PhD options. I had high scores in my master’s degree, which included a research component and a thesis, qualifying me for a smooth academic transition. I didn’t tell him. I worked in secrecy. I wasn’t sure how he would react, and it wasn’t straightforward. The only way I could see that he might agree would be to convince him that he would benefit financially. And so, I looked for a scholarship.

It could only be Haifa University. It was the closest to home, and the furthest he would ever allow me to go. He wouldn’t let me study further than where I could drive to and return from in a day. I did not mind. I loved Haifa, Mount Carmel, Wadi Al-Nesnas and the beach that embraced the lower side of the city. I loved walking its streets, reclaiming some of the old memories of the falafel shop my dad had once owned there. The streets I walked when I was doing my bachelor’s degree. It was where, for the first time, I sat in a café and sipped a coffee by myself. I had a unique connection to Haifa.

I told no-one but Yousef.

The tree on the edge

Breaking point

Breaking point is the threshold beyond which the system can no longer remain stable. He pushed me so close to death.

As I began preparing to pursue my studies again, I became more careful with money. I needed to save – a skill I had learnt from my mother. Although she was a housewife, she had an extraordinary ability to manage and save money. My father used to joke about their unwritten agreement that she was allowed to take any cash she found in his pockets. He trusted her completely, knowing she would put it aside for the family's future. My father had no real concept of saving, but he believed she had mastered it on behalf of the household. That quiet strength became vital when his company was on the brink of collapse. Over the years, thanks to that silent agreement, my mother had saved enough to buy a piece of land. When the crisis hit, they were able to sell that land and rescue the company.

The faint scent of a new cologne clung to the room. I was not sure if Musab or another woman had bought it, but nor did I care. He pulled out a sleek leather wallet, also new, and slipped in a few notes from the stash I'd carefully saved for groceries and bills.

'Don't you think this is the time of the month we should budget?' I ventured, forcing my voice to remain calm.

He looked up without interest, barely a flick of his eyes. 'I'll decide what we do with the money,' he said in his usual dismissive tone.

'Look how many bills we must pay,' I continued. 'The money we agreed to leave in the drawer is for this purpose.'

Then I went to the drawer and took the remaining notes to put aside. My hands tightened around the stack of notes I was holding. I could almost feel the hours of teaching and marking homework and exams, the late nights studying and earning one degree after another, and the early mornings driving to university and then to school slipping through my fingers.

I had studied hard to be a high school teacher supervising Year 12 and

the mathematics faculty at a school. The money earned was feeding not our future but his endless appetite for control.

‘No way, you don’t decide on my money. I am taking this money and depositing it into my account so we can pay the bills and buy food and live like a normal family,’ I snapped.

I was not aware that he had followed me to the bedroom. In a second, his rage boiled over once more and he smacked my head into the wall with a thud. Sweat slicked my palms and soaked my armpits. His words slammed my back like a whip. I fought back – for me and for many other women like me – but he was physically too strong.

Collapsing onto the bed, my head throbbed, not solely from physical pain, but from his overpowering presence: his disapproval, his belittlement, his erasure of my very being. And it wasn’t just him. I was groping for words that I could never find, but I screamed anyway with all the strength I could summon. Yet, I buried my head in a pillow, afraid of the noise waking up the children. I knew no-one would come to my aid.

He was too forceful. The pain intensified as his hand clamped onto my head, his grip so tight it felt like he wanted to rip out my hair. He was asserting his dominance.

‘How dare you make that decision?’ he yelled. ‘You and your money belong to me!’

‘It is my money!’ I shouted with all my strength. ‘You need to work and make your own money, like normal husbands!’

Musab reached for the books I would read in the time between putting the children to sleep and him coming home late at night. This was my precious time. My time with Nawal El Saadawi, with Kahlil Gibran, with Ernest Hemingway and many other writers who gave me wings to fly outside his prison. He started tearing them apart.

‘This is where you get these ideas from, ha! Nawal El Saadawi, the feminist bitch. I am going to burn all her books.’

He hurled the books and ripped their pages to shreds. A strange, visceral pain travelled through my veins at the sight of the books being torn, as if they were my own flesh.

Then he got uncomfortably close, his breath sour against my ear as he said, 'I make the decisions here. I decide what we spend and on what.' His words were suffocating.

I felt trapped and weak, like I was nothing more than an object for him to control. The room transformed into a terrifying prison, and I into a powerless prisoner. All I was able to do was scream. When he attempted to silence me by covering my mouth, I bit down and broke away from him, fleeing towards the safety of the girls' room. I trembled uncontrollably, trying to stifle my sobs so as not to wake them. Luckily, they were still asleep. I could not close the door between him and us, as it was faulty and awaiting the final phase of renovation. I stood between my eldest daughter's and my toddler's beds. I was not sure at that moment who was protecting whom.

He stood in the narrow hallway between our bedroom and the girls' bedroom. I feared he would follow me, that even the sanctity of the girls' bedroom did not give me immunity. The light was off, but the illumination from the rest of the house betrayed my face. Holding my breath, I locked eyes with him. I refused to show any sign of fear or weakness – even as my legs threatened to give way beneath me. I didn't dare turn and check if the children had stirred. The intensity of his gaze was all too familiar.

Suddenly, there was a beep. He pulled his phone from his back pocket, read a message and, without any hesitation, turned and left. I heard him grab his car keys and slam the front door. I didn't let myself drop to my knees until the sound of the engine faded away.

Finally, I was safe. *But what should I do now?* I asked myself. *Should I call the police? Should I call my parents to come and just take me back to their place?* That they were living nearby did not really help me. The few hundred metres between us felt like thousands of kilometres. I had made them aware of his violence and his dysfunction – as a husband and as a father – many times. What would be the point of telling them again? Seeing them as helpless as I was only added to my agony. *Or should I just end this miserable life? It will be easier for everyone, including them,* I thought. *They will probably mourn me for a year or two and then go on with their*

lives. Life goes on, does it not?

I tiptoed, still shivering in anger and fear, back to our bedroom and reached for the phone. My fingers trembled as I lifted it. With my head throbbing, I tried to recall the police number that I had memorised, fearing he would find it if I wrote it down or saved it in my phone. I used to memorise lots of numbers, to rely on patterns and associations to avoid his scrutiny.

But then, a cold shock rippled through me, starting at my toes and racing up to my head. I couldn't do it to my family or myself. Shame would be brought on all of us forever. Staring at the phone in my hand, I froze. The words of the community echoed in my head: *We Palestinians do not call the police on each other.*

For some people, the police are symbols of safety, order and the protection of justice. But in our reality, they were not protectors. Instead, they were perceived as an extension of the occupying power, agents through whom control was enforced rather than preservers of peace. What was called 'law and order' elsewhere was felt here as surveillance, discrimination and the quiet normalisation of fear. Protection was not offered, and trust was not built. Uniforms, here, were not worn to serve, but to oppress. The promise of justice was supplanted by the reality of intimidation. For generations, we had learnt not to expect help but rather to brace for harassment and arbitrary violence. The police were never a shield for us; they were a weapon pointed in our direction, wrapped in the language of law but driven by the machinery of occupation.

Instead of appealing to the police, I called my friend Yasmine.

'What's wrong?' she answered, her voice sharp with concern. 'It's too late for you to be calling me now.'

'I want to call the police on him. I've had enough,' I said, my voice shaking, 'but I can't. I can't let a Jewish Israeli police officer come here and expose my children, my parents, all my family to this.'

I kept talking, the words spilling out between sobs. On the other end of the line there was only silence.

'The police won't care, anyway,' I said. 'Just like they don't care about

the crimes or the conflicts in our community, as long as there are no Jews involved. Why would they care about a Palestinian woman being hit or harmed, especially if it's by her own husband? I feel I am in two prisons, Yasmine, and I don't know what to do.'

At that moment, I wasn't sure which prison felt more suffocating: the one inside my bedroom or the one that awaited me – actually, us Palestinians – outside.

'I feel your pain,' said Yasmine finally.

'No, you don't. Your husband is very nice to you!'

'I meant the prison outside,' she said, ending the conversation.

In my darkest moments that night, I began to wonder if God existed at all. And, if He did, why was He silent? Why would a merciful God let suffering linger in the hidden corners of my home, behind closed doors and in my young yet bruised heart? Was He watching? Testing me? Or had He turned His face away long ago?

Closing my eyes brought no relief. I am not sure if I slept that night or just closed my eyes for endless hours and, as dawn broke, I dreaded facing the day.

Then in no time, it was almost 7 am. I had to get the children and myself ready. Glancing in the mirror, I noticed the bruises on my face. No amount of make-up could hide them today. After a quick shower, I dressed and braced myself before walking to the kitchen to prepare for another day.

'What time are you teaching today?' he asked.

I gasped. I hadn't noticed Musab sitting in the lounge room until I walked into the kitchen.

'I have to be at school by nine,' I said, my heart sinking in fear. 'I will drop the kids off at my parents' house on my way. My mother will make them breakfast, as I am running late.'

Despite the smirk on his face at my startled surprise, he seemed on edge and ready to resume last night's fight. But I refused to give him the satisfaction. When he shouted his demand for coffee, I quietly prepared it for him.

'Leave it in the kitchen,' he grumbled after a moment. 'I'm going to

bed.'

As he passed by, his odour lingered. It was a stark contrast to the cleanliness of my dad. I missed him.

I waited until I heard him slump onto the bed before gathering my courage and calling the school principal. I took pride in being a role model for my students. They looked up to me, and I couldn't bear the thought of them seeing me in such a state. I was determined to show them, especially the girls, the significance of being strong and independent by obtaining a university degree and achieving excellent grades. It was my passion to inspire them to recognise the invaluable opportunities that education could provide.

Well, I thought, I am not an inspiring teacher today. I was embarrassed. Ashamed.

'Mr Rashad,' I whispered when he picked up. 'I won't be able to come in to teach today. I am not well. Please find a substitute teacher for today.'

I spoke quickly. I didn't want to give him a chance to object, as he so often did. The thought of me being, as I was, more qualified than he was clearly annoyed him. It was almost sad, and yet undeniably amusing, how envious a male school principal could be of a female mathematics teacher like me.

Though I was supposed to be working that day, Saturday, my kids had the day off as they attended a private Catholic school while I taught in a public school.

'Good morning, Mama.'

It was my eldest greeting me as he walked into the kitchen. He nearly caught me speaking with the school. I was pretending to wash dishes, but in reality I had been trying to distance myself as much as possible from the bedrooms to make the call. I kept my head down, hoping he wouldn't notice the bruises.

He carried on speaking, 'My sisters are getting ready and waiting for your help.'

'Okay,' I replied. 'I don't have time to make breakfast as usual, so you will have to eat at Setto's today.'

‘Yay, it is Saturday! Everyone will be there, right?’ he asked, excited to be seeing my brothers and sisters and their children.

‘Yes, they will come later on.’

My mind was consumed with my appearance, leaving no room for anything else.

‘That’s okay, Mama,’ he reassured me, his tone gentle.

I was not sure what he meant, but I felt my love for him overflow. All I ever wanted was to ensure that he and his sisters were safe and loved.

‘I thought I heard someone screaming last night. Was that you?’

His question alarmed me. I had assumed – hoped – that he had been asleep.

‘Just get yourself ready, habibi,’ I deflected, unable to answer his question. ‘I’m running late for work.’

It wasn’t the first time he had asked, and I knew I couldn’t evade the truth forever. My ten-year-old shouldn’t have had to endure the havoc of our household, yet there he was, forced to bear witness to our conflicts once again.

I knew I couldn’t delay any longer. Wiping away my tears, I went to my daughters’ room to help them get dressed.

‘Mama, you have wah wah.’ My two-year-old’s small hand brushed against my bruises as I changed her clothes.

‘Yes, wah wah. Mama hurt herself again,’ I replied, my voice catching in my throat.

Her tender kiss on my forehead melted away some of the pain, while my seven-year-old gazed at me with her curious, big, brown eyes, pleading silently for answers. Unable to find the words to explain, I enveloped them both in a tight embrace, grateful for their unconditional love.

After dressing the two girls, I entered my bedroom to find Musab still in his sweaty clothes, sprawled on top of the covers with his dirty shoes on. Exasperation built up inside me. *Should I end this now by smothering him with a pillow and freeing him from the misery of being married to a devoted wife who did everything for his lazy self?*

‘Mama, let’s go. I’m getting hungry,’ said my eldest daughter, who had

followed me unnoticed to the bedroom.

Her persistent tug on my hand jolted me back to the present. Had he driven me to the point where I entertained thoughts of ending his life before he could end mine? I knew I couldn't do it, but the throbbing of my head served as a harsh reminder of my misery.

The kids seemed to pick up on my sombre mood, maintaining an unusual quietness through the five-minute drive to my parents' house. Their subdued whispers and attentive stares only deepened my sense of failure as a mother. They were too young. They should not have had to be concerned about me. Their innocent souls relied on me for security and stability. It was a terrible reminder that whatever happened to me affected them, too.

My dad was already outside, even though it was drizzling, when I pulled up to their house and parked on the side driveway. His straight posture gave him extra height and made him look more handsome from the back.

He was on his slow morning walk from his place to my brothers' places, about 200 metres away. The three houses he had built and secured for his sons, something his father failed to do, were testimony to his success. His robe, dark brown with a purple pattern, was open. In one hand he held his cup of coffee and in the other his cigarette. I could almost smell his coffee from my car: a strong one that my mum roasted at home with lots of cardamom.

Under the olive tree, a table and some chairs were still set up from the night before – at least twenty chairs. This is where all my parents and siblings had been sitting last night, enjoying coffee and probably some sweets, and chatting for hours. My grandmother told me once that a house without an olive tree has no soul.

At that moment, my parents' home exuded a sense of safety. While a few years earlier, my sole aspiration had been to break free from it.

'Seedo!' My son's excitement was evident as he rushed from the car to embrace his grandfather. His enthusiasm only served to deepen my sadness. It hurt to see that he was happier to see his grandfather than his father, but I couldn't blame my son. Musab shared no bond with him – no matter how much I begged him to take notice and spend time with our son, who craved

his father's love and attention.

My eldest daughter emerged from the car at a slower pace, betraying a growing sense of unease.

'Good morning,' I said as I got out of the car.

'Wa alaykum assalam,' said my father. *And peace be upon you.*

He warmly clasped my son's hand before turning his attention to the girls and me. His eyes narrowed as he noticed the bruise on my face.

'What happened to your face?' he asked.

I felt a surge of annoyance, but I kept my voice steady. 'Do you really want to know?' I replied through my teeth.

In the eyes of the community, my marital status released my parents of any responsibility for my wellbeing, reinforcing the patriarchal structures that silenced my voice and perpetuated my oppression. Struggling to navigate the complexities of tradition and autonomy, I knew I would need to challenge not only external expectations but also the internalised beliefs that I had mistaken as mine, the ones that conditioned me.

I sighed, wondering whether, if they could go back in time, they would have stopped me from marrying so young.

Fourteen years into a disastrous marriage, I found myself at my parents' doorstep with a bruised face, a heavy heart and three children eager to be fed because I was too distressed to cook for them.

He didn't press further, choosing instead to address the children.

'Setto is making manaeesh for you. Let's go inside to see her,' he said, diverting the conversation from my discomfort.

The smell of fresh za'atar, which my mum made from scratch by mixing herbs she'd picked herself with sumac, sesame seeds and olive oil, sizzling on the freshly baked manaeesh filled the house with warmth. But nothing could have warmed my heart that day.

Even when I sought refuge at my parents' home, for a few days at a time, our discussions invariably revolved around the same agonising question: *Why couldn't I make my marriage work?* Their enquiries, laced with implicit blame for being stubborn and talking back to Musab, as he used to say, only deepened my sense of isolation and despair. And, when he

inevitably called or reached out, his pathetic apologies and promises of change, after twisting the story, casting me as the aggressor and himself as the victim, often overpowered my resolve to break free.

‘The kids are here!’ my father announced to my mother, his voice interrupting my reverie.

Reluctantly, I greeted my mother. ‘Good morning,’ I murmured, steeling myself for the inevitable interrogation. Her gaze immediately fell on the bruise on my face, her expression a mixture of concern and disapproval.

‘What happened this time?’ she asked, her tone tinged with disappointment.

I sighed inwardly, weary of the familiar refrain.

‘Does it matter?’ I said, bitterness seeping into my voice.

‘You realise this is happening to you because you are away from God.’ She shook her head. ‘Why can’t you be like all the other good Muslim wives? Why must you always be so different?’

Before I could retaliate and respond, my father intervened, eager to diffuse the tension.

‘Yallah, let’s eat,’ he said, guiding us towards the dining corner. ‘Majeda, you need to leave before you’re late for work.’

As everyone, except for me, sat down to breakfast, my mother’s words hung between the two of us, a stark reminder of the split that divided her and me. I moved my eyes from the manaeesh that she had just taken from the oven to the moon-shaped tomato slices my dad had cut and put on a little plate with some pickled green olives. It reminded me how he used to do this when my siblings and I were little. It brought back the warmth of a home I once had.

With a heavy heart, I bade them farewell, knowing that the burden of my truth would remain unspoken for now.

I hugged my children and said, ‘I love you more than anything, and I’ll always be here to take care of you.’

I lied. That day, I couldn’t promise that I would always be there for them. I had hit rock bottom. I turned to my mother, a lump building in my throat.

‘Just take care of the children, Mum,’ I whispered. ‘They need you.’

My mother tilted her head, her brow furrowing in confusion, but my youngest called for her before she could question me further.

‘Take a manoosheh,’ said my dad, handing one to me before I could say no. ‘Eat it on your way.’

‘I don’t need it. I am not going to school,’ I muttered to myself, hoping he could hear me and maybe stop me.

With one last longing look at my family, I turned away and headed back to the car.

As I drove aimlessly through the rain, my thoughts spiralled through hopelessness. How much longer could I endure this living nightmare? How much more could I bear before I reached my breaking point?

I switched on the cassette player in my car to try to silence my thoughts. Louis Armstrong was singing ‘What a Wonderful World’, but my thoughts continued without pause. They became louder, more agonising. I thought of my first home with my parents and my second home with Musab. I had been exiled from both. My thoughts overpowered Armstrong’s words.

I could not help but think of when home becomes an exile, and refuge becomes a battlefield. The days when my heart became one big wound, bleeding with every beat, life draining from it with my every inhale and exhale. When the light turned pitch black, the path seemed endless. When my tears grew larger than my eyes could shed, than my eyelids could cover. When pain grew so deep that it was all I could feel. When I ate pain, drank pain and breathed pain with every sigh.

When my eyes closed only to wake with the wet traces of tears on my pillow. When I hid my face in my hands to forget I existed. When I preferred to hurt as I was hurt and ache as I ached. When I was crushed by the feelings of death and despair.

When the world narrowed on my heart in ways that devoured my days and nights. When I resisted a scream ripping my heart, tearing my chest and slitting my soul, I surrendered, hoping that it might instead shake the world

around me, not just my life alone. Yet no-one else felt it but I.

When the face of the beloved one became my pain, his voice became my tormentor, I woke to the myth of 'What a Wonderful World' while the rain pounded against the windshield, obscuring my vision as I pressed the accelerator in the hope of ending it all.

I was driving my car recklessly, swerving on and off the side of the road. Swaying on the edge of unconsciousness, I saw my bag that had been on the passenger seat, the tissues that I keep there for the frequent teary days, and the untouched manoosheh my father had given me, bouncing from one side of the car to the other then landing on the floor – except for the manoosheh, which chose to hit my face.

A sense of worthlessness swept me, a tidal wave that threatened to consume me entirely. What was the point of it all? What future awaited me if I continued down this path? And what would become of my children, trapped in a cycle of violence and dysfunction?

Tears blurred my vision as I rounded a sharp bend, the screech of tyres drowned out by the deafening roar of my internal pain. I screamed into the void. The words tore from my soul like an earthquake: 'I hate youuuuuuuuuu!'

Then a quiet darkness and the warm za'atar smell of the manoosheh wrap.

As if waking from a dream, the scent of za'atar pulled me back to the edge of consciousness. I opened my eyes and reached for the door, but it was jammed. With fading strength, I managed to make one phone call, then everything dissolved into blackness.

When I again began to wade back to consciousness though my internal haze, I caught a glimpse of a familiar shadow standing near the car. Waiting. Watching. He didn't leave until the ambulance arrived.

At the hospital, a nurse worked quickly to clean the blood from my forehead while a doctor examined me with a furrowed brow. He asked, 'How did you end up crashing your car into a tree?'

I hesitated, struggling to piece together the fragments of memory: the ones I had lost and the ones I was adamant not to share.

‘I can’t quite recall,’ I began. ‘It was raining heavily, and I thought I saw someone or something on the road. I swerved to avoid hitting them.’ The words tumbled out in a rush.

The medical team seemed satisfied with my explanation.

After reviewing the results of some scans, the doctor reassured me that, aside from some bruises and a cut to my forehead, I was relatively unscathed.

‘I’ll prescribe some medication to alleviate the pain,’ he said. ‘You were lucky today.’

Lucky! I thought. *I am not sure that is the adjective I would use.*

‘Who should we contact to pick you up?’ the nurse asked me kindly.

I hesitated, reluctant to ask them to call Musab but resigned to the inevitability of the situation. I couldn’t believe they were going to release me so soon. A part of me was hoping to stay the night, safe from whatever awaited me at home.

‘You can call my husband,’ I replied, my voice barely above a whisper.

A couple of hours later, Musab walked in, his mere presence commanding attention and quieting the room. He was still wearing the same clothes as the night before, and his unpleasant smell hit me as soon as he entered the room.

He seemed concerned but, although I wanted it to be genuine, was looking at the two nurses and the doctor who had cared for me. I knew it was a show for them.

He asked the doctor dramatically, ‘What happened? Will she be okay? Who found her?’

His voice dripped with fake concern and I moved my hand in a get-your-hands-off-me, stop-pretending kind of way. The nurses smiled, probably wishing their husbands were as caring as mine.

‘She is okay,’ the doctor said. ‘She needs to take the medication prescribed and rest. She was lucky that a man passing by found her and called the ambulance straight away.’

I froze at the mention of the man. But I found my voice quickly and said to Musab, ‘Let’s go.’

The annoyance in my voice puzzled those around us, but I didn't care. I needed him to revert to his usual behaviour before I fooled myself into thinking that this caring, doting husband was real. This was his charade, one that I had played along with through countless gatherings and community events. When he reached for my hand to assist me off the bed, he ignored my stern gaze, which clearly communicated *don't touch me!*

The lectures commenced once we settled into his car to drive home.

'Who was this man? How do you know him? How did it happen to be that it was him who found you? Is there something you need to tell me?'

'You are sick in the head,' I said. 'He was a stranger passing by, so stop it!'

Surprisingly, he let it go. But he decided to go on another rant.

'As I've said before, women shouldn't be driving. You could've died, and then what would have happened to me?'

He struck the steering wheel and I flinched involuntarily.

'I would've been stuck trying to raise three children. What woman would want to marry a man with babies who couldn't care for themselves?'

My head throbbed as he continued his tirade.

'No! They are *not* my responsibility. You must be more careful next time, otherwise I won't allow you to drive again!'

I was completely shattered by what I had heard. Not sure what to say or do, or whether it would even matter anymore. I sat through the journey home in silence. I started imagining how my life would be without him – a visualisation practice I used to be able to breathe and somehow keep going.

When we finally arrived home, I collapsed onto the couch. I was too drained to summon the energy for any conversation. I was glad he left shortly after to get the children from my parents' place. As usual, he left the TV on. In the tense wake of what had happened, I thought of Zaid, one of my Year 10 students, and his mum.

Zaid was a difficult student known for his hot temper and powerful, distinct presence. His deep, sad brown eyes, piercing into a void, presented a

challenge for me. I knew he was a bright boy, but his fiery behaviour, to say the least, disguised all his good attributes.

One day as the sun blazed down on the humid, un-airconditioned classroom, it all came to light. I could feel beads of sweat dripping down my back as I wrote the linear equations on the board.

‘Zaid, we’re on page seventy-five. Start with question one from homework. Please share your solution,’ I said as I extended my arm, trying to hand him a whiteboard marker, and pointed to the board.

‘The answer is one hundred and twenty-one. I know it’s correct,’ Zaid replied dismissively, ignoring my request to come to the board.

‘How did you get that answer? Please explain.’

‘I found it in the answers section at the end of the book.’

He laughed, and the whole class giggled.

I began admonishing him, ‘So you think you’re funny, the class clown —’

An item, possibly a book or a calculator, flew my way, but I dodged to the left, and then Zaid stood on his chair and shouted, ‘I don’t do homework!’

Other students jumped onto their chairs and desks. It looked like a zoo where all the cages had suddenly flung open.

‘Are you out of your mind? Out of my class. *Now!*’

Zaid slammed the door and disappeared. The noise echoed through the building like thunder, and Mr Rashad came running from his office.

Zaid was suspended for two days, and when he returned, he was accompanied by his grandmother. She looked to be in her early seventies – or maybe younger or older, I could not tell. She had the kind of face you might see a hundred times and never remember. One of those people you meet but will never recall what they looked like, whether they dressed in black or white, whether they smelt of perfume or freshly pressed olive oil mixed with za’atar. She just looked tired. Defeated.

‘I’d like to meet his mother,’ I said.

Zaid’s grandmother sighed. ‘She’s dead,’ she said.

‘What about his father?’ I asked, regretting it immediately, sensing

another bombshell.

‘He’s in prison. Zaid is in my custody.’

I looked at Mr Rashad in disbelief and felt a keen disappointment that he’d kept this information from me.

‘His father killed his mother many years ago,’ she explained. ‘I’ve been taking care of Zaid since he was three. I know he acts angry most of the time, but he’s a good boy. He doesn’t study or do homework. There’s no one at home to help him. I can’t read or write.’

In that moment, I felt numb. Her words had sliced through me like blades. *That could easily be me*, I thought. *My husband is capable of doing something similar when he goes into his violent episodes*. A lump formed in my throat.

I could suddenly grasp the void that Zaid’s eyes were looking into. I saw his mother pleading, his father seething with rage, his hands closing around her throat as she took her last breath. My throat was closing. I was out of breath. I saw her collapsing, breathless at the doorstep of their home, leaving behind three little children – just like mine – while Zaid’s father’s unsteady screams filled the air. That voice did not sound unfamiliar.

‘He was not in his right mind,’ Zaid’s grandmother murmured, pulling me back to the moment. ‘Maybe he was under the influence of something. He said he was joking. God only knows.’

Names flashed through my memory: Najwa, Hasnah, Samia, Fatima and more. One was a Christian who ran away with a Muslim guy, one who ran away with a guy, one who ran away and one who perhaps only thought of running away. Names of women spoken of in hushed tones in towns. Women who were killed at the hands of their brothers, fathers, husbands or other men in their families. Some of these deaths were categorised as honour killings, and the convicted men were celebrated after they got out of jail; others were labelled as an ‘accident’ or a ‘mistake’ or ‘he was joking’, and perpetrators were sentenced for manslaughter instead of murder.

Even today, the murdering of women in my homeland has not stopped. It has only been modernised, Westernised. Most of the time, it is no longer the father or the brother who kills her; it is largely the ex-husband, the father of

her children.

I got up from the couch and went to get a glass of water so I could have the painkiller I needed so much. The pills stuck in my throat, and I wondered what would have happened if my attempt to drive to end my life had been successful. I couldn't bear to imagine what awaited my children if I were no longer there to shield them from their disastrous father.

Ending my life was no longer an option. It was such a selfish, cowardly idea that made me feel more guilt than ever. I realised that I was the only one standing between my children and a bleak future. I needed to find another solution. With this thought, I was able to swallow my painkillers.

I looked for the TV remote, as the noise was multiplying my pain. Just as I found it, a commercial came on about studying for a PhD in the UK. My eyes shifted to the computer we had placed in the small nook between the living area and the kitchen. I remembered the unfinished application for my PhD at Haifa University that I worked on whenever Musab was not at home. A surge of determination coursed through me, igniting a spark of dopamine similar to the ones I get when I solve mathematical problems. I had always believed that my studies held the key to my salvation. *How did I not think about applying abroad before?* My heart was bouncing, or maybe even dancing – I could not tell.

Sinking into the computer chair, I finally had clarity: instead of applying to do the PhD at Haifa university and stay where I was, an abused woman with a PhD instead of a master's degree, I could apply to study somewhere else in the world. I needed a new field with a different set of rules. Somewhere that the law provides me with protection, where I can at least call the police to stop him. A place where my life matters. I had outstanding scores and could possibly earn a scholarship to do a PhD abroad. Perhaps that would be my salvation.

With a throbbing headache, I immediately dived into research, exploring opportunities for international scholarships. If I could earn a scholarship, he wouldn't have an excuse. Many nights after this would be spent in long,

tense stretches, waiting for the dial-up modem to finally connect so I could begin my research while keeping one ear tuned for the sound of Musab's car pulling in. But determination overrode the fear; I refused to stop before finding a solution.

The solution was there all along, hidden in my academic pursuits. Without a word about the change in plan to anyone – not even Yousef, my sole friend in whom I confided almost all my feelings and misery – except for Laila, my colleague who was an English teacher, I threw myself into the task. I was determined to secure a future for my children and myself. If I could get accepted into a program abroad, I could use Musab's passion for travelling to convince him to move wherever I got accepted. It was the perfect solution.

I felt a rush of relief at finding a way out, but it came with an unsettling realisation. I had become cunning, and I hated it. And I hated him even more. I was no longer the person I once was and certainly not the one I wanted to be.

What mattered was that I was moving in a direction that was not random. It was not accidental. It was a calculated decision. I was seeking clarity and meaning so that I could rise rather than simply converge towards a point defined by others.

6

Function

A function takes an input and transforms it into something new. I discovered that I could alter the variables, expand the domain and consequently widen my range of possibilities. Secretly pursuing a PhD abroad was my function: an input of years of fear, sleepless nights and abuse went in; courage, power and a new path forward came out. I thought it would be a simple linear function, but it turned out to be exponential. I even dared to test undefined and forbidden zones. It was the first proof that I could redesign a different map for my life. A life that contained possibilities.

The day I was saved by a solid olive tree shocked me to my core. I realised that the solution did not lie in taking my life. It lay in taking my life somewhere else. Somewhere I felt respected and valued. Where I could call the police if needed and seek protection. From the depths of hardship emerged a new-found determination to reshape the direction of my life.

I could leave the country without him and take the children with me – by law. But logistically, it was impossible. Beyond the legalities, there was the weight of shame, a burden that would fall not just on me, but also on my family and, most painfully, on my children for the rest of their lives. I couldn't do that to them.

One of Musab's brothers lived in Australia, so that would be the most logical place to go; it would be much easier to convince him of that destination. I knew I had to take him with us. And, if I'm honest, a small part of me still clung to the hope of a new beginning. Not a fairytale, not a kiss that would finally convert him to a prince, but perhaps, just perhaps, in a new country the beast might soften into something more human. I wished for a positive change once we relocated to Australia.

I could have endured the larger prison, if not for the smaller one at home. I would have stayed. I didn't want to uproot myself and my children from our homeland. I would have preferred to stay in Palestine. But I had no choice. I had to survive. I knew that if I didn't do it now, my daughters would have to in the future.

On that night, I wrote this poem and hid it with the others in my shoe drawer.

I gather my fragments

*I gather my fragments, piece by piece,
rebuilding my body, my soul, my spirit anew.
I gather the parts of a body once strong, unyielding,
now I see it, frail, diminished.*

*With my own hands I gather my hands,
finger by finger, nail by nail,
forearm and palm.
I search for my feet,
rebuilding them after they lay paralysed.
I breathe movement back into them,
though they once forgot how to chase butterflies
or leap among flowers.*

*I look; my eyes are gone.
I search again in every corner,
to find them withered, their light dimmed.
They cry out for a gaze
that could fill the world with longing.
I return them to their place,
so they may follow a yearning without end.*

*I strain to listen, yet my ears are deaf.
Do they hide in the darkness of stillness?
It is time they hear again,
but voices of a different kind.*

*I call for my words,
but my voice, too, has taken refuge in silence.*

*Has the alphabet lost its glow, its flame of fire?
Today, I need you more than ever, my voice.
Come, let us learn a new alphabet together.*

ألملم أشلائي

ألملم أشلائي، أجمعها قطعةً قطعة.
أعيد بناء جسدي ونفسي وروحي من جديد.
ألملم أعضاء جسديّ كان يوماً قوياً، جباراً،
فأراه اليوم خائر القوى.

ألملم يديّ بيديّ،
إصبعًا إصبعًا، وظفرًا بعد ظفر،
ساعداً وكفًا.
أجري بحثًا عن قدميّ،
وأعيد بنائهما بعد أن كانتا قد شُلّتا.
أعيد الحركة إليهما،
بعد أن نسيّا كيفية الجري وراء الفراشات،
والقفز بين الأزهار.

أنظر، فلا أجد عينيّ،
فأعيد النظر من جديد في جميع الزوايا،
لأجدهما قد ذبلتا و غاب بريقهما،
تستغيثان لنظرة هي ملء الدنيا شوقًا واشتياقًا.
فأعيدهما مكانهما لتتابعاً شوقًا لا ينتهي.

أسترق السمع، فلا أسمع أذنيّ.
هل تختبئان في ظلمة السكون؟

لقد حان الوقت لتسمعا من جديد،
ولكن أصواتاً من نوع آخر.

أنادي كلماتي،
فلا أجد صوتي، قد لجأ إلى الصمت هو الآخر.
أما عاد للأبجدية ذاك الوهج ؟
أحتاجك اليوم، صوتي، أكثر من ذي قبل.
تعال نتعلم معاً أبجدية أخرى.

This challenging task of being accepted by an Australian university that offered a PhD scholarship program for international students began with secret phone calls and concealed applications, all while striving not to trigger Musab's outbursts. To gain entry into Australian PhD programs, I had to demonstrate my English proficiency. This meant undertaking the challenging Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) – no small task, considering English was my third language.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Laila. ‘I will help you prepare for the TOEFL. I am an English teacher, you know.’

Though studying had usually been exciting for me, the secrecy I had to maintain took away the joy of learning. Luckily, Laila assisted me in discreetly acquiring the necessary resources. Musab was seldom home, so I had invaluable study time in the evenings while the children slept. Laila and I would also go for afternoon walks together – for fitness but also to revise the various components of the test.

After registering for the exam, I found another reason to worry. I couldn’t figure out how I would be able to take the test in Tel Aviv – which was more than two hours’ drive from home – without him knowing. Unencumbered by family obligations, Laila offered to drive me on the day of the test. But how would I keep it a secret? *Do not fret*, the voice within reassured me. *Prepare for the test*.

Three months of study rushed by, and the urgency of organising how I would get to Tel Aviv gripped me. It was already Thursday afternoon, just days before the test on Monday. After the day's work, I made the customary stop for groceries. Steadfast in his traditional beliefs, Musab would never assist with 'women's duties', as he called them. 'Not my job!' he often roared when I asked him for help, though I did not stop asking. That day, however, I did not ask. Juggling shopping bags, three children and worries, I was praying for a peaceful evening. Perhaps, over a pleasant dinner, and if he was in the right mood, I could even broach the topic of a PhD overseas and the need to do the test in Tel Aviv.

Arriving home, I was greeted not by familiar emptiness but by Musab's car in the garage. Dread clawed at my insides as I ascended the stairs, burdened with bags and accompanied by my youngest daughter while the older two raced ahead of us.

I climbed the last few steps, I could hear my son asking an innocent question that put a smile on my face: 'Where are you going? Are you going on holiday?'

'Yes, I am going away for a week,' Musab replied casually.

Thank you, God, I thought, grateful for the respite and that I got home in time to find out that he would be away for the whole week.

'You never tell me where and why you go overseas,' I complained, pretending to be annoyed.

'I am going to help Adam. He has some complications at his university in Romania,' he said.

'That's thoughtful. When will you be back?'

I pretended to be interested, hiding my true feelings behind a polite façade, doubtful he was going specifically for his nephew. I knew he was going to see the girl in the photos. But I could not care less.

When he departed – his absence for the week a much-needed reprieve – I raced to the phone and relayed the news to Laila.

'I told you it would work out,' she exclaimed.

Monday's test was now within reach.

The waiting game for the TOEFL results began. As the days stretched into weeks, I felt increasingly nervous. My journal was my breathing space. But my writing was obviously stressed and anxious, just like my core. I was still sharing my journal with Yousef regularly, and its journey to and from him was the oxygen that kept my heart alive. Yousef noticed the increased heaviness in my writing and read between the lines. He asked me a few times, so I ended up telling him about my plans.

I used to check my email twice a day from school. I did not dare check it at home. Finally, after two agonising months, the verdict arrived like a punch to the gut. I had fallen just three marks short of the cut-off set by the University of New South Wales (UNSW) to be accepted for the PhD scholarship program. The realisation hit me. I feared having to retake the test in Tel Aviv, with all the logistics that I would have to go through again.

Giving up was never an option for me. This was my lifeline, and I refused to let go. I spent many sleepless nights thinking, planning and searching for a way forward. Finally, I devised a bold strategy: reaching out to the school of education directly. Writing a proper professional email in English was still a weakness of mine, but Laila kindly reviewed and edited it with me in some ‘urgent staff meetings’ (at least, that’s where I told Musab I was) after school.

I was determined to accomplish the mission and open my prison door. I wasn’t willing to let three marks decide my future. Instead of retreating, I focused on finding a solution. I began my search by identifying academics whose research aligned with my master’s research, looking for someone who might agree to supervise me. Strategising carefully, I developed a clear hypothesis built on my master’s findings and was determined to find a supervisor who would see its potential.

That’s when I found Professor John Sweller, the originator of Cognitive Load Theory (CLT). This theory was the foundation of my proposal, as it aligned closely with my master’s thesis research on Realistic Mathematics Education.

I sent Professor Sweller a detailed email explaining my proposed research direction and how it related to his work in CLT. To my surprise, he

encouraged me, saying my proposal was interesting and he would be happy to supervise me. He didn't know I had fallen short of the required mark in my TOEFL test, and I chose not to disclose that detail. He simply followed the university's academic process.

I received Professor Sweller's email formalising his agreement to supervise me a day later and appended it to my application.

The inflection point

Finally, the inflection point in my life's function arrived – or perhaps it had been waiting for me all along. In mathematics, an inflection point is where a curve bends from one direction to another. For me, it was when everything began to bend towards possibility.

For a couple of months, I would rush to the teachers' lounge to check my email before my day began. My heart pounded fiercely, only for me to face the same disappointment – no news – and then to carry on with my day, bearing my shattered heart.

One day, I reached the shared computer and began scrolling through the emails in my inbox, quickly categorising them as not important before moving on to the next.

Not important ... not important ... not imp—

And there it was: my letter of liberation from UNSW, informing me of my acceptance into the PhD program and the offer of a scholarship. My heart started dancing. I felt as if I was holding my new birth certificate. I spun around in the empty room, overwhelmed with joy.

I didn't notice Yousef enter and take a seat in the furthest chair in the teachers' lounge. His gaze was silent and sorrowful, as if he could read what was going on inside me. He knew that my liberation meant leaving this place behind. Leaving him behind.

Yousef, the person I entrusted with every fleeting rise and every crushing fall in my life. The one who made living bearable despite the humiliation, the injustice and the endless zero hours of my life that multiplied beyond

control. Yousef, the beam of light that gathered the darkness and pushed it aside, even if just for a few moments stolen from time and space.

I had read the term *soulmate* somewhere in the books in the attic of my parents' house but never understood it until I met Yousef. Yousef was its definition. It always intrigued me how deep and powerful a relationship between a man and a woman could be. We're taught to expect – even to fear – romance, tension or complication in such bonds. But rarely are we prepared for the quiet intimacy of understanding, the richness of shared thought or the rare comfort of being seen without judgement. There was no need for us to name that relationship or define it; it simply *was*.

And it existed despite the watchful eyes of society, religion and the weapons of my prison guard. It grew in the shadows of confinement, in a space where words mattered but silence somehow mattered even more. It grew despite the two prisons' walls. Despite all the elements that made it impossible.

'When will you leave?' he asked, his sadness wrapped in joy to match my happiness.

'As soon as the visa is issued,' I replied, my joy wrapped in sorrow to mirror his pain.

'I need to see you before then.'

His eyes looked deep into mine. I saw only pain, a sorrow that ran deep into my heart, cracking through the layers of rock that protected my heart.

'You see me every day,' I whispered, fully aware of what he meant but feigning ignorance.

'Not here,' he pleaded, his voice barely above a murmur.

I did not answer. I let the silence stretch between us, heavy with unspoken words and impossible choices. At that moment, what was consuming me was how I would tell Musab about the scholarship so that he could not refuse. I had to have a perfect plan.

I don't know how I continued to teach for the rest of the day. I was in another world. I could not wait for the day to end. I collected the children from school and drove straight home. I told them nothing about the offer.

Arriving home, I noticed his car parked on the side of the driveway, which meant he had already gone out, returned and was planning to leave again shortly. So I parked my car in the garage, making sure his car did not block mine, just in case I needed to leave in a hurry – a practice that I maintained for my safety. I prayed for a rare stroke of good luck. To my relief, he seemed relatively calm when I saw him. I waited until the children finished their lunch and then asked the older two to take care of their little sister for a short time.

Alone with Musab, I summoned my courage and revealed the news. His reaction surprised me.

‘When do we leave?’ he asked, leaping from his seat in excitement. ‘I can’t wait to see my brother!’

‘When we get the visas.’ I replied.

Without even finishing his coffee, which was not like him at all, he went downstairs to tell his family we would be ‘going on a holiday to Australia’. As I took my students’ exams out of my bag and piled them in different lots to mark later, I reflected that it wasn’t a bad idea to portray the move as a temporary vacation. That was clearly what he had assumed.

But Musab returned before long, a furious expression on his face, and my heart sank. ‘What’s the matter?’ I asked.

‘Walid said you will leave me once we get to Australia,’ he said, his fists clenched. ‘He told me this is a terrible idea, and we shouldn’t go. So we will not go!’

Walid was smart. And he disliked me.

I knew I had only one chance to convince him otherwise, to quell the storm brewing inside him. I used the strength every caged woman through history had to master: my cunning – although I preferred to call it wisdom. I had no other means.

I approached him, wrapping my arms around his waist, the touch foreign and cold against my skin.

‘I think Walid is just jealous,’ I began steadily. ‘He can’t stand to see you happy, travelling the world while he stays behind. He’s trying to bring you down because he can’t afford to go travelling, but we can. The university is

paying for my tuition and the children's school fees, and we'll have enough money to rent a house there. It is silly to give up all that because your brother can't stand the thought of you being more successful than him.'

I felt his body soften slightly against mine. Hope flickered within me.

'Think about how much fun you'll have with Khalid,' I continued, desperation creeping into my voice, though I tried to suppress it. 'You've always wanted to see him again, to spend more time together. This is your chance.'

I knew how much Musab cherished the thought of reuniting with his older brother, who had moved to Australia several years ago after marrying an Australian girl. When Musab had previously visited him, he raved about how beautiful Australia was. The idea of living abroad was quite appealing to him. I hoped it was enough to sway his decision. But as he draped his arm around my shoulder, his foul odour making me recoil inwardly, I braced myself for his next move.

'You're right,' he conceded, a faint glimmer of victory in his eyes. 'Walid has always been jealous of me. It'll be a great holiday. I'll call Khalid and tell him the good news.'

First, though, he pushed me against the kitchen wall, kissing me roughly and unbuttoning my blouse. Panic surged within me and I resisted.

'Maybe we don't go to Australia, then,' he growled, his hands now moving towards my neck.

I forced myself to stay calm.

'The children are in the lounge room,' I reminded him, my voice trembling slightly. 'And we have the carpenter coming to the house soon.'

His grip tightened around my throat. 'Then I will have my way with you later.'

He released me, but the threat remained as he retreated to the lounge room, grabbed the remote control and changed the channel.

My eldest daughter stood up, said, 'I was in the middle of a movie!' and stormed to her room. Then my son, ever protective, ushered his youngest sister to the girls' room to play. Grateful for his intervention, I made a silent vow to protect them at all costs.

With Musab momentarily calm, I seized the opportunity to escape, announcing: 'I'm going to my parents' house to share our good news.'

Quietly, I gathered the children, eager to see my family. 'Come on, kids, we are going to Seedo's,' I whispered, and led them out to the car.

'I am not sure why you need another degree,' said my mum when I told her. 'You keep studying and working, and he is just spending your money.'

But my dad smiled at me. 'Congrats, doctor.'

Though they were a little shocked and sad at the prospect of my departure for what they referred to as a 'four-year holiday', I sensed relief in my parents' expressions. To no longer receive my late-night phone calls would be a welcome reprieve.

A forbidden input

He was on the forbidden list, and I never dared to include him in my variables.

I wasted no time in applying for our visas. A couple of months later, the news came that my student visa was approved, accompanied by the approval of the children as my dependants. I was overcome with joy but also with dread. The speed with which our applications were processed left me sceptical; usually things do not work easily or smoothly for me.

My thrill was quickly overshadowed by despair when Musab's visa application, tied to mine as a dependant, was rejected on the grounds of 'character'. I was not surprised. We did not receive much detail from the Department of Immigration, but, knowing him, one could predict what type of files he would have had.

Musab was angry. He yelled, swore and threatened to go to the Department of Immigration in Tel Aviv. But he did nothing.

The rejection of Musab's visa application threatened to crush the fragile threads of hope I was clinging to. I was lost, unsure of where to turn until I confided in Yousef. He immediately recommended his friend Adel, a PhD

law graduate from a prestigious university, who was visiting from the US at that time. Though apprehensive about meeting a man in such circumstances, my desperation overrode any reservations. To be safe, I arranged to meet Adel during regular school hours in the teachers' lounge.

I admired Adel's sharpness, education, success and intelligence. When we first met, my eyes widened at the sight of his impeccable attire, his carefully shaved baby face, his immaculately styled, straight black hair; his image was gentle and stood in absolute contrast to Musab's. His perfume carried a refreshing charm and, when he read parts of the applications or spoke on the phone in English, his attractive New York accent sounded like it was from another world: a world where I wanted to be.

Securing Musab's visa was complex and took almost a year. Adel travelled back and forth from the US during those months. Yet he kept helping me in corresponding with the immigration department and through the whole visa process. He was my lifeline in this matter.

However, every encounter with Adel – whether it was a phone call, an email or an in-person meeting – was a huge risk. I had to do it in complete secrecy. Musab, with his suspicious, possessive and controlling personality, would not allow me to see, talk to or meet a man to help with his visa. Nor would he do it himself. He would just give up and let the opportunity lapse, adding it to the pile of his failed projects. I could not let that happen.

This secrecy polluted my life. It made me feel even more stained. I was always scared of Musab finding out. I was living in constant fear, but I kept going.

Musab's grandfather gave him a plot of land that Musab transformed into a small farm for growing vegetables. It was a quiet area, a mere ten-minute drive from our home. The garden became an occasional retreat for him and his friends but also, less frequently, the children when he was in high spirits. One day, he suggested we meet there for lunch after I picked up the kids from school, an unusual invitation that filled the children with joy.

The sun cast a warm glow as we arrived at the patch of land, and my son,

eager for some father-son time, began exploring the vegetable crops. It was a scene that tugged at my heart; I yearned for our family to be able to simply enjoy each other's company without underlying tension. I watched the children bond with their father over the growing vegetables, but the intrusive ringtone of my phone shattered the afternoon. The caller ID sent shivers down my spine.

Earlier that day, I had left a message for Adel. I needed to see him to discuss the development of the visa application, so I planned a seminar for him to share his experiences of studying abroad with my students. I expected him to return my call during school hours, but fate had a different plan.

Answering the call, I pretended to have a conversation with a female colleague to avoid immediate confrontation. Musab, sharp and perceptive when his jealousy was aroused, noticed that I was hiding something. I am not a good liar. He could see I was confused and stressed. His anger flared, and suspicions ignited.

‘Who were you speaking to?’ he demanded.

I hesitated, attempting to shield myself from his fury, and said it was Laila. Consumed with jealousy, he demanded her number.

Feeling scared and wanting to avoid more fights, I reluctantly gave him her contact details. When he called her, Laila's story wasn't convincing, which made him even angrier. He grabbed my arm tightly. His yelling got louder, making me feel panicked.

Not knowing what might happen next, I somehow managed to break free from his grip. I hurriedly told the children to run to my car. The four of us ran, terrified.

The drive to my parents' house was a blur. Adrenaline pushed me forward as I went through the busy streets, just wanting to get away from the situation. When we finally got to my parents' place, I tried to explain to them what happened, hoping they would comfort us.

‘Why would you talk to this man?’ they asked me.

My parents, as usual, were not prepared for this situation. They were at a loss, unsure of what advice to give me or even what to say anymore. I was

too scared to go back home, so I stayed with my parents for a few days. I didn't send the children to school, and I also took a few days off from work.

Musab became even more severe in our marriage after this. He demanded to know about every incoming and outgoing call on my phone. And, since it was registered in his name, he had the power to request the itemised phone bill to review all the incoming and outgoing calls.

I felt the ground was swaying beneath me and spent the next few months living like a mere echo of myself: a ghost, awaiting the finalisation of our visas and tickets. I stayed out of Musab's way as much as I could. I also avoided any interaction with Yousef or Adel for a while.

Meanwhile, Musab's grip was tightening by the day.

'We are not going to Australia anymore,' he repeated like a death knell whenever his orders were not obeyed.

Countless times, I swallowed my pride, hardening myself for yet another round of obedience in the face of his tyranny. The only outings I was permitted were to my parents' house, work, the kids' school, and, every second Sunday, Jenin in the West Bank with my parents for cheaper groceries.

Musab's voice at home and the voice of the soldier at the checkpoint entering Jenin sounded the same, though they spoke in two different languages.

Still, I refused to let his abuse derail my preparations for our move. I taught myself to conceal both sadness and joy, building a barrier between my inner self and what I showed the world. I trained my face to remain frozen, void of emotion.

Musab couldn't reach me, but the saddest part was that neither could I. This is what I realised many years later. People saw only a cold person, emotionless and detached. All my warmth and feelings were buried very deep.

Adel kept working on Musab's visa in the background, communicating with me via Laila. I thought I was dreaming when I finally received the

email granting Musab's visa, thanks to Adel's advocacy. The key out of the big prison was in my hand now. I just needed to unlock the gate.

When the time came to purchase our tickets to Australia, Musab insisted on accompanying me to the travel agent. My heart sank. I wasn't prepared for this scenario.

I had secretly withdrawn money from my account and saved it with my mother to ensure we could afford five tickets, and because I knew he would not have agreed to buy them himself. Now I would have to reveal the secret stash I had shielded from his prying eyes and sticky fingers.

'Where did you get all that cash from?' His tone was accusatory.

I hesitated before admitting, 'I've been saving a portion of my paycheque with my mum. Otherwise, we would have been short on funds for our airfare tickets.'

His reaction was immediate and explosive. 'How much more have you given your mum?'

I remained silent, refusing to meet his gaze, knowing that any further admission would only stoke his fury. But Musab's fingers tightened around my arm like steel hooks.

'I'm not hiding anything more,' I protested, struggling to break free from his grip. 'This is all there is.'

His eyes bore into mine with a ferocity fuelled by paranoia.

'You're lying to me!' he spat, his hot breath stinging my face. 'Tell me the truth, or we're not going anywhere.'

I used the only leverage I had. 'I swear on the Quran that I'm not hiding any other money. If you don't want to use the money for the airfares, go ask your family or friends for a loan instead. But I did this for us, so you didn't have to.'

The suggestion of seeking help from others struck a nerve, threatening to expose the cracks in his carefully constructed lies. Again, I had to become cunning and, again, I hated it. It became a survival mechanism.

Defeated, he released his grip on my arm and stormed out of the car. We booked our flights in tense silence. I dared not let my excitement show.

Saying goodbye

Initialisation

Saying goodbye was the initialisation of the function: everything was set. There was no return to the previous state.

The children understood why we were leaving home – my scholarship and my PhD – and knew we'd be gone for four years. Still, as the school year drew to a close in late June of 2005, my eldest two found it hard to say goodbye to their friends and their cousins. But their most painful goodbye was to the two Baladi chickens we had been hand-rearing on our rooftop courtyard. They had to give them to Rawan's children.

My youngest daughter, at five years old, hadn't formed strong attachments to her peers yet, so leaving cousins or friends didn't seem to upset or bother her as much as it did her older siblings. The chicks were a different story. She cried so much. I also cried a few months later when I learnt that my sister cooked and served them with couscous. I did not tell the children.

My last day of teaching, 21 June 2005, was filled with heartfelt farewells. I gathered with my colleagues for a bittersweet lunch, sentiments running high as we reminisced about our time together. During the laughter and tears, they surprised me with a meaningful gift: a gold necklace featuring a pendant in the shape of Palestine.

'Take this piece of Palestine with you, a reminder of home, so you come back,' they said, their words carrying both sorrow and hope.

It was a touching gesture, a token of the strong bond we shared and a reminder of the place we all called home. As I accepted the gift, gratitude and sadness washed over me, mingling with the anticipation of what was ahead of me.

We were about to leave when I smelt a familiar cologne. Yousef, unable to join us for lunch, had arrived accompanied by Adel. I was excited to see them both.

‘You did it!’ Adel said, his almond-shaped brown eyes radiating victory.

‘Only with your help,’ I whispered.

As we parted ways, Yousef’s eyes reflected unfathomable loss, his usual jovial nature replaced by a sadness that affected us both. We had been each other’s confidants for years, sharing the highs and lows, the trials and tribulations – of his life as much as mine. Now, with my departure, a void hung between us, a silent acknowledgement of the end of an era.

Keeping in touch at that time was not as simple as making a phone call or sending a message. It was difficult to comprehend that our pure, though forbidden, cherished relationship had come to a final, definitive end.

Ironically, there was also an unexpected sense of relief that I had not experienced for a while. I was tired of living in secrecy.

Saying farewell to my Year 12 students stirred contradicting emotions. Watching them stride across the stage at graduation, knowing I had played a part in the milestone they reached, filled me with a swelling sense of pride. However, despite the joyous celebration, I felt a stab of sorrow. I wouldn’t be there to guide the next cohort of students.

In our tight-knit community, the bond between teachers and students extended far beyond the classroom. We were more than mere educators; we were mentors, confidants and guiding lights in our students’ lives.

‘Ms Majeda, you have changed my life,’ said Zaid, his eyes no longer staring into the void. ‘I hope you know that.’

When I learnt about Zaid’s traumatic childhood, I started to look at him differently. No longer did I think of him as a naughty boy. Rather, he became a fragile teenager who needed help. I started to assist with his homework after school, during my lunch break and whenever I had a free period. When a school counsellor was appointed later on, I communicated and coordinated my work with hers. And in class, in front of other students, I made sure I boosted his confidence.

On that day, he seemed like a different person. I could not help but think how once we change our perception, the world around us changes as well. It

had been a heartfelt lesson learnt from my powerfully present student.

‘No, Zaid, you changed mine,’ I said with a smile. ‘I will never forget you.’

A few months later, Zaid went to study abroad in Jordan. On my last visit to Canna, I found out that he had become a successful lawyer.

The asymptote

An asymptote is a line that a curve gets closer and closer to, but never quite touches. Yousef was like an asymptote to me; painfully close but never in reach.

A few days before I was due to leave, Yousef and I agreed to meet one last time. Not at school. We agreed to meet at the University of Haifa in the lower carpark.

To cover my tracks, I told my husband I needed to collect some papers from my master’s supervisor, Dr Peled. I called her and arranged a real meeting.

‘I will come with you,’ Musab said.

‘Of course,’ I said without making eye contact. ‘We are meeting tomorrow at 10 am. We need to wake up early.’

‘Maybe it’s better if you go by yourself.’ It was exactly what I needed to hear. ‘I don’t think I can wake up that early.’

That night I almost did not sleep at all. In the early hours of the morning, I wrote this poem and hid it with the others.

Stillness

At times, stillness settles in my heart,

and I imagine it is the world that storms.

*At other times, a tempest rises in my depths,
and I imagine the universe serene
with only me in revolt.*

*When I am inside the storm,
I crave nothing but quiet
and the warmth of your arms.*

*And when stillness holds me,
I dream only of a storm
that sweeps me to you,
that carries me,
lifts me,
and delivers me
to the revolution of your being.*

السكينة

أحياناً تسكن السكينة قلبي،
فأخال الوجود هو الذي يعصف.

وأحياناً أخرى يسكن الإعصار أعماقي،
فأخال الكون كله هادئاً
وأنا وحدي التي تتور.

حين أكون داخل الإعصار،
لا أتمنى إلا أن أنعم بالهدوء

ودفع أحضانك.

وحين أكون وسط السكينة،

لا أحلم إلا بعاصفة

تأخذني إليك،

تجرفني،

تحلق بي،

وتسوقني

إلى ثورة وجودك.

The drive to Haifa took about an hour. Sixty minutes of fear, guilt, courage, defiance, longing and doubt, all mixed in one soul. Every minute stretched like a lifetime. *Why am I taking this risk?* I asked myself. But I knew the answer. I could not carry this pain with me to the other side of the world. I needed to soften the rock inside me, even for a few stolen moments. He was my asymptote; painfully close but by the law of the universe – of mathematics – we could never touch. Yet I couldn't leave without a farewell.

At the university entrance checkpoint, the familiar routine began with questions, suspicion and the popping of my car boot. *Why are you here?* Normal, we used to say – as if anything about that could be normal! What could be normal about security checks connecting the university with the main road? What could be normal about searching students' bags or cars every morning when they come to seek education, when they are treated as a threat before they start their day? I passed through, heart pounding.

Instead of driving up to the university tower where Dr Peled was waiting, I turned in to the lower carpark and turned off the engine. In the rear-view mirror, my own eyes stared back, wide with terror that Musab might have followed me, brimming with everything I couldn't say aloud. But I needed to see Yousef one last time.

I spotted his car turning in to the carpark. Without thinking, I jumped out

of mine and walked rapidly towards him. I opened the passenger door and slid in.

‘Drive,’ I said, my voice shaking. ‘Just drive. Quickly.’

Yousef’s eyes darted around nervously. ‘Is he following you?’

‘No. No-one’s following me,’ I said, breathless. ‘Just go.’

The engine hummed as we pulled away, leaving more than just a car behind.

We drove for a few minutes along Carmel Mountain’s narrow, leafy, unpaved roads. We were surrounded by natural beauty, but fear and anxiety wrapped me so tightly that I couldn’t see any of it. I didn’t notice the gentle breeze brushing past me, even in the heat of July. I didn’t hear the birds singing from the pine trees or breathe in the earthy scent of herbs and distant wildflowers. I looked but was not able to see. I listened but was not able to hear. The mountain stood in quiet majesty, offering calmness I wasn’t able to feel or receive. I was there, but I was too consumed by dread to truly *be* there.

Yousef finally stopped the car after we were sure no-one was following us. I had never been in his car before. I instinctively looked around, scanning the space that held so much of him. It was clean, faintly scented with an air freshener clipped to the vent. A familiar Arabic song played gently through the speakers.

I sat still, my body tense. My hands were folded tight in my lap. The fabric of the seat cradled me, but I felt no comfort. It was a private world, his world. I had stepped into a world that looked warm but felt frightening. It was a contradiction I knew all too well.

‘I could be killed if he finds out. You know that,’ I said, clenching my fists. ‘I am not sure why I came.’

‘I know. I know why you came,’ he said with confidence.

‘Why?’

‘You wanted to prove to him that you can.’

‘I think I wanted to prove it to myself.’

‘This is why I believe in you,’ he said.

His hand reached towards mine, not to hold but to anchor.

I let it. My hands relaxed.

His other hand did not leave the steering wheel. He was ready to drive away if needed. Like a guardian, he was always ready to stay or to leave if that was what safety required.

I did not resist. I needed an anchor. I needed to be believed in. I leant my head on his shoulder and rested for a moment. I could hear his breathing: even and present. It slowed mine while the soft music hummed around us.

He took his hand from the steering wheel for a moment to adjust the rear-view mirror, then said, 'So you are finally leaving. It will be a long road in front of you.'

'I did not choose to leave, you know. Sometimes it is the only way we can breathe. At times, we need a different type of air to be able to inhale and exhale.'

'What will you do when you come back, eventually?' he asked, with agony in his voice.

'I might not come back. Departures can be infinite,' I said, with more agony in mine.

'Some paths make sense only one way,' he said before sighing deeply.

I held on to that for a moment. Very true. My path will only make sense in one direction – a forward direction.

I closed my eyes and saw a long, wide path in front of me. A path that has a start but no end. It felt familiar. I could smell both risks and promises.

'Your writing has been pregnant with fear and hope recently,' he said, as if reading my mind.

'Are you measuring me?' I said and lifted my head to look into his eyes.

'I am only witnessing,' he said with a warm smile. 'I wish I could come with you.'

Silence settled. There was no reaching, no crossing. Just two souls sitting inside a shared truth, neither demanding more.

I did not want to think of Musab or his reaction if he saw me in a car in a deserted area with a man. I knew I would be dead in no time – and that he would have a 'good excuse'. Every time my thoughts went that way, my body shivered, but I continued.

‘Talk to me,’ I begged, for a distraction. ‘Don’t stop, please.’

‘You were so brave to come today. I was not sure you would come,’ he said.

‘I needed to set my compass right for the next journey. Did you not say once that you were my compass?’

‘I think you are mine. I don’t want you to be anything else,’ he said while squeezing my hand and then letting it go.

In that moment, I felt something rare and sustaining. It was not fear, not desire, but alignment. A companionship that did not claim, only accompanied. The kind that steadies you long enough to continue your own trajectory. A feeling that had evaporated from my life.

And then the guilt and fear came sharp and immediate. It curled as I pulled away, breathless. I wasn’t supposed to feel this. Not now. I needed to go. I felt trapped.

I need to leave everyone, I said without words. I need to be just me.

Then I regained my own firm voice: ‘Drive me to my car. I need to go see Dr Peled.’

When I was getting out of his car, back to mine, he reminded me of the sentence he used to comfort me with in my dark days: ‘You will never walk alone.’

‘This time, I am,’ I said and jumped into my car.

No longer on the same axis

My siblings and I were no longer on the same axis. It was time to leave the shared plane and say goodbye.

The hardest part for me was saying goodbyes to my family, especially my brothers and sisters. Our bond was unbreakable, forged in a lifetime of shared experiences and support. Our plans were always made with all of us in mind, and the thought of being separated left an ache in my heart.

I clung to the hope of staying connected with my siblings from afar, but I also sensed that it might not be possible; we all lived busy lives. I couldn’t

shake the feeling that our dynamic would never be quite the same, no matter how many phone calls we shared.

It also didn't sit well with me to conceal my true intentions from my siblings. Though I longed to confide in them, the fear of causing them heartache held me back. It was a secret that threatened to fracture the foundation of trust on which our relationship was built.

The night before departure, my siblings stood to hug and say their goodbyes.

After a long pause, Rawan commented, 'You don't seem happy.'

'I don't know what it means to be happy,' I said, looking away to avoid eye contact. 'I am scared and thrilled at the same time. Are you happy for me?'

'Please take care of yourself,' she replied, searching for my eyes. 'I am serious.'

I changed the subject and excused myself: 'I am going downstairs to see Setto.'

My grandparents' two-bedroom house was always clean and smelt of coffee, cardamom, sage, za'atar and olive oil. They had an attic that we could see from the living-bedroom area, full of jars of halloumi, pickled green olives and some ball-shaped labneh, and a few tins full of olive oil. In the kitchen I could see the dried bamiyeh, *okra*, sewn into strings hanging on the walls beside the hand-woven trays and semi-baskets made of wheat stalks. When I was a child, I used to participate in family gatherings to make all these foods. If I was lucky, I got to have a go at making one or two balls of labneh that would then be covered in olive oil. But making the halloumi was more sensitive, and kids were not allowed to come close.

To me, Setto's house was the smell of the homeland. Her wrinkles were its sighs. With time, her house changed, modernised slightly, especially after my grandfather passed away. The bamiyeh strings became bags in the freezer and the jars moved from the very high attic to instead live in the pantry, but the smell stayed the same and her wrinkles became deeper – so did her sighs.

When I went to say my goodbyes, she was lying on her bed, fragile yet

resilient. She asked for another pillow beneath her head so she could rise a little higher, as if summoning some final strength to bestow her last wisdom on me. She wanted me to listen, to carry it with me. I don't know how she sensed what was hiding inside me; it was as though she held a crystal ball, seeing straight through my eyes into the storm within.

She looked at the wall, where her photo with my grandfather in their Hajj, *pilgrimage*, clothes was placed, and said, 'You know your grandfather left to go to Lebanon during the Nakba. After a few months of his fighting in the el-Shajarah, many massacres happened in the nearby villages. He was terrified. The soldiers used to get men they suspected of being part of the thowar resistance groups and shoot them in front of everyone or put them on a truck and take them away and no-one knew where to. Everyone was frightened for their life.'

'Are you saying he left without you?' I whispered.

'Yes, I told him that if I am going to die, I'd rather die in my home. I am not leaving. I will stay with my kids here in my home. Your dad was three years old, and your aunt Hamdeh was only three months old. *I will come back*, he told me. *The Arab leaders said we needed to leave for two weeks and things will be safer and we could come back*. He returned after a couple of months, knowing that there was no army from any country coming to save us. Luckily, he arrived just in time to get his ID card. The Israeli government declared that day that any Palestinians who were outside Israel as refugees would have no right to return.'

A right that we still fight for until this day.

She looked me in the eyes and said: 'We should not leave. And if we do, we must always come back.'

I felt her soul seep deep into my core, giving me a lesson in resilience and resistance. I closed my eyes, covering unshed tears, feeling my embarrassment and guilt mixed with intergenerational pain. But what consumed me then was a pain far greater – the pain of a continuous struggle for survival.

Then she turned to my five-year-old, who was clinging tightly to me, and, as if drawing her future direction, said, 'Never forget you are

Palestinian.’

Those words stayed with my little one, quietly embedding themselves in her heart. They would go on to shape her identity, her choices and the path she would carve out for herself.

My spirals

My curls were perceived as spirals going against their preferred straight lines. I had to straighten them.

The next day, my last in Canna, I needed to rush to the hairdresser. Odette was opening earlier than usual to straighten my curly hair – a regular task I ticked off without fail. Like many Palestinian women with curly hair, I visited the hairdresser once a week to have it straightened.

On my way to the salon for the last time, I took a slight detour to visit the school where I had studied and worked for so many years. It felt important to see it again, as if part of me remained there.

I passed the old men-only café on the main street, the one we used to dread walking by as teenagers, always tense under the gazes scanning us head to toe. There was the supermarket where I used to stop for groceries between finishing work and picking up the kids from school, the clothes shop where I bought most of my clothes and the butcher who once asked me why I was always in such a hurry.

The pomegranate fields lined the road like quiet witnesses to all the seasons I had survived. The church, still gently bracing the old mosque, reminded me that harmony is real and factual. Everything looked brighter and softer in its farewell. Even the potholes in the road seemed smaller, less irritating, as if the place, too, was letting go with grace.

I parked in the same spot I used to park when picking up the children from school. I needed to walk that Roman-tiled street one last time. The school was closed for the holidays, but that didn’t matter. I wasn’t there for school; I was there for the echo. It was the same street I had walked countless times on my way to high school, passing the Wedding Church

where Jesus performed his first miracle and converted water to wine. In walking it again, I wasn't just retracing my steps; I wanted to take away the pain I felt with every step I had walked for many years. I was acknowledging the many times I walked it hoping for a miracle that never eventuated, the ground that shaped me and the years that had folded into the person I had become.

The salon was usually cosy, but this morning, in the absence of other customers, the dimly lit salon made me feel uneasy. But Odette's cheerful greeting flooded the room with brightness.

'Habibti, ahlan ahlan. How are you?'

Odette's warm smile never failed to lift my spirits.

'Hello, Odette. I'm doing okay. Thank you for seeing me so early.'

'It's my pleasure, Habibti. I'm so glad I get to see you before you leave,' she chirped, guiding me towards the basin. 'Come, let's get started.'

'Thank you for always being a wonderful hairdresser,' I offered lamely. I wasn't in the mood for conversation.

'I will be here when you return,' Odette reassured me. 'Don't worry about that.'

Odette always maintained a sunny attitude. It was one of the many reasons I liked her; she never spoke ill of anyone, always radiating kindness. As she washed and dried my hair, she chatted away: a comforting backdrop to my thoughts.

As she straightened my hair, all I could think about was that, on top of the suffocating weight of injustice and discrimination from officials and the government treating us as second-class citizens, we imposed even more restrictions on ourselves, especially on women, tightening the chains they had already fastened around our necks. We created more ropes and tried to train more elephants among us. Parents did it with perfection. *Curly hair is not accepted*, my mum's voice was always loud and clear in my mind.

'It's so exciting that you get to go overseas.' She was buzzing. 'And how kind that your husband will let you study. Were the tickets expensive? My husband would never do such a thing for me,' she said, bringing me back to reality.

I nodded absent-mindedly, not quite registering her words as I wrestled with my feelings.

‘All done – your husband won’t be able to keep his hands off you,’ she quipped with a wink.

Her words elicited a wave of nausea in me. But I plastered on a smile, masking my discomfort.

‘You are so lucky to have a husband who works hard so you can follow your dream,’ she added earnestly.

It began to rain as I prepared to leave, which was very odd. Rain was a rare sight during the scorching summer months. I glanced up at the flat sky and noticed how strangely black it was.

When I reached my car, I couldn’t bring myself to start it. As if struck by lightning, I froze.

Was the sky weeping for me? Did it have emotions? Was this rain a warning or a blessing? A sign? Should I stay? The questions came like thunder. Was I making a mistake in uprooting myself and my children from the soil of our homeland? We Palestinians do not leave. It is not just a belief; it is in our blood, breath and bone marrow. We are taught from birth that to remain is to resist. Was I betraying that truth? Was I betraying my people? Would my children one day look back with anger and hate me?

But I needed to live long enough to see my children grow, to see them free in ways I never was. I screamed, but no sound escaped. I lifted my eyes to the flat, two-dimensional sky. I felt it was coming down to crush me.

I shouted from deep within: ‘You want me to stay? Then show me you can protect me.’

No answer. Just silence.

I wiped my tears, turned the key and drove away, away from a world that had given me no safe place to stay.

Before I turned left from the main street to drive home, I made a final detour to visit the olive tree that had saved my life – the tree I crashed into on that blurred day. The day when resolution sprang out of desperation. To anyone else, it was just a tree. But to me it was the line between life and death. The silent witness to a moment I was never supposed to survive.

If only Musab knew that the man who called the ambulance wasn't just some passing stranger. It was Yousef, the only person I trusted in those panicked breaths.

There were things I'd never said aloud. Stories buried beneath silence and survival. But that tree knew, and so did all olive trees in our land.

Fortunately, by the time I arrived home, the rain had subsided to a gentle drizzle. I covered my head with my jacket and I dashed from the car to the house.

'Yallah, hurry up,' Musab said. 'I want to eat before we leave.'

I was surprised that he was showered and dressed. We weren't getting picked up for a few more hours. The kids, too, were ready and excited.

After preparing a meal for all of us, I felt the need to double-check that we hadn't overlooked anything. Walking past the imposing glass cabinet that divided the guest room from the kitchen, I felt sad. Inside were shelves lined with books, each one a cherished part of my life. The thought of leaving them behind filled me with despair, especially knowing that I wouldn't be returning to live in this house and someone else might not value them as I did.

I longed to take every book with me. But they were too many, too bulky, and carrying them would incur hefty expenses for extra luggage. It was a difficult choice, one that forced me to leave behind pieces of myself.

I packed only a few. I made sure to pack my journals and the books that mattered most: Mahmoud Darwish's complete works, Ghassan Kanafani's stories and a few of Naji al-Ali's caricature books – the very scent of Palestine wrapped in paper and ink. As for Nizar Qabbani's poetry collection and Nawal El Saadawi's powerful books, I had given them to Laila a few days earlier, trusting she would give them a good home. I also packed most of the children's books – there were so many. I could only hope my luggage wouldn't exceed the weight limit.

The memories stayed with me as I moved around the house, packing our belongings. Each item held a story, a reminder of the struggles I'd faced and

the sacrifices I'd made in pursuit of a better future. As I closed the last suitcase, I couldn't help but feel a sense of relief mingled with sorrow. *Finally*. I sighed.

The ringing phone pierced the morning stillness, jolting me from my thoughts. I waited, listening as he answered. His voice abrupt.

'Hello. *Hello*.'

There was a brief silence, and then he spoke again.

'You cannot even speak? Who are you, motherfucker?'

He slammed the phone down and started to curse even more. He looked in my direction while I pretended to be busy and ignored his piercing eyes. He banged his fist onto the table, the sound vibrating through the room.

'That's it! Call your dad and tell him not to come. We're not going to Australia anymore!' His words cut like a knife, a familiar threat dripping with venom.

I couldn't risk calling his bluff, so I remained silent, refusing to engage further.

'Do you have something to say?' he said, expecting me to challenge him.

'No,' I said, swallowing my pride. 'I'll wash the dishes and wait for my brother to arrive and get him to help me with the luggage.'

Choose your battles, I reminded myself and walked towards the kids. 'Seedo, Sitto and Uncle will be here soon,' I said to them.

'Are we still going on our holiday?' my son asked innocently.

I awaited Musab's response with bated breath.

'Yes,' he replied abruptly. 'But first, grab my cigarettes from the lounge. And my shoes,' he added, his demands a stark reminder of his control.

My son did what he was asked, but his eyes were full of rage. I turned towards the sink, concealing my clenched fists from his view.

Finally, the doorbell rang, indicating my parents had arrived. I attempted to contain my emotions. I dared not let excitement creep in, knowing that he could change his mind at any moment.

'Yallah, let's go!' My father's call to action spurred us into motion.

I cast one last glance around the house, ensuring we hadn't forgotten anything crucial, before I locked the door behind us.

The sky was still gloomy but thankfully it was no longer raining. No longer coming down to squash me. Just grey and flat.

‘God is not happy about his trip,’ said my mum once we were outside. ‘The sky has never been as dark in July, in the middle of summer.’

‘Please stop this,’ I whispered to her.

Musab was already seated up the front with my brother, and the girls were in the back seat. My son squeezed himself into my dad’s car to ride with my parents. After I said my goodbyes to Musab’s family downstairs, I sat in the back of the car with the girls.

I didn’t care about not seeing Musab’s family again and was grateful the children didn’t ask about them either. I couldn’t wait to get away, and I was anxious that they would get involved and try to stop us leaving. Walid had tried again last week to convince him we shouldn’t go. His argument was that Musab wouldn’t be able to control me when we lived abroad.

If my marriage was healthy – or even near healthy – I would have stayed. If societal norms had given me the freedom to leave my husband and raise my children as a single mother without shame or stigma, I would never have thought about leaving. Just like my grandmother in 1948, I would have stayed.

The desire to stay was always there, deep and tied to something greater than personal comfort. We Palestinians faced so many difficulties and hurdles as the native minority, yet none of us would want to abandon our homeland. We endured relentless hardship and systemic oppression – struggling against a tide of discrimination, erasure and marginalisation every single day. Yet we held on fiercely – not because it was easy but because it was ours.

Driving away from the house, I looked at the closed iron gates behind which I had felt like a prisoner for the last time. I knew I had made the right decision.

Hitting the road

Irreversible point

The moment we hit the road, the system crossed an irreversible point: where every outcome lay ahead and none behind. From now on, it will curve to my side.

As we neared the Jordanian border, my youngest daughter suddenly announced her urgent need for the toilet.

‘There’s nowhere to stop,’ Musab snapped. ‘She will have to wait until we reach the border.’

‘I really need to go,’ said my baby, her tears beginning to flow.

Musab, already in a foul mood, had little patience for his child’s tears. ‘Stop crying, or I’ll give you something to cry about! There’s nowhere to stop. If she doesn’t stop crying, we’ll turn this car around and head back home.’

Meanwhile, my eldest daughter reached out to soothe her sister, offering her hand.

‘You can squeeze my hand whenever you feel the urge, okay?’ she said.

‘Habibti, we’re almost at the border,’ said my brother. ‘Once we’re there, we’ll take you to the toilet, alright?’

My brother’s calm voice, combined with her sister’s comforting gesture, managed to calm my little one down.

I was worried about the drive to the border because there were so many factors that could potentially upset Musab. Part of me had wanted to fly out from Tel Aviv airport, but it wasn’t logical. It would have taken too long, and we would’ve needed to buy additional tickets to fly from Tel Aviv to Amman. We decided it was cheaper and faster to drive to Amman airport in Jordan. Musab had arranged with his nephew Sami, who studied and lived in Jordan, to pick us up at the checkpoint and drive us the rest of the way.

When we reached the checkpoint, a few Israeli soldiers dressed in uniform and armed with guns stood on each side of the narrow passage through which we had to drive the car. Seeing them was enough to intimidate the kids.

‘Mama, I’m okay. I don’t need to go to the toilet anymore,’ my youngest said, despite her multiple requests along the way. She was subtly wriggling

in her seat. I nodded.

Musab's nephew was already waiting for us on the other side of the border. It was one in the afternoon, and the sky remained gloomy above us.

After explaining our situation to the soldiers, they allowed us to park the car as close as possible to the checkpoint to unload the suitcases and carry them through the security checks to the other side. But they urged us to be quick.

'How quick do you think we can be?' Musab asked. 'We have all our suitcases to load!'

I couldn't believe he snapped at the soldier. Thankfully, my dad intervened. He spoke fluent Hebrew.

'Sorry, sir. We promise not to be long. My son-in-law is just tired and nervous about the long trip ahead of him. We will hurry.'

My dad knew how to keep the peace. The soldier nodded and walked away, but the tension between Musab and my dad was intense. Musab lit a cigarette and observed my brother, my dad and me unloading the car. My son, eager to assist, took the small carry-on bags from my dad.

Just when I thought we had gathered everything from my dad's car, my mum handed us three gallons of olive oil. She insisted we take them, convinced we couldn't survive without these essentials. I tried to explain that we might not be able to check them in, but my protests fell on deaf ears.

'You will need these. Don't be silly; just take them.'

Then something unexpected happened: my mum embraced me tightly, her tears flowing freely. It was a rare display of emotion from her. The last time she hugged me like this had been on my wedding day seventeen years earlier. Not even when I gave birth to my children or experienced the sadness of miscarriages, nor when I suffered at Musab's hands, did she show such vulnerability as she did at that moment.

'I can't believe you'll be so far away,' she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion. 'Please take care and let me know when you arrive. I'll pray for you every day.'

'Thank you, Mum,' I murmured, with gratitude and sorrow.

Though I was sad, tears eluded me. I couldn't deny the love I held for my parents, even though our relationship was fractured. I glanced at my dad, hoping to catch a flicker of the man he used to be – the one whose eyes sparkled with boundless affection and protection, the one I relied on to shield me from life's uncertainties. Back then, he'd playfully tease me, crunch my styled hair or affectionately call me 'Doctor' due to my thirst for learning and passion for books.

He bid me farewell with a kiss on my cheeks. 'Take care. May Allah keep you safe,' he said.

I couldn't let go of how let down I felt. It seemed like he had no idea how much I needed him, how empty I felt inside.

'Kids, it's time to say goodbye,' I declared.

I observed tears pooling in my kids' eyes as they clung to their grandparents and uncle. Their reluctance to part with them was clear in their tight embraces.

'Take care, sister. I love you.' My brother's heartfelt words resonated deeply with me. I understood the limitations posed by his youth. Standing up for me was difficult for him when he was still discovering his strengths and capabilities.

'We should start moving,' Musab interjected, his hand resting gently on my shoulder in an attempt to portray an impression of unity in front of his audience. 'Thank you for driving us to the border,' he added.

He guided me towards the security chamber separating us from the Jordanian side of the border, where his nephew was waiting for us with a van to drive us to the airport in Amman. Checking passports for the five of us did not take long.

As we drove further into Jordan, Sami chatted away through the otherwise solemn atmosphere. The rest of us sat in silence, enveloped in our thoughts during the three-hour drive. It was as though each passing kilometre only served to deepen the chasm between us, highlighting our burdens.

Remarkably, the children managed to stifle their demands for a bathroom break until we arrived at Amman airport, where more trials awaited us.

Musab resentfully helped his nephew unload our suitcases onto a luggage trolley this time.

Leaving them to get on with it, I said: 'I'll take the kids to the toilet. We'll meet you at the check-in counter.'

Before he could protest, I hurried off with the children, seeking relief in the commotion of the bustling airport.

When we finally met up with them, a sinking feeling settled in my stomach as I noticed his shameless ogling of women passing by. His blatant flirtation, in the presence of our children and me, disgusted me and discomfited the other women. The entire situation was utterly repulsive.

'What are you doing here? Go with Sami to check us in,' he said to me, waving his hand.

He turned his back on me to continue his shameless attempts at conversation with strangers.

'You should accompany your wife and kids,' Sami intervened, trying to reason with him. 'Here, take the trolley, and I'll show you where you need to check in before I leave.'

'Don't tell me what to do. Just because you're studying law doesn't make you a lawyer,' he grunted defensively.

Sami did not reply, just kept going. Finally, Musab gave a frustrated sigh and followed reluctantly. But the process of checking in evolved into an entirely new horror.

'What do you mean we can't take the oil?' Musab asked. 'Are you stupid? What are we supposed to do with it now?'

His irritation was escalating, and I recognised the familiar tone that often preceded an outburst. The poor woman at the counter looked upset by his aggression.

'Put a label with our name on each one and send them with the rest of the luggage. How hard can it be?' he demanded.

A security guard approached, concerned for the attendant at the counter trying to check us in.

Musab didn't give her a chance to speak before asserting: 'She's okay. She's just not doing her job properly.'

Trying to avoid a scene, the attendant quickly explained, ‘Sir, we cannot check them in as they are. They need to be boxed and sealed properly and then weighed before we can estimate the additional cost you would need to pay. I wish I could help you today, but unfortunately that is the protocol.’

‘I will keep them with me,’ said Sami. ‘Send me your address when you arrive in Australia, and I will ship them to you.’

I felt relieved that Sami had waited around until we checked in.

‘Do whatever. I don’t care,’ he said, turning to me. ‘This is your fault – why couldn’t you say no to your mother? Maybe we just don’t go anymore. It’s all too exhausting, and now I’m tired.’

With a deep breath, I suppressed the urge to lash out.

‘Why don’t you take a seat and relax? You look exhausted,’ I said, forcing sweetness into my tone. ‘Have a coffee and a cigarette. I’ll finish checking us in.’

I didn’t wait for Musab’s response; instead, I finalised our check-in before he changed his mind.

‘I’m so sorry for the trouble today. It’s been a long day, and he didn’t mean to be rude,’ I said apologetically to the airline officer as Sami left.

I rallied the kids and found Musab half asleep at a café.

‘We’re checked in. Shall we head to the boarding gate?’ I suggested, eager to move forward.

‘Alright. Hand me the passports and boarding tickets,’ he demanded. ‘I’ll hold on to them.’

Having the documents myself would have given me the chance to depart without him, at least, but there was no other option than to surrender them. After we went through security and the children grabbed a quick bite, a knot of tension tightened in my chest.

When we stood in line to board, anxiety gripped me like a vice, rendering it difficult to breathe or glance around. My focus remained steadfastly on the kids, a silent plea running through my mind.

‘Mama, where’s Dad?’ my son’s voice cut through my thoughts, prompting me to look around.

Musab was slumped in a nearby seat, oblivious to the boarding queue.

My mouth felt dry, my palms slick with sweat, every inch of my body taut. I yearned to urge him to get up, to snap out of it, but the words were stuck in my throat.

‘Madam, your boarding passes?’ the airline officer asked when we reached the front of the queue.

We needed our tickets, but I couldn’t bring myself to utter a word to Musab.

‘Madam, you cannot board without them,’ the officer reiterated, her impatience growing.

My head was starting to spin, but he was unaffected, oblivious to the urgency of our situation as we stood on the precipice of departure.

‘Madam, if you don’t have your tickets, please step aside so others can board.’ The urgency in her voice was increasing.

‘Dad!’ my son yelled out desperately. ‘We need to go now!’

My heart pounded in my chest, fearing the worst. Startled by his son’s cry, Musab finally stirred, his movements slow and reluctant.

‘Okay, okay. I’m here,’ he grumbled, his voice heavy with irritation.

Though I couldn’t bring myself to meet his gaze, I felt his presence like a noose around my neck, making it nearly impossible to breathe.

‘Sir, may I see your boarding passes?’ the airline officer was sympathetic now, her eyes betraying pity for my dilemma.

With a resigned sigh, Musab handed over the documents, his face a mask of annoyance and irritation.

‘You can go through now. Enjoy your flight,’ she said kindly.

I stumbled onto the plane, guiding the kids to their seats before sinking into my own. The moment pressed down on me, the gravity of our escape sinking in.

When Musab handed me our passports and boarding passes, I felt a wave of relief. I secured the documents in my handbag, making sure to never let go of them and, for the first time since accepting the scholarship, I allowed myself to believe that he could no longer have power over me.

On Tuesday 5 July 2005, I left my homeland. As the plane was taking off, I remembered the story of the baby elephant. On that day, I cut the rope

that tethered me, the rope more fragile than myself. On that day, I took my life to a new field, where I knew that with a new set of rules and operations the function of my life would behave differently – and to my favour.

7

Integration

Though it is assumed to be otherwise by many non-maths people, integration is a simple concept. It is about adding small pieces together until they form a whole. In Sydney, I stitched a new life from fragments: the law's protection, my children's laughter, pages of a thesis, the quiet relief of safety. Alone, each piece seemed too small to matter. Together, they integrated to a sum greater than I imagined.

As the plane ascended, I could feel the stress of two decades lifting slowly off my shoulders. The sound of the engine roaring and the sensation of take-off was a melody that resonated within my soul. Tears welled in my eyes, not out of sorrow this time but out of the overwhelming relief that I was finally breaking free.

For the first time, happiness felt within reach – no longer a distant dream. Australia wasn't just a country; it was a place where we could redefine ourselves, where laughter, love and hope would replace despair. We were ready for this new beginning. Glancing at my children – my thirteen-year-old son, my ten- and five-year-old daughters – I admired their resilience and how they never complained, no matter the upheaval. They sat beside me, quiet witnesses to the turbulence that had defined our existence. Leaving behind friends and everything they knew was undoubtedly challenging for them, but I knew this was the path to a brighter future.

At thirty-four, I reflected on the choices that had led me to this moment. Was I running away instead of fighting? I could not fight him there. He held the power, socially and within the community, which gave him an advantage. I needed neutral ground for a fairer fight. A fairer field.

Even during the flights, instead of helping and making the long journey more bearable, Musab managed to frustrate me and the children. The flight from Jordan to Doha was short. Luckily, the layover for the next flight to Singapore wasn't too long. The plane to Singapore was bigger and more seats were vacant, so the kids and I sat together, and he chose to sit alone in

the same row but across the aisle. The width of the aisle was the distance I needed.

At Singapore airport, we waited a long time for our last flight to Sydney. It wasn't ideal; we were all tired and restless. There was only Asian food available, and since they had never tried it before, the kids were reluctant to eat and opted to go without.

When we finally boarded the plane to Sydney, Musab chose a similar seating arrangement and again the aisle gave me the distance I needed from him. There were a few people on board who spoke Arabic. As usual, he talked to anyone who paid attention to him.

'Why are you going to Australia?' an older man sitting behind me asked him in Arabic.

'We want to have a baby there to get permanent residency,' he replied casually.

I felt a surge of embarrassment, and the older man, unsure how to respond, simply nodded. He did not bother to educate Musab on Australian immigration laws.

I ignored Musab for the rest of the flight. I attempted to nap with the kids, but my anger made it impossible.

On 7 July 2005, we finally made it to Sydney. A new beginning, a new life, was taking shape. I used to feel that I must have been born in the wrong place at the wrong time. And here I was, being reborn in a new place. I told myself: *This is my true date of birth*. Not many people get the chance to be born twice. I did.

I knew reclaiming my life wouldn't be easy. It would be slow, messy and exhausting – and life would certainly be different on the other side of the world, without my parents, siblings and friends. On new soil. But a newborn takes nearly a year to find their feet, and so would I. I had already survived more than one fall. Now, it was time to learn how to breathe, under a new sky, without being suffocated.

We passed through the airport in Sydney with surprising ease,

considering we had three very hungry and tired children in tow. For the first time, I felt like a normal human being: not interrogated; respected and not reduced to suspicion. The experience stood in stark contrast to what we usually endured at Ben Gurion airport, where a journey felt like an accusation, where our identity alone was enough to justify distrust. In Sydney's airport, I realised how deeply I had internalised that sense of being watched, doubted and simply othered – even in my ancestors' land. It was only in the absence of that weight that I understood just how integrated it had been.

‘Brother! Hello. Welcome.’

Khalid was taller than his younger brother. He picked Musab up and hugged him as he swung him around.

‘Come, let's go,’ he said. ‘Aunty Rose and the girls are waiting at home for us.’

Rose and Khalid had been married for many years. Rose was an Australian girl he had met in Israel when she was travelling as a young woman, probably in her early twenties. They married a few years later and he moved to Australia soon after that. She was only a couple of years older than me. She visited a few times during our engagement and also after we married, so I had a friendly relationship with her.

Musab and Khalid took the lead, handling the suitcases, a situation I welcomed.

‘Mum, I'm hungry,’ said my youngest.

She was tugging at my hand, wanting to stay close to me.

‘Me too, Mum,’ said the other two in unison.

‘We will eat soon,’ I assured them in a whisper. ‘I'm sure your uncle and aunty have prepared food at home.’

Khalid's was a very large car, with plenty of room to stretch our legs and get comfortable. I breathed a sigh of relief when the engine roared and we were finally on our way.

‘You all must be hungry, so we will go straight to this fantastic Lebanese restaurant in Punchbowl. It's a bit of a drive, about thirty minutes away, but trust me, you'll love the food.’

What the kids and I needed was a quick hot meal, a warm shower and to slip into warmer clothes; we were not up to sitting in a restaurant, but I kept my thoughts to myself. It was nice of him to offer.

‘So, Majeda, when do you and the kids start school?’ Khalid asked. ‘I’m more than happy to drive you around until you get used to the public transport system.’

The offer was a pleasant surprise.

‘That’s very kind of you, thank you. I have to go tomorrow to organise my papers, and my son begins on Monday morning. Please let us know what time you think we should wake up and be ready to ensure he gets to school by eight o’clock.’

‘Why eight o’clock?’ Khalid asked, genuinely puzzled.

‘Because school starts at that time,’ I replied, baffled by his question.

Khalid burst into laughter, then said, ‘No, school starts at nine.’

‘Mum, is it true?’ my son asked, happy to sleep in another hour.

‘Of course it’s true,’ Khalid said.

‘We are used to the school day starting at eight,’ I said, unable to hide my naive surprise. ‘Why isn’t it the same here?’

‘Because we are sensible here. But here’s an idea: why don’t you talk to our prime minister and ask him to change the start time from nine am to eight am? I’m sure he’ll change it just for you.’

Khalid laughed again, this time joined by Musab, and I felt a ball of anger and disappointment forming in my throat.

I stayed silent until we arrived at the restaurant. Once seated, the food arrived promptly and, famished from the flight, we dug in without delay. The food provided a comforting distraction, easing the tension from the earlier exchange.

It was my first time trying Lebanese food. As Palestinians living within the 1948 borders, we were barred from travelling to most Arab countries. The only exceptions – beginning in 1994, following formal peace agreements – were Jordan and Egypt. So, we’d never really met people from other Arab countries or tried their food before. This was all new to us.

It was late when we finally reached Khalid’s place. We were all

exhausted. Our meeting with their two daughters – who were a similar age to my children – was very brief. Khalid and Rose guided us to our rooms. Musab and I would be using the guest room, which was spacious, equipped with a queen bed, a built-in wardrobe and two bedside tables. Rose had made an effort to provide fresh bedsheets. After our much-needed warm showers, Musab wasted no time, promptly bidding everyone goodnight once he knew where he was sleeping. At least he showered beforehand.

Khalid left it to his wife to show us the rest of the sleeping arrangements. Determined not to go to sleep until the kids were settled, I ventured into the kids' designated sleeping area: the rumpus room. Rose explained that the room was a bit cold because the ducted heating did not reach it, but she brought in a portable heater and some extra blankets for the kids. Khalid and Rose both were doing their best to accommodate us.

Thankfully, after I tucked the kids into bed, they all drifted off to sleep quickly. Slipping into bed with Musab, I realised I was relieved he was already fast asleep. For a moment I regretted that feeling. In spite of everything, I hoped to start our new life together on the right note. I was keen to shift my perspective; it wasn't just about me. It was time to think about a fresh beginning for the kids with their father. Khalid appeared different from his other brothers, almost a positive influence on him. I couldn't help but wonder: could tonight mark the shift we all needed?

The sky is concave

Mathematically, a concave curve bends downwards like an upside-down bowl. For the first time, the sky looked concave to me – not just bending downwards, but embracing.

Morning came too quickly and, even though I was tired, I was eager for my first day at university. I was both nervous and excited to study in Sydney and adapt to a new culture.

I entrusted the kids to Rose's care. She was happy to look after them, and she understood that Musab was not a hands-on father like his brother.

Khalid graciously offered to drive me to the university.

‘I usually wake up around this time for work, so it’s no trouble driving you,’ he said.

En route to university I was in awe of the simplicity and lush greenery of Sydney. The city was undeniably beautiful. The scenery kept changing as we neared the University of New South Wales, with tall buildings popping up and the roads getting busier.

When we reached the university, I told Khalid what time I was expected to finish my day.

‘I’ll be right back here to pick you up. Enjoy your first day,’ he said, dropping me at the entrance off Anzac Parade.

When Khalid had driven away, I turned to the enormous campus. There was no security gate, no soldiers to check my bag. It felt strange. I was not used to it, and I kept looking around, expecting a security guard to stop and search me. But then I realised they didn’t have them here. Normality felt foreign. I started walking, trying to figure out where I needed to go: the Faculty of Education – near the library, as the email from UNSW described it. The university bustled with students, and what caught my eye was the diversity. I wasn’t sure what to expect, but what I noticed most was the diversity of faces, skin colours and backgrounds around me.

My initial interactions with Australian people surprised me in a good way. They were friendly and didn’t mind my heavy accent, although I felt a bit embarrassed because my English was far from conversational and sometimes I mixed up words in Hebrew, English and Arabic. My left hemisphere’s default foreign language was Hebrew at that point of time. It took years for the Hebrew to take a back seat and let English lead.

Meeting my supervisor, who was pleasant and understanding, added to the positive experience. The atmosphere was different from that of Haifa University, where, regardless of my academic standing, I, as a Palestinian, felt like a second-class citizen – not to mention the degrading looks we received from the office administration staff at the faculty of mathematics, as if the faculty was not meant to include Palestinian students. Here, everyone seemed to treat each other with respect and friendliness that I was

not accustomed to. It made me feel strangely itchy, just like what warmth does to cold skin.

My visit to Student Services further eased my transition. After they showed me around, they gave me keys to a locker near a cubicle I could use to study and keep my belongings safe. It was exactly what I needed to secure the passports, which I had kept with me since we landed, safe. Almost robotically, I took them out of my bag and put them straight into the locker. I felt relieved.

I was required to attend in person only one day a week, and the rest of the time I was able to complete my research from home. It was precisely the flexibility I needed. It would give me time to search for a house of our own, so we didn't have to rely on Khalid and Rose for too long. The schedule would also allow me to look for a job, since the scholarship was barely enough for us to survive on. I wasn't prepared to rely on Musab finding and committing to a long-term job, so I needed to be proactive.

I could hear my mum's voice, saying: *Don't! He is supposed to provide for his children.* But I ignored her in Sydney as I had in Canna.

As my first day at university came to an end, a sense of happiness surrounded me. It was not that I needed further confirmation, but that day I knew I had made the right decision. I walked down the long, tiled walkway from the education faculty towards Anzac Parade, where I would wait for Khalid, and noticed the library.

Stepping inside, I felt a rush of familiarity. The scent of aged paper transported me back to countless childhood afternoons spent lost in the pages of a good book. Rows upon rows of shelves towered taller than me, each one a treasure of knowledge and imagination waiting to be found and explored. Running my fingers along the spines, I was captivated by the smell. Oh, the smell of books – earthy, warm, timeless – wrapped around me and held me still. *This is paradise*, I thought. *My paradise.* I could live here forever, among stories told in silence.

As I stepped outside, another scent caught me; it was rich, bitter and inviting. The smell of coffee, like the smell of books, pulled me in without permission. Just nearby, tucked close to the library entrance, was a small

coffee stall. I needed one. Still unfamiliar with the words on the menu, I began explaining what I was after: ‘Something strong, with milk ... not too much milk, not too much foam, but not too watery either.’

The barista smiled knowingly and said, ‘Ah, that’s a flat white.’

I ordered my first flat white and drank it slowly, savouring every velvety sip as if it were a secret. With the passports – the children’s and my own – in a safe place, books in one hand and coffee in my veins, the day was getting better minute by minute. It was mine.

Realising the time, I rushed down the long-tiled walkway as fast as I could. While I waited for Khalid, being in this new place, thousands of miles away from the only other place I knew, I was finally able to pause and soak in the beauty of something as axiomatic as the shape of the sky. Has it always been concave and embracing? I could avow that it was not like that before. Or was it, and it was only that I could not see or feel it?

It seemed that in Palestine we were so consumed with surviving on the land that we forgot to look at the sky. Our eyes stayed fixed on the ground: on checkpoints, on potholes, on borders that kept shifting. We learnt early that the earth beneath our feet was both home and battleground. In that constant state of alertness, the sky is irrelevant. It is a luxury.

Or maybe it wasn’t just the occupation. Maybe it was Musab. I had kept my head down, not just in fear but also in the exhaustion of navigating each moment, like stepping between landmines. And yet, probably, the sky was always there, untouched by our borders or his rage. It had always been concave, waiting to embrace me.

This was a moment of clarity, a reminder to look up despite all the elements that forced my gaze downward: shame, fear, exhaustion, the weight of survival and the burden of resilience. At that moment, the concave sky was embracing and inviting. A new perspective.

When Khalid’s car arrived to pick me up, Musab was in there too. I was slightly surprised, but I didn’t mind. It was nice to see him wanting to spend time with his brother.

Khalid told me that he had finished work early and decided to introduce Musab to some of his friends before they came to pick me up. They didn’t

bother to ask me about my first day, but I wasn't surprised or upset by it.

When we arrived back at the house, Rose was nearly finished making dinner. She had made spaghetti bolognaise. I went to check on the kids. In the lounge room, I found my youngest daughter nestling between her siblings while they watched television. It struck me as unusual, but perhaps they were merely trying to keep warm. I did not see Khalid and Rose's two daughters sitting with them, just my three vectors huddled together.

'Mama!' My youngest was the first to rush towards me.

She threw her arms around me and, as soon as I lifted her, she burst into tears.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

'Baba ... hit ... me.' Her words were muffled by her tears.

'Baba smacked her on the bottom this morning because she wet the bed in her sleep.' My eldest daughter spoke in a hushed tone, looking around in fear.

I was shocked, as he had never laid a hand on the kids before. Not that I was aware of.

'She didn't mean to, Mama,' my eldest daughter continued, defending her little sister. 'It was so cold in the room last night.'

'Oh, habibti, I know she didn't mean to. I'm upset at your father, not your sister.'

After soothing the kids, I approached Rose to discuss the incident.

'She had a bath, I washed the sheets, and they're dry now. She'll be okay to sleep on the mattress tonight – no need to make a fuss about it,' Rose explained, maintaining a comforting and composed tone.

Though her words carried a sense of assurance, I still believed that, if he had been willing to strike the children once, he might do it again in the future. Calling the children to the dinner table, I was torn between confronting him about his actions and maintaining peace for the sake of everyone at the table.

After we finished dinner, the two men were already making plans to go out for the night. I was not happy that we weren't included. It was only our second night in Australia, and it didn't seem fair. Part of me felt triggered.

There was no way I was going to let him repeat the same cycle we lived through for seventeen years.

‘Where are you going tonight?’ I asked, trying to stay calm.

Khalid didn’t seem bothered by my enquiry, and Musab refrained from abruptly dismissing me as he usually did.

‘A good friend of mine lives in Parramatta, and a few of us are gathering at his house for a game of cards,’ Khalid explained. ‘I want them to meet my favourite brother,’ he added with a friendly pat on Musab’s shoulder and a broad grin.

Playing the role of the concerned husband, Musab turned to me and asked: ‘Do you need something from me before we go?’

We both knew the rules of this game.

‘No,’ I said, and managed to fake a smile. ‘But it would have been nice if we were considered for an outing, too, since we’ve never been here before.’ Feeling the discomfort I caused in the room, I changed my attitude. ‘Just have a good time.’

‘Tomorrow we can go to the movies,’ said Rose, trying to balance the situation. ‘I will take you and all the kids.’

‘We can go to the movies, just us? You mean without the men?’ I asked as I happily accepted the offer.

‘And on the weekend we’ll start looking for a house for you, so you feel more comfortable,’ said Rose.

Once the men left, I focused on finding a way to keep the kids warm through the night. Rose entered the room holding an old blanket she had discovered in the back of a closet.

‘I’m sorry I don’t have anything more for the older ones, but this should keep her warm.’

I accepted the blanket, feeling a pang of guilt. The thought of my other two children spending another night in the cold room without additional warmth troubled me.

Sensing my distress, my son reassured me, ‘That’s okay, Mama. We’ll be fine. Give the blanket to my sister.’

My heart swelled with gratitude for them and their existence in my life.

Later, trying to sleep, I couldn't stop thinking about my youngest vector.

The search for a new home went well. Rose and I dedicated most of our Saturday to searching real estate listings until we came across a townhouse on New Line Avenue, not far from their house.

'I like it,' I said to Rose before we had even inspected it. 'I like the name of the road. It is a line, and it is new,' I continued ignoring the confused look on her face.

After we had visited, the real estate agent assured us he would let us know on Monday if our application had been successful. We were feeling hopeful, since not many people attended the inspection.

As the evening approached, Khalid and Musab started gearing up for another outing. Though I tried to suppress my disappointment, I felt compelled to address my husband when we were alone.

'Why can't we all go out for dinner or drive to the city?' I asked. 'I want to explore Sydney too.'

'We will. But tonight, Khalid and I are going to play cards. I won last night, so I know I can win again,' he replied, grabbing his cigarettes, lighting one, then putting it out when he remembered Rose's rule – *no smoking inside*.

Following him into the living room, where Khalid was seated, I couldn't contain my emotions any longer.

'Why can't we all spend time together?' I asked, voicing my frustration in the hope they would change their minds. 'It's not fun when you make plans without us.'

Khalid, unfazed, offered me a reassuring smile and said, 'Don't worry. I know you want to go shopping tomorrow to buy winter clothes, so we won't be home late.'

As expected, despite their promise, they did return home late. I lay still and did not stir when Musab climbed into bed, reeking of cigarettes. The scent intensified when he half curled on top of me. I couldn't escape it. Once his snoring commenced, I carefully rolled him to the other side of the

bed. It was a manoeuvre I had perfected.

The next day, I woke up to the familiar stench of cigarettes and sweat that surrounded him each time he went out. I did not wake him. I opened the kids' room door and saw them still asleep, so I went downstairs, following the smell of coffee.

Rose was using a coffee machine, inserting capsules instead of using a coffee pot. Very different from the Palestinian coffee we were used to. She offered me a cup. It was nice but smelt and tasted cardamom-less.

'I noticed the men got in late, so I guess they won't be coming shopping with us,' she remarked, acknowledging the obvious but not seeming to care.

'Are you okay with driving us?' I asked, eager to focus on our plans for the day.

'Yes, absolutely. But we must leave soon as the stores close early on Sundays. They will probably be asleep until we come back and we can have a late lunch together.'

'Sure, I am used to it,' I said, my half-smile full of disappointment. 'How do you deal with this situation?' I asked with true curiosity.

'I don't care as long as I am independent,' she confidently and robotically replied, like she had been asked this question before.

By Monday morning, my son was ready for his first day at the Intensive English school in Marsden. I accompanied him in the morning. We took a bus to the nearest station, then caught a train and finally walked a few minutes to the school. We arrived on time.

'Don't come to pick me up,' he said. 'I know how to come back. It is embarrassing.'

I am so proud of you, I thought to myself. Many years later, he confessed that he used to get lost but never told me about it.

After a long day at university, I returned to our temporary home to find my son and his cousin in the middle of a heated argument over the computer; he needed it for homework, but she refused to share.

When we finally received confirmation that our townhouse was ready, it

was a relief. Still, in time, the tension faded, and my son and his cousin, like many children who clash when young, grew to become close friends.

Once we settled into our townhouse, Khalid generously offered his brother a job in his small business. He attempted to persuade him on several occasions, but Musab was uninterested.

‘I don’t know anything about what you do in your business. Frankly, it’s not something I want to do,’ he responded, sticking to his usual pattern of rejecting work and relying on others for support.

Perplexed, Khalid sought clarity, asking, ‘What do you *want* to do?’

Musab shrugged and casually stated, ‘I will apply for government assistance.’

‘You’ve been here less than a month, brother.’ Khalid shook his head. ‘You are on a student visa as a dependant. You are not entitled to any government assistance. The government won’t give you a cent.’

Musab’s reluctance to work surprised him. Determined to find a middle ground, Khalid proposed an alternative.

‘Try it for a week,’ he suggested. ‘I will pay you good money. If you like it, we can continue from there.’

Though Musab agreed to this arrangement, he quit a few days later. Khalid was not happy. All his attempts to convince Musab to continue working were fruitless. And, as we knew, he was not eligible for any government assistance.

As usual, I was compelled to take matters into my own hands. Within a few weeks, I secured two jobs. The first was with a translation company in Chatswood, a commitment that required me to navigate the challenges of commuting. The second involved tutoring in a learning centre. The dual responsibilities demanded sacrifices of time and energy, but our financial situation left me with no alternative.

I knew that my mum would advise: *Don’t work, then he will have to find the money to support you and the children. It is his responsibility to do so.* In a normal situation and with a normal human being, she would have been

right. But with him, it would not have worked.

Déjà vu

Recurrence

Although the domain shifted with place, the governing rule remained unchanged and his recurrent behaviour generated familiar outcomes. I was not going to let this continue.

Life became hectic again. Juggling two jobs, studying, raising my children, managing the household and adapting to a new country was a whirlwind. Each day became a matter of survival as Musab reverted to his old ways.

Khalid would come to pick him up, only to find his brother nestled in bed, stubbornly refusing to get up and go to work. He spent his time socialising with people similar to his relatives and friends back home, and he invited them to our home, expecting me to entertain them.

During their visits, the men would watch sport on TV, unleashing loud and obscene shouts. Their blatant lack of respect unsettled me. I witnessed them encouraging Musab to abstain from work, insisting that he could obtain money from the government. It became increasingly challenging to persuade him to dismiss their encouragement and instead find a job.

‘You have to work!’ I pleaded, attempting to reason with him. ‘We can’t live like this. You need to shoulder your responsibilities and contribute.’

‘No, I don’t need to work,’ he said. ‘And if you don’t like it, we can go back home.’

I began searching for jobs in schools to provide me with more stability – and hopefully more income. After having my degrees assessed and approved by the state government, I discovered I still needed accreditation from the Department of Education, which required me to pass the Professional English Assessment for Teachers (PEAT). The PEAT was rigorous, and it tested not only language proficiency but also my understanding of policies, procedures and everyday interactions in Australian schools – things entirely new to me. Despite being a PhD student

and having passed the TOEFL, I still had to enrol at TAFE Randwick, near my university, to prepare.

After several costly attempts at this non-negotiable step towards accreditation, I was desperate to pass. Following hours of serious studying and a \$400 fee per attempt, every mistake I made felt like a blow to something much bigger than just my confidence. But I was determined. This test was more than a qualification; it was a lifeline.

On my last attempt, I couldn't afford anything to go wrong. I decided to stay overnight with two women I had only recently met, Deborah and Carol, because they lived close to the test centre. Deborah was a Jewish woman – originally South African – known to a friend of a friend in Haifa. A few months later, Deborah and I realised that we had lived on the same street in Haifa at the same time in the late eighties, but we never met until I was in Sydney. I barely knew Deborah and Carol, but I trusted them more than I trusted that Musab would let me leave in the morning so that I wouldn't be late.

Before I set off, I made sure the kids had enough food and gave them strict instructions: stay inside; keep the doors locked; don't open them for anyone. I told them I'd be back by midday the following day. I didn't want to scare them, but my voice was tighter than usual. I had to leave our house before Musab came home. Timing was everything.

I took the bus to the nearest train station, then a train to Hornsby, where I needed to change to a different line. My eyes scanned the surroundings constantly, my pulse loud in my ears. When I arrived and stepped onto the platform, my breath caught: I saw him. He was crossing over to the opposite platform, heading home.

My entire body locked up – retrieving the pain of many years of abuse – and for a moment I couldn't move. I didn't know what would happen if he saw me, but I couldn't risk finding out.

Heart racing, barely breathing, I pressed myself against a pole and waited. I watched him board, his figure disappearing behind closing doors. Only when the train pulled away did I exhale.

My legs shook, but I stayed standing.

He hadn't seen me. And I wasn't going back. I did not care about the fight that would happen when I got home the next day.

I passed the test.

After two months in our new home, I returned late from work to a chilling sight: my eldest daughter was crying, hiding in her room. Musab was nowhere to be seen. I sensed that something sinister had occurred.

'What's wrong?' I asked, my stomach churning with anxiety.

She explained to me that her father had demanded that she fetch his shoes as he was heading out. Engrossed in her homework, she hesitated and didn't immediately rise to do his bidding. Enraged, he had yanked her by the hair, shouted that she was forbidden to say no to him, that he was her father and so she must do whatever he told her to do, then stormed out.

He disappeared for several days after this incident, so I couldn't confront him. The days crawled by and a dark silence hung over the house. When he finally came back, I found the courage to stand up for my daughter. However, his response was dismissive, a casual wave of the hand as if swatting away a minor annoyance.

'She needed to learn her place,' he said. 'I'm her father, and she can't defy me. I won't let her become like you.'

His words cut through me like a knife. I felt powerless. I needed to protect my children, but I did not know how. I couldn't be home all the time without compromising my studies or the work I did to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table. I had no parents nearby, no family, no-one to keep them safe after school if I needed to work or study late. I did not know how to keep them safe.

I was counting on something, but I wasn't sure what it was. Perhaps faith in my function acting in my favour.

A few weeks later, I came home to another scene that filled me with terror. Finding my son packing some bags and clutching a map, I feared the worst.

'What's wrong? What happened? Where are you going?' I asked,

desperation welling within me.

Attempting to hold back tears, he simply said, 'Anywhere but here.'

I interrupted his frantic preparations and calmed him down. When I asked what had happened, he said he was trying to do his homework when his father spilt a bottle of milk. Instead of cleaning up the mess himself, Musab ordered him to handle it and fetch a new one from the nearby store. My son attempted to reason with him, hoping that he would spare him the task and let him finish his homework. However, his appeals fell on deaf ears. Reluctantly, he went to the store and purchased more milk, only to return to yet another demand. Ignoring his son's allergies to grass, Musab demanded he mow the backyard.

When he stood his ground and refused, Musab's response was swift and violent. He slapped him across the face.

Musab wasn't home, which wasn't unusual. He had a habit of leaving after every argument or fight. My fury surged. My children were no longer safe, and I refused to expose them to this lunacy.

'Come with me,' I said to my son. 'Let's go to the park.'

My son didn't ask why; he just walked with me. When we got to the park, I sat him down and asked him to listen carefully.

'I'm not going to let this happen to you again,' I said. 'I am not going to lose your sisters or you because of him. Things aren't working with your dad, and he is not going to change. I want to leave him. Do you think we will be okay and survive without him?'

I didn't need permission from my thirteen-year-old son, but I needed to know how he felt about this decision. Without hesitation, he said *yes*.

I didn't have a plan or know how I was going to leave Musab, but I didn't have to think about it for too long. When he returned to the house that night, the kids were asleep and I was ready for a fight.

Years of pent-up anger surged through me. Everything I ever wanted to say to him just came pouring out. Things I never thought I was able to say.

He pushed me so hard that I stumbled and slid across the floor.

'You are the worst human being ever. I hate you!' I screamed.

I couldn't hold back, though I knew it would wake the kids. Before I

could get up, though, he started kicking me. I covered my head, but he wouldn't stop. He didn't care that he still had his shoes on. I don't know how, but I managed to roll away from him. Then, as I tried to get up, he grabbed my hair and yanked me back to him.

'I'm going to kill you!' he shouted, and he took me by the throat and began trying to choke me.

From the look on his face, I believed he would go through with it. I couldn't give up now. There was no way I was going to die this way. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw everything I would lose if I didn't fight back: my kids' faces, watching and screaming, horrified, from the doorway. They gave me the strength I needed.

With everything I had, I kicked him in the groin. He shouted at me in anger as he fell to his knees. There was no time to think. I grabbed the phone and, in a haze of adrenaline and fear, dialled triple zero.

'He is killing me,' I told the operator. 'Please come quickly.'

I somehow managed to give them the address before he unplugged the phone.

Calling the police was enough to make him stop. He did not run away, though. Instead, he lit a cigarette and paced, saying yet again that he had had enough, that we were all going back to Canna.

I didn't engage with him. I sat with my kids, huddled in the corner, their eyes wide with a mixture of fear and horror – especially my youngest daughter, who had been woken by the screams. My son's earlier *yes* echoed in my mind, strengthening my resolve. I couldn't go back now. I had to see this through.

When the police responded to my call and came to the house quickly, Musab was shocked and I was happily surprised. They took the situation seriously, especially seeing the three kids horrified. One female police officer stayed with me and took my statement, while the other officers wasted no time taking Musab away to the police station – especially when he started to dismiss a female officer who was questioning him.

After all the officers had left, the kids and I huddled together and cried. I was devastated that they had witnessed the violence. They had been

exposed to our fights previously but never a situation in which they thought he was going to kill me.

At midnight, he was released with a warning. He came home but didn't do or say anything. The kids all jumped into bed with me, and he thankfully left us alone. I could hear him opening drawers and cupboards, searching all over the house for something. The passports.

I was so relieved that I had trusted my instincts and hidden them in my locker at the university. They were in a safe place that he would never reach. Suddenly the noise stopped and I heard him lie down on the couch downstairs. Through his many years of abuse, I had become an expert at analysing noises in other rooms.

When we woke up in the morning, he was gone. The atmosphere in the house was a mix of relief and apprehension. The previous night still felt unreal. A few days passed, and still there was no sign of him. Although the children and I were shaken up, we needed to return to school and work. Our neighbours, Joanne and Richard, knew of the situation and had said they would call me if they saw Musab or suspected the kids were in danger. Their call came very soon.

'What is happening?' Joanne asked, not knowing that I wasn't at home.

'What do you mean?' I responded, my voice shaking.

'There is a lot of noise at your place. Is everything okay?'

Panic set in. I needed to get home from Chatswood, and I couldn't waste time catching public transport. I paid for a taxi even though it was money I couldn't afford to spend. When I opened the front door of the house, I was not expecting to see what I did.

Musab wasn't there, but he had broken every single piece of furniture in the house. Nothing was left. The mirror in the lounge room was smashed, the television had been thrown across the room, there was broken glassware on the kitchen floor, everything in the kitchen drawers and cupboards had been pulled out, and the couch was in pieces. It looked like a tornado had ripped through the house, but worst of all was that I could not see or hear my children.

I ran upstairs to look for them, unaware that I was screaming

hysterically. Then I heard my youngest calling to me. I found the three of them huddled together in a corner of my room, crying and shaking.

‘Did he hurt you? Did he hit any of you?’

They shook their heads *no*, crying. I didn’t know what to say.

‘When is this all going to stop, Mama?’ cried my eldest daughter.

I turned to look around the room and could not believe what he had done. I found all my paperwork, all the articles I had read and my first draft of Part 1 of my thesis torn to tiny pieces – as if he had used a shredder. It was devastating. I had followed my supervisor’s advice to start writing the literature review of my thesis right away, summarising the articles I read from the very beginning. I had written everything by hand, planning to type it later, and now it was all lost. Two months of hard work were gone. He knew exactly how to hurt me.

Seeing that the phone cord had been ripped out of the socket, I used my mobile and called the police again. The police officers, with empathy in their eyes, documented the wreckage, urging me to push back against against the terror we had endured. One of them took photos and advised me to take out a temporary and immediate AVO against him.

‘What is that?’ I asked.

‘It stands for Apprehended Violence Order. It’s an order to protect victims of domestic violence.’

Hearing the words *victims of domestic violence*, I began to sob. Finally, someone understood what was happening to me. Finally, someone was on my side. Finally, there was vocabulary to describe it in legal terms.

‘Ma’am, I can see this has been a traumatic experience for you and the children, so if you wish to proceed with the AVO, I can make an application on your behalf,’ said the female officer.

I nodded before completely breaking down. I allowed myself to let go and cry out the heartache and sorrow that had engulfed me for most of my life. I didn’t know how much this AVO could protect us, but knowing that it existed meant that law enforcement was on my side.

Musab didn’t come back that night.

Khalid called me the next day. First he tried to mediate, asking me to

give his brother another chance. But it was too late. When he realised that I wouldn't change my mind, he showed his true face and started threatening and verbally abusing me.

'If you keep going, I will call the police and tell them how you too are threatening me,' I said with courage and confidence.

He hung up.

The children helped me clean up the debris. They did not ask questions. They were still in shock. School seemed an overwhelming task for both them and me. I was afraid he would go to school and take them, especially my youngest daughter, so I allowed them to stay home for a few days.

Musab's response to this legal restraint was to disappear. I felt a deep sense of relief when my sister, in a phone call, confirmed she had seen Musab back in Canna.

'It is time to go to school,' I said, with a sigh of relief.

My son took the bus to his school, and I walked the girls to theirs. While walking, I faced a blunt question from my eldest daughter: 'Are we poor now, Mama?'

'Why are you saying that?'

'I told you I lost my glasses. I need new ones.'

'We will manage, sweetheart,' I assured her. *I will never be poor*, I said silently to myself. *I will always be financially independent*. 'I will get you the new pair of glasses. Don't you worry.'

The legalities went on for several weeks, the court sessions unfurling like an unwelcome ritual until the final AVO, our shield against Musab's brutality, was granted by the court. Though we knew he was more than 14,000 kilometres away, the possibility of his return still made us feel uneasy. We tried to get on with our lives, not knowing when he was going to reappear.

One night, after a couple of months, I heard Musab return in the dead of night. His presence came with a chilling reminder of our vulnerability. Fear enveloped me; my heart and brain froze.

I am not sure why, but I did not call the police. I took my bag and my papers and hid them in the girls' room. Soon I heard him settle on the couch downstairs and begin snoring. I endured a sleepless night in the girls' double bed.

I confronted him the next day, instructing the children to remain safely upstairs and to call the police if needed. He demanded that I give him the children's passports.

'You can stay here if you want, but I am taking my kids back to Canna,' he said.

'They don't belong to you, and no, you can't take them with you. How can you call yourself a father when you have done nothing for those kids? They belong here, with me,' I said, attempting to retain composure even though I was so scared I could hear my heart racing.

'If you don't let me take the kids, I will kill myself,' he shouted.

This was a reprehensible tactic, a manipulation designed to exploit my deepest fears. But I tried not to react. I knew he wouldn't do it. He was too selfish.

He didn't crave custody out of paternal love. It was about salvaging his image in the eyes of his family. I stood firm. I reminded him that the AVO was still in force, a legal safeguard that he dared not challenge. Hours passed in tense argument until, enraged by my resistance, Musab gathered his belongings and left.

But my fear did not. I needed more legal help. The AVO was not enough to keep us safe. To get an extended order, I reached out to the police again and the domestic violence officer put me in touch with the legal aid unit.

I travelled to their office near Central Station and was assigned a young female lawyer, Olivia. She was a godsend. After I had shared my story – from arriving in Australia on a student visa to enduring Musab's abuse – Olivia offered a quick, no-nonsense solution.

'I can cancel his visa,' she said. 'His visa is dependent on yours. He has no legal rights to be here.'

I felt as if I had been drowning and suddenly was able to raise my head above water again and take a breath. I agreed immediately.

A couple of weeks later, my brother called and told me he had seen Musab in Canna again and that he was apparently planning to remarry.

‘Wow, this is great news,’ I said.

‘Aren’t you upset?’ said my brother.

‘Upset? It’s time for celebration!’ I laughed. I had not laughed for ages.

When I shared the good news with Olivia, she suggested we begin the process of applying for sole custody of the three children ‘just in case’. It was a wise suggestion.

Within a few months, I was granted full sole custody by the family court in Sydney. I had always had sole responsibility for my children. I just needed a piece of paper to legalise it.

That day, I wrote another poem, but I did not hide it in my shoe drawer or anywhere else.

It’s time

*It’s time to end the bleeding,
To silence all the grieving.
No bitter taste of pain,
no open wound,
no ache remains.*

*My wings begin to rise,
I’ll reach for the skies.
The road is rough, it’s true,
but worth the passing through.*

آن الأوان

آن للنزيف أن يتوقف،
آن لحدادي أن يصمت.
لا لمرارة أحزاني،
لا جرح مفتوح،
لا وجع يدوم.

أجنحتي بدأت تنمو،
سأصل حدود السماء.
حقاً، طريقي وعر،
لكن يستحق العبور.

Dancing in pink

Turning point

What happened next was a turning point. I was finally safe. The system that once imprisoned me had shifted, and safety now defined the new direction of change.

The end of December was approaching, and I had just learnt that the New Year's Eve fireworks in Sydney were spectacular. My neighbour, Joanne, encouraged me to take the kids by train to Milsons Point to watch the show. She said it would be a good idea to pack some picnic food and go early to get a good spot.

We arrived around 2 pm and were lucky to find a great place with a clear view of the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge. The atmosphere was completely different from that of the quiet suburb where we lived. We watched the 9 pm fireworks, which were beautiful. Many families with young kids packed up and left after that, but we stayed because my children were excited to see the midnight show.

A few months later, Musab tried to enter Australia.

‘Mum, my dad called me today,’ said my son. ‘He was turned back from the airport.’

‘I see,’ I said.

Musab’s visa had been cancelled. I had received a letter from the immigration department about that sometime earlier, but to hear that he was turned back from the airport gave me a real sense of safety and protection.

From that day, I refrained from black or grey. I bought myself a bright pink top and danced in my living room to loud music that vibrated throughout the house. The children watched with their mouths open. They had never seen me dance before. They probably thought I was going crazy.

My pink top was more than just a change of wardrobe: it was a celebration, a declaration that I was ready to embrace a future unshackled from the chains of my past. With him on the other side of the world and the cancellation of his visa, I finally felt safe. At last I slept well.

Still, Musab continued his attempts to manipulate and control me from afar. He took his grievances to my parents, hoping to pressure them into coercing me to return home. The constant calls and pleading from my family became a background noise disturbing my growing contentment. It was not that he wanted *us* back. It was his image he was worried about.

Musab was a master of manipulation. He married another woman using an option of Sharia law that allowed him to marry without divorcing me. Meanwhile, in the Israeli civil court, he claimed that his new wife was only his girlfriend. He probably did not register his second marriage outside the sheikh’s books to avoid the punishment under Israeli law for polygamy. In the meantime, my battle for a divorce began.

Khalid arrived at my doorstep with a storm of accusations, demanding that I conform to his skewed idea of a wife. He refused to condemn Musab’s toxic, abusive behaviour and even accused me of having an affair. To avoid any further confrontation with him, I made the decision to move

away.

Securing a new home far away from the haunting memories, not just a change of address, was a much-needed next step. But it was a strategic move that would have to be carried out discreetly to ensure that Kahlid and Rose didn't see the moving trucks if they drove by my home. In July 2006, I managed to move us away without them finding out.

Brighton-Le-Sands marked the beginning of a new chapter in our lives. I was determined to build a life where safety and joy prevailed. The house, nestled on a bustling street, brought us closer to the soothing embrace of the beach. The neighbourhood felt welcoming, dominated by the lively presence of the Greek community. Our landlords, an elderly Greek couple who lived next door, became our first connection to this vibrant area.

One of the immediate comforts of our new home was the discovery of stores offering Middle Eastern delights. The taste of home became accessible again, alleviating some of the pangs of homesickness that had remained since our move to Sydney. I finally found a bakery in Rockdale that made manaeesh. It was like finding a taste of heaven on Earth. Life started to be good.

The children's education brought about a significant change. A week after we moved in, school started again. My son was now in Year 8, my older daughter in Year 5 and my little one in Year 1. They were only just getting used to their schools in Australia and had managed to make a few friends. Now, they had to start from scratch in Term 3 and make new friends all over again.

The schools in our new area were quite different from North Sydney. I noticed they hardly ever came home with textbooks and were given minimal homework, leaving me to wonder what they were really learning. Their responses to my enquiries about their day at school were a casual 'I don't know.' I also couldn't easily engage with the children's teachers as I did back home, where such interactions were customary. Nevertheless, the children appeared to be adapting well academically.

Our lives began taking better shape. Mornings were a shared family affair, with breakfast bringing us together before my son and eldest daughter left for school and I walked my little one to primary school. Then I would study until it was time to pick her up, unless I was working that day. Post-school hours unfolded with cooking, eating, homework sessions and moments of relaxation at the nearby park or beach. After the kids went to sleep, I would return to my studies until the early hours of the morning.

Balancing my studies, parenting and work posed challenges, but it was much easier without Musab. I was doing some tutoring at the university, and the demand for mathematics tutoring meant I could give private sessions on Saturdays too. This proved financially beneficial, as I continued to shoulder the responsibility for rent and the children's school fees. The imperative to complete my PhD before the three-year scholarship ran out added complexity.

The process of divorcing Musab also proved a tangle of legal complexities. In Australia, the process seemed straightforward: a one-year separation followed by an application for divorce to the Family Court. Thankfully, the AVO application proved the separation date. The Family Court of Sydney finalised the divorce on the first anniversary of that date. I couldn't wait another day to make it official.

A phone call from my dad one day alerted me to a new threat: Musab had been trying to access my superannuation back home. Musab claimed that I was overseas, and that he was withdrawing the money for me because I was desperate for cash. Fortunately, the superannuation fund refused his request and, not being able to reach me, did the right thing by contacting my father, whom I had listed as my emergency contact. Having filed for divorce in Australia did not mean anything in Israel. I needed to file for divorce in the Israeli court.

My dad was supportive and agreed to start the process on my behalf, but getting the divorce papers through Musab was another obstacle. He would refuse to sign or cooperate. His phone calls and messages in response were disturbing. First, *I will not divorce you. There is no way I'm going to allow that to happen!* Then, *You belong to me, remember?* Finally, *Come back,*

and I will financially support you and the children, I won't send you any child support while you are keeping them in Australia.

Fortunately, my family saw through his tactics. The suggestion of support from a man who had never been supportive during our seventeen years of marriage was all lies. My parents no longer entertained the idea of pressuring me to return, recognising that Musab's promises were hollow, his intentions malicious.

After almost two years in Sydney, I missed my family and longed to see them. Each Sunday night was dedicated to a long chat with them, but it wasn't enough to satisfy the ache for family connection. The desire to see my family, especially during the upcoming summer holiday, intensified.

During a regular conversation with my youngest sister, I confided in her about my financial issues, expressing my inability to afford a trip home during the Christmas break. Unbeknownst to me, she told my father. The following day, my father called me, expressing that the family longed to see me and the kids.

'We all want you to come home, Majeda,' he said. 'We miss you. Please come. I am going to transfer the money into your account so you can book and pay for the tickets yourself.'

His words felt like a warm hug, pulling me back to where I belonged. This was the loving, kind dad that I knew. It was because of this generosity that, one day before Christmas, the kids and I were on our way home. The 34-hour journey – which led us through Singapore and Vienna, where we had an eight-hour layover before our final flight to Tel Aviv – showed the lengths I would go to to reunite with my siblings and parents, to enjoy the warmth of their love for a couple of weeks.

My dad's warm embrace at the airport comforted my soul. My son was the first of the children to hug his grandfather, his enthusiasm warming my heart. While we were driving from the airport to my parents' home, there was a mix of excitement and nervousness. The joy of reuniting with my family took precedence over the anxieties and fear of being near Musab.

When we reached my parents' house, my brothers and sisters and their

children had gathered in anticipation of our arrival. The reunion was heartwarming after being away for so long. Tears flowed as my sisters and I embraced. It felt like the bonds of our family were stronger than ever. My mother's welcome was unexpectedly warm, and she greeted us with tears, hugs and kisses, genuinely happy to see us again.

'Welcome home,' she said. 'Thank God you arrived safely. Do you want to rest first, or are you happy to join the rest of us for lunch?'

I could see the effort she had gone to in preparing all our favourite foods – especially waraq enab, rolled vine leaves stuffed with rice and minced meat. The moment we heard they were on the menu, we bolted to the kitchen.

Seated around the dining table, surrounded by loved ones, we all indulged in my mother's exquisite cooking. There were tons of questions, but I was busy hunting for vine leaves through the chaos of my siblings', nephews' and nieces' hands, also reaching for them. Everyone was moving the chunks of lamb in front of my brothers, who loved meat. This was the usual habit of my family. Ah, how I had missed that!

'Can you make me shishbarak while we're here?' asked my son, looking at my mum.

'Tomorrow,' said my mum with a big smile on her face.

She knew it was his favourite dish. It still is today.

Conversation flowed – between my kids and their cousins, my siblings and me – reminiscent of old times. The overlapping dialogue, shared laughter and communal joy reminded me of when we used to eat together, everyone talking over one another. The noise of the table was a delightful, welcoming sound. It eased my anxiety and, for that moment, I was happy to be in their chaos again.

Going back to my parents' place had felt like the safest option, a familiar haven. But with that refuge came the rules I thought I'd left behind. Even though I was an independent, grown woman, my parents still held tight to their idea of how things should be. There were curfews to abide by and a constant need to check in. It was like stepping back in time: a reminder of why I'd wanted to spread my wings in the first place.

The news of our presence quickly reached Musab. Predictably, he called my parents, wanting to see the children. However, the trauma inflicted by his actions still haunted them, and they firmly refused to have any interaction with him. I was caught in the middle, trying to convince the kids to meet him while also dealing with Musab's constant calls to my parents. He, of course, insisted that I was the one preventing them from seeing him.

'He will come here to Seedo's house, so you will be safe,' I assured them.

'He is not my father,' said my eldest daughter. 'He has never loved me, so why should I see him? Have you forgotten what he did to us?'

Though I didn't want to force the children, I needed Musab to stop calling and harassing my parents. After a week, and with the promise my parents would be with them and I would be in the next room, they agreed to see him – just once.

When the day arrived, the children reported that Musab's attempts to win them over felt disingenuous, more about showcasing his fatherly image than genuine affection. He proposed outings, shopping trips and visits to his relatives. The children could see through that. I knew he was hoping to save face by performing the role of a good father in front of his family. He wanted to show that he still had access to the children – that he still had control.

After Musab said goodbye to the kids and left, they were adamant that they didn't want to see him again and were not interested in seeing his family. I respected their decision, and I was unwilling to subject them to further distress. When he called, eager to schedule another catch-up and a date to pick them up, I conveyed the children's decision not to see him.

His response was a mix of denial and blame. 'It's your fault – you have fed the kids lies about me,' he spat, and threatened to sabotage our return to Australia. 'If you don't allow me to come pick them up, I'm going to make sure you can't go back to Australia. I will be at the airport with the police so you cannot take them out of the country.'

There it was. His threat ignited a panic that propelled me to swift action. I reached out to the airlines, border security and anyone who I thought

could provide answers. I was desperately seeking information on whether he really could impede our departure. However, their responses were vague, leaving me in a state of agitation. The conflicting family law systems – the Sharia court and the Israeli civil court – brought only confusion. I struggled to understand the details, aware that I was only in Australia on a student visa, and that everything could turn into a mess.

The only option I could see was to expedite our departure. The next morning, I called the airline and brought our flights a few days forward. The altered return date was not disclosed to anyone but my parents and the children. Just as our arrival was a surprise, so was our departure.

After we returned to Sydney, my father continued pursuing the divorce case on the other side of the world. He attended court and official offices, and met with the lawyer on my behalf, armed with the hope of progress and resolution, only to be met with obstacles. My father's commitment was comforting, and feeling that he was on my side eased some of the anger I had carried towards him. Despite the never-ending turmoil in court, I felt my heart growing lighter.

The children and I attempted to resume some form of normality after we returned from our trip. School seemed to be going well for the others, but my son, now in Year 9, got caught in the middle of misunderstandings and tension between the Macedonian and Lebanese students in his school. The Lebanese students thought he was Macedonian, while the Macedonians believed he was Lebanese. This confusion created a toxic atmosphere, and my son, who was already having a hard time making friends, became a target for bullying. It was a tough time, but we got through it together – and it brought us closer. He matured so quickly and became very independent, finding his first job at a Pizza Hut near his school.

Though she didn't say so at the time, my older daughter also experienced bullying at school. She told me many years after she left school that it was because of her name: it didn't sound white. She also found a job of her own while in high school. They both loved being independent and they were

hard-working.

My youngest made friends effortlessly. The novelty of school fascinated her, particularly the fact that there were chickens within the school premises. Her excitement reached its peak when she got to bring one of the baby chicks home for a night.

Meanwhile, my own life was consumed by academic and work commitments. My goal was to complete my PhD in three years while gaining financial stability, and that left little room to socialise. However, the translation company where I worked was a hub for migrants, and it was there I met a few Arabs from different countries. Many became close friends I have to this day.

One of these friends, a young Syrian woman doing a PhD in Civil Engineering at the University of Sydney, introduced me to another acquaintance: a Palestinian man from Nazareth, who was studying at UNSW. He introduced me to his wife, a psychologist, and our friendship began to flourish. They were a delightful Palestinian couple, genuine and trustworthy. I remember one time, when I needed them, they stepped in to care for my kids. Our bond grew, and my children developed a genuine fondness for them.

Soon after, we met another Palestinian couple. They were 1948ers too, and we connected. We understood the context, the pain, the feeling of being citizens of the occupier without having to explain or justify as we did to others. We all became a close-knit family: a supportive and loving small community. Our gatherings were filled with laughter, shared stories, warmth and, of course, politics. Not the politics of where we were living, but the politics of the homeland. As 1948ers, while our bodies resided in Australia, our hearts lived in Palestine.

How ironic life could be. We loved Sydney: the freedom, the security, the sense of safety. Little did we know that we had left one colony for another. We didn't yet understand that we were living on stolen land. It took a couple of years, once we were finally able to breathe without fear, to start noticing words such as *invasion* and *stolen generations*, to begin to understand the injustice faced by First Nations people, to learn what had

been done to them – similar to many Indigenous peoples around the world – in the name of civilisation, modernisation or democracy.

On 17 February 2008, a few days after the formal National Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples, I looked up and saw the word *SORRY* written across the sky as I drove along the Grand Parade in Brighton-Le-Sands. Tears ran down my face. I hoped I might one day see that same word – probably in another language – written across the sky of Palestine.

New York, New York

Increment

Presenting in New York was an increment: this achievement added to all the others, cumulatively changing the trajectory of my life.

In the exhilarating month of March 2008, the university generously sponsored my trip to the United States to present my research at a prestigious conference in New York City. I asked my Palestinian friends to look after the kids and left with my heart dancing in pride.

My room on level 42 of the Sheraton in Times Square was booked by the university. All expenses paid, even my pocket money – up to a hundred dollars a day. Every morning, I would step out of the Sheraton onto 7th Avenue and walk south towards the Marriott, where the conference was being held. The buzz of Times Square pulled me in instantly: flashing lights, street performers, the scent of NYC in the air. I was at the heart of it all. I felt I was in another world.

The conference itself was a stimulating experience, bursting with academic insights and networking possibilities. My presentation was set for the second day, and my stress was building towards it. I spent most of the first day mingling with the attendants – there was a large number of academics and PhD students from all over the world discussing Cognitive Load Theory research and findings. I did not rehearse my notes. I was confident – stressed-confident, to be more accurate.

On the morning of my presentation, I wore a professional black suit with

a white blouse underneath and high-heeled boots. High heels always gave me assurance, but they had to be comfortable, which meant a high price. *Don't save on shoes* was one of my mottos. It still is. No compromise. I looked in the mirror and saw myself looking back in pride and faith. I sprayed lots of perfume and put a confident smile on my face.

'I wish my dad could see me now,' I murmured to myself as I approached the stage to give my presentation.

After the four-day conference, I decided to explore the city. It felt like a scene from a film. Despite the cold, I wandered the bustling streets with wide eyes, letting the pulse of the city carry me forward. I strolled through Central Park, where even the stillness felt alive. I boarded the ferry to the Statue of Liberty and stood in silence, staring up at her as if she was more than a monument, like she was calling for me – for all women. I visited the American Museum of Natural History, where the movie *Night at the Museum* had been filmed, and for a few hours let myself become a curious child again. I took many photos there to show my children; they loved that movie.

One morning, I boarded a bus for a daytrip to Washington, DC. As we approached the White House, I found myself unexpectedly drawn into a peaceful protest unfolding at its gates. I couldn't read the posters, which were written in Chinese, but I felt the weight of their message – especially seeing the images included. In that moment, among strangers outside the world's most watched residence, I felt how deeply connected we all are, even when language fails us.

Of course, I couldn't resist the thrill of shopping, especially with the Australian dollar soaring to nearly double the value of the US dollar. It was the first crack of the Global Financial Crisis. I took full advantage, exploring fashion outlets near Ground Zero. Even shopping felt like a kind of history lesson, surrounded by the echoes of what had once been and what was coming. I had little knowledge that I was witnessing the prelude to a historic financial crash.

If someone had told me three years earlier that I'd be presenting on a stage in the Marriott and walking the streets of NYC alone, I would've

laughed and called them a dreamer. But there I was in the heart of a city I had only seen in films and heard about from Adel. The world around me braced for economic collapse, and yet, amid the uncertainty, I felt something unexpected: a quiet kind of hope. As the foundations of the global economy trembled, something within me was steady. I was beginning to understand that transformation takes root in the most unpredictable moments. It only requires time and a plan.

As I walked through the city's streets with a new-found sense of clarity, a quiet ache persisted. I found myself scanning the crowds, searching for familiar faces. Faces of people I longed to see or meet. The six degrees of separation theory tells us that any two people are connected by remarkably short links. And I was instinctively looking for those missing links. A familiar face could have made the distance bearable. I was looking for Adel's face, yet all I found were unfamiliar faces: people who lived parallel lives, separated by the dimension of time not just geography, destined never to cross.

That thought settled heavily on me. For all the city's noise and brilliance, I felt alone. So, four days before the end of my stay, I brought my flight forward and headed home. It wasn't just about being away from my children; it was also the weight of being on my own.

The definite integral

In mathematics, the definite integral is the process of summing infinitely many small pieces within defined boundaries to arrive at a single, complete value. It transforms fragments – tiny, small units – into something whole and measurable. My PhD was just that: the definite integral of my life's effort. Each lecture attended, each experiment run, each sleepless night, each sacrifice made: all were minute on their own but, gathered and bound by years of persistence, they congregated into one undeniable result.

I managed to submit my thesis just five days before the deadline of the

three-year scholarship. The university allows a fourth year to complete the PhD but with no scholarship support. If I had missed the deadline, my scholarship would have ended and I would have had to pay all expenses of the fourth year – including my university fees, the children's school fees and the rent – from my own pocket. I felt very proud that I completed it within three years.

It still seems to me today that necessity, more than ambition or desire, drives us towards our greatest achievements. Like a hammer striking with relentless force, necessity shatters us into pieces, only to remould us into something greater than we once were. It makes us stronger, more creative in finding solutions. It makes us unstoppable.

A few months later, my thesis was approved just one mark short of a high distinction. I felt such relief and excitement. Finally, I had achieved my goal – and it was met with pride. On that day my title became Dr, not Miss, not Ms and *definitely* not Mrs – titles men do not have to worry about.

‘Majeda, we are coming to visit you next month! Our parents, myself and the kids,’ my youngest sister, Aseel, brought me the exciting news over the phone.

‘When exactly in December are you coming?’ I asked my sister, feeling nervous.

‘I think it's the twenty-third,’ she replied.

I breathed a sigh of relief. My graduation ceremony was on the eighth. I did not tell her.

I gathered my three children and explained, ‘My graduation ceremony is in two weeks. We will go to the ceremony at UNSW and celebrate. However, no-one can know about this, including everyone overseas. Even when they come here, which is two weeks after that, you can never tell them.’

The children were confused.

‘Why, Mum? Why do we need to do that?’ asked my son.

‘Because if they knew I finished my degree, they will want us to go back with them. Do you want to go back?’

They all agreed not to tell anyone. They dreaded the idea of going back.

In preparation for my graduation, I drove with a Palestinian friend who introduced me to the fashion outlet in Homebush. She was another 1948er whom I met in an art gallery in Marrickville. I bought an elegant purple sleeveless Diana Ferrari dress for the occasion: a shade deep enough to feel regal, but soft enough to feel like inner me. The dress hugged my body gently, highlighting my shape without demanding attention. It flowed to just below the knees, modest yet confident, with a subtle shimmer that caught the light when I moved. The neckline was simple, drawing just enough attention to the strength in my shoulders. I found a matching pair of shoes – sleek, not too high – and delicate accessories that tied everything together.

As a Leo, I've never needed a spotlight to know my worth, but the day of my graduation, dressed in a deep royal purple, I let myself feel it fully: like a lioness – not roaring but standing tall. It wasn't just an outfit; it was a quiet declaration of pride and deservedness.

Before I left my bedroom, I looked in the mirror and saw *me*. I gathered my children and a camera and drove to the ceremony in my run-down red Toyota Camry, determined to mark the day not just on the calendar but also in their memories. When my name was called, I walked up the few steps to the stage, unaware of the many eyes watching me. I felt only three pairs – hazel and glowing with pride. In that moment, they were the only eyes that mattered.

Two weeks later, my family arrived. As agreed, my children and I hid our joy and pride along with the photos we took during my graduation ceremony. They came and left Sydney thinking I still had one year of study to go. We only showed them the photos twelve months later after photoshopping the date that was printed on them.

Permission to live

The ultimate degree of freedom

All prior contributions and experiences had accumulated, producing this maximal freedom. The area under the curve of my life had

reached a new peak.

After my family's visit to Sydney, I plunged into securing permanent residency. Simultaneously, the kids and I were granted bridging visas, providing a lifeline for their education without the burden of school fees. Without the financial cushion of the scholarship now that I had graduated, and not being eligible for any social security, the responsibility to support us remained with me. Determination was my constant companion.

Getting permanent residency was tough. Applying as an onshore skilled migrant required accumulating 120 points. I needed to pass the Academic International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which was a significant element for skilled migration. The IELTS proved to be challenging. The pivotal test demanded an average score of seven and a half out of nine across four components: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Frustratingly, my scores fluctuated. In a moment of desperation, I flew to Jordan from Sydney for the third attempt, opting for the British Council's IELTS in Amman. My rationale was a gamble; perhaps, in a non-English-speaking environment, I could secure a more favourable assessment as the marking might be more lenient. That was my theory. I was wrong. I still failed.

Undiscouraged, approximately two months later, I undertook the IELTS again at UNSW's school of languages in Sydney. Finally I achieved the required passing score. It marked a significant milestone towards securing permanent residency.

Throughout the process, I was growing stronger in ways I had never imagined. I gained valuable skills, improved my English language abilities, and built more confidence and self-esteem than ever before. I felt I grew taller with enhanced posture following some public speaking lessons I had taken. I formed new friendships – not just at university but also with colleagues at my casual jobs, neighbours and the parents of my children's friends.

Little by little, I learnt to shift my focus away from what was missing in my life and to instead appreciate the good that surrounded me. Rather than

dwelling on the gaps, I embraced the opportunities, connections and moments of joy that each day brought. My children also made strong friendships, some of which last to this day. They started to call Australia home. Well, a second home – a safer one, I guess. This period highlighted my solid commitment to overcoming challenges and doing whatever it took to remain in the country. I was willing to go to any length necessary to secure a stable future for my family.

However, the immigration rules presented some unexpected challenges, and the last part of the process of securing permanent residency plunged me into stress and uncertainty. Though I had sole custody of my children, the immigration department insisted on their father's signature for their permanent residency applications. Musab, predictably, refused to cooperate.

Refusing to let his unreasonableness dictate our fate, I sought assistance from an immigration lawyer, a tenacious ally who stepped into the arena on my behalf. With much determination and skill, he presented a compelling case to the immigration department.

‘She has sole custody; he has a history of AVOs against him and his visa has been cancelled. Why demand his signature when he will never provide it?’ he argued.

Yet the authorities remained rigid. In a strategic move, my lawyer proposed an alternative route: secure my permanent residency first, then pursue the children's applications afterwards. The suggestion, while pragmatic, struck a chord of fear within me. *What if they never gain residency? What if they must leave the country?* The thought made my heart sink.

Determined, I declared, ‘No, I will wait, regardless of how long it takes. It's either all four of us or none.’

My lawyer, grasping the gravity of the situation, proposed an ultimatum. He would write to the immigration department one last time; if they wouldn't approve all four applications, we would escalate the matter to court.

Just as I was contemplating what we would do if we needed to leave the country, my lawyer called to report: ‘Given all the evidence you have

against your ex-husband, the immigration department is willing to accept that you are the sole carer for the children and have approved and granted all four of your permanent residencies.'

The magnitude of the moment was indescribable.

When I shared the incredible news with the children, tears flowed as we embraced the joy and relief that permanent residency gave us. We danced together in the living room, finally safe to live our lives freely. I felt thankful, realising that the decisions I had made had given my children, my vectors, the chance to choose their own paths in Australia.

A few days later, unaware of the change in our circumstances, Musab called and, without even saying hello, demanded to speak to my son.

Without a word, I put him on speaker and handed the phone to my son, letting him take over the conversation while I rested on the couch next to him.

'When are you coming back?' he asked. Musab clearly assumed that our fate still hung on his refusal to sign the documents.

'We are not coming back,' said my son, unable to hide his excitement. 'We don't need you to sign anything.' There was a brief pause, as if he was savouring the moment, then he continued with even more enthusiasm: 'We've already got permanent residency!'

This was a victory against injustice, one that meant freedom, security and a future we could finally claim as our own.

A few weeks later, my father phoned me.

'He did it, Majeda. Musab signed the papers,' he said. 'You are now officially divorced in both Sharia and civil courts. You can come home now or when you finish your study, and he cannot do anything about it.'

While my dad might not have explicitly acknowledged the depth of my struggles, I sensed that he knew. Perhaps his fighting for my right to divorce was his way of making amends for when he had felt powerless to alter the course of my life. The tears that flowed after that call were not just of relief but of a realisation, in its truest sense, that the battle for our lives against the one man who knew no boundaries was finally over.

I sought help with my job applications from my Palestinian friend who had a PhD in physics from the University of Sydney and worked in project management at an elite company in Sydney. The same friend who took me to buy my graduation dress. She taught me how to write a proper résumé and how to tailor it for each job application. Hundreds of applications later, a fortunate twist of fate presented several opportunities. I was offered a lecturer role with Charles Sturt University in Bathurst. The package included relocation support. In the same week, UNSW extended an invitation for an interview as a project manager for mathematics assessments. I got the job.

I turned to my children for counsel, and they all said together, with no hesitation: ‘No more moving! We do not want to go to Bathurst.’

That sentiment resonated within me; we had moved yet again only recently when our landlord raised the rent beyond what I could afford.

I accepted the role with the University of New South Wales.

My first day in my project management role was more significant than just another professional milestone. I wore a peach jacket, a short-sleeved white shirt and tan-coloured pants. I also made a deliberate choice to let my hair flow in its natural cascade of curls, unfurling the coils that had long been confined and letting them breathe freely. Even after all these years living in Sydney, I had still straightened my hair every week. Now I had finally let it go, finally quieted my mum’s voice and her disapproval of my curls.

I looked in the mirror and this time, I saw my true me. Ready to leave, I came to my son, who was standing by the front door.

‘It’s good to see you happy, Mum,’ he said.

My son’s words, my children’s safety, permanent residency, a PhD and a secure job integrated into a sum greater than I had ever imagined: a redesigned life that now belonged to me.

8

Variables

Equations become more complex when a new variable enters the system. The day I learnt about the dark history of my second husband my life tilted into chaos once more and for a moment I thought it was unsolvable. Variables can shake your balance and test your resilience. I had solved harder problems before; I would solve this one too.

Five years after arriving in Sydney I was finally divorced and free. I had a PhD. My children and I had been granted permanent residency in Australia on the skilled migration scheme. I had been able to secure a full-time job at UNSW. I had accomplished most of the things I had not even imagined achieving.

But I was lonely.

I was also under pressure from my family. ‘You finished your degree. It is time to come back!’ they all demanded. One day they would say, ‘We miss you,’ and the next they would say, ‘People have started to talk. Our reputation is being questioned.’ I was getting a few of these phone calls each week.

My life felt as if it was being tossed around like a ship caught in a storm. I craved stability. I needed security. But most importantly, I felt lonely.

Living far away from your home strips you of your roots. You’re never quite sure if you can grow new ones.

What you don’t expect is the loneliness that comes from not sharing a history with anyone around you. You have to build friendships from scratch with people who know nothing about your childhood, your teenage years, your adulthood or the things you’ve been through. Sometimes, these are people you don’t even share a language with, people who can’t understand why your body moves in a smooth, involuntary dance when you hear classic Arabic songs, or why your eyes well at the sound of Umm Kulthum’s voice or at the sight of a sign in Arabic calligraphy – even in a grocery shop.

No-one knows how isolating it feels to miss a joke. Or how it stings to receive awkward looks when you mispronounce a word. Or the shame of not knowing what others consider basic, common knowledge in this new place that you now call home. Like not understanding a reference to Bunnings on a Saturday, or the difference between AFL and NRL. Or like hearing someone say they're heading to Macca's, wondering why they're talking about Mecca only to find out they just mean McDonald's.

They have no idea what effort your brain goes to just to form a sentence or two, going back and forth between two languages (in my case, three languages), trying so hard to sound natural. And the second you open your mouth, you get the question: *So what accent is that?* They have no idea how fluid, articulate and funny you are when you speak in your mother tongue.

While busy surviving and adapting, you don't notice the grief inside you: the grief of losing parts of your older self in growing and developing new parts.

On the other side of the world from where you were born, you count on the small wins. There's the triumph of having your first argument in your new language, even if it's with the phone provider or the removalist. The thrill of signing your first rental contract. The quiet success of passing your first job interview and the pride of negotiating a job offer.

Living far away forces you to be a farmer, watering a tree for years before tasting a single fruit. Still, you keep going on faith that the harvest will come, while the roots quietly strengthen underground. And just when you start to feel like you belong here, in your new home, you begin to realise you no longer fully belong there, in your first home. The ache lies in knowing that, wherever you are, you will always feel half-rooted: half-belonging, half-foreigner.

Then you start feeling the need to build connections at another level – connections that are more than just friendship.

Trust

The dependent variable

A dependent variable is the result you observe; it depends on something else changing. Trust, for me, was a dependent variable: never standing alone, always defined by someone else's actions.

I met Andrew online and after two conversations we decided to meet in person. We discovered we worked two streets away from each other and chose to meet at a café nearby. It appeared that we both knew it and had been there before, just at different times. Perhaps I had not noticed him before because I was not interested in seeing anyone then – not before I got my permanent residency, I had promised myself.

On the day, I was nervous, reluctant, but also excited. Very unlike me, I had completed almost zero of my to-do list at work by lunchtime. Then a text message came in with a ding that drew me to reality. It was time to meet.

I left my fear at my desk and gathered all the courage I had and walked the two blocks to the café; each step was dragging me closer to the next spiral. He was there already, sipping espresso in an expensive-looking grey suit with a white shirt and a tie. He smiled at me when I entered.

He ordered my coffee with an expert gesture of his hand, making sure his Rolex was showing from under his sleeve. Not that I paid attention – well ... perhaps I did. I had no idea what to say or how to behave. I was back to being a teenager without experience in dating, let alone in dating a man from a different culture in another language. I did not have the English vocabulary for dating. It seemed more than strange; it felt foreign. I decided to listen and go with the flow.

‘Let’s have the coffee first, then we will order lunch,’ he said, smiling with full eye contact.

Andrew and I stayed there for more than an hour. He talked about almost everything. He told me about his European heritage and big family – his parents, his two brothers and three sisters, his many nieces and nephews – his work, his divorce and his two adult daughters who lived overseas.

A big family like mine, I thought. Finally, I would have the family warmth I missed, and my children would have some family connections

too.

He told me about his previous businesses, his adventures overseas, and his dreams of owning a property in the city and another one on the South Coast for holidays.

Great, I thought. He is an established man; I don't need to support him financially. Good! His polished shoes, his classic cologne: he looks clean and immaculately neat. He is the polar opposite to Musab.

We met almost every day for a few months. I gained some confidence and started telling him about myself and my circumstances. His profile kept improving in my imagination. I just wanted someone who treated me with respect and kindness: something he did to perfection.

‘I have never had anyone open the car door for me. Are you always nice with everyone?’ I once asked.

‘Of course, this is how a gentleman behaves,’ he said. ‘Besides, you are not anyone.’

God, that man could talk! We talked over coffees, lunches, long drives and walks. We connected very well. I was over the moon.

Andrew proposed after a few months. I was reluctant to accept his offer, but that night my parents called me.

‘We need you to come back immediately,’ they insisted. ‘We have had enough of people asking and talking about you staying there after you finished your degree.’

‘Why do we have to care? Who knows that I finished my degree?’

‘It is Musab. He is questioning our reputation and yours. He is going mad since he learnt you and the children got permanent residency.’

‘I see. Him again. What does he want? We are divorced and he is married to someone else. What does he want from me?’

I knew what Musab wanted. If he couldn't have me, he wanted to destroy me. I understood how he thought. He desired to possess me, but I was too far away to be controlled by him. My only solution was to stay here.

The next day, I met Andrew for coffee before I started work. I sipped on my double espresso.

‘I accept your proposal,’ I said.

‘You deserve to be happy, Mum,’ my son said when I told him.

All three of my children helped me plan the wedding, which was going to be at a Moroccan restaurant. A close enough taste of home, I thought. As I expected, my parents and my brothers and sisters did not take it well.

‘Is he a Muslim?’ was my dad’s first question.

I had my reply ready: ‘No, but he is happy to convert so we can get married and do katib kitab by a sheikh.’

Andrew did not mind. He was not a devoted Christian, as his mum and eldest brother were. The only thing that linked him to Christianity, as he put it one day, was Christmas lunch and Easter feasts. He loved his food.

Despite Andrew’s on-paper conversion, which I scanned and emailed to them ahead of the wedding, my family were not happy. I kept getting phone calls at random hours of the day and night. Until I uploaded a few photos of the wedding to Facebook. *I am a married woman*, I wrote: a shut-up message to everyone, particularly Musab. The calls stopped.

Andrew and I agreed that we would go on our honeymoon later, during the festive season, when we both had annual leave. In the meantime, we moved to a bigger place: a four-bedroom house. The children were happy to have a room each. My son’s room was on the first floor, which gave him some privacy, while the girls had a room each on the top floor. The house had a water view and a small pool.

Just as we started to look for tickets for our honeymoon, destiny laughed at me.

‘What do you mean you cannot fly with me for our honeymoon?’ I asked, raising my eyebrows.

‘I have some issues ... since my bankruptcy,’ he muttered.

‘Bankruptcy? What do you mean by bankruptcy?’ I asked, my voice rising as my heart sank. ‘You have bankruptcy that you forgot to tell me about until now?’

‘I didn’t know it was still going on,’ he said, avoiding eye contact. I

thought it was finalised.’

‘I told my parents we are going to visit them as part of our honeymoon. What do I tell them now? I married a bankrupted man who is not allowed to leave the country?’

‘No, no, we can solve it. I was told I need to pay \$24,000, and I should be able to go.’

‘So pay it, and if you don’t have enough, ask your mother. She seems to have more than she can spend,’ I said, using the words he had used himself various times.

I feared he would ask me for the money. He did.

I lent him my savings after his mother turned down his request, but the bankruptcy order did not go away for years. I went on the honeymoon by myself.

A year later, my parents travelled all the way to Australia to meet him. Though they both liked him and his parents, my mum wasn’t too pleased to see him kiss me hello and goodbye each day.

Life with Andrew was up and down in a different way from life with Musab. He remained respectful to me, but he started focusing on small things with the kids, like doing chores and helping around the house. The girls resisted his disciplinary approach. There was an obvious power struggle between him and the children, with the girls more than with my son. My son was a grown-up with his own magnitude and direction, so he did not seem to care. But these dynamics stripped the joy from family life, and I was bleeding emotionally – internally, not able to show it, even to myself.

I lived in denial, convincing myself that things would work out, eventually.

They did not. And he never paid me back the \$24,000.

Entrepreneurship

The independent variable

Independent variables hold the power to change the outcomes. Finally, I combined my research with my passion, taking control to claim my independent variables and shape my own outcome.

After about two years, my work at UNSW had become routine and lacked the challenge I sought. I found myself distant from the research I was most passionate about, particularly the kind that could drive real change in education.

Mathematics has always been close to my heart, and I knew that the long-standing issues in its teaching and learning could be meaningfully addressed through the application of Cognitive Load Theory (CLT): a framework I had studied deeply and believed in. I made every effort to integrate its principles into the large-scale assessment projects I was managing. But the system resisted innovation. Change, no matter how evidence-based, is often unwelcome.

So I took a long, hard look at my situation and made a decision. I returned to the business idea I had first developed in 2007. Something I had carefully planned but put aside while I completed my PhD. I dusted off the files and smiled at the foresight in those early papers. I knew the time had come.

I was ready to move from theory to practice. The taste in my mouth was not unfamiliar. The taste of a challenge. The butterflies in my stomach weren't fear; they were fuel. And my burning passion for mathematics moved me forward. I had a vision, and I had a plan.

In short, CLT uses the structure of the human brain to suggest how we can develop instructional materials that optimise learning. By not overloading working memory when new concepts are introduced to students, it aims to minimise unnecessary mental effort so students can learn effectively and efficiently. Besides the instruction design, CLT also looks into the methodology of teaching. That was my plan: using CLT for teaching. But to do that, I needed a curriculum that was developed using CLT.

I started developing the curriculum for primary school mathematics

based on these principles while still at my full-time job at UNSW. I worked day and night seven days a week with laser focus. I knew where I was going, and I knew my research and my subject. Meanwhile I started looking for students. My youngest daughter was my first, and the neighbours' children were interested too.

I searched for a place, a couple of rooms, to carry out my 'dream revolution in teaching mathematics', as I called it. I was not aware that I was entering a new field called entrepreneurship. For the first time, I had something that I could call mine. It was solely mine. It was my dream and my hard work and study for many years.

I required a logo, a website, and all the things a small business needs. I sought help from colleagues, friends and my own children. My children were not as excited as I was, but they did help. My son was studying accounting then and had his cadetship in auditing. So, he helped me with that part. My oldest daughter, a people person, was happy to help with administration and customer service when needed, and my youngest was a student (and also a recruiter – many of her friends sought the service later on). When the first phone call came from a parent who wanted to enrol their child, I knew it was happening.

Andrew was still working full-time in an industry completely unrelated to education. The kids did not like how strict he was about superficial things such as setting the dinner table, folding the washing and helping around the house, which made my life more challenging. 'Just leave the kids alone,' I used to say in almost daily arguments with him. But on the other hand, he encouraged me and gave me the mental support I needed. His ambition was peculiar; he was more of a dreamer than truly ambitious – and that felt familiar somehow. But I was too caught up with work, kids and his big family's social events to notice the red flags. Between my drive to achieve and my fear of arguments piling up, I chose denial and drowned myself in work.

The business began to attract some media attention. I remember one morning, a photographer from one of the popular newspapers called and asked if they could come by to take some photos for an upcoming editorial.

I was bouncing with excitement.

‘Of course! What time would you like to come?’ I asked, expecting an afternoon visit, when the tutors and students would be around.

When they said they would be there in an hour, I quickly called Andrew to ask if he could take time off work and help. Luckily, my youngest daughter was home, and we managed to recruit a boy from the neighbourhood, too. Andrew came and ended up in the photo.

When the editorial was published, Andrew appeared standing just behind me in the photo and labelled as a tutor.

‘You couldn’t explain anything to anyone!’ my daughter joked to Andrew when I read out the caption. ‘You could never be a tutor!’

We all laughed, including Andrew. I didn’t know then that this photo would come back to haunt me in the future.

After two years, I knew I couldn’t work full-time at the university while also giving my business, my real passion, my all, so I decided to take a year of leave from the university without pay. Then, when I was finally satisfied that the risk was worth it, I resigned from the university and never looked back.

Despite making some bad decisions throughout my journey, this one proved to be right. The business thrived once I dedicated my full time and energy to it. I hired more teachers and administration staff, and I developed the curriculum for teaching English in addition to mathematics, and opened to high school students, too. Within a couple of years, we needed a larger space. I negotiated another lease and moved to accommodate more students, and soon we were ready to open a second location about an hour’s drive from the first.

The business won the Local Business Award in 2016, which felt like a powerful recognition of how far I had come. But nothing could prepare me for the following year. In 2017, I was nominated again, and I showed up to the gala night, proud to be among strong, inspiring small business owners. I wasn’t expecting to win again, let alone twice.

When my name was called for Businessperson of the Year, on the same night as I had already won the Local Business Award, I sat frozen for a moment. It didn't feel real. I looked around, wondering if they had made a mistake. But it was my name. My story. My work and my resilience.

As I walked to the stage in my sleeveless red dress, I remembered the nights I had stayed up planning classes, answering emails and preparing assessments after my children had gone to bed. I remembered doubting myself, wondering if I could make it as a woman, as a migrant, as a mother of three trying to build a business from scratch. I remembered the voices, internal and external, that said I wouldn't.

Standing there under the lights, holding two awards in my hands, I gave a short speech. I didn't speak as a polished businesswoman with a rehearsed script. I spoke as someone who had lived many lives in one lifetime: as an educator, a survivor, a mother, a newcomer to this country who had dared to dream again. I spoke about how hard work, vision and teamwork had brought me there. And I spoke, most importantly, to anyone in the room who thought they weren't the 'type' to win. I had once thought the same. But that night, I stood there a winner – twice over.

A few months later, my business won an even more significant award, a national one this time: an Australian Small Business Champion Award. It felt like my hard work was finally being recognised on a larger scale. This time, I came prepared. I had a feeling that I might need a speech, and I was right. I stood in front of a room full of high-calibre business leaders from across the country, with my team on stage with me, and delivered my winner's speech.

This time I wore a knee-length green dress that hugged my body just right. I had chosen it carefully, wanting to feel both elegant and powerful. My curls flew free, unapologetically, and my make-up was just a little bolder than usual: enough to say, *I'm here, and I've earnt this*. Every detail was intentional. Every moment, a quiet rebellion against every version of me that was once told to shrink. It wasn't just a celebration of success. It was a statement for me and the audience. A woman like me, with my background, my story and my journey belonged on that stage too.

In my acceptance speech, I didn't share my personal story from overseas: only what I had endured here in Australia. There was still a part of me that wasn't ready to open that chapter in front of strangers. It felt too raw and I was not ready to revisit or face it. But even the part I did share, what I had survived and achieved here, was enough to move the room. Sometimes, a fraction of the truth is still powerful. And sometimes, it's the beginning of being ready to tell the rest.

After the many awards, the profile of the business continued to increase. What I did not know was that while I was enjoying my success and finally savouring some stability, the ground was about to quake beneath me.

Men in uniform

What are the odds?

It seemed almost impossible, surely not meant to happen, but it did and it shifted everything in its wake.

After four years of marriage, on a seemingly ordinary Wednesday morning, everything changed. As Andrew and I were waking up to get ready for a long working day, I heard a firm knock on our front door. I looked through the peephole and saw three police officers. *Again?* I thought. Though they looked different from the Israeli policemen who came knocking on my door more than twenty years earlier, I had a strange, familiar feeling in my stomach.

I was baffled at Andrew's refusal to open the door. Instead of answering, he hurried to the bathroom to take a shower, making me wait until he was done before I could open the door. Not only did he have a long shower, but he also dressed well and put on his Rolex, his ring and a lot of cologne, as if he was going out on a date. I could not comprehend his bizarre behaviour.

By then, the banging on the door had grown louder, and the children had woken up. When Andrew finally let me open the door, he was asked to identify himself. What happened next shocked me to my core. My children's faces filled with horror.

‘Sir, you are under arrest for soliciting the murder of your ex-wife in 1990 and her brother in 1989. You have the right to remain silent,’ one officer declared while approaching Andrew and putting handcuffs on him.

My heart pounded in my chest. It felt like time had slowed down. Andrew looked at me, his face showing nothing but coldness. *How can this be happening?* I wondered, frozen to the spot, my mind racing with disbelief and fear.

The officers led him away, and I was left trying to grapple with this unforeseen catastrophe. The house, once a safe place, now felt cold and alien. Each corner echoed with unanswered questions. The life I thought I understood was collapsing under the weight of distrust and deception. But what almost killed me was the look in my children’s eyes. I wished I could just vanish from shame and guilt.

Why is this happening to me? Why am I so cursed? What have I done in my life to deserve this? Questions were pounding and throbbing in my head. And instead of reacting with tears or anger, I was frozen and cold.

A media frenzy erupted, turning our private turmoil into a public spectacle. Headlines about this cold homicide case blared accusations, and every detail of Andrew’s past was scrutinised. The life we had carefully built and the new dreams we had nurtured seemed to crumble before my eyes. My dream of happiness now felt like a distant illusion.

Every night, as I lay awake, I was haunted by the question of his true nature. *Who was the man I had come to share my life with? Was there a hidden darkness I had been blind to?* The weight of these questions, linked with the relentless scrutiny, left me in a state of anxiety.

My battle with fate started again. As if the first lesson was not enough and I needed another one.

To begin with, I believed in his innocence. Perhaps I wanted or needed to believe. I acted as the good wife again. I supported him emotionally, socially and financially. His behaviour during the long trial years provided me the logic and rationale to believe him. His story of being framed by the

police fitted too neatly with my perception of police and authority. The husband is always the easiest one to accuse, as he put it. He was convincing, not only in his narrative but also in his actions. He acted like an innocent man waiting for the court to confirm it formally. No-one I knew doubted him for a second.

For almost a year, I worked six days a week and on Sunday I would drive to the correctional centre, most of the time with my son, to support him. Andrew was given bail later that year. But once he was out, he had no job. No income. Nowhere to go. His large family refused to help. His wealthy mother, his comfortable brothers, his well-off sisters – all were absent when we needed them most, as the legal fees began to pile up. I was stunned.

How can a family turn their backs so easily on their own flesh and blood? I wondered.

‘What are the odds of this happening?’ everyone said – and then they left. The whole financial burden of his four-year trial fell on me.

Andrew loved being under the spotlight, a matter which brought lots of conflict between us. He insisted on turning up at the business, just as parents were arriving, even though I’d asked him many times to stay away from the business. He would repeat his innocence, almost enough to make everyone believe him, but still his presence put the business at risk: the business I had put my heart, sweat and tears into. I needed him to stay away, but he kept coming back.

I was exhausted – not just because of his actions but because of the high costs of the legal fight to support him as well as the battle to get him to stay away from my business. It was too painful, and it took too long. I could not share this situation with my family overseas. I lived in secrecy for four years. Living so far away had its advantages. Meanwhile his family, the supposed closeness of which was one of the reasons I married him, claimed zero responsibility and offered no help. On some occasions, they would attend court hearings with us. Other than that, though, they only talked and

sipped coffees with him while they witnessed my world collapsing. Something felt off.

‘I will be acquitted today,’ Andrew said with a big smile on his face on what would be the final morning of his trial.

‘Whatever the results are, I am filing for a divorce,’ I responded steadily.

I had reached my limit: tired of the constant stress, and of him caring for nothing and no-one but himself. It felt so familiar. Whatever came next, I was done surrendering control. This time, I would make the decisions. I would steer the boat. I had – again – played the role of the good wife long enough. It was time to leave.

I had escaped my parents. I had escaped Musab. I had escaped my big prison. But this time, I was not escaping. I was shedding him from my life and creating an opportunity to grow.

Shocked and in disbelief, he protested: ‘But I am innocent! You believe me. I will pay you back every cent you spent on my legal fees. I know you paid a lot.’

‘It is not just the money. It is more that you are reckless, not thinking of anyone or anything but yourself in this whole painful journey. You just love being in the spotlight, even for a murder trial. You put me and my kids in danger. You did not care how this is affecting us or the business I built. You should’ve cleaned your past before you got me involved with you. You had almost thirty years to do it. This is not fair to me or my children.’

You are not a god

You are not a god, and you will never be.

Yet I was captivated by the god that dwells within you.

*You are not a planet, and you will never be.
Yet I orbited for a while in your path.*

*You are not a sun, and you will never be.
Yet my day lit up, if only once, with your light.*

*You are not a moon, and you will never be.
Yet you scattered the darkness of one of my nights.*

*You will never be my day or my daylight.
You are not my Sunday, nor my Saturday,
not the end of my week, nor its start.*

*You are not my autumn nor my spring.
Not my winter, nor my summer.*

*I thought my trees would bear fruit with you.
I thought my roses would bloom beside you.
I thought you were my next beginning,
perhaps my last.*

*I walk, and I ask about madness,
what madness is it that sketches my steps?
I walk, while my past asks about me,
and I keep asking about a beginning.*

لست إلها

لست إلها، ولن تكون.

لكن يأسرني الإله الذي يكمن فيك.

لست كوكبا، ولن تكون.
لكنني درت قليلا في مدارك.

لست شمسا، ولن تكون.
لكن نهاري أضاء ولو ليوم واحد بنورك.

لست قمرا، ولن تكون.
لكنك بددت ظلام ليلي يوما ما.

لن تكون يومي ولا نهاري.
لست أحدي، ولا سبتي،
لا نهاية أسبوعي ولا بدايته.

لست خريفي، ولا ربيعي.
لست صيفي، ولا شتائي.

ظننت أن أشجاري ستثمر معك.
ظننت أن ورودي ستزهر بجوارك.
ظننتك بدايتي التالية،
ربما الأخيرة.

أسير وأسأل عن جنون.
أي جنون يرسم خطاي؟
أسير وتاريخي يسأل عني،
بينما أسأل عن بداية.

I meant what I said about filing for divorce, still believing he was innocent and would be acquitted that day.

Andrew gave me a kiss on my cheek and silently left for court. My son, also believing his innocence, accompanied him and provided him with support. I went to work. I had a business to take care of, and I was more than confident that he would be acquitted and the nightmare, as he kept saying, would be over.

At 3 pm, my phone dinged with a new message from my son. I could not believe what I read: *He is acquitted of the brother's case but convicted of soliciting the murder of his first wife.*

I grabbed my bag, my car keys and the shattered pieces of myself. I drove home, burdened with more sorrow than a heart should ever bear. The conviction wasn't just his; it was a sentence on my present and my future. The next morning, I filed for divorce.

No-one ever paid me back.

Not him and not his large wealthy family.

My three constants

Just like constants in mathematics, steady and reliable, my children were my anchors, quietly holding my life together.

The media frenzy erupted again. An article about the case featured the photo that many years ago was a source of excitement and happiness for us – the one with the caption ‘tutor’, which we had laughed about together. Seeing that photo in the newspaper almost gave me a heart attack. I was afraid I was going to lose everything.

The weeks blurred together as I poured every ounce of myself into my business. It became my refuge and my purpose. My bank account was nearly empty. Other people in similar situations may have closed down or collapsed, but I had no choice; I needed the business and, as a child needs their parent, it needed me. Every hour spent working meant one less hour thinking. That was the easiest way to survive. It was the only way I knew to survive: keep pedalling, no matter how steep the climb. People did not see that: they only saw the resilient, calm, powerful person they thought they

knew.

Sometimes distance becomes a blessing. Living so far from my parents and the fact that they did not read English both shielded them from this crisis and spared me from facing their reaction. I did not need that then. I was embarrassed more than anything else. Still, as the end of the year approached, something inside me ached. I felt a silent, persistent pull back to my parents' home. Maybe I needed reassurance. Maybe I just needed to hear my name spoken with kindness. So, in late December of that year, I booked tickets to visit Canna with my Vector 3.

To say my parents were shocked is an understatement.

'I need to talk to you,' I said when everyone else had left, and I was alone with my parents. 'There is something important you need to know.'

They sat across from me at the dining table, their faces stiff with expectation. My mother's arms were folded tightly across her chest; her lips pressed into a hard line. My father, sitting in his usual chair, watched me with quiet curiosity, as if trying to decipher something before I spoke.

I took a breath and forced the words out: 'He's in prison. Convicted of accessory to murder.'

Silence.

My father blinked, his brow furrowing as if he hadn't heard me right. My mother, on the other hand, let out a sharp sigh and shook her head, looking away.

'No,' my father said finally, his voice low. 'That can't be right. He's a good man.'

I swallowed the lump in my throat. 'Well ... he says he is innocent.'

More silence. My mother's expression remained cold, unreadable, but her silence was heavier than words.

'That's what you brought us?' she said at last. 'This news?'

I flinched. 'I did not know,' I said. 'It happened thirty years ago. I had no way of knowing such a horrible thing. You met him and you also thought he was a good man. You said that.'

I was pleading for them to believe me. To contain me. To hug me.

There was no hug, no comforting hand on my shoulder. Just anger. Disappointment.

‘You know that all that is happening to you is because you are far away from God. You don’t pray, you don’t fast and you don’t cover your hair,’ she said, her words slicing into my soul.

‘You will never understand me and will never know me,’ I shouted. ‘I am not sure if you are my mother and I am your daughter; this is happening thanks to you and your sheikh. I did not have to marry Musab at the age of eighteen, I did not have to be abused for seventeen years while you were all watching, I did not have to go to Australia to be safe and be able to get divorced. I should not have to choose between my children and my safety. I did not have to marry Andrew. It is all because of you and what you did to me.’

I stormed out, as I used to do at the age of sixteen, while my dad tried to stop my mum from adding any more salt to my wounds.

Feeling like the eighteen-year-old who came home crying again, I wished the earth would just open and swallow me whole. By now, they should have known that I didn’t typically ask for help. I handled my own wounds and tried to heal on my own. When I did ask for help, that’s when they should have known it was really bad.

We returned to Sydney the next morning. *Never again*, I promised myself. From then on, I would seek refuge from no-one other than myself. With that decision, I shook off the past, stood tall and moved forward.

The children needed me, and I needed them. We became closer and started to have more family time together.

The fifty-minute drive between the two branches of the business was my weeping time. I cried, not because I was weak. I cried because the price of staying strong was too high. Too painful. These tears felt different from the ones I had shed so many years ago, back when I was trapped. Then, I would wake with a damp pillow: tears that had fallen silently in the night – unnoticed by me, yet gently washing my soul. As if they were the universe’s quiet way of sustaining me, giving me just enough strength to

survive one more day.

But these tears ... these were not for survival. They were for clarity. For becoming. I wept from the ache of transformation. I remember asking myself when I had hit rock bottom before, dealing with Musab and trying to escape his trap, *Is God watching? Does He see what's happening to me?* And now, sitting alone in my car, I asked myself these same questions again but with faith. *Maybe this is happening for me, not to me.*

Growth, I realised, is never comfortable. Just like a crab must shed its shell to grow, leaving itself soft and exposed for a time, so must we. Vulnerability is the birthplace of strength. For a while, I would feel raw. But in time, a new, stronger shell would form. A larger one. One that could hold all of who I was becoming.

Shortly after that, I enrolled in a business acceleration course. I didn't ask my accountant if I could afford it. I didn't wait for the perfect time. I just did it. It felt like the first step towards something more.

On my first day, I took a train to the city. It would be a whole-day training session, once a month for twelve months. The training room smelt like new carpet and nervous ambition. All whiteboard walls, bright lights and a PowerPoint presentation already glowing with bullet points that promised transformation. I took a seat near the middle, close enough to engage but not close enough to be seen too early. My notebook was open, pen poised, as if I were about to take notes on a new version of myself.

Around me, there were people who looked like they belonged. Polished, confident, chatting about KPIs and growth metrics as if it was their first language. I sat quietly, fixing my curls, adjusting the sleeves of my burgundy jacket. I wanted to look professional. I wasn't intimidated; I was observing. Gathering data and myself.

The trainer introduced himself, his tone warm and assuring.

'Let's start with a question,' he said, clicking to the next slide.

Who are you as a leader, and who do you want to become?

I blinked. A strange stillness settled over me. Who *was* I as a leader? For years, I had led in silence: led children through confusion, led a business into growth, led myself out of the fire and back into it. Twice. But no-one

ever gave me a name tag for that. No job title. No morning coffee with colleagues who saw me as anything important. I was only a teacher, a mother or, later, a business owner. But here I was. Pen in hand. In a room where I had chosen to be.

I wrote slowly: *I am a leader who has already done the hard things. I just need the language to name and communicate them.*

I didn't know then how much that sentence would change everything. But I felt something shift. Just slightly. Like skin itching, ready for a new shell.

I knew what I wanted – or, more accurately, needed.

Midway through the session, the instructor paused.

‘Sometimes, what holds us back as leaders isn't lack of skill but the stories we carry in silence,’ he said, scanning the room. ‘I invite you to share, only if you feel ready. What's one story that's been holding you back?’

A murmur passed through the room. Chairs shifted and eyes dropped. Then one woman stood up and spoke. Then a young man. Their stories were not like mine, but their courage softened something in me. I felt my heartbeat rise in my throat. My hands trembled slightly. I don't know what pushed me to stand. Maybe it was the silence that begged for truth, or the feeling that if I didn't speak now, I never would.

‘My name is Majeda,’ I began, voice shaking but present. ‘I came to Australia to do a PhD, but my real reason was that I was finally running away from a seventeen-year-long abusive marriage. I was silenced, controlled and hurt. I then had the courage to leave, bringing my three children with me. I left. I rebuilt. I thought I had moved on. But I realise now ... I never gave that version of me a voice.’

The room was still. Not frozen with judgement but quiet with listening. The kind of listening I had rarely been offered.

‘For years,’ I continued, ‘I built everything I have despite what I went through. I've been here for fourteen years, but this is the first time I've talked about it.’

At that point, a woman offered me some tissues. I was not aware that

tears had covered my face and I was shaking.

When I sat down, something inside me was lighter. Not because the pain had disappeared but because I had finally opened the window and let it breathe.

Afterwards, a woman I hadn't spoken to before reached over and touched my arm. 'Thank you,' she whispered. 'You helped me say something I've been holding for years.'

And, just like that, I realised leadership isn't about looking strong and hiding the wounds. It's about showing how the light comes through them.

At the end of each monthly session, I would take the train back to my business and share what I had learnt with my staff. The next day, we would brainstorm how to implement the ideas and set out a monthly plan to follow. This is what we did for twelve months and beyond.

Gradually, but steadily, things began to turn. The business grew, and I grew with it. I published my first book: *Who Cares About Maths, Anyway?* It wasn't just about mathematics; it was a review of the Australian education system – a system that left many parents, especially migrants, lost and excluded. I had lived that confusion and that exclusion. I wanted to create a compass for parents, especially migrant parents.

When two thousand copies of the book arrived, I felt that familiar surge of pride: *I have made it again*. But this time it wasn't just about me. I needed this book to reach parents. They deserved to understand the system their children were being shaped by. They deserved to feel empowered. Soon, our reception area was filled with parents quietly reading the book as they waited, nodding with recognition at every paragraph. My staff would glance over, smile and say, 'Your words are telling the truth, Dr Majeda.'

And that truth was beginning to ripple: one reader, one parent, one moment of understanding at a time. The business started to flourish again, reaching new heights, and my profile grew with the many awards the business and I won. That year, 2019, we were again shortlisted for an Australian Small Business Champion Award, and I was shortlisted for the prestigious Ethnic Business Award as well as a few other local business awards. These two significant awards were the dream of any small business.

For me and my business, they were a lifeline: not only financially but also for the positioning in the market. I was not used to my hard work being acknowledged or recognised. It had a unique taste.

Covid-19 hit us all in 2020. Of course, the pandemic and its restrictions affected the business – much like all other educational and service businesses. However, with my great team – supported too by my three children, who played different roles helping in the company – we were ready for it. We transferred all our courses online and survived the storm. The business continued to flourish and we began to grow again after lockdowns were relaxed.

Throughout all the turmoil, my three children were my anchor. When everything else felt uncertain, when I was questioning my choices, my strength and even my sanity, it was their presence that grounded me. Their laughter, their needs, their resilience reminded me why I had to keep going. It reminded me how I once fought for us to be able to spread our wings.

I wasn't just fighting for wings now. I was building something *for* them, *with* them. I made sure they had their own directions – that they could remain vectors even when I needed them – and each of them received a necklace with an engraved pendant, *Life is the sum of your choices*, when they turned eighteen. They were my clarity and my unshakable source of strength.

With their magnitudes and mine, and with their directions and mine, I was able to solve another problem. I was able to solve any problem.

9

Limits

Mathematically, a limit describes what you approach but never quite reach. That is how exile feels: living between two homes, always nearing belonging but never arriving.

Australia offers blossoms; Palestine offers roots. I stretch myself from one to the other, tracing the outline of a home that exists only in the space between.

There's a kind of ache that comes from loving two places at once. Each one pulls you in a different direction. One is filled with your memories: your mother's cooking, your grandmother's sweets and stories, the smell of tea with mint and sage on cold nights. The other holds your present, your future: your work, your financials, your children, your safety. You can't choose between them without sacrificing something, without leaving behind a part of yourself – despite your craving to be whole. You live with a constant homesickness, no matter where you are.

When you're in one place, you miss the other. When you visit the homeland, you're struck by how much has changed – and by how much you have changed. You no longer know the slang, the local politics, the unwritten rules of how things work. They have changed, but the image you have in your mind of them has not.

You find yourself in an argument with your younger sister about her favourite food, something you were sure of for twenty years. But she insists it was never that; you got it wrong. Your parents, your siblings, your closest friends changed many things, but they neglected to tell you. Somehow, in the distance, the details began to slip.

When you go there, you are not confident driving on the other side of the road. The feeling of being in a prison crawls back. You speak in your mother tongue with a strange new accent. For the first few years, they pick you up from the airport, then you start choosing to get a taxi. *It is easier for everyone*, you say, offering an excuse for them and for you. You sleep in a room full of stored items, not your childhood bedroom; the house has been

through many renovations in your time away. They call you a visitor now. You laugh along, but deep down it hurts.

And when you return to Australia – to your present, to your future – you wait for WhatsApp calls that hardly come. Then you remember, too late, that they are eight hours behind. You stop checking your phone as often. And, slowly, the distance becomes more than just physical, not merely time zones. You are so hurt that you swear not to go back to see them, but you do – just a year or two later.

You don't feel entirely at home where you live now, either. You have citizenship and the right to be and belong. You know how to navigate the system, where to buy the good bread, how to do small talk at work. How to negotiate a job offer, how to start a business from scratch and succeed. You decorate your house in December, but Christmas never replaces Eid. You fast in Ramadan, but Iftar doesn't taste the same without the noise, the crowded tables, the call to prayer echoing from nearby mosques. At work, no-one seems to remember that you are fasting, even if you tell them every day.

Over time, you learn to live in this in-between world. You create rituals that blend both worlds: Arabic coffee on Australian mornings; manaeesh and an almond flat white while listening to Umm Kulthum on YouTube. You hang Arabic calligraphy on the wall next to family photos taken in front of the Opera House. You build a life that doesn't fully exist in either place but stretches its roots across oceans. You don't belong to one homeland anymore; you belong to both. And to neither. And maybe, just maybe, that is its own kind of wholeness.

Yet you still hold your breath when someone asks *Where are you originally from?* As if belonging is something you must prove. You hesitate, calculating what answer will satisfy them while still honouring who you are. And that can happen even when you are about to stand on stage to be recognised as the winner of one of the most significant business awards in the country.

Gala night

Summation (Σ)

In mathematics summation (denoted by the Greek letter sigma, Σ) is the process of collecting individual quantities into a single whole. This moment was the summation of years of effort, experience and growth, each small contribution adding to the total trajectory of my life.

I fixed my curly hair, crunching the two sides to look more symmetrical, and straightened my posture as I was taught in a body language course. I felt the energy in the room. The unnervingly loud whispers from nearby tables and the rowdy crowd did not help.

I heard mumbling and became aware that the formal speeches were about to conclude. I was not sure if it was the freezing air from the vent above our heads or a chill of disbelief, but I wanted to shake the resulting fear off myself.

My eldest daughter leant over and said, 'Let's go to the bathroom. We have time now.'

'And I need a cigarette,' one of my staff members added.

The three of us ducked out.

'Mum, a cigarette or a toilet break?' my daughter teased.

'Toilet, of course.'

'Bad choice, Mum.' She laughed, but her word echoed. *Choice.*

How many times in my life had I truly had the power to choose, or to step freely out of choice? Sometimes life doesn't give us that freedom to bloom. We make plans, build dreams and we draw paths only to watch them fail. Out of despair, we choose survival, not fulfilment. And yet, the path is often right there, waiting for us to walk it. We just don't see it until collapse brings us to our knees. Then, finally looking up, we find a way forward. Not just to survive, but to become.

When we slipped back to our seats, a woman on the table behind us said warmly, 'I hope you enjoyed the break. Where are you from? I'm Vanessa.'

‘I’m Dr Majeda. From Sydney.’

I always use my title with my first name. *I* earnt it, not my family. It is mine.

‘I meant originally. Where are you from originally?’ she pressed.

‘Oh, I see.’ I smiled without answering.

How many years must I live here to finally belong? Will I ever? The *where are you from-from* question always unsettles me.

‘And where are you from, Vanessa?’ I asked. ‘I mean, originally?’

She blinked, then gave a polite but uncomfortable laugh. ‘Oh ... England,’ she said. ‘But my parents came here as teenagers.’

I nodded, letting silence stretch. I straightened in my seat, my heart calm and my spine tall.

Let them ask, I thought. *I know where I belong: here. In this room. At this table. In this dress. With my story. I fought my way here.*

Isn’t it just a matter of migration timelines? Mine began earlier or later than others, but we all ended up here somehow. The only people who are *from* here, really, are First Nations people – the true owners of this land.

It was a nerve-racking wait.

My youngest daughter nudged me and said, ‘Mum, you always seem collected, not affected by anything. What’s going on?’

Collected. Did she know what that really meant? Or, more precisely, seeming collected. No-one sees the storm inside when you wear calmness like a mask. It’s like a duck gliding on water, looking graceful from above but frantic beneath. People see only the glide, not the paddling.

When nothing seems to touch you – not events, not loss, not bruises or wounds – you start to seem cold, as if your heart has frozen. *Collected*, they call it. But that’s the trick, isn’t it? The absence of reaction is the reaction.

‘And now, finally, we move to the Children’s Educational Services category,’ the MC said, breaking me from my thoughts.

My heart raced. My dress felt tighter and tighter.

We were in disbelief when the name of my business was called as the winner of the Australian Small Business Champion Award for Children’s Educational Services. We stood, jumped, laughed and cried – every emotion

condensed into a single moment. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Vanessa smiling at me with admiration.

In 2020 I received an email that had significant impact on my professional life and my confidence. I had won the New South Wales Small Business category of the Telstra Business Women's Awards – the most prestigious women's business awards in Australia.

Unfortunately, the New South Wales gala night, where I was to receive the award, was cancelled in the first wave of Covid-19 restrictions. It still feels like it happened. At home, I wore the champagne-coloured dress that I had bought especially for the gala and took photos holding the winner's certificate. With all the chaos and confusion that the whole world experienced during the hard times of Covid-19, I had my clarity.

These types of achievements can balance it all: nights like these, when I belonged on a stage once again. Acknowledgement that Palestine and family did not give me, but Sydney and entrepreneurship did. My limits stretched from a small town near Nazareth to the stages of business awards ceremonies in Sydney.

The phone call everyone dreads

The final limit

We think of death as the final limit, the only end point a system can reach. But, for me, the final limit is not death itself – rather, the silence, the words we cannot exchange.

Despite all these awards, a void surrounded my heart. There was something missing. I navigated the uncertainties of life very well; dealt with broken and unbroken relationships, hearts and souls; met with great people and evil ones. I savoured success and failure equally, but the missing part of the puzzle consumed my energy.

The law of closure suggests that humans tend to complete incomplete

shapes and figures automatically, perceiving them as a whole even when parts are missing. In other words, the brain has a tendency to fill in gaps and create a complete image out of something incomplete. My experience of life went against this basic principle, and I did not perceive it as whole for many years. I could not complete the incomplete parts of my life. I needed the finality, mainly with my dad.

I was feeling deeply homesick and missing my parents and siblings with an ache I couldn't ignore. It had been over two years since I'd seen them, since I'd laughed with them or simply shared the same space. I was meant to visit in March of 2020, but my youngest daughter had broken her ankle skateboarding and needed me. She couldn't walk, shower or move around on her own. It was good that I stayed. I was also glad that I postponed my trip as, in response to Covid-19, the borders closed and I would have had difficulty returning to Australia.

Battling lockdowns and running the business with such uncertainty during those days was exhausting – although, looking at it now, I learnt so many skills that I would never have acquired if not for those difficult times. On the other side of the world, my father's health had started to fail. They had said it was nothing serious, that he was managing. But something in me stirred uneasily. I couldn't explain it, only feel it.

As time passed, a different kind of absence grew quietly in the background. I reminded myself that absence is as meaningful as presence, just like zero is not nothing in mathematics; it's a placeholder, an anchor.

I remember well when my phone rang in September 2021. It was my sister Rawan, much more affectionate and less single-minded than me, who was updating me on my dad's health. He had been unwell for a while and had recently gone through some checks.

'Majeda, you must come back. It's terrible.' She started crying and, in between her weeping and blowing her nose, I heard the words *pancreatic cancer*.

'What do you mean, *cancer*?' I yelled in disbelief.

It could not be. We all agreed that he would die of a stroke or a heart attack! We always teased him, trying to get him away from the TV screen, watching the news – the war – all the time. We did not talk about cancer. And if it *was* cancer, it must be lung cancer; he'd always smoked like a chimney.

She paused, agreeing with me between her episodes of weeping.

I wished I could just cry and weep like her. I still envy her skill.

'Hello ... hello, where did you go?' I asked, in the silence that had settled. 'What are we talking about here? How bad is it?'

'You need to fly back immediately, Majeda.'

Aseel took the phone off Rawan as she threw her weeping body onto a seat – I could hear it from Australia.

'There are decisions we need to make together,' she said. 'You are the eldest, and we all need you here. It is Stage 4 pancreatic cancer. He has less than six weeks. He does not know yet. You need to be here as soon as possible.'

'Okay, I get it. Where are the boys? Does he not have four of them? Now I am suddenly the decision-maker in the family? Finally, at over fifty years of age – and on this matter?' I said in bitterness.

The businesswoman in me jumped to a plan and actioned it. I got permission to fly (borders were closed again due to Covid-19, so I'd needed an exemption) and had booked a ticket within twenty-four hours. I organised my schedule and, knowing I may be away for a while, allocated tasks and responsibilities to my staff.

As the flight took off, I thought of all the conversations I still needed to have with my dad, all the unfinished matters we had left hanging, the arguments we avoided even when they were necessary, the words I longed to say but had never dared to speak, and the heavy silence we needed to break.

I arrived in Canna one week before my son, who would be followed a week later by my youngest daughter. They both were keen to say goodbye

to their grandfather. My brother picked me up from the airport this time. My father had been discharged from hospital and was waiting on the balcony in his usual robe. But this time, his sunburnt face was pale, his skin was yellowed from jaundice, and a deep sadness lingered in his yellow-tinted eyes, overpowering his smile. He looked like a shadow of the father I knew. He was fragile, depleted and almost hollowed.

We hugged as we fought tears. We were both successful in that fight, but my sisters, who were watching us, were not. In a minute, I was surrounded by people: brothers, sisters, a few of their children, aunties. It was the usual big crowd, but it was a sad welcome this time. Everyone was pretending to look happy but failing.

Witnessing my dad's health deteriorating so dramatically was shocking to all of us. The strong, powerful and kind father he'd been in our minds had been replaced. We had no idea how to handle his anger or frustration. He was not yet aware of the severity of his condition, only that he had a serious problem with his liver. He would not accept that there was no surgery to fix him.

'Take all my money and fix me,' he said once in despair. He was trying to understand why the many doctors who had examined him were doing nothing to cure him. He had no idea that he had passed the stage of any therapy.

'Dad, it is not that, doctors can do nothing while your bilirubin level is this high,' we kept saying, with some truth.

I need to talk to him, I thought almost every day. *Today is going to be a good day.* But then something would happen, or he would have one of his anger episodes, so I couldn't – or rather, I didn't.

The first two weeks were heavy with sadness, agony and rage. We were mourning the father we knew while he was still alive.

Finally, voice trembling, I said to my siblings, 'We need to tell him the truth. We can't hide his condition any longer. He has the right to know. He deserves the chance to settle his affairs and prepare in his own way. It's

simply not fair to keep him in the dark.’

We also needed to tell our mother. She had the right to know too. Interestingly, when we explained the situation to her, she said she already knew. She was smart enough to conclude that it was much worse than what she had been told.

It was November, and the olives on the trees were more than ready to be picked. A few of my brothers, their wives and their children had already headed to the grove on the edge of the town, about a ten-minute drive away. It was one of my father’s good days, and he wanted to go to the olive grove too and for me to go with him. I couldn’t deny him that visit. I knew he wanted to say goodbye to his trees.

My father insisted on driving, even though it was almost impossible in his condition. I asked one of my brothers to come with us, knowing he could help, and my mother joined as well. Despite how dangerous it felt once we realised he could barely control the steering wheel, I’m still glad I agreed. That drive in his beloved white SUV Mercedes through the town and towards his olive trees was his last.

After this, we agreed to have the family doctor deliver the harsh truth to my father, but we remained by his side to offer support. My son had arrived by then and sat next to my mum. At first, my father faced the news with courage, reassured by the doctor’s promise of a treatment plan once his bilirubin levels decreased. However, a couple of days later, when he realised that the levels continued to rise instead of fall, the reality sank in: his time was running out. With that understanding, his spirit faded, and he began to withdraw rapidly.

A week later, he began refusing to eat or drink. For someone who loved his food, it was shocking to watch. He started to go in and out of consciousness – of long sleeps, as we preferred to call them. In his shrinking awake times, he would smile or say a few words. Other times he would go into an episode of rage, without any effort to hide it and only a weak voice to express it.

I needed time to ask if he regretted pushing me out of the life we once shared – a life that, at least for a time, was filled with love, warmth and

kindness. Did he ever wonder if things could have been different if he had not followed the Islamic Movement, if he had not forced me to wear the jilbab? Did he regret the choices that drove me away? Was he sorry for not protecting me from Musab's violence? These questions weighed heavily on my mind, and I couldn't shake the need to know.

I was praying for a tiny window of clarity, so I could dare to ask the questions I had rehearsed over and over. I was so close.

One day, using the arm he was still able to move, he waved at me and whispered, 'Get your sister. Where is she?'

'I am here,' said Rawan, who had made a sitting corner for herself next to his bed. 'Do you want Aseel too?'

'No, just you two,' he said weakly.

My eyes opened wide. I felt like he was going to talk about it finally. Maybe he would apologise; maybe he would tell us how hard it was for him to belt me and drag us to the shop to buy the jilbabs that both my sister and I hated; or perhaps he would tell me he was so sorry he could not protect me from Musab's abuse and that he should not have let it happen.

I leant over his bed. I wanted to be very close so I could hear every whispered word.

So did Rawan.

Then, silence.

He drifted away without saying another word.

Just as his mother had seven years earlier, he slept for a few days before peacefully and calmly passing away. And, just like his mother, he had a big smile on his face when he left us: a room full of family and loved ones.

We were fortunate that he did not experience pain throughout the whole process. His agony was more of the feeling of helplessness as his system was shutting down. He departed at the age of seventy-six. His funeral was attended by thousands of people, slightly more than his mother's.

To this day, Rawan and I wonder what he wanted to say to 'just' the two of us.

I flew back home with a heaviness I didn't know how to carry. My son and my youngest had to leave Canna two weeks earlier than me for work commitments. When I arrived at Sydney airport, my son was waiting for me. I saw his face trying to read mine before I even spoke.

Grief landed differently the moment I walked through the door to our home. I moved through the house in silence, not ready to unpack – not my suitcase, not my feelings.

My daughters waited for me at home. They hugged me carefully, sensing the weight I had brought back with me. What I didn't say to them – not even to myself for a while – was that the hardest part wasn't the goodbye; it was the silence. The words that were never spoken. The chance that vanished with his final breath. I had rehearsed those conversations in my head for years, carrying them like folded letters in a pocket across oceans and continents. I didn't dare say them aloud, and neither did he.

That silence has now made a home inside me. Neither loud nor angry. Just sitting there, even now. A quiet ache that lives in my throat, just where the words should have passed.

I often wonder how it would have changed me if he had said the things I craved to hear, or if I had said the things I needed to say. Would it have changed the way I see myself? Would it have softened the edges of my anger, or loosened the grip of rage I had mistaken for strength?

When a parent dies, their silence becomes your inheritance. And my inheritance was full of pauses and unsaid truths. My grief wasn't just for his death; it was also for the parts of myself I had buried to survive him.

But I am learning that silence, too, can speak. It points to the wounds we carry across generations. It explains why I still sometimes flinch at softness, or why I work so hard to make sure my children are secure and independent. I'm piecing myself together, not in spite of what I had to survive but because of it. The healing work is slow and unfinished. Just like a limit we approach but never quite reach, we live in this in-between space – a space not just between two physical homes but also between our wounds and healing.

Epilogue

My life has never moved in a straight line. It spiralled, each loop a return to pain or power; each turn a step deeper into understanding. At times, I felt I was circling the same fears, the same wounds, the same cages. But in truth, I was rising, each time with stronger legs, sharper sight and a clearer voice.

The struggles and victories wove together like layers of particles and remains pressed by time. All the moments of pressure and fire shaping something unbreakable, something solid. A rock. I became what I needed to survive: steady, unmoving, unshakable and emotionless. I hardened where I was once soft. I silenced the parts of me that were tender, because tenderness had no place in the world I was trapped in.

They called it tradition. Wrapped it in religion. Dressed it in expectations of a good daughter, a loyal wife and a perfect mother. But beneath that was control, cloaked in love, enveloped in duty. Silence, passed down like a legacy. Violence, endured behind closed doors.

I lived under occupation – one outside my home and another inside it.

For years, I stayed. Until I understood that I was never meant to live compressed, reduced or hidden. My escape didn't look like rebellion. It looked like a strategy, research, a study. Like showing up to class with a purpose. Like solving equations, writing and reading late at night and earning degrees I wasn't meant to earn. Like founding a business, writing a book and standing on stages I was told I didn't belong on. Education was the chisel I used to shape a new form of myself.

For a long time, I thought that the crossing of oceans was my moment of freedom. But real liberation came later: when I realised the weight I carried wasn't tied to me. I was carrying it *with* me. The rope was not holding me. I

was holding it, out of engraved fear. Fear that was imprinted and normalised.

There were moments I believed life had finally settled. But each time, the ground trembled again and I had to rise, again and again. I did. Because it's not how many times we fall that defines us but how many times we decide to rise, and who we become each time we do.

My repeated rising was my proof for all equations and inequalities. I rearranged variables, tested new functions and expanded my domain. I reached integration, and now I'm ready to push further – towards the limits and towards challenging more axioms.

This is what becoming looks like for me – and for those before and after me. A becoming that is not just lived but also passed on, especially to the ones who call me *Mama*.

The ones who never have to confront the axioms I had to confront. The ones who don't need to chase equations to live by, only to be met with inequalities. They can follow their own trajectories, living beneath a concave sky.

At this point ...

My children, my three vectors, have grown up to be independent, strong individuals and citizens of the two worlds.

Vector 1 is married, academically accomplished with two degrees, and building a successful career in finance. Other than securing a great potential and future, he also found love and serenity. He became a real vector. My Vector 2 is married with two children. She has grown up to be the best mother anyone could dream of. She is parenting, studying and working hard with her husband, who is her best friend, to create a safer and better world. She is raising children who will never know the oppression we experienced or the silence we lived through. As for my Vector 3, she has manifested my grandmother's prediction. She is changing the world in the activism realm after completing her first degree.

All three of my vectors are living under an embracing concave sky. The

rest of my family are still in Canna and – like the rest of the 1948ers – are living under a flat sky that crushes them every day. Their sky has never been flatter or more pressing.

While I poured my story onto these pages, Gaza has been burning; its people have been suffering in ways no human should ever experience. I write with a trembling heart, hoping that, before this memoir reaches readers, the bloodshed will have stopped and the world will have awakened.



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