

Salam Bullies

by
Soumyana

Please, visit Soumyana's website: lots of free books, textbooks, Islamic curriculum:

soumyana@lycos.com

<http://www.alhidaayah.net/soumyana/>

<http://soumyana.weebly.com/>

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“When a bully is directly confronted and calmly told to take action or walk away, more often than not the bully will stand down.” Gracie Jiu-Jitsu Academy.

CHAPTER 1 

While you sleep with your eyes closed, your ears deaf, your tongue mute, and your arms and legs motionless, how do you travel, meet people, and do many things in a few minutes or an even shorter lapse of time?

I keep asking myself those questions over and over again. I keep asking and, for me, that's a miracle.

And, how come when you wake up in the morning, you feel deeply influenced by those few magical seconds? Freud attribute dreams to desires and past experiences, but how can you explain dreams that inform you of a future event involving people you have never seen or people you have not seen in years? Freud is a no-brainer. We study it in our

philosophy class. However, what if Freud was wrong all along? Actually I am sure Freud is mostly wrong.

I have been dreaming since I was born. Duh. I know, you too.

I have been dreaming things that actually happened like when Mom's little sister was going to marry this one in a thousand guys. I dreamt that he wore a shirt that was so small he had to pull on it to cover himself. Come on, everybody loved him. Me too! How could I make this up? A shirt is symbol of one's faith. Well... turned out that this guy was only praying to show off before my aunt. So, I wonder, what if our souls had a life of their own. How do we dream? With what part of our body or being do we dream? Why do dreams last only a few seconds? How, and why, do we remember what we dreamed

while asleep? Could dreams be the text messaging of God?

;S ("Hmm? What did you say?")

As I am lying here in my bed, thinking it through, time goes away with my dream. If I do not make an effort to recall it, it will be gone forever; SHE will be gone forever!

The alarm clock rings; it's time to pray. Prayer time is getting really early now, but I don't feel a bit sleepy. I don't let the call for prayer finish. I push the alarm clock's beep so that I can continue in my line of thoughts, undisturbed.

BOT (Back On Topic). I continue typing on my netbook. That's where I keep my diary. Sometimes I even copy parts of it and send it to people overseas, old friends, sometimes family too, but rarely.

BOT. BOT.

This girl I have been dreaming about these last months has got to exist. I don't know why this seems so obvious to me. Maybe because she's so real. I could recognize her in a heart beat if I met her. Maybe because I wish her to be real? But I'm not in Freud's camp.

I also wonder if it's good or bad to think of a girl like that.

There are many dreams which, though bad in appearance, prove to be good and pleasing in actual life. And there are a number of dreams, though seemly good, prove to be bad in actual life. For instance, seeing someone dying means they will live for a long time, and laughing means we are going to cry.

When we sleep, it seems like our spirit ascends to

this world of ideal forms without completely breaking its connection to the body. It continues this connection through a chord. The reason why this is so important for me is that once again, this girl seems to try to tell me something incredibly important. What is it you want to say, sister?

Her footsteps are light. Her touch is light, but her meaning is heavy. She pulls me towards a strange garden. This garden means the garden of Heaven, but I'm not too worried about that. I worry about the girl. She seems so real. She's like a friend. She comes back in my dreams often like a real person. She's tangible to me.

Even though, she has no business being in my dreams. Come on, I'm a Muslim and Muslims do not date or it's a blank date that sets you for life. How can a dream be so real? Dream **AYOR** dude

(At Your Own Risk).

I keep recalling historical people who had true dreams in order to reassure myself.

I'm not mad, right?

Sure, Abraham Lincoln dreamed the night before of his assassination, but this girl is not predicting anything for me. In his dream, he saw the White House servants running to and fro, telling each other that Mr. Lincoln had been killed. He woke from his sleep in great excitement. Despite warnings, he went to a theater that evening and was killed.

Sure, Eisenhower's dream just before he landed on Normandy in June 1944 changed the course of the Second World War. Eisenhower dreamed that a big storm broke out and overturned the landing crafts. This caused him to move up the date. He was right.

But this girl is not changing the mainstream of my ideas, or at least not yet. She's not warning me of a danger.

The mother of Anne Ostrovosky, a Russian writer, saw many scenes of the German-Russian battles five years before the Second World War broke out. Her dream was published in several newspapers. No wars, here, dude!

Several scientific or technological discoveries were first seen in dreams. Elias Howe, while trying to figure out how to thread a sewing machine, dreamed that he was a prisoner of a tribe who wanted him to thread a sewing machine. He suddenly saw holes at the ends of his captors' spears. He woke up and made a little "spear" with a hole at one end. Gee, I'm not an inventor!

These examples turn and turn around in my head. I can't let them go.

Niels Bohr, who was studying atomic structures, dreamed of planets connected to the sun with threads and turning around it. When he woke up, he conceived of a resemblance between what he had dreamed and atomic structures. So dudely brain cracking! I love dreams.

And these are not isolated events in the history of mankind. Not that I'm about to discover anything important; I'm just a high school student who still lives with his parents. I'm no genius.

And this girl takes my hand and drags me to an unknown garden.

This girl, she is so nice and so friendly. She's all that and then some. I really like her, and I think she likes me.

I'm no biter, but I must say I love the way she talks and dresses and I'd try to look as refined if I weren't a boy. She is, yeah, well... just compelling in simple ways, and... well... in this boy's ways too.

She speaks so proper; I don't think anyone my age speaks like that.

But it doesn't matter because for one I'm not in the US anymore and I'm trying to learn a new language and I must admit I can't think of a slang word in French. Well... yeah, not true. I can think of only one. Frenchies don't use slang. I mean yes, that's why I cannot recall any in French, I just do not hear them; people are not slang oriented here.

I must probably sound like my dad.

It blows chunks when kids try to talk like their parents, and there's a good reason for that. They're

too young! Dad always tells me: “Now, boy, mind your slanguage.” At least, that was before we came to France.

Even when we speak in English at home, which is less and less, we have to watch what we are saying because Muslims do not use slang, everybody knows that. Things I don’t want to do can’t be “lame” in our house anymore, and things that make me happy cannot be “sweet” or “fresh” anymore either. My parents are watching my vocabulary. They are hawks. Da bomb! We are Muslims and Muslims speak properly. Keepin’ it real, yea know.

LOL (laugh Out Loud)

IDR (I wonder).

But this girl, she told me a riddle yesterday and I wonder what she means.

“Your name is a silver lining,” she said.

Oh, maybe this is all because I am starting my new school today and I’m really scared.

OK, I’ve got to roll. Time for prayer.

CHAPTER 2



Gosh, I dislike those bare walls and wooden seats aligned one behind the others, and I dislike the teachers who change their clothes only once a week.

I have been in a French public school for a month now and I hate every minute of it.

I hope some of you guys will write back to me because I'm missing the NetLingo and the English language. At first I thought saying "ohlala," "merde," "j'adore!" and "baba cool" (hippy) was super cool, but then it's cool only in Americans' mouth. I'm tired of been called a "Ricain," or "Amerlok" two disrespectful short-cut for "Americans."

So now, I tell people my name is Ric. It just sounds better.

Right now, what I want more than anything? I want out of this school.

I hate this school, hate, hate it!

Som'thing yucky. Mom says not to use the word "hate" but I sure hate those rules we've got to respect like not wearing a cap, not chewing gum, and so on. Mom says that it takes a little to get accustomed to but I feel I will never be able to like it here. Honest...

I hate it when they make me feel like I'm here to freeload like a refugee, but I'm not a refugee, thanks to God, I'm just a kid who moved. Of course, with a name like that, Darussalam, it's hard to convince anyone. It's hell to convince anyone we're French. No kidding... I'll just pop it out of my mind. Whose idea was that? Dad! Dad changed his name when he became American; his French

name was going to cause his children problems. His French name is “Connard,” which means in English “Jackass.” No better, eh? Darussalam means “the territory of Islam.” Very appropriate for a new convert. Not so appropriate for a stay in France. But at the time we were not thinking of living in France. Couldn’t think of everything, dude. Our new name is also a problem, but I way prefer to be called a radical than to be called Bunk.

Despite my family’s best efforts, I’m still bullied.
Thank you Dad, but no thanks.

Everywhere I go, I hear, “Hey, the Ameer locking up!” or “Ric, ric-olala”. Ricola is a candy in case you guys don’t know. Well, I guess I used the word “ohlala” in a way that made an impression.

Mom said not later than this morning,
“Forget about these bullies; they will stop when
they see they have no impact on you.” She’s
dreaming. It is not working. She also said, “You are
lucky to be here. French school system is superior
to the American one. French people are nearly
always extremely well read, articulate, and
informed about the world, rather than just their
country, you know. You have a lot to learn from the
French.”

O, yeah? French children write on squared paper
that resembles our math paper: the curves and stems
of every letter start and finish at precise points in
the square. Zzzzzzzzzz. No wonder everyone in
France has the same exact handwriting. Yep!
Except maybe for doctors who still cannot write

properly no matter where they are. They'd better have technology at their finger tips if you ask me. That's not all. Every morning, I have to answer in class to the beat of a metronome: "Five times eight square," tick; "nine times nine square," tick, and so on, everybody is writing the answers down on the tick. I did not take it in my stride. I'm math addicted. I enjoy math! Why don't you, guys?

I have a "cahier de texts," a homework book for my parents to see and sign and be in perfect control of what I'm learning. Come on, people! I'm not a kid anymore! I'm twelve! I'm not a retard!

No homework, yeah, but instead pages of poems, verbs, historical facts, songs to learn by heart, I swear, and I have to recite whatever I learn before the class, and on a stand, please.

I have “controles” or tests every week. Yes, every week. Needless to say that I don’t have extra curriculum activities outside school ‘n home. School starts at 8 am and ends at 5 pm, Monday through Saturday but only morning classes on Wednesday and Saturday, as if that was going to make us feel better. *Ya Allah!* (Omigod!) Better catch up on my sleep than my sports or art skills. My pastime is to “stuff” at home for the test because my mom knows by heart what my average mark is and where I come in class. If I don’t pass the test, I will stay in the same grade for a second year! Some kids in my class are two years older than the rest of us. Eh, they are my bullies. No wonder. Frustration backdoor exit anyone? Hurray competition, parental control and public speech. Bye bye character building, team work and

creativity. Everyone has to fend for himself. No questioning minds, please.

When I explain all this to Bibi, she laughs and she says, amused, “It’s good to swap notes, don’t you think?” Bibi? She’s my student, yep, my student! But I’ll talk about her later. I do some community service with Mom, yea know.

Anyway, thankfully, at school, they are teaching us English, my only fun class. Eh! That’s also the one I’m best at! You wonder why? Ah, ah. Seriously, I mean stuff like art, journalism, archery, horticulture, music, woodshop, sculpting, photography, football, yea know, FUN fun classes, are absent. Nyet. Zip.

Even if I want to learn how to play an instrument, I can’t, no time, no class for that. But you can play an instrument in a “conservatoire de musique” and

learn martial arts in an “association sportive.” Got to pay for it too.

Some of you back home asked me:

“Can you design your own course?”

No. I swear I look lame even if I’m not supposed to use this word.

“Does your school have a swimming pool, lockers, a student government?”

No.

“Hell! Do you have a graduation ceremony?”

Nope. My eyes are drooping.

“School dances, a yearbook, a school newspaper, a school radio station, assemblies, lockouts?”

Nappy, nope, nope, nope!

“Gee!”

I yawn. And let's not forget the final exams! Holy Cow! To pass the Bac, you need to be a serious genius. High school in the US is nothing like it. US friends can't image that. School, school, school then work, work, work. I guess if I'd have to study less or not at all, I'd have a "life", but I don't. Here I admit, yes, I don't have a life. Well, actually, our school has a swimming pool, but I'm not allowed to go because, no kidding, girls wear string bikinis and the teacher wears a speedo. Me *shudders*.

And listen up, dudes. I was a math wiz, yes, really, so I went to Middle school a little early. Here, I'm only a K-12 student like everybody else. I have to slow down for others. Mom taught me to count using the Doman method so I don't have to think, I just put two or three numbers together naturally.

Well, here they assume I don't know my

multiplication tables yet. Well, just kidding.

Smiley.

Seriously now. How frustrating can this be? There would be a school to help me soar, but it's too far away from where I live. Duh. Too far here means two hours drive and out of the map. Never heard of commuting here, simply doesn't exist, nope, nope, nope.

O, wait. The other fun thing here is that I have a buddy, yeah, a French buddy for science experiments!

Christine is my wannabe class buddy. We've got to hang out with partners in science class. Since nobody was warm about her, or me, she's got me all for herself. Lucky one. *Wink.* She's not really bright but she's totally invisible. I mean we could pass a hundred times near her and we would not

notice her. For one, she doesn't move very fast, for two she's not very nice to look at, for three she's so slow to answer a question most people who try to befriend her lose patience after a couple of minutes. But she's a human being and working with her taught me a thing or two.

The first thing I learned from her is patience.

What's the rush, after all? I had to slow down my life to catch on with hers. She's got the true Mediterranean spirit.

The second thing I learned is how to disappear. So now I'm a chameleon too. That helps with the bullies, especially when they see two chameleons trying to get a conversation at the speed of a snail together.

The bullies? O yeah! They are the ones who got me here in the first place, I mean in the counselor's

office.

It's not a bad place. I told Wudood, my lil' sister about the shrink's office and how much it looks like my old school and she wants to come too because she studied in my old school and she misses it as much as I do. But they did not want to let her touch the games or even explore the place. I wonder why. Would eyes break anything?

As if you did not know, I live in France now.

Tadah! We moved a few months ago to our new country and it shows... painfully.

I must confess, it's beautiful here, really.

There are real castles, very old buildings made of granite with roofs that look like made of bumpy red tiles, and cobblestones streets where no cars are allowed. There is a building in front of our school that is 600 years old and still stands. Got a few

centuries more to go too. I don't think any building in America can last that long. Honest. History is a fast food in America.

So, OK, how did I get here, in the counselor's office?

CHAPTER 3 

This is our first day to the counselor's.

Pretty big step, Isn't it? Not a dream. I wish it were. I feel so lonely here, and I need a friend so badly, or at least this is what one of my friends told me, that is why maybe I made this girl up, the girl from my dream, to fill in a void. Well, my parents have been talking about this to the counselor. Bunch of Judas! This girl, she said "Your name is a silver lining." I still do not understand why. I realize I am not called by my name anymore. Maybe I have to make everybody call me Mohammad? But... how do I make them?

So, how did I end up being here? Eh, you'd like to

know I'm sure. Well... bullies.

I'm a nice guy and in America I never had anyone bullying me, but here... OMG!

It started with my name, and then everybody evolved into the sneaky part. Here, they don't kick your plate or make you fall. Here, they just pick on you and punch.

And the worse is that it starts with the teachers!

The teacher almost knocked me to the floor because I said I thought I'd forgotten to take one of my books. And then I was helping the boy who sits next to me to find his red folder from a cupboard and the teacher yelled. "Sit down! I'm through with you."

O man, he said that and then he pulled me by my t-shirt and kind of flung me with it in the direction of

my desk.

This teacher is crazy. He cuts the crap out of us. He even managed to stop every bilingual kids to learn another language than French. The kids are so scared and also the parents I guess because nobody has complained of yet.

In a French system you leave the kids at the door of the school and that's it... they are not your kids anymore!

But Mom is American and there is no way this is going to work.

Mom and Dad spoke to the head teacher and his class teacher and they were told that some of it was down to rough play, but yes, there was some justification to what I said. The school admitted that

there is no system to deal with it, and the adult would just ignore the incident.

After the meeting, for the next three or four weeks things have seemed better, but then one day I have been repeatedly attacked, kicked and punched because they found out I am Muslim. That's so unjust! See, the genitor saw me praying in his closet.

“Get out of here,” he said. “And if I catch you again, I'll report you, Bounouille.”

My classmates saw that, and they all yelled after me, “Bounouille, bounouille,” which means “towelhead.” I could not believe my ears. No way this could happen in America. The genitor? But in France apparently everybody is secure in his job. So, he can do whatever he likes. Yeah, I tell you, a

genitor!

Some of the kids punched me and said, “Get back from where you come from.”

So, in a few minutes, I was given a life sentence.

Man, it’s hard.

I wish I could go back to where I come from, trust me.

Bougnouille? Nobody wants to be called that. It is plain mean. It’s degrading.

See, the Nazis named all the French people “bougnouille,” but now the word applies to Arabs, so it is really a hate word. I wish they knew how it feels to be hated. Some of the Arab guys said to me, “Punch back, or they’ll keep at you,” and I did. I do not know why I listened. Instead of making it better, it made it worse. It’s like a game now.

Plus, I was sent to the principal’s office and I was

expulsed from school. Because I defended myself and my right to practice Islam, I was kicked off from school. Unreal!

Now, every time I go to school, I feel like I want to die.

The other day, another teacher did this finger plucking thing like nipping at me with her long nails. Man, it hurts! It's humiliating.

She shouted really loudly at me, saying, "You write like a pig!" I'm left handed and I really struggle to write French style.

After that, some of the older kids in the class pushed and shoved me, pulled me around by my clothes to imitate the teacher and screamed at me up close and personal, "pig, pig." I kept saying "Stop that, stop that!" but they did not listen. I wished I

was dead.

Mom put a note in my “cahier de liaison,” a book that allows communications between parents and teachers, stating that she does not have permission to hit me.

I did not want to show her because I thought it would cause more problems.

Mom said, “Okay - but if she ever worries you again, or manhandles you or hits you, show her the note.”

I agreed. So, I showed her the note that day and she had a screaming fit, said I had to stay after school, but I got out when the other kids left and I came home.

This time, Mom went to see the “conseil des parents d'élèves” which is a parents’ meeting, and they discussed it in depth. A representative went to see

the teacher and explain that 'numerous' parents had complained. That's how we know it is not permissible for teachers to hurt us. She is laying low since. Thank God.

So, I guess, Mom solved the teacher's problem. But the kids in my class are like they got the green light to go after me.

So, why the counselor? Well, I have to go to bed, so I guess I'll tell you later.

::poof:: (I'm gone)

CHAPTER 4



Counselors here live in a playground. No kidding! The place looks somewhat like a Montessori school with low shelves and different corners where you can do different things. You know, one of those private schools that teach kids to be independent and free thinkers. The only difference is that you cannot choose what you want to do; adults choose for you. Get out of here, man! I miss the puzzles, the practical life activities, the cultural cards that teach about the world, the free spirit atmosphere, in one expression -- the topping and the crumbs. There are Montessori schools in France, I'm told, but Dad cannot afford to send me there. Too bad. Instead, I've got to go to the public school.

Ah, yes, the counselor.

I'll tell you that much. Once school was over in America, we were shipped here first Air France flight, and after a few months in my new school, we were all invited inside the principal's office, Mom, Dad, Wudood and I. Sure! At first I thought that's really welcoming, really, he doesn't have to, me embarrassed and all, but soon I realized something was cheesy.

At first, the principal spent a lot of time in small conversation to a point that we really thought he had invited us over to welcome us. He also talked about himself a lot. He told us how he likes to fish and if Dad would care to join him on Sunday morning. Dad declined politely because he doesn't like hurting living things just for fun and French

people do not reject the catches to the water like Americans do.

He said, “I’d like to go, I appreciate the offer, but you see... we are so very busy since we moved. Taking care of a new house is a lot of work and we have not put away everything yet.”

The headmaster paused long enough to wipe his eyeglasses.

“Moving is stressful,” said Dad looking straight into the principal’s face as if apologizing. “Moving abroad is more stressful and moving abroad with children is even more stressful still! I am sure you understand.”

“Whenever you’ll like then,” said the principal with confidence. “Concerning your child...” he started, trying to find his words or so it seemed although I’m sure he had his little speech

prepared for us.

“What about my child?” said Dad looking surprised and a little nervous.

“How does it go at home?”

Mom and Dad looked at each other puzzled.

He added, “Did he take the move well?”

Mom cut in, “That’s it. We’ve taken the plunge, Monsieur, there’s no turning back.”

“I see,” said the headmaster grimly.

Mom felt like she needed to add, “We cannot opt out now, but I still wonder if we made the right choice for the children.”

The headmaster listened carefully. I wish they would ask children how they feel; it was like I did not exist.

For me, I was like trying to decide if I like him or not.

I sensed that the meeting wasn't innocent and that he was going to make decisions about my life. I knew he was to.

Mom felt embarrassed by the silence. She continued, "To expect them to be as caught up in our excitement might be too much madness, I know. How can we avoid them missing their former life? We are trying our best to smooth the passage but on every dirt road there are some sharp pebbles." Was Mom trying to translate a French expression she did not get right?

The principal nodded and answered carefully, "The answer depends on what kind of children they are. Sporty children love the idea of a better climate and France's great sports facilities..."

He turned towards me for the first time and asked me gently, "How do you feel about moving,

son?”

I'm glad he was not asking me how I felt about France and the “fun” time we had to go winter sporting. Living in the outskirts of a small town, I was scared, yes I was. You would be too. The first few days I could hear the wind blowing, the owls howling and strange noises on our bedroom wall. I could even hear people screaming and my imagination made me believe that the house was haunted, until I discovered that the strange noises, screams and laments at night time came from our neighbors'; the herd of sheep and their young lambs herded on the other side of our wall. I just could not tell him that, could I? But the house was the least of my problems. If only these bullies did not exist, I could be okay. So I tried to hide my face and did not make eye contact.

He asked again, “Where you in the habit of getting into fights back there in America too, son?”

Mom answered the principal, “Of course not. Does the school have some concerns about Mahmoud?”

I was all ears. He fidgeted a little and rubbed his hands slowly and for a long time as if he was trying to warm up his fingers. He talked about my debuts at the school and how bright a student I was, but how hard it was for me to be here. Finally, he told us that it would be better for me to see a psychologist. Mom was in shock.

“What! ... What?” she said.

--- 5000 words ---

She's not a believer in psychology. She always says, "These mind twitters; I do not trust them."

The day her sister said she was going to become one of them psys, she answered like that, "You are going to open a door you will not be able to close." And she sounded really upset. She added, "You might never see the light on the other side."

And she put a paper roll right in front of her face to illustrate. That was pretty aggro, right? Her sister insisted that she wanted to help other people, but Mom said, "Help yourself first. They are going to twist your mind a great deal, I can assure you that."

I wonder why she is so much against psys. She is not telling us everything, I'm sure. Sure as chunks.

Now, she looked calm and respectful. My mom? I just could not believe it was her! Maybe she had changed her mind about the profession. People

change, yea know. But do moms change? No way!
Or maybe she didn't want to look like she wanted to offend anyone; she's got more manners than I do, more than anyone of us actually. Dad is more French in his way of dealing with people, Mom more American. Dad is diplomatic, but he would not hesitate to say "bullshit" whenever the occasion suits the word. Mom always hides her true feelings; she hates confrontations so she would say what pleases other people. It's not that she is telling lies. Mom never lies. That's something about her I always admire. However, she always finds a twist for not telling what she really thinks and avoids hurting people's feelings that way.

They talked a long while and, at the end, after Wudood and I yawned a few times and

stretched our legs out of fatigue and boredom, they finally decided that I would try this therapist out just for a spin. I wish I could do something because I was not that into it and I just couldn't stand everybody talking about my life without consulting me first. Chucks! Dad winked at me a few times to calm me down. Mom put her finger over my lips whenever nobody was watching. She looked a little defeated.

When we were alone, Mom let the vapors out and declared rather hotly, "Why do they want my son to go see this bunch of brain scrapers? He is fine, just fine. Aren't you, Mahmoud?" She didn't wait for me to answer. She added, "To go spelunking inside your mind, your emotions, your motivation," she huffed while looking sharply at

Dad. “That requires *un Je ne sais quoi...* a weirdo set of mind.”

Mom knows a little bit about therapists; two people in her family are doing this job and she doesn’t really get along with them.

She explained to Dad, “They tell you, you should leave your sessions often feeling challenged to think in different ways, uncomfortable because you’ve felt emotions you haven’t in years, awkward because you are trying out new behaviors, angry because you’ve been pushed to confront something you’ve been avoiding, teary-eyed because your therapist ‘got it’. More than comfortable: growing, learning, taking therapy into real life, facing the hard stuff, sharing your fears and taking risks. Bla, bla, bla... Bogus! I’m not sure this is what our son should be facing. He is just a lone ranger, nothing

more. He will make friends on his own time, at his own pace; kids always do. Kids are smart and flexible. They adapt quickly.”

“Hello!” said Dad doubtfully. “The bullying has been going on for quite a few months! And the fights too.”

I shrugged myself and I exclaimed, startled,

“What has been going on for that amount of months?” But inside I knew; I was just surprised that they knew too. I did not tell them the bullies had started again; I did not want to trouble them. Apparently the principal knew about it too.

I pleaded with them the rest of the day because I didn’t want the mind twitters to scrape my brain, and what did counseling have to do with bullying anyway? But there is nothing I could do or say that could change my fate. We were scheduled to see the

psy. the next day.

Mom said, “Go to bed now. French are very particular about punctuality. We’ve got to make a good impression.”

Quote.

OK, **TLK2UL8R** (Talk To You Later).

CHAPTER 5



When we arrived at the counselor's, I couldn't believe it, the principal presented us as the Darussalam family, good people relocated a few months back. Integration is hard for the boy and he needs a little bit of help. See the picture?

Mom got frustrated about the paperwork.

“Excuse me?” she said. “I think it is a mistake, Mahmoud is only here to get evaluated, not to be admitted” and, “O my God, it is late; we will not be able to stay long. That's too bad you could not make it earlier. We will have to go pray soon. Muslim custom...”

The therapist looked straight at Mom and said, “I'm here to help, to be useful to you, fox. Consider me as a friend with a higher purpose.” He

suddenly turned towards me in a pick-a-boo fashion and said, “Got peek that, son?”

I looked at Dad in a strange way. Son? He smiled back.

That must be the way French people call all children, like Americans when they call me Sonny or Sweet pie or even Sweetie.

I’m glad Dad smiled at last. He had a serious discussion with Mom after the visit to the school’s office. It was a long and hard talk and I was eavesdropping again, but shoot, I wanted to be let in, it’s my life after all! Dad almost didn’t make it to this meeting; he was so upset they could even find something wrong with me. But I guess the principal smoothed them out, and I mean literally when we showed up for the meeting.

He said, ‘What do you have to lose? Talk

five minutes with the therapist and if you do not like him, just walk away. That could be great for your kiddo, you know. At least, you are going to have the opportunity to decide that. Nobody is forcing you into doing anything after all. No hands twisted; you can say no at any time. Therapy's not a punishment; it's a gift to oneself.'

The counselor now tried to reassure Mom and Dad.

"I know your difficulties, Mister and Misses Darussalam. I have Muslim friends and I lived two years in the *Etats-Unis*. Parenting can be complicated and is frequently a difficult job, especially when having a different set of values than the place where we live," he said while offering a chair near his huge patient's armchair where I'm supposed to spend some time. "Children differ

tremendously, yet are alike in many ways. Children adapt and grow in response to their environment regardless of their biological or genetic attributes. Environment strongly influences a child's personality, moods, behaviors, and relationship patterns. Children are not, what we would say... in control. They have less experience, fewer coping skills and less control over the environment. They also have difficulty describing emotional problems. Children will usually show their distress by being irritable, having sleeping or eating problems, personality changes, physical complaints, disregard for personal safety, school problems, problems getting along with others, acting younger or older than their ages, and so on."

I must have been gaping. I soaked it all up. Mom closed my mouth gently by rubbing her thumb

over my mouth gently and holding my face between her hands while I sit before her. Gee, I was thinking, I didn't know all these things about kids. The psy went on and on. He is such a chatter box. He ended his discourse, saying, "Solving problems are more often the result of experience and learning. I think I can help Mahmoud.... If he helps me."

He smiled at me and I looked at him as if he was a nut. Help him? Yeah, sure. Good! If he was going to get rid of the bullies, I did not care about all his speeches about kids and all. I only cared about the bullies. I smiled back.

When we left for the waiting room where we still had some paperwork to fill in, Mom told Dad in English,

"I don't know, Darling. This feels wrong.

Come on, we are Muslims; we do not need therapy. Therapy is for the people who go the wrong way. I'm sure Mahmoud is fine and is going to do better as he goes along at school."

Dad agreed. "I know, there must be another way. However, school principals are law here. Let's them have their way for a while, and then let's close the door once and for all."

If we are able to close it! That's how Mom and Dad sealed my fate for the next couple of months.

As it turned out the psy gave us darn good advice afterall.

The first advice he gave Mom was to let me do community service.

He said, "Get your kid involved. The more kids are involved in school and community, the more protected they are from bullying."

That's how I met Bibi.

CHAPTER 6



Yeah, I saw Bibi. No, not the one in my dreams, not her!

KK (Knock, knock). I wish.

This is how it happened.

First off, during the weekend, Mom said,

“Today is community work.”

We all looked at her like she was crazy. We asked a lot of questions like, “What do you mean, Mom?” and “What does that mean?” I did not say that, Wudood did. My lil’ sister wants to know all the grown up words, so Mom had to tell her it was like helping the community, helping poor people, those who do not have as much as we have. She answered all of Wudood’s questions, but none of mines, like “Where are we going, Mom?” or “Who are we

going to meet on a weekend?” But Mom did not want to spit a word. Surprise, surprise! All this time, she was grinning at me, so I kind of imagined we were going to clean up the trash from the streets, yea know, the “adopt a county” kind of thing.

Okay by me.

The bad thing was that we had to take Wudood with us even though it’s ‘La Zone’ because Dad had to catch up on something. Couldn’t help it. La Zone is like a place filled with foreigners. Mom wasn’t sure about taking small children with her but she reasoned that La Zone was filled with children and if Arab children could live there, so could Wudood, at least for a few hours. Mom has lived in New York, so...

I liked it there, but going there was like a nightmare.

Wudood decided she had to take old toys she didn't want anymore to the poor children of La Zone. She watches 'Diego', so she is constantly trying to save animals or people. When she was done packing all her stuff with the help of Mom, she had marker marks all over her face from trying them out. Mom had the great idea to ask her,

“What have you done with your face?”

With a panicked look in her eyes, she touched her cheek and replied,

"It was there a minute ago! "

Follows cries, Mom going to fetch a mirror, Wudood making sure everything is there.

ROFLCOPTER (Rolling On Floor Laughing And Spinning Around).

When we finally got to the car, we were already fifteen minutes late.

Mom finally set up her GPS and off we went. The problem is the last couple of times we have invited Margie (that's Mom's GPS' name) along for the ride, she was still insisting we make a U-turn as we were pulling into our destination--and she still thinks that we live on the opposite side of the street. To be honest, Margie is not very bright. Dad's GPS, Tommy, on the contrary is a doll. Dad is thrilled to bits with him! Anyways, it took "her" a few minutes to figure out where she was, but after that she was good to go. I guess boys have a better sense of direction. Shh! Don't tell Mom this.

We weren't sure Mom would find her way among the tortuous French roads where two cars have to scrape to pass. But, thanks to God and Mom's threats, "Next time, I'll do the map!" finally

Margie found her way to our appointment.

Finally, after a rough start, we pulled into the parking lot outside our appointment's place. I was surprised. So, we were really going to meet someone. They weren't at home, so we waited, and waited, and waited at the door of their shabby apartment, but no one answered the door. The tension building in my stomach was becoming almost painful.

When we finally decided to leave, there she was, Bibi, at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for us. She drew the brim of her veil over her face in a bashful manner.

Wow, this girl is like five feet tall, very small, and so thin... so thin, she looks like her clothes are eating up her up. Mom drove me to see her because she's part of an integration program and Mom is

here to help as a volunteer. The girl doesn't speak any French or English, so we teach her. Cool, ain't it?

So, Bibi decided that we weren't strangers when Mom showed her card that said 'volunteer' on it.

I think she was at the grocery store or something because she was lifting a heavy bag full of potatoes and other vegetables. I thought she was going to be blown away by the weight.

Mom said hello, and she smiled.

Mom said, "I'm Sarah."

And the girl smiled. Mom introduced us to her, and she smiled again. That was getting really boring by now. She had a very engaging smile, but it made her look older. I could tell she was much younger than me but older than Wudood. I saw now that she was

wearing a floating jilbab that was very light and seemed to form one garment with her head cover. When she moved, her thin arms made the fabric dangle below. Mom started feeling embarrassed, so she tried to shake her hand. The girl smiled shyly and moved back a little, not understanding what Mom wanted. She pulled her heavy bag to the side, waving her hands in the air. No, we were not trying to help you lift the load. Is that what you're thinking? After reflection, maybe we should have proposed to help; I wondered how she was going to carry this load up the stairs. I looked around and saw an elevator hidden in the semi light of the old musty building. Mom showed her the box and we all stepped inside. Wudood stared at the girl and started playing with the brim of her very long scarf, laughing. The girl took Wudood's little hand and

helped her push the flashing button that would carry us upstairs. Wudood was delighted.

The girl pointed to herself. She said something inaudible but my little sister smiled and proclaimed at the top of her voice, looking around to make sure we were paying attention.

“Her name is... something... uh... gibberish.”

“Wudood!” exclaimed Mom in shock. “It is not necessary to be rude.”

The girl talked again.

Mom caught it, “Bibi? Nice to meet you.” B.B.? What sort of a name is that? But I didn’t say a word.

Wudood clapped her hands with delight before she astonished us, yelling in excitement, “B.B. the Bumble Bee! Buzz! B.B. the Bumble

Bee!”

“Can you stop buzzing for a minute, Wudood?” I said, really embarrassed and looking at my feet. The girl laughed, a hand hiding her teeth.

“Bee...” she repeated, waving her hands in the air and making a funny buzzing sound with her hands while crossing her eyes just in front of Wudood’s nose.

Wudood liked her immediately; she held one of her arm while the girl was trying to lift her load with the help of our mom. They carried it to the front door. The girl opened it and let us in. I was very surprised to hear her saying loudly,

“Jaddati, ana huna.”

I remember her first words because I repeated them in my head over and over again. Her language sounded like her name, very funny.

Her grandmother answered, “Jayid.”

And then I realized it was Arabic. I have no idea what they were saying but I guess it may have meant something like, “I’m here.” And “Okay” or something of the sort. However, my Arabic is simply washed out.

I also didn’t understand why her grandmother didn’t open the door when we knocked. Scared? Of what? The lady who was inside the apartment was an old apple with two shiny eyes in the middle. Mom tried all the languages that she knew in order to communicate,

“Ana Sarah, wa anti? They’ve got to know some Arabic words,” said Mom turning towards me. “They are Muslims for God’s sake, and they lived in Algeria!”

Mom soon gave up when she saw their blank faces.

“Probably my accent....” she concluded.

“We are going to start with French,” she declared at the end of her rope.

“Moi, un peu français,” said the girl.

We all looked at each other and burst out laughing.

We never did think of talking in French. It seemed like they had learned some words and sentences out there after all. Good for them!

After the introductions, the girl soon came back with a plate. She offered us cucumber with hot sauce. Delicious.

Mom said politely, “Look at all these beautiful cucumbers.”

“Cucumber,” repeated the girl.

Wudood, after looking at them for several seconds, yelled,

"MOM! This isn't cucumbers! It's pickles!"

Sure my little sister never leaves one alone. Soon, Mom was explaining the difference between cucumbers and pickles. Bibi learned a few words on the way and I was in for a few chuckles. Suddenly Wudood wanted to try one pickle-cucumber, whatever. She had been previously sick with an upset stomach and diarrhea for two days. So, Mom told her not to eat the salsa.

“This will hurt your bottom,” Mom explained.

Wudood protested, "But I will eat it wif my mouf!"

I swear this little girl one day will become a humorist.

So, I see her once a week. We're friends. Yeah! My first non-French friend. We teach her.

We teach her grandma too, when she's not too tired to attend; otherwise, she naps on the couch, on the other side of us. We show them objects and we say the name in French. They repeat after us. Mom says they have to learn their first hundred words in French to start reading children's books. We have a lot of baby books at home in French. They served us well. Time to pass them on!

Bibi is about nine or ten, maybe a little younger, it's hard to tell and Mom is not great help. However, she's very mature for her age because she has been through so much.

She has been around other kids before because she knows how to treat Wudood, and she did not study a long time at school because she looks like she has been raised at home. Honest! She looks like '*la fée du logis*' or 'the house fairy'. This is all my

reasoning and Mom says it makes sense although we should not assume too much of people because life is sometimes more complicated than we wish it to be.

I wish she were the girl that comes to me at night. She actually looks like her a little. Maybe this is why I like her so much.

Her grandma is a nice lady who seems to pick up French quickly. Maybe she has studied the language when she was younger at school because sometimes she seems to recall words Mom did not teach her. That makes her very happy. Sometimes we pray together. That's strange because I'm the only one standing in front.

Bibi has also made great friends with Wudood who literally adores her. They communicate by making faces, playing games, singing songs, doing crafts.

Bibi is good at making paper flowers and handmade carpets. She teaches Wudood, and as we learn her traditional art, she learns French words to put names on them. Wudood has already made a collection of dolls and animals made out of pieces of wool. Bibi showed her how to put the threads together for her rag dolls. Sometimes we also bring beautiful paper with us and Wudood looks at the pages and caresses them with admiration before her hands crease them into new flowers.

“Jameel,” she says several times, “chukran,” which means she’s happy and she thanks us. With Bibi, we must do a lot of guess work, but I like this. Sometimes it’s refreshing to talk to someone without words; sometimes words pollute a relationship. The less we speak, the less we’re inclined to say wrong things and the more we enjoy

the other person. Well, at least, that's a theory.

When we leave, she says, "Allah afeez," while laughing and waving, seeming very content. Her smile stays with me and warms my heart even a long time after we have left. She's my only friend here, a Muslim friend, a true Muslim friend. Not that I do not have friends in our community. I do, but somehow I feel closer to Bibi than to any other being. She's like family. I feel she understands me, although, only with her eyes.

SLAP (Sounds Like A Plan).

OK, I hope you're not **AAK** (Asleep At Keyboard)

CHAPTER 7



BTR (Back To Reality).

Wow, those weekends are a breather now, especially when I still have to see the shrink during the week.

ADIH (Another Day In Hell).

“So, what do we do?” I asked the therapist during our first meeting.

He explained, “Mostly we play. Play is a form of healing. When you can "play out" your fears and difficult experiences in a context in which you can be understood, you will be able to move on. Trust me.”

As if to illustrate, he turned towards me.

“Give me five, boy.”

I don't know where he learned about fives or where

he learned to say this in English, but I was reluctant.

I admired the effort, but I'm no kiddo after all!

“Maybe Mahmoud you do not think it is fun to be here, but I can guarantee you that I can change your mind.”

Really? I'd like to see that. Was he trying to sell something or what? Hello! It's not like I chose to come here. Fun? There's a lot of tension between the school and our family all covered up by smiles. Duh! Nobody is having FUN or looking for FUN for that matter. Either I come or I get expelled from school and placed in a specialized school. We checked. Me *shudder.*

“I'm not supposed to lie on a couch of something?” I asked, puzzled.

“The couch therapy? Heck! We're here to

rule that out.”

Mom stood up to leave, walked the few steps separating us from the entrance, and peeped at the door; she wanted to make sure I was okay. She had her concerns.

The psy watched her with a deep frown on his face, and then he stood up quickly and pursued her. As he overtook her at the front door, he declared,

“Eh! This is a place to enjoy, where one can focus on oneself. You’ll find a complete library in the waiting room and you can come and peep at any time. I said it before but I want to stress that more. It is a place where we play with the kids. Game therapy is very effective, you know. It works! Come on back after the session and I’ll uncover the hidden

threads for you.”

I envied his enthusiasm.

“Okay,” said Mom her voice trembling nervously.

“Are you going to tell me that I’m cracked?”

I said doubtfully. “Because if you do, I can tell you right off the bat that you’re wrong.”

“Gee, I don’t know,” he said, “maybe you’re going to tell me if I am cracked or not, maybe that’s why you are here.”

I smiled. I think I started likin’ him right there.

“You’re cracked,” I declared, amused.

“Why don’t you tell me about your move, Mahmoud,” he started rather abruptly.

Gosh, I felt trapped.

“Well... uh... One day Dad says we are moving to France to the land of their ancestors and

that it's gonna be the greatest adventure of our lives.

Six months later, crack boom, we're here."

"Hmmm. And what about the school?"

"I don't like it."

"Why don't you like it?"

"I'm not sure..."

"Maybe it is just new and there is a totally new way of doing things, yes?"

"NO!" I emphasized, "I DON'T like it! Never will."

"Are you unhappy, Mahmoud?"

"Sure I'm unhappy."

"We are going to play a little game, son. I hope you don't mind."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Whatever you say..."

"Here is a model. See the map, yes? Here is

your school, and there is your house. Can you place your house on the map for me, son?"

I did what he said.

"Good. That's not very far from the school, is it?"

Was he making small talk or was he trying to trick me? I wondered. I chose to remain silent.

"Now, tell me, son, how is home? Can you make a home using this clay tray?"

I did. My home looked brown and soft, warm to the touch with a chimney. I love my family, my parents, my sister, so of course any house would look beautiful in my eyes with them in it. When I was done, he asked me to place it in place of the other house on the map.

"Here is some more clay. Can you please make a school now?"

I didn't like his idea, but I still worked on it reluctantly and I chose the ugliest colors ever and I made it crooked. I looked at it satisfied and with a feeling of revenge. He didn't seem to mind the fact that I put eyes on the windows, actually on all the windows of the school.

“Good,” said the psy. “Why don't you make some people on the road from your home to your school?”

“Why should I?”

“Is there no one in the streets in the morning? No school mates coming out of their homes when you leave your home? No one who walks to school with you?”

“My parents drive me to school... but, yep... there're lots of kids in the street. Since my little sister goes to the Maternelle, basically a

building attached to the Lycee, we go as a family.

People? OK... let's give you people."

I torn clay in my hands nervously, and then I confessed, "I don't know how to make people."

"Really?" said the man surprised, "just make two hands, two legs and a head and you'll be fine."

"NO thank you," I said and I threw the rest of the clay in the trash.

Didn't he know that we're Muslims and we're not supposed to make even drawing of people, much less clay model? I was done with the little experiment.

"All right, Mahmoud."

He gave me a different work to do and left me alone for a few minutes. I had to take the school model apart and remove the different colors. I pulled the clay pieces and replaced them in the

appropriate pots. I felt anger mounting inside me. “I’m going to hulk out, for sure,” I thought. “I’m gonna ripcord.”

When I thought he was not looking, I looked at him, THE therapist. He was an old man with grey hair not really smoothed right on his head, maybe because he liked to stick his pencil around his right ear and behind his neck. Something must itched him down there, maybe because his collar is so stiff. When he looks at me it is like he is petrifying me with his clear blue eyes in his very pale face. Superhero kind of look, you see? But when he talks, his smile makes all this paleness disappear and warmth kind of comes out of him as if by magic. Really weird guy. He seems washed out like some cloth Mom pulled out of the washing machine the other day. And he likes to kick his foot up when he

crosses his legs. I tried that; that was very hard.

While I was working, I thought, *Someone at school said I need a therapist. What for? He just chats with me. I can have my little sister to chat with me anytime; she likes to listen.*

The therapist came back and noted that I blended all the colors together.

I ask him, as if to make him feel better,

“Can I keep the home?”

He nodded assent.

“Sure. That will be all for today,” he said, and he walked me to the door without saying another word.

TTG (Time To Go).

CHAPTER 8



The next day, we did not get to do the same. Pfewww! Or should I say it in French *Oufff!* Thanks God! I was watching him from the corner of my eyes. I was just cool and everything was tope, until his stupid question.

“What do you dislike about your school, Mahmoud?”

What I dislike about my school? He was playing with the pencil. I wished Mom did not have to stay outside. Gosh, I couldn’t stand him today. I was off. And his shirt was so bobo! I remember someone told me once that it’s only in America that pink is not a man’s color. But he was so busted in that pinkish torn at the elbow thing, OMG. Anyway,

“don’t step on my rides today, psy,” I grumbled to myself, “or I’ll jut barf.”

“You look tired, my son,” he suddenly said, detached, as if to tell me, “We have time; I have time.”

“Come and rest on the sofa,” he said. “We can talk here if you want to or we can just remain silent and you can even take a nap if you wish.”

Take a nap? Take a nap! Are you kidding me? How could I take a nap when I was turning YOUR QUESTION all over in my head. *Breathe. Come on, Mahmoud, don’t be trippin!*

He stared at me. I could not stand it anymore. I decided to tell the truth, all the truth about the teachers, the bullies, the blow in the chest, the pain I was feeling. I spilled the beans. At the end of the time over, I said it all, all that weights in

my heart, I lost it all onto his lap. And I sobbed; I completely melted down. I boo hooed myself sick.

TYAFY (Thank You And *Freak* You).

I declared, “I hate this place. Here, we are non-existent. We aren’t allowed to exist, and not even to breathe. There is no one to make you feel they’re happy you’re here. ‘Gee, you flew all the way here just to be in France!’, and all that. Nobody appreciates you’re learning their language, and if you make a tiny mistake, like I make a he-word become a she-word, then everybody is on my back. And there’s no one like telling me ‘Woaww cool we’re going to learn about you and we’re gonna tell you about our culture.’ True to God, I hate French kids. No one gets the itch to ask me to play. They do not try to know me. They even don’t want to say

my name right. Here, we do not even get to keep our names. In France it's like we're the guest, but we've got to cook it up all for them!"

"How's that?" the psy asked, pushing the eraser part of his pencil into his gums.

"You see, here, they call me Momo. At home, they call me Mahmoud. Our prophet is called Muhammad, you know, Prophet Muhammad." He nodded. I continued, "Momo, Mahmoud, Mahomet, these are all nicknames for Muhammad. That's a beautiful name. But I'm not sure I like Momo; that sounds a little idiot, don't you think so?"

He said that he didn't know and what do I think he thinks? A name is a name. I tried to make him understand.

"They also call me Dirty Arab; that's my other nickname. I never told anyone, but I don't

know what that means. I clean myself five times a day before prayers! And Bounouille. Gosh, I'm not even Arab, not even close. But I know, that's because I'm a Muslim... I think. The first Muslims were Arabs; they lived in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Then a lot of people became Muslims, and now only 20% of the Muslims are Arabs. That ain't much, is it? But still people remember where we're coming from. That amazes me. My mom and my dad became Muslims before they met each other; they are not even Arabs. My dad has always lived here, in France, and his parents, and the parents of his parents. My mom came here to meet my dad. She was searching for her ancestors, the parents of her parents, you see. All French! She's never lived in an Arab country. Probably never will. But they will never understand. Wish they did."

I stopped talking. I felt I was talking too much, but inside it was like the sound of a bee in a beehive, all those ideas going through my head. After a moment, I declared right to his face, very strong like a blow with my mouth and my heart and my face and my soul,

“No matter where you’re from, the smallest seed of faith is better than the largest fruit of happiness.”

And that’s true. I didn’t make up this; I just borrowed it from someone. Don’t remember who. Anyway, that’s beside the point. What’s important is that I prefer to be a Muslim rather than being happy here and there, without faith. I would go anytime for faith. They may not like me. Pff! Allah likes me. That’s it for me!”

CHAPTER 9



When I returned home, I was still upset. I went to bed and I woke up still angry. At night, I didn't dream. I always dream at night and I often dream of this girl in the garden, but not tonight. I wished she was there talking about her silver lining. That got to mean something.

Anyway, in the morning, I cleaned and dressed up. That morning, we weren't having breakfast until later. It was Wednesday, no school. And it was a Muslim holiday. I caged around and finally I came close to Dad and rolled myself inside a love chair nearby, still trying to get the anger out. I felt tormented. I felt like I wanted to hurt someone. I cannot stand my school, I cannot stand

people my age, I cannot stand people, dot. I was so glad we were taking a break from the world around. That's true, today was also a special day for Muslims.

“Dad...,” I said.

“Yes, Dear.”

Mom came in in a hurry and looked at me once and then uttered excitedly, “O, my, you are so duded up today!”

“Eh!” I said. “It's Eid. It's still one of the two shindig we're celebrating.”

“True,” she confirmed and ran out of the room.

Mom and Wudood looked wonderful, but Dad also looked very handsomely.

He was checking his emails while the girls were getting ready and were putting the finishing touch to

their regalia.

All of a sudden, Dad exclaimed indignant, “Pff!”

“What is it, Dad?”

He hesitated and then said, “This guy is asking me towards which direction Muslims pray. I tell him it is the Kaba in Mecca. Do you know what he writes back? I quote: “One true god is only in Mecca?? huh... greedy Muslims. Can’t even share god.””

I felt offended but I smiled inside myself because the people’s ignorance is funny, although it’s sadly funny. One day I tried to explain why Muslims at first prayed towards Jerusalem in order to rally the Jews to our religion. The direction is not important; what’s important is the unity, the fact that all Muslims pray towards the same spot. Jews also pray towards Jerusalem. Traditional Christian and

Orthodox churches also always face the east, the New Jerusalem to come. Many religions have a spot towards which they pray. It helps everybody to focus. So, the person I was talking to suddenly exclaimed, “So your god is having a bad day? He just changed his mind? Hypocrites!”

Agh!

SUX (Sucks).

When I say it’s good to take a break from the world, I don’t mean from the Muslim community, I mean from the people who trick you into talking about your religion in order to humiliate you, I mean people who call you names, who slap you with an elastic band when you walk out of the classroom, from people who spit at your feet in the street.

Thinking about all this, I was fidgeting. My heart was being squeezed and I couldn’t help

saying, “I hate non-Muslims. I swear, Dad. I wish they would disappear inside the earth falling down forever and ever and EVER!”

Dad turned sharply towards me.

He said, “I am shocked, Mahmoud. A Muslim does not wish bad for others. You’d better smother these thoughts before they take hold of you. Our Prophet said about those *waswasah* from Satan, ‘Allaah has forgiven for my *ummah* that which is whispered to them and which crosses their minds, so long as they do not act upon it or speak of it.’ I have not raised you to speak or even think like that.”

I decided to keep my feelings well hidden inside and maybe I tried a little smothering too. I blushed and I was mad I blushed. Still, I can’t understand and I don’t understand why French

people are so dead set against Islam. I felt slightly ashamed although I meant what I said. What a dilemma. *O, I know how to remedy those whisperings, I thought. I'll just ignore them completely, no matter how frequently they may come to mind. When these whispers are ignored, they go away after a short time, I'm sure of it. If I pay attention to them, I may become insane.*

Dad continued his preaching. “*Waswasah* make the believers go astray, make them confused, make their life a misery, cause them distress to the extent that they leave Islam without realizing it.”

I nodded and lowered my eyes to the ground. It was like this buzzing sound again inside my head. I went to my room. It was time to look at all those newspaper clips I keep in a portfolio. They help me to understand the big picture when I stop

having feet on the ground.

I read. Since 1945, the Muslim population in France has increased by thirty or forty times. Woaww! I guess we're part of the increase. Maybe that was too much for them. Despite all this, being Muslim in France has been said to be a pipe dream. French are afraid to lose their way of life. Massive immigration is the reason.

In a forum one day, I read, "Muslim population increase, 20% in 2050. Does it matter? There isn't anything that we can do about it, either way. The real question is what will Muslim France be called. Surely the Muslims will want to give it a bright and shining new Muslim name. Where will the native French move to? I guess these things have been happening throughout history. The Moors had Spain for centuries."

Moron!

Fifty years ago the question would have been 'Why is there a large French population in Algeria?' Now it's 'Why is there so many Muslims in France?'

There must be a price for colonization, right?

But, look, only 15% of French citizens are now from foreign origin, hardly a tidal wave if you ask me. As a result, since September 2002, Muslim headscarves, Jewish skullcaps, Sikh turbans and any other "overt religious symbols," including large Christian crosses, have been declared verboten in schools, and France a strictly secular nation. I think France is more at risk to lose its identity due to the implantation of Mac Donald's, the use of English words like 'sandwich' for 'casse-croute', and the like. France is not even Catholic anymore! Nobody

can believe that at one time France had its own Pope.

I kept turning the pages of my news diary. I read, “It’s disturbing to see that because of its racism, France is turning logical geographical areas of the country into a time bomb. Sure! Many cities or neighborhoods in France have turned into all-Muslim territories where burning cars is the sole statement young people can make. There are 1 million Muslims in Ile-de-France, Paris, out of 11 million of people living there. No wonder there is some tensions. Imagine a whole suburb filled with mosques, hijabs, beards, in one word “sand devils.” A true nest for extremism, isn’t it? *Louche. Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose* - Strange. The more things change, the more it’s the same.”

I highlighted this part.

The next higher Muslim population numbers in France are located in Provence-Cote d'Azur, the South with Montpellier, Marseille; and then there is the region Rhone-Alpes, the East, near Lyon; and Nord-Pas-de-Calais, the very North. Muslims don't have supernatural powers, the bulk of Muslim populations are where the work is. Like all immigrant communities, they go to where the jobs are. The major cities that are getting richer, that is where the "new" Muslims are.

I can attest that we are everywhere. The proof is that we live in a small town and today was the day where a Muslim crowd of about 2000 people was about to gather, men, women and children alike in a public place to pray in order to celebrate the end of the pilgrimage.

I know; I still have the clip from last year. I was looking at it.

The French have a saying “*Le meilleur pour la fin,*” the best is for the end, and this is true of our Eid because we save our family celebrations until last. Today, everybody would look radiant and eager to hug each other. Muslims’ houses would be so full of friends, cousins, aunties and uncles that it could be like having a wedding. Everyone would have fun and joke around with each other. Eid is so special. We also have the Eid at the end of the month of Ramadan; it’s the happiest moment of the year but it’s also the saddest one of all as we look sadly on the month behind. Most Muslims like Ramadan. They may think it’s hard to fast during the day, but at night we all go to the mosque to pray and our heart is filled with happy thoughts, our days are full

with charity, kind words. Everybody makes an extra effort to volunteer, cook for others, to call each other, to meet to talk about Allah. That's what we like most about Ramadan. Ramadan is like a yearly miracle because everybody feels so close to each other. But AlHamdulillah - thank God, it occurs only once a year otherwise it would be too hard to keep it up all the time.

I looked at the getup of all the people on the picture. It was a patch work.

Our family was dressed in Middle Eastern clothes because they were given to us as a gift, but really any good clothes would do. Wudood was dressed all in black with a lot of intricate colored wool designs on the front of her dress and the sleeves. Mom wore a gauze light pink dress with colored beads incrustated all over, '*dernier cri*'. '*J'adore*.'

She was going to cover it up to go outside with an abayah or a cape, but would remove it when with the other women. I'm too old to go with her, but I remember from the previous years, before I was ten. Now, I have to stay with the men.

I'm sure that Eid in Muslim countries is better than in France because they do a lot more than us. In France, we sort of hide to worship. We do have mosques, but they are often located in the most incredible places like a basement or someone's apartment or an abandoned factory. It feels good to know that despite racism, we are still booming from the ground.

Everybody would be feasting today although not everybody is a devote Muslim. Well, yes, we can't have it all. According to a survey, 88% of French Muslims fast during Ramadan. I thought the number

was higher because neither I, nor Dad, nor Mom has never ever met a non fasting Muslim, even among the so called Muslims. Fasting is so much in the culture, even non Muslims who live in Muslim countries do fast! So, if you want to know if someone is Muslim, do not look at if he prays, just come around during Ramadan. Anyways, 43% pray the required 5 times a day, which isn't many. And 20% read the Koran or go to the Mosque at least once a week. Even less! Only 4% have already been to Mecca for their lifetime pilgrimage! I wish we could go to Mecca... People say that over there, during the hajj, everybody looks like everybody, no difference. The poor walk along and are dressed like the rich. Presidents and cobblers walk side by side. Even men and women walk on the same side of the road and pray on the same line! No kidding!

That's so amazing to me! A French-Arab journal published in Paris says that in France, 3 million Muslims are from North Africa, 400,000 from the Middle East, 300,000 from Africa, 50,000 from Asia, 50,000 are from French origin, and 300,000 are illegal immigrants from unknown countries.

This brings the total to 4 million.

That makes 4 million people bullied everyday! Gee, the Frenchies must have time to lose. I snort, feeling a little better. Think of it... only 2 million among us are actually real Muslims. Hold on, you, brothers and sisters in Islam.

Mom knocked at my door. I had completely forgotten about the Eid prayer. I shrugged it off and shed my anger somewhere in those newspapers. I just cannot point out what makes me feel so good about those articles, but they work like magic.

“So,” Mom said. “Are you ready?”

“Lord! We have been ready for hours
Mom!” I answered with a laugh.

Today, the Frenchies were going to complain that Muslims are making a traffic jam. ‘Those foreigners again, always making trouble for themselves!’ And who cares? Today, I was marching with my community, proud, ahead of everyone. There’s no hiding. And I was happy and merry and glad despite all the lot of them.

CHAPTER 10



Eid is not the only moment I feel special and happy. The place where I live is just amazing. If you have ever wondered how it feels to be like sitting on the window sill just before sunset prayer and the sky goes blue, purple, red, indigo, pink, you'll understand why I'm potty with this place. Wudood, my little sister says she's potty too. She knows it's my favorite word at the time. Of course, she's potty trained!

Anyway, God created all these colors just for my enchantment. God gave me this gift today, and I hope for it also for tomorrow and the day after, and the day following. It's like a rainbow of clouds. It makes me forget the rest of the day. I could live

only for these moments, just before Dad says,

“Time for prayer.”

I plead, “Dad, just one more minute, just one minute, please... until all light disappears.”

It’s not that I don’t like praying; I do, but if I pray at this moment, I miss the entire magical scenery, so I delay just for a few minutes. It’s like this every night, and every night Dad frowns and puts a worried mask on his face. He looks at Mom for support. O, I like it when my mom says to me, “It’s just between you and God. I will not interfere.” I just love her.

She’s right, come one guys, it’s my alone time with Allah, when I say thank you for all of this. Thank you for my family, thank you for the things that make me happy, thank you for the food, a shelter. I’ve seen so many people in the USA who lived in

cranky pre fabricated houses and didn't have enough money to buy gifts for their kids. That sucks. Mom and I went to bring boxes of toys and craft kits to the children who didn't have anything for Eid and who were forgotten by everyone. They were mostly refugees. So I say thank you for all I have in those moments of sundown. For anyone it's just the mountains around, and every place has its own skies, but for me this is the place I know Allah shows me wonders; it's the place where Allah talks back to me. And I just love it all.

Wudood comes to sit on my lap and nuzzles against my cheek. I wish I had another Wudood in my life. She's my only sister. I'm so jealous when she nuzzles onto somebody else's lap. O am I! We look outside and my poetic self is lifted up and up when she suddenly exclaims,

"Look, Moumoud, somebody already turned the moon on!"

"Really?" I say amused. "Look, and someone took a brush and painted all these colors in the sky."

"Does Allah paint the same canvas everywhere?"

I think hard, and then say, "No. God has created a sky for every continent, each very special, so that when people meet, they can teach each other about their differences. Skies in Europe are always changing. Skies in Africa are very vivid. Asian skies are faded due to heavy pollution. Skies in Artica are like scribbles of lights. Daddy once told me the sky is more on the purple end of the spectrum but that is because our eyes actually can't perceive this color very well, so the sky looks the

blue that it does.” I ask Wudood with a melted smile, “So, what color is the sky in your world?”

She thinks for a moment, and then she says that she thinks about God quite often. She tells me that pink has got to be God's favorite color.

“Why is that?” I ask.

“That’s because even though He makes white and black and brown and red people, we all have pink parts. Most of us have pink lips and gums, we all have pink under our skin,” and... most importantly, she says, "He made pink lipstick!"

But of course. I smile and ponder over her mind set. I add in jest, “And He makes all babies pink at birth.”

“True,” she says. “And their parents decide to paint them black or yellow or other color if they want to afterwards.”

She's a pack of laugh.

As I look at these colors and the cotton clouds surrounding them, slowly, the darker over tone patches the sky as if the colors wear out. Once again I think about what our Prophet Muhammad said, *'Faith wears out in the heart of any one of you just as clothes wear out, so ask Allah to renew the faith in your hearts'*.

That's the moment I decide to go pray and where I ask Allah to increase my trust in Him. If I have a special request to ask and I have been fasting during the day, that's the moment I choose to ask for it; that's the best time.

After prayer, Dad asks us to come and make a circle around him. He then starts reading from a book of traditions called *Riyadh us Salihin* or Garden of the Righteous. We always set aside a

time at home and try to sit down together to read it. It does not have to be long. Even five minutes or ten minutes suffice. A daily dose of the words of Allah goes a long way in keeping us attached to our faith. Actually everything in Islam is measured in small quantities. We pray a quick prayer five times a day; we say a quick supplication before eating to thank God for our food or to ask God to protect us while going out. Small quantities weigh a lot in the balance. I mean, we do a lot of sins like yelling, talking back, turning to someone a deaf ear, eavesdropping, backbiting, and so on and so forth. We do all those sins and we think they are little and they don't count, but Allah counts them all and it's like a pile of wood. Each little twig is added to the pile, one by one, until it gets huge and much more aggravating than the major sins. With this, we can

light a fire. It's like shopping at the Dollar store; we always think we bought a little when we bought too much. Cents and dollars add up quickly.

Similarly, we can easily accumulate small deeds and make a mountain of them if we try, like smiling to everyone or saying a good word, helping Mom around the house, serving others in little ways, carrying people's bags or opening doors for strangers. There are many, many ways to make our minor deeds seem major.

The other day, I was reading something from George Washington Carver. He said: "How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in life you will have been

all of these.” He must be a closet Muslim! This is so true, scary true. I’m sooooo not going to forget that. We have lit a fire in the garden and we have loaded in *halal* marshmallows. Yummy! We eat them gratefully.

After some time, Mom asks Wudood, “Do you want s’ more?”

She replies candidly, “Why would I want more of nothing?”

Indeed...

UCMU (You Crack Me Up).

CHAPTER 11



Well, I thought after the vacation, things would smooth out on their own, people would be tired of taking me as the center of their pranks, and I'd be forgotten. Wishful thinking.

They came back in force and had another go at me.

Few days after the break, I was in the gym class standing in line. Of course, no teachers were around. Someone slapped the back of my head. I turned around and there were three guys laughing. I didn't care which one of them hit me. I picked one of them and punched his face with all my anger. Pretty soon, the three of them jumped me. I fought with everything that I had. However, eventually, they got me down to the ground.

Fighting is great. It can work. It is good for your pride. Thing is with fighting a bully... it only works if you win.

Christine was like an angel. She actually stepped in and yelled at them. I think they were so surprised, at first, they didn't say a word. I was like, no way, I was being rescued by a girl. Now, I'm going to be called gay.

Christine said, "Mahmoud, you should not be fighting. That's all they want. Why you give them what they want?"

I shrugged. She was right.

She added, "The downside... maybe it's just me but... you hurt a bully, they will come after you. With more people, or with more aggression, or by surprise... and in a fight I think it's almost always the more aggressive one who wins. You're not the

type. I'm sorry to say, Mahmoud, you're not a winner."

I am ashamed to admit, she hit on the bull's eye. I am just not cut up to be a bully!

I knew that fighting was not the answer and that they would use it as a pretext to say all Arabs are violent even though there is not one drop of Arab blood in me.

Once you fight back, they're going to actually hate your guts, rather than hit you just because having a human punchbag is fun. And they'll going to hate all "bounouls" in me.

"Be a man," Christine whispered, making sure nobody was listening. I must have looked really perplexed because she added, "It is harder to stay Zen."

It sunk in. She added, “I don't think there is anything wrong with not fighting, you know. If you get lost in the woods and come face to face with a grizzly bear, what is it that the experts suggest you should do? Slowly back up, but do not look away and do not break eye contact - because this shows fear and will trigger an attack. It's samo with the bullies. Bullies almost smell out people who look at themselves as weak and helpless and it pretty much spreads around like and aura.”

Okay, she's got a big point, so from now on I decided to try “the ostrich's strategy” or sticking my head in sand as the French say. In one word, ducking.

I started to hide in class when it's break time so I don't interact with the bad guys at the playground

and I don't play sports anymore, their favorite hideout to push and shove people around.

I used to sit in the front seats of the classroom. Not anymore. I'm blending and blending works quite well for me for now. However, from my new station, I have started to see the bullies in full operation. I know who they bother, who ducks, who fights, who plays along. I'll admit, I do not like that. I feel like a coward.

While this was happening, I went back to the therapist's office. Man, how I regret the days of Eid! The Muslim holiday was a time outside the usual time; a time for Allah. Now I guess we're living for ourselves again, selfishly. That rather depresses me.

When the therapist heard what I was feeling concerning my new observation point at school and how cheap I felt, he invited me inside a strange place that has no sound and is very small. It's inside the building but I have never noticed it before. It looks like a tube and it has items that stimulate the senses: diverse touch experiences, scents, and interesting sounds like water falling. It feels good inside this... uh... "room". He asked me about other worlds that exist around us.

"Mahmoud, what do you think about the worlds we cannot see, the worlds we know exist but cannot touch or see?"

That was a weird question.

"Er... There's an invisible world around us, you know. There are angels and microbes and a

bunch of things, living creatures we don't even know exist.”

He noted something in his notebook. I hate when he does that. I feel like a specimen.

When his scribbling was over, he asked, “What does this place remind you of?”

I decided to just ignore what he was doing and I tried to relax.

“It reminds me of the dreams I have sometimes.”

“Would you share with me, Mahmoud?” he asked gently.

“Okay,” I said. I guess I needed to share with someone. I knew that Mom and Dad had told him about the girl I meet at nighttime, so it wasn't a big secret anymore. So, I explained, “The other day, I went with this girl, a friend of mine, to a deserted

place close to where she lives. It is a beautiful old house completely abandoned. Nobody has lived in this old house for years, only mice and spiders live there. This girl walked through a crack in the wall where a spider lived. This spider really seemed to be there for a long time but I would have sworn my friend passed this way before. That was strange. That's what this place reminds me of.”

I stopped here. I did not want to give away too much of what I was thinking; he would not understand. I told Mom about the girl. I keep calling her ‘the girl’ because I still do not know her name. Mom said, ‘A spider protected our Prophet when he escaped death and fled for his life from Mecca to Madina. A spider spun her web at the entrance of the cave making it look like it was there for a long time. And two doves made their nest there too on

this occasion. Maybe this dream is telling you something very important, Mahmoud.'

I stopped talking for a long time now, thinking about what Mom said.

"Hmm," finally grumbled the therapist. "So you are saying that she went through the web?"

"O, no. I came closer and I saw that she had found a fake spider web somewhere and that she had added it near a real spider web to let people believe nobody was entering this way."

"Clever girl," put forth the therapist, looking serious and amused at the same time.

"I'd like to believe that," I answered in a flash. "She is my best friend."

"So, I heard," said the therapist thoughtfully.

I concluded at the end of the session, "Sir? Life is not what we see but also what we cannot see.

A whole world is hidden from our eyes, so that we believe only what we can see. This is what faith is all about, believe what we cannot see. If we had a microscope to see our world, we would not doubt it; we would not doubt faith.”

He nodded.

Later on, Mister Shrink asked Mom if the girl I was meeting at night could be a real person, someone I had lost sight of.

“I don’t see anyone, no,” said Mom.

He then said to Mom with his non-stop chatter, “You know, some children invent invisible friends, talk to them and really believe they do exist. When children invent a non-existent friend, there is sometimes reason for concern but most of the time it’s good. For children with a fertile imagination, a make-believe friend is a constant

source of comfort and companionship. Victims of bullying may dream up companions for support and to help cope with the stress of their situation. It is quite normal.”

They talked for a long while and they ushered me into another room while they finished their discussion. When they were done, Mom asked,

“Is there an old minaret in your dream?”

“Yes, there is a tower that does look like a minaret, but it is almost nearly destroyed,” I said, very sure of myself.

She looked at me very intently, and then she waved the thought, whatever thought was in her head, away.

She hurried us outside and started another conversation. I looked at her from time to time as she was driving. She sounded cheerful, but she

frowned a lot and she looked like she was trying to hide her thoughts while talking to me. Soon, we fell silent and I started rumbling in my head.

When we arrived at home, she kissed me asked me to go up in my bedroom do my homework. That sounded fishy. Instead, I listened from a distance, well hidden behind the kitchen wall. I know, I was ear dropping, pretty bad, but... emergency oblige.

Dad was in the kitchen, sipping orange juice. She mentioned my “imaginary” friend. I wish I could convince them I do not have imaginary friends. Guys! Come on, why would I?

“It is my fault,” said Dad. “I let him watch ‘Foster’s Home for Imaginary Friends.’ I should have known better.”

Mom tried to reassure him, “It will pass. It is just a phase. Doctor Shrink said that himself.”

Dad sounded guilty. He said, “I wish I had a solution to Mahmoud’s problems, Darling. I feel so powerless in front of the whole situation. They won’t let us change his school, and private education is too pricey for us. If we take him out of school, they put us in jail.”

Mom said, “I know, Darling, but we just cannot follow him around everywhere to protect him either. One day, he will have to learn to fend for himself.”

Dad did not say anything for some time, and then he said, “Maybe Allah is sending us all these trials so that we may purify ourselves and go to Heaven? Maybe we should try to become better

Muslims, pray more, supplicate more, be more grateful for what we have.”

“Maybe,” said Mom.

Dad sounded like he was scrubbing the palm of his hands up and down over his face, nervously.

Finally he declared, “I feel trapped.” Then, out of the blue, he said, “Maybe you should organize something cool, a party or something where Mahmoud could meet more of the right kind of friends. What do you think?”

Mom thought for a moment and then declared with a big grin on her face, “Sure... sure thing. I guess I could.

143 (I love you) Mom!

CHAPTER 12



Today, Mom was doing a story time. She was now organizing this once a month for our community. Our community is knit tight. I really realized that when Mom started the meetings. Everybody knows everybody and we make a point of meeting regularly and sharing our knowledge. Life would be different without those evenings; they keep alive inside us for weeks until the net closes again.

We like to gather on the veranda; that allows us to savor the last sunbeams as we pray. The younger crowd prays together with their moms in the back; actually, women and girls in the back and children between them and us teens. Dads are never invited. They gather in another house that's not very

far from ours and they have their own chit chats there.

We soon lighted the candles and a few butterflies, attracted by the balmy smell of the lilacs, came flutter and say goodbyes before the night. The trees are planted in front of the kitchen and the bedroom windows. In the Spring, Mom has the windows open and the entire house smells of lilacs. Yeah, it's aromatic!

GS (Good Shot), I know. I have been working on my French really hard lately and it shows. Frère Armand is my French teacher and he has been encouraging me big time. I think I saw his kids here today.

Anyways, I love trying new foods moms from different countries have brought. Here, it's not like in the USA; people who bring food don't take it

back after the meeting is over, so we get to keep all these delicious dishes that are left over. Mom puts some into the freezer so that we can enjoy them later and not eat everything all at once.

We went to get Bibi from her house with her grandmother. She's a good friend of ours now, but she still doesn't know she's like family. She's very happy to be able to make some friends and she mixes herself up in our little reunion as if she was the lily of the valley. And she wears one of her fresh floral dresses, her white *hijab* stitched with colorful, softly shiny threads, and her smile plain and full. I wonder how we can keep our eyes away from her. She looks so different.

After prayers, we usually sit down on the veranda that overlooks our walled garden. I wished I could sit next to Bibi, but the girls and the boys don't mix.

Tradition oblige. It's very private and homey; a super TV screen could never compare. We spent the afternoon bringing cushions from all over the house in order to accommodate everyone. It now looked like one of the pages of the book *One Thousand and One Nights*. Mom thinks the book is not appropriate for young Muslims because of all the treachery involved, the innuendoes, and so on, but Grandpa reads them to me secretly at night when we go visit him. The book is very big and very old, not very practical but beautiful with inspiring illustrations.

So, after Mom took her place in the midst of us and put down a few starter treats in front of us, she was ready to begin. I took a few dates and the frozen sweet citrus juice someone made, and melted into a comfortable state of mind. She quite unexpectedly got a toy train out of her pocket and I

wondered why she did that. Other people also wondered. Was today's story about trains?

She started, "You are probably wondering about this object?"

People nodded and smiled.

She continued, "I borrowed it from my son's chest because I wanted to tell you the story of our faith."

We were very curious about the story she was going to narrate. Mom is a writer so she can come up with all sorts of beautifully hitched stories.

She took Wudood in her arms because it is her favorite place and she feels like she owns her Mommy this way. It's like she's making a statement every time: this is MY Mommy and nobody else's. I'm proud of my mom too. I wish I wasn't too old

to put my head on her lap while she talks, like we used to do in America.

O, well...

She started the tale. We all hushed and listened.

“This story is called The Little Muslim that Could.”

We looked at the train and the wagons she pulled out of a bag one by one. We looked at them and we looked at her as she put them together while telling us her story, and our minds were projected into another world. I love to feel like I can fly away somewhere in my mind.

She continued, “Allah said to the little steam engine. ‘Today you are 10, today is a special day, it is a day you are becoming a Muslim by will, not by birth. You have to go on a long journey. You need

to carry wagons with you to help your faith along the way and reach the Garden of Delights.’

So Allah attached wagons filled with treasures behind the little train.

He put the *Shahada*, ‘there is only one god’, in front to be used as a cheer leader. ‘Go on, boy, go on boy...’ Allah said, ‘Do not lose the statement of faith or you will lose your purpose out there.’

The Little Muslim that Could nodded assent and thanked Allah with all his heart.

Allah attached five more wagons for the prayers. And he put a *Muezzin* as grease to help push them along. The little Muslim that Could said Thank you to Allah.

Allah then gave him the *Saum*, the fast, and he ordered the night to help him along the way. ‘This wagon is called Ramadan,’ said Allah. ‘And this

one is for me. When you arrive at your destination, I will have to remember you among all the other Muslims of the world, and this will tell me who you are. All of its treasures are for me only but you will get a reward for pulling it along when you get there.’

Allah then gave him two more helpers, a scroll to write his deeds, good or bad. He also gave him two angels to warn him of the bumps and obstacles on the road, and two angels to write down his deeds for him. When nobody was watching, a Satan boarded The Little Muslim that Could for a free ride. An angel saw him and sounded the alarm. ‘Let him in,’ said Allah who always knows everything. ‘This Little Muslim that Could will also take this passenger. This one as well as the others might confuse you, yes, but if you keep your mind

focused on the road, there is nothing anyone can do against you, nothing at all.’ The Little Muslim smiled feebly, a little worried, but he trusted Allah more.

God added, ‘There will be a lot of people traveling along your way, loved ones, friends, enemies. They may stop to help you or ignore you or cut in your way, so be patient and listen only to those who know their way around so you do not get lost.’

The Little Muslim that could smiled, and thanked Allah for His wisdom.

The *Hajj* wagon was attached next. Allah said, ‘If you want to enter the Gardens, it is better to make a good impression and clean yourself up good, so I give you the pilgrimage to scrub yourself clean. This wagon,’ said Allah. ‘You will have to

worry about it only once, so cheer up, once loaded you can forget about it.’

The Little Muslim that Could looked gratefully at Allah’s feet and said Thank you.

Allah further said, ‘When you arrive to Jannah, you will have to pay the entrance with your *Zakaat*, so he added the charity wagon. The wagon, full of money, good words and acts of kindness also contained an eraser to erase sins.’

At the end, Allah gave him the Qur’an. ‘This will soothe your heart and guide you like a road map,’ said He. ‘The Quran will be speaking for you or against you when you get to Jannah, so listen to it well. The more you read and memorize of it, the farther up you will be able to go once inside the Heavens.’

The Little Muslim that Could saluted Allah, and said Thank you again and it was time to hit the road.

The Little Muslim that Could was very excited but very anxious too. He was very eager to arrive at the Gardens but the road was long and he was afraid to get stuck on the road. Thus, he started his journey slowly.

After some time, the first small hill formed on the road and The Little Muslim that Could huffed and puffed to carry all his wagons. He huffed and puffed and wwoood wooed all his way up until he finally said, out of breath,

‘I can’t, I can’t, I can’t! Go up there, go over there, over the hill.’

The Satan blew in his ears all the way to the top, whispering, ‘Of course, you can’t. Why do you think you can? It is too heavy, way too heavy for

you! Drop a wagon or two; that will feel much lighter.’

Hearing that, every wagon on the train intervened and yelled, ‘You can! And you will! Do not drop us! We’ll help!’

So, the *Salaat* got off the wagons and pushed.

The *Shahada* pointed to the top of the hill saying, ‘Almost there, son, courage, almost there. Go, go, go!’

The night fell down quickly so that the top of the hill did not look so far away anymore.

The *Zakaat* got off the wagons and pushed him up too.

The Quran repeated words of encouragement; the Muezzin grabbed it and started reading it out loud.

Finally the *Hajj* dismounted too and asked Allah to make the boy’s load easier.

The Little Muslim that Could almost reached the top of the hill now, and, with a sigh of relief, yelled happily, 'I can, I can, yes, I can! And I will, and I can, go, over the hill.'

When he reached the top and was about to slide down the hill, everybody jumped back into their respective wagons. The sun came up again, and Allah said to him, 'Good job, Good job.' The angels of the sky came to tap him on the shoulder and congratulate him.

The Little Muslim that Could sighed in content and said as if to himself, 'I can, yes I can. I am not The Little Muslim that Could; I am The Little Muslim that Will!'

And he could care less about all the hills that were visible in the distance, not for now at least. And the scroll wrote his first challenge as passed.

And so is faith, there are highs and lows. What Allah wants from us is to remember him in those highs and lows. Remembering is passing the test.”

There was a huge silence around as every one of us sank in the story. I shrugged myself off. This story had reached home. What a nice way to introduce the kids to the five pillars of Islam, I thought with awe. You go, Mom! Everybody stretched and felt happy.

I wished we had more storytellers. I wished we could have more storytelling evenings like that, but the evening was not finished and people were coming up.

“Melon and cake, anyone?” asked someone else’s mom as a group of mommies entered the room with dishes and saucers.

Those dishes smelled delicious. There was hummus and baklava, vine wraps and honey fingers. Mom brought some *halal* marshmallows to teach our Muslim friends how to roast them over the flame. O, I love the caramelized outer skin with a liquid, molten layer inside. It's to die for, figuratively, of course.

A little voice suddenly asked anxiously,
“Are there ponies in Jannah?”

“Sure,” said Mom.

Wudood smiled to herself; she loved horses.

“And Muslims?” asked Wudood in an
overwrought voice. Everybody laughed.

“What can we do to go to Jannah?” asked
Wudood innocently.

Mom said, “We are all Little Muslims that
Could. Remember?”

CHAPTER 13



BION (Believe It Or Not) I'm still seeing the therapist.

He keeps hassling me about my dreams. It's not that I do not want to tell him, but Islam actually does tell us to keep them secret unless the person who hears them can interpret them. Mister Shrink, I'm sure, can interpret dreams, but in his own material ways. He doesn't know what's in the Qur'an that makes them clearer for us Muslims. Finally, I told him. Dad said it was okay to share but only if it can help the therapy. So, I decided to tell him.

“Well, the other night, I dreamed that I was in a place so peaceful, everything was green and shady and I could hear every bird and every tree's

life. I entered this place, call it a meadow, by the side I think, and then I was looking down at the trees. I was wondering, 'If this is *Jannah* then where are the flowers?' Later my look fell on the middle of the place where there was a huge beautiful city, kinda similar to New York, when I saw a building that amazed me."

I wasn't sure I would be able to describe it, so I skipped that part. "I was saying to myself while dreaming, 'Is this possibly my *Jannah*? But the buildings need to be better.' And then right away the buildings crashed into half due to a big explosion and were burning, this is where I was wondering what's going on, then a wonderful voice said to me, 'You should rebuild this.' I said, 'How?' The voice said, 'By yourself.' And I said again, 'But how? I need 2 million people to rebuild all

this. It's hard...' and the person said again, 'You have to do it by yourself; there is no other way.' And I kept saying, 'But please tell me how, how?' And the person left... and I woke up."

The therapist did not even try to interpret it; he asked me another question instead, "Do you have recurrent dreams?"

"Yes," I replied. "Sometimes I dream that I die. Sleeping is like dying so we cannot go there unharmed. I dream that angel Israil wakes me up in the other world and takes me to *Jannah*. In *Jannah* there's plenty to eat and rivers of milk, yea know. There are houses made of candy and frosting. In *Jannah*, there's everything one wants, and in *Jannah* we're with the ones we love. Little children await at the door of *Jannah* to get their parents. That's where I stand, every night. I refuse to enter

Jannah until I see them, I mean my parents, coming towards me. That's when I wake up, so I don't know what we do next. I hope we all get to go to *Jannah*.”

“You seem to be very involved in you faith. What do you think of sins, Mahmoud?” asked Mr. Shrink.

“Muslims are afraid of their shortcomings and sins. Allah will count on me as a Muslim unless I say or do something against Islam. That's our hope. If I reject Islam, I will be a *kafir*, an unbeliever, a person who has ceased to believe. I'm afraid of that. Sins can lead to that.”

“Does the Arabic word *kafir* also mean ‘Infidel’, Mahmoud?”

“Yes.”

“Am I a *kafir*, Mahmoud?”

I felt a little intimidated, that was a hard question, but I knew what to answer. Mom taught me once. I said, very confident,

“Your parents are not Muslims, so how could you disbelieve when you have never believed? Of course not, you are not a *kafir*.”

He smiled and added, “Why would someone refuse to enter Islam in your opinion?”

“I don’t know why people would do that. It’s not like it’s hard to be a Muslim. I mean, otherwise, why are so many people Muslims? Performing the prayers doesn’t take up a great deal of effort or time. It’s only a few minutes affair. And the rest is like stuff in any other religion: give to the poor, be kind, be respectful, have compassion...”

“You think it’s easy, huh?” asked the therapist. “I do not think it is. Your religion seems a bit complex.”

I answered, “Thaabit al-Banaani, an early Muslim, said, ‘*I strove hard to do qiyaam al-layl for twenty years.*’ These are supererogatory prayers offered at night. I don’t even think of those yet. He also said, ‘*And I enjoyed it for the next twenty years.*’ Whatever you wish for in life takes effort.”

“Right. So that takes effort, yes?”

“If we cannot put up with making the commitment of these few minutes, then I do not think that we could ever succeed in our lives. Don’t you think so?”

The therapist shrugged. He wasn’t Muslim. It was a bit over his head.

I turned a card in my hands while I was talking about all of this. We were playing a game where we answer questions like ‘Are you ticklish?’ or ‘When I say White, what do you say?’ and so on and so forth. I’m not sure what this game was for, but it kept my head focused. I continued talking. It did not matter if Mister Shrink didn’t agree with me. He was paid to listen, right? And I did not feel judged.

The Prophet once said, “*My delight has been made in prayer.*” Woaww! I wish I could say that. Mister Shrink didn’t think he was missing on anything, LOL, neither do my classmates and neither does most of France. However, how do we explain that Islam is the second fastest growing religion in France and the USA?

All these people who revert to Islam must do it all by themselves. I have my mom and my dad and that helps. My relatives are really supportive of my religion or at least they take us on other grounds, which makes us feel they accept us. But these French people who revert to Islam really have to do it all by themselves.

That reminds me of my dream. It said, 'You will have to do it by yourself.' Yes, being Muslim in France is like destroying things inside and rebuilding them. When I was younger, my little sister who was a toddler at the time used to destroy all the Lego constructions I made when I turned my back. This reminds me of that. We build our faith one piece at a time and then someone else comes and tries to destroy it. There is no one to help us rebuild. Other people can only tell us which

materials to use and how they should fit together,
but the building work needs to be done by us, and
only us.

Maybe Mister Shrink was busy working on his own
building too, his own way, like we all do.

CHAPTER 14



This morning, we were late. Fat chance we were going to have a lucky day. I could just feel it in my running shoes. There was a competition at school, a race to be exact. Without boasting, I'm usually a good runner, so Mom and Dad persuaded me to register for the race and impress everybody. They thought integration went through sport and the sport's fan club. Little did they know about France. No matter how much I told them France is not the USA and I would have more chance in the brainy club section of the Lycée, that is if they had one, but they waved their hands in the air and zipped me up in my coat.

“Eh! Hot pants will always be for hot legs,” declared Dad coolly. “All teenagers are obsessed by

their body. They won't resist you if you show them how athletic you are."

"Maybe your classmates will finally find something in common with you," said Mom.

I was not impressed. I doubted it all, but they insisted and finally both burst enthusiastically, "Let's give it a shot, Dear!" Well, I'm like that; I just can't break their heart.

From this morning on, everything went wrong, so I knew we'd better not even bother. We woke up a little late because we had been to the mosque the day before and we found friends to chat with and stayed late. Very cool people, I mean good Muslims, thank God.

And then the bread was put into the toaster in a hurry, but it was still set up for frozen bread from the day before.

After I handed my little sister her toast, which was a little on the dark side, she exclaimed, "I can't eat that, I'm black toast intolerant."

I replied, angrily, "Some kids do not even have anything to eat and would be happy to have these!"

"If you are so hungry, Moumoud, eat them yourself!"

"Mom!" I shouted in desperation.

"What is it, Dear?"

"I swear, one day, I'm going to join LSA."

"Really? Good for you, Dear!"

"I mean... NO! Not the college. I mean LSA: Little Sisters Anonymous."

"O? I did not know that existed."

Mom was definitely not catching up on the joke this morning. Her head was up in the clouds.

I threw a blank eye towards her. I was so nervous. The whole idea seemed so ridiculous. Why would I participate in the tournament when everybody hates me? That didn't make sense.

When we walked to the car, Wudood immediately climbed on the front seat. Some other girls in our neighbor's car were also getting ready for the school feast. They looked at Wudood with her finger stuck up her nose. They were laughing and pointing. Wudood turned instantly shy, and I couldn't help laughing as well when she said, "Mahmoud, it's SNOT funny!" but as I tried to pack things for our trip, the girls drove by us and disappeared. Wudood chose this moment to have a wonderful time playing on the couch.

At one point, she said, "Moumoud, look at this," and stuck out her two fingers.

Trying to keep her entertained and still thinking of those girls who were going to be with us at the school party today, I reached out and stuck her fingers in my mouth and said, "I'm gonna eat your fingers!" pretending to eat them before I rushed out of the car to the house to get my sneakers. Duh, how could I have forgotten those? Was I going to run or not?

When I returned, Wudood was seated on the back seat, belt on and everything, looking very serious, staring at her fingers with a devastated look on her face.

I said, "What's wrong little pea pod?"

"Moumoud, where's my booger?"

That wasn't a very good morning after all, so I spat a few times and drunk some water to get the idea out of my mouth, as if that was going to do

anything.

She suddenly realized what had happened and announced with a giggle, "Eh! I got a boogie booger on you!"

“Gross...!”

“Really, Wudood!” said Mom a little alarmed.

Mom put a scarf on my little sister’s head so that she could get used to wearing it. I think with the scarf she looks beautiful and fragile, the type you want to cuddle and protect, even after the booger thing. Very deceptive! And she’s growing up so fast. Soon, she’ll have that candied look all the time. Poor people!

We arrived at the school. Wrong day, wrong place! When we arrived at the school, they did not

let my little sister go in. We reacted surprised.

“But why?” asked Mom. “Children are not allowed here?” We grinned at the joke.

“Because she is too young?” my Mom asked.

We were told, “Her age is not the problem.”

Mom tried to play the innocent a little longer, as if this was going to change the outcome, right?

“Because she has a little bit of a cold?” she asked looking at a stalagmite coming out of her nose. It’s true that the flu was a big concern this year, but seriously, Mom, were you playing dumb or what? Even I knew why...

They didn’t care if she was contagious or not. In fact, they could not care less if she was so contagious she could pass on an atrocious illness to

everyone. They just didn't want to see a scarf.

Funny enough, they did not say anything about

Mom!

That was so weird. They just put it all on a little

girl.

Dad said, "Okay, Wudood, you can remove your scarf now."

We all turned towards Dad in shock. He looked at us in surprise,

"What? She is just a little girl. She does not need to wear it until she is a teen. Let's not cause any problem here."

Mom said, "We're not going to compromise."

I agreed with her, "If she removes it, then next time they will go farther; it's victory for them, Dad, don't you see? We can't back up."

Mom narrowed her gentle eyes and simply said, “Let us in or else.”

“Move you people,” they said. “We’re calling the police,” as if we were criminals. Come to this, they were the criminals.

“It’s we who are calling the police,” said Dad making a stand.

“I warn you, you are going to be the losers. Why don’t you scat instead?”
What!? Who gave them the right to treat us that way?

“I’m a student here,” I exclaimed utterly puzzled. That made no difference, the boy could come in if he wanted; the rest staid out, they declared. Move aside, more people are coming this way; we are busy here. Someone grabbed me by the shoulder to pull me aside so that I could clear the

entrance.

“No way! Dad? Help!”

Mom tried to cool the whole party down and declared she and Wudood could stay in the park in front of the school while we went to our little gathering. She did not want to spoil it for me.

“It’s really Mahmoud’s day, not theirs,”

Mom said convincingly. “That isn’t a big deal and let’s just leave those Frenchies to their dark age.”

I turned towards Mom in surprise. I could not believe my ears. They were still pulling at my shoulders and I was still resisting. Mom looked behind her shoulder with a worried look on her face. A line of French parents was forming outside and everybody was looking at us with detest as if we were scum. I felt so humiliated, I could cry but I would not melt down right here in front of the

school; that would be even more humiliating.

Dad said suddenly, adamant, “No! We go in all together or none of us will ever set foot in this school.”

I turned towards the crowd and yelled proudly, “All for one, and one for all!”

We decided to go now; no use getting the police involved and making a scene.

That’s how Mom and Dad started big debates on homeschooling, today, the next day and many days following for a whole month. Winter vacation was starting tomorrow, gee, I could not believe it was so hot outside and it was probably still snowing in the USA! Okay, I felt better, there was still time to keep Dad’s words. If I finally did go back to school in March, then I’d have to chance

that everybody had forgotten his words by then.

That wouldn't be so humiliating. Thank you vacations! Relax, Mahmoud, relax! I told myself.

“Couldn't we homeschool these children from now on?” said Mom seriously, I mean really dead serious.

I intervened, “At least for a while?”

Mom was winking at me, “Dear, do not add to the problem, will you?”

Instead of replying to Mom's question, Dad said as if for himself, “We do not get but what we strive for; it's in the Quran.”

“Yes, right!” said Mom who got excited every time she had a new idea. “So, instead of going to the competition at school, we are fighting our own battles at home.”

“Where nobody can hear or see us,” added

Dad sternly.

Mom ignored that.

“If we do a search on the internet, I am sure we can find lots of stuff about homeschooling in France. And maybe if we ask around, we’ll find out if others in our community are involved in homeschooling too.”

“I thought it was illegal to homeschool in France?” I told Mom and Dad.

“Americans are surely way ahead in this domain,” said Mom. “But let’s not exaggerate.”

“We could use the American curriculum,” I ventured, but nobody replied to that.

When we got home and we were settled for some time, Dad joined us in the living room and reported to us, “Okay, guys. Here is the news. In the Netherlands, it is illegal. In 1993, South African

parents were sentenced to two years in prison for home schooling their children.”

“Gee!”

“No kidding!?” said Mom perplexed.

“You’re put in prison for doing what you think is best for your child? Unreal!”

“Yep,” said Dad. “And you have not heard the worst... In Bulgaria, homeschooling is only allowed if the child has a physical or mental condition.”

“Duh!”

“To home school in Germany, parents must meet the same requirements as public and private schools.”

“It’s probably like a ton of requirements,” said Mom now depressed. “Thank God, we’re in France. Are you trying to cheer us up, Darling, or

damper our spirits?”

“Listen up,” continued Dad in his own line of thought. “In Switzerland, parents must be certified as teachers to home school.”

“If that’s true, America is way ahead of the rest of the world in this domain,” exclaimed Mom very proudly.

“So, cheer up, people, here comes the good news!”

“What?”

We were all ears.

“France! In France, families must be approved by school officials to home school.”

“That’s it?!”

“Yep. Except that their efforts are supervised with many in-home visits.”

“That’s not so bad,” declared Mom

surprised. “You sure know how to develop suspense.”

Soon, they got into those big philosophical debates,

“If we don't stand up for our children, then what do we stand for?” declared Dad.

“Well said,” said Mom.

“That’s a citation from a lady called Marian Wright Edelman, the founder of the Children's Defense Fund in the US.”

“Really? Wise lady,” Mom added in a mysterious tone. “Too often we give our children answers to remember rather than problems to solve. Homeschooling is all about problem solving, isn’t it? I like that. Maybe this is a God send after all.”

“Is that a citation from Roger Lewin?”

Dad really had a great memory. I was like...

woawww.. impressed.

Mom ignored him after nodding assent.

“This whole thing boils down to one thing,” she said. “What is the best way to fight something? To confront it, right? If we chicken out, that means we have lost.”

Mom is always in for a fight, the true American spirit.

She continued, “We all are tried to prove our faith, otherwise who will know who is the best? Agree? It is like a competition. How do we know who will be the winner if there is no championship? Remember the Patience of Jacob or the challenge of Moses, or the mistake of Jonas? We all need to be tried for a reason. Why slicker when we can be here in the action arena?”

I was afraid she was going to say that. Very

much like her.

I declared very disappointed, “No, Mom. I don’t want to be in the arena unless you come with me. That would teach you...”

“Little cubs are free after being weaned. Look at you all grown up and not able to fend for yourself?”

“Well... humans are not animals. Animals serve humans, remember?”

Dad hold me by the shoulders and declared, “Your mom is not totally wrong. See, Mahmoud, before you could even walk or talk, I began a routine of reading time. It has been a high priority for us to instill a love of reading. We wanted to stretch your mind and your muscles at the same time, train your hands and your heart. We wanted you to love knowledge, especially spiritual wisdom,

but we also wanted you to act upon it and be physically fit.

We also wanted you to think critically. That was our second priority. We did not want you to just accept anything and be vulnerable to peer pressure. We wanted you to be proud to be Muslim and proud to belong to a family who is Muslim and proud to be part of an Islamic community despite all the external pressures. Thinking about God help us feel this way. We pray that our children will not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of their minds. We want our children to be a positive influence on their friends, not to be a people pleaser, following the crowd. I am aware that you are not well accepted at your school and that has an influence on your well being. However, you need to be aware of bullies and find your own

strategies to deal with them. We need you to have spiritual backbones and the courage to stand up for your convictions, and to fight for your Faith. I want you to learn to be brave, even if it is the hard way, the ‘road less traveled’, if you will. You need to learn to be unselfish, to always put personal feelings and interests aside in order to do what is right, to care for the weak and needy and for the lonely. If you are in the position of being pitied, you will also find pity in your heart for others, and compassion. I am not saying that you should suffer, but yes, I would like you to learn to endure and be patient. God will find a way for you.”

Mom added, “Hold on just this year. If at the end of the school year, there is still no improvement, we’ll homeschool.” She smiled and declared, “I love you more.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

Wudood was listening and did not want to be left out of the conversation.

She suddenly declared, “And I love you s’more.”

CHAPTER 15



AV! (Ah, vacation)

Today, my little sister Wudood could not stop talking and chatting and rumberling and questioning. It was Sunday and we were on our way to the Sunday school.

The travel to the Sunday School was long and Wudood got easily bored. She made us describe the people there zillion times and we were trying to reassure her. Yes, she will be alright; she may even have fun there. The road was turning and twisting like most roads in France and it was very narrow. We left our Honda Odyssey back home in the US and we replaced it with a very, and I mean very compact electric car using lithium batteries called Zoe. Mom and Dad are all for the green

planet. They chat our ears off with their ‘We have to sustain the earth, that’s what Islam is all about’, and so on and so forth. Not that I disagree... I actually rather agree, but a teeny tiny car! Mom says electric cars do not consume gas, which does not release pollution into the air. Allah is happy with that. We feel proud to be Muslims. I feel great we’re not killing the pretty French flowers on the side of the road too, but I wish I had more space to put my feet in. I also feel great that we’re not causing the leaves of the trees to fall so that we can appreciate the road canopies along the dirt roads we have to cross everyday. That’s a relief because French cars do not have air conditioning. And we can be in the shade all the way to Sunday school under those trees.

We now were passing the mosque on our

right and the presbytery. Sunday school was in this building.

After Sunday school, Mom asked, “How was your class, Mahmoud?”

“Me? Huh. That was awesome.”

“How come?” Wudood said, interested.

“Today, we learned about a pious lady who lived a long time ago. Would you like me to tell you the story, Wudood?”

We soon settled down on a rocky wall.

I started the story, “There was one day a Muslim couple who loved each other very much.”

Just at this moment, some of Wudood’s classmates came around the corner heading home. They did not live very far from the presbytery, I think. One friendly Irish little boy ran towards us

and asked Wudood in English, "Do you want a date with me?"

She snorted at him, "Uh, no, only if I wanted a baby or something, which I don't."

The boy, confused, waved the date nuts at her before leaving.

"So," Mom asked, "how does your story end?"

I resumed, "So they had a son and this son became very ill. Despite their prayers, their son died. Umm Sulaym, the mom, covered the child up as if he were sleeping and told her husband, "O Abu Talhah, do you think that if you lent something to someone, you could ask for it back?"

He said, "Yes."

She said, "Allaah lent your son to you, and now He has taken him back, so have patience."

“Nice story,” said Mom. “And a good reminder. One should always look at the big picture. Everything happens for a reason.”

I thought about the bullies and why I had to be a target, but Mom was right, everything happened with a reason and if we were patient, we learned something from whatever we lived.

“Did I happen for a reason?” asked Wudood contentedly.

“Of course, Dear.”

“And Moumoud too?” she asked doubtfully.

“Even Mahmoud,” Mom replied with a wink.

“So, we won’t hold it against him, huh Mommy?”

“No, we won’t.”

CHAPTER 16



When we finally arrived at our grandparents' house, Wudood woke up and immediately looked very excited. Another family member, another aunt we did not know was also here and Dad recognized their car. What a surprise! I could not wait to meet them. I soon learned that I had a four year old cousin who was coloring on the floor as her cupcakes were baking in the oven. She had made them especially for our arrival and she could not wait to show Wudood what she had made. But Wudood did not want to hear any of that. She stuck her nose in the air, sniffed and said,

"It smells like cake in my nose!"

I'm not sure if it was good or not but little Rachele looked pleased and that's all that mattered.

I do love family reunions; I wish they would last forever.

Papie and Mamie are very nice folks, but they're very old, so they have problems with kids running around, noise, all the excitement we bring them. Mom and Dad sometimes do not have any more resource than to send us in the garden until we calm down. Of course, I have to watch the kids because I'm the older and I'm more mature. You bet I'm more mature! I'm a teen; they're still kids. And that sounds like a badge of honor.

So, Wudood and Rachele were exploring the meadow for little wild flowers they could not find 'cause it's still winter.

This was the holiday season, and I did not have to go see my therapist this week. I was so worked up about that. I had a school assignment and

I wanted to get it right. I would have liked to talk to him about it; that would have made me feel better. I could not complain about assignments to my parents; they would just get mixed in before I could think it through. Parents are such a handicap at times. I liked the therapist's attitude, when he was like, "What do you think?" He never gave me the answers. He did not help, but it was a no helper that actually helped a lot. He gave me time to go through my thought process. Thumbs up, Shrink.

So, for subject, I had the choice between the animals, the climate, nature or pollution. So, here's the scoop. If I took any of those, I was going to repeat someone else's report and there would be like thirty papers that said the same basic things.

No, I wanted a subject that nobody would be talking about. I wanted to impress my class. I wanted to

stand out in a good way. I was tired of being the one seated in the last row.

At first, they wanted to make me skip classes, but not forward, rather backwards. Because I didn't follow the same program in the USA, they thought I had gaps in my academics. I needed to prove them my brain was going on strong, that I was smarter than they thought.

Dad said, "You have nothing to prove to anyone."

I DO! Maybe then they would let me be although it was not as bad as in the first months. I guess they were slacking off now that I ignored them and kept to myself.

After some time, I heard footsteps behind me. It was Mamie, my grandmother, who was coming to see me. She is very alert for her age

because she eats organic and she is always out and about. Her garden is her pride. She asked me what I was doing and I told her I was trying to find a subject for my biology class.

Mamie is all ripe and wrinkleless in a blooming face that smiles most of the time. She always wears an old apron, a habit from school. In the front pocket, there are little treasures such as pins, a key, bills, and more. Sometimes I like to pick inside and try to find out what she has been doing that day. It makes for an afternoon of entertainment as everybody tries to cut in and guess.

“Why don’t you talk about gardening in a sustainable way?”

“Okay,” I said not very excited. But I didn’t see anything else special to talk about. Plants were basically very boring.

“Gardening is a science,” she explained.

“My garden may look like it put itself together and it is harmonious because nature is beautiful, but I put a lot of hard work in the design. See, the main focus in French landscaping is usually the house, and lines of sights are built from this central focal point. Perspective is important. For the house, we make much use of climbing and vining varieties.

Since most houses are made of stone; they will never damage the walls and the walls also provide spots for the plants to climb up. The house must be part of the décor, but it must also stand out. These vines are eyeliners, so to speak. Most gardeners in France cannot leave their garden as they are.

Americans add a piece of furniture here and there or a statue, but we incorporate big items like gazebos, arbors, trellises, and window boxes to add interest.

We are actually looking for little private niches where we can meditate. It is part of the garden charm. We do not have wide open spaces like Americans have. Each space is valued and has its purpose. And we have the Potager, our Kitchen Garden, essential to any garden. It has to be hidden among the flowers so that the birds will eat the flower seeds but not the vegetables.”

It really seemed like Mamie’s garden was all nature made, but she did put a lot of efforts into it and maintenance appeared like a full day of work.

As much as I loved her garden, there wasn’t enough material for me to write my report on, especially during the winter. Wudood and Rachelle came back with armloads of flowers and mostly herbs; I guess they had a problem distinguishing them. They were now going to make some bouquets

for the house. I was surprised plants lasted that long here. Maybe they had ripped the green house. Oops.

In France, everything is truly spiritual as people are taking time to live and they put time and effort into details. Plants seem to live up to that. Every little place has its own charm and no place resembles another place. I could not say the same for the USA. We have those large meadows and forests that look like they repeat each other and every parcel of land is used practically and not for their beauty. French people seem so impractical to us. Why spend money and valuable time researching and creating a unique garden when we can copy a satisfying one from a book? Really it's two different mind sets. The result is, when I come to Mamie's garden, I just cannot leave. I feel happy. I cannot say the same about our landscape. But

also... we don't really have time to stand and appreciate it anyway. In America, time is money. In France, time is a dream land.

CHAPTER 17



I'm so glad to be on vacation. I wish this one would stretch for years and years. I think the most beautiful authentic villages in France are here, down in southern France, near the Italian border. Honest!

When I asked Dad, he said, surprised, "There are many wonderful villages throughout France, each with its own character."

That shut me down.

Mom looked at me with a smile on her face and then declared, "Vezelay in Burgundy is particularly pretty, old fortified Burgundian town on the banks of the river, and in general Burgundy is quite unspoiled still. Many rural villages there haven't changed for hundreds of years. It's located

in Cote D'Or, in the right cheek of France if you imagine it has a face. That's where my family comes from, but a few generations back. Dad's family lived on the jaw of France and that's where Dad was born too." Mom thought for a while while she was preparing the breakfast, and then she added dreamily, "O, my... Provence is gorgeous. The Dordogne is beautiful. Burgundy is divine! So many places to choose from..." She looked at Dad and laughed, "You must be young to travel so you can do it on a shoestring! Just hop in a car and go! Everything is breath-taking!"

Mamie smiled too and said, "Wish I could take you by the hand and village-hop but alas, my days for that are over! So, you carry on! And enjoy every bump in the road along the way."

Dad who was getting hungry declared, “Yes the villages are scenic, but more importantly the food is to die for! You can pay as much or as little as you want. I had the meal of my life in an old Moulin but it cost around 200 Euros and yet I had a meal in a farm restaurant, just 1/2 a mile outside the nearest village with two local friends. We ate traditional food including 4 courses with lots and lots of food for only 20 Euros each.”

Mamie concluded, “O, well... No need to check specific places. In France, you can just toot around and see other places wherever you end up driving to... There’s plenty to see and enjoy.”

Wudood appeared at the door of the kitchen. She rumbled her sleepy hair, massaging her skull. It was time to leave the discussions hanging there if we wanted Wudood to leave us alone.

“Mommy! I’m hungry.”

“I am almost finished with the pancakes.

Just wait a few more minutes.”

“I can’t.”

“Well then,” said the usual cereal maker.

“Daddy is going to make you a nice bowl of cereal.”

My little sister exclaimed with her hands outstretched in front of her, “No thanks Daddy, you don't make it good.”

Mom burst out laughing and everybody joined in.

In the evening, we settle down in a huge daybed we shipped to them a few years back. It was very comfy and Rachelle had joined us there. So, Grandpa was holding a book, hugging Rachelle and me in his arms and talking to us. He was reading

‘Le Petit Prince’ to please our parents – good story, good morals, yea know. Wudood came in after brushing her teeth and putting on her pajamas, and of course wanted to sit next to Grandpa. Too bad, Rachelle and I loved this place and wouldn’t share it for anything.

“Let me pass, Moumoud,” she said while elbowing her way to Grandpa’s side. I pushed her away gently.

Grandpa said convincingly, “Papie only has two sides, so only two of you can sit next to me at a time. We’ll have to take turns.”

Wudood promptly said, "Papie, let's pray right now and ask God to send us another side so that there will be enough sides for all of us.”

We all smiled and Papie finally took Wudood in his lap. I swear this one is going to roll us around her little finger when she grows older.

The story went on and on until all of us started feeling dizzy and good for the comforters. Wudood who liked to play with mom's cell phone while listening, and everybody knows that cells don't last long, started getting really tired. I know the phone was on but I barely could see any light out of it.

She started rubbing her eyes and told Papie, "I think my batteries are running down."

Beep... beep...

Grandpa looked puzzled and concerned.

"Mine too," he said, as we could all hear his pacemaker beeping.

“What’s that noise?” asked Wudood
intrigued.

“My heart,” said Papie.

“Can your heart speak? Does it have a
mouth?”

“Only when I am in love,” confirmed the old
man hugging her gently.

I reached for mom’s cell phone and
declared, “It’s just Mom’s phone, Papie.”

“Glad to hear that.”

Papie really gave u a fright that night.

Sometimes I feel like the number of
homeless in the streets and the birds dying from the
pollution are like red flags. In Islam, we believe that
when God created man, the angels were surprised.
They protested to Allah and asked why did Allah
create a creature that would spill blood on earth?

Allah answered, “I know what you do not know.”

Sometimes I wonder if Allah has not allowed suffering, and all natural consequences, so that we can see this red flag. Because everyone has to face challenges in life, right? Everyone is part of something bigger. Everyone touches the heart of someone else. Everyone is important. Even I am important. I’m important because I see the red flag and I can try to do something for others. I can be part of the answer. Am I not?

CHAPTER 18



It's Friday and a school day. Vacation time is over and I have to go see the therapist again. That feels a little bit heavy in my heart. I did a presentation on the dogs and their footprint on the planet. Gee, Frenchies are animal lovers! They really didn't like my presentation very much. No wonder that we have to walk in the streets the nose glued to our feet. Anyways, I didn't make any friends that day, but I had a good grade if that can compensate.

I was even insulted. They said, "Eh! Riff-raff, go back to your country. There's no dogs there, dog killer!" I think of my Muslim friends; they would never say things like that. I don't care what these people do; they can never become my friends, not

even if they were the last people on earth. Our friends are like us; they influence us and we influence them. These Frenchies don't stand a chance. Friends who aren't good friends, I guess that's what's called peer pressure. I'm never going to fall into that.

The report? It all started when we went to the pet store. Mom was fretting about getting a cat because Dad had promised so many times he would get us one when we grew up and we could take good care of it. We postponed, and we postponed, and we postponed again until Mom said, "That's it, we're getting a cat today, no matter what falls on us."

Dad did not say, “Insha Allah” so I was very suspicious. We always say Insha Allah—God willing, when we want something to happen.

So we are in the pet store. There was this lady who was holding a tiny dog in her arms and it was licking her face in every place imaginable, even inside her nostrils and a bit inside her ears. I could not really see, but I could hear her earrings banging against each other; I think she had like three pairs of them, and a lot more on her hands.

We all stared and she invited us to get a share in the delight. “*Venez, mes chéris, c’est gentil comme tout ce chiot.*”

Mom said, “Thanks but no thanks. Muslims are not partial to dogs.”

The lady shrugged her shoulders and muttered words to herself.

“We have a sanitizer for your convenience,”
said the salesperson.

Thanks but no thanks. Mom hesitated, Dad
backed up a few steps.

Mom whispered under her breathe, “Judas!”

“What can I do to help you?” said the
salesman, holding his hands at us. He was really
thinking we were going to shake hands, no way!

Dad said, “Eh! That’s a pet store! I’m sorry,
we were just passing by.”

And he hushed us out, all giggling and steppity
running out of the store.

I said teasingly, “Come on, Dad, that’s why
we were created, to take care of the Earth. The
animals were created to serve us and we are their
guardians. We cannot be unjust towards them. They
have rights over us. We should apologize to them.”

Dad glared at me. Mom looked disappointed.

“I guess we’ll have to wait until someone is ready to give some kittens away,” she said.

Dad beamed.

“That’s a pity,” I declared. “But think how you are saving the Earth by not adopting a pet.”

“What?” said Mom confused.

“Do you know that the eco-paw print of a pet dog is twice that of a 4.6-litre Land Cruiser driven 10,000 kilometers a year?”

“How did you get that information?”

“There’s a big poster on the pet shop window pane. They urge pet owners to become green and they do have all the necessary products inside we need to do so.”

“What about your report,” said Dad staying focused. “Have you found a subject yet?”

“No, Dad,” I confessed. As if he didn’t know!

“What about this poster?”

“What a great idea, Dad! You’re the best!”

Time passed and we enjoyed our stay at our grandparents’.

“What about this report?” Dad asked suddenly one week later, and looking very interested. “what did you find?”

“I went online and to the library, and I was literally blown away by all the information. Some people say we should all swap cats and dogs for creatures we can eat, such as chickens or rabbits. I

think I saw that in a book called *Time to Eat the Dog: The real guide to sustainable living.*”

“Go on, son,” said Dad chuckling, but overall really impressed.

“The authors have assessed the carbon emissions created by popular pets, taking into account the ingredients of pet food and the land needed to create them. A German shepherd’s impact on the environment is like driving a large car around. See, Dad... Mom... A lot of people worry about having SUVs but they don’t worry about having large dogs.”

“I am glad we do not have a SUV,” Dad said.

“And I am glad we do not have a dog. So, I assume you do not want your pet anymore?” Mom said perplexed.

“Don’t you see, Mom? The reintroduction of non-carnivorous pets into urban areas would help slow down global warming.”

“Well... That’s a new turn of events!” she scuffed.

Dad intervened, “You have a choice... Either you keep the car, or you keep the pet. If you keep the pet, you’ll have to walk or ride to work but you could be at risk to catch more colds, which would reduce further your footprint because you’ll be staying at home more...”

I relayed Dad, “...and would decrease your overall shopping-print...”

Mom raised her eyes to the sky. She cut me off in the middle of the sentence, “Get out of here!”

I think she was convinced. We weren’t getting a pet anytime soon, but that was okay, who

do we think we are, keeping animals in prison when we are free?!

So, I went to class, and I blurted all out without thinking, really proud.

“Dog owners have a terrible environmental impact. Dogs dump about 88 MILLION!!! tons of waste on America. Forget the global warming aspect, 88 MILLION tons of untreated waste, going into our water supply, is a MAJOR health hazard! Soil had to be removed from Central Park because it had become so saturated with fecal coliform bacteria and dog worm larvae. Yuck! Pretty disgusting, isn't it? I hope babies didn't go pick up dirt there. Not only that, but the removed soil had to be treated as hazardous waste, and the turds are like bait for roaches, rats and other vermin. Clearly, dog owners aren't good citizens.”

The students' mouths opened wider as they heard more of the report.

“And you expect we sympathize with that?” exclaimed someone in the classroom. “Dirty Americans.”

I looked around chin up and dug up my grave, “I don't expect anything. I'm out there now to change the world.”

“Yeah, right,” pushed in a kid. “I guess you think the other countries that eat their dogs are way ahead of us.”

And they threw little balls of paper on me.

CHAPTER 19



That day, when I arrived home, I wanted to run upstairs and hide the rest of the evening, but Mom caught me before I reached the top of the stairs and told me to be quiet because Wudood had just fell asleep.

“What’s wrong with her,” I asked.

“She’s having the varicella.”

“The varicella?” I asked incredulous. “Mom, why are there so many people suffering on earth?”

She did not hesitate, “It is a Muslim’s belief that suffering with pain, hunger, tragic accidents etc, are due to one’s sins, for Allah wants this suffering to erase people’s sins. Allah says, ‘Whatever misfortune happens to you, is because of the things your hands have wrought, and for many

of them, Allah grants forgiveness'. It is also apparent that man in times of crisis gets closer to Allah and starts repenting.”

“But, Mom, why do children have to suffer? Wudood has committed no sin.”

I was really talking about myself. I hid in my heart how bruised I felt about being rejected at school. I was speaking for myself more than for Wudood.

Mom sat down at the bottom of the stairs, put her apron over the railing, and answered, “I do not think she suffers more than you would, Mahmoud. I think that grownups are accustomed to pain so it is no longer a big issue for them.”

She took my hands in hers and gently explained, “Allah only gives us what is good for us and He does not burden more than we can bear. Our

Prophet said the true believer is the one who is thankful when everything goes right and is patient when everything goes wrong.”

She stopped to consider me a few minutes. She later added, “Earth suffering has value, don’t you think so?”

“Why would it have any value?” I said shocked.

“Sometimes we do not see its value right away and sometimes it takes years for us to realize its importance, but suffering is an eye opener, and if it is not an eye opener, it testes our patience or our commitment to God. During times of adversity, we have an opportunity to learn things about ourselves we might not learn in any other way. Maybe we can learn things about other people we could not learn any other way.”

“I see,” I said, but I needed to give some thought on it. I was so tired, too pooped.

“I’d have better get some sleep over it, Mom.”

I went to have a nap. It made me feel closer to Wudood to think we were both resting.

I removed my house slippers, lied down over the bed sheet and counted the stars on my wall until I was drowsy and could not open my eyes anymore, and then I fell asleep.

When I woke up, I went straight to Wudood’s bedroom. She was awake and smiled at me. She didn’t look so bad. I told her that if nobody came to visit her, like her friends, it’s not because they did not like her anymore, it was because they were themselves sick. She understood. She could not really talk a lot because it made her feel dizzy,

but she liked to hear me talk and she finally fell back to sleep.

When I went downstairs, I saw that Dad had come back from work. He had taken a shower to relax and was reading the newspaper. When Mom saw me, she asked me how I was feeling now. I was all right and Wuddod too.

Mom felt sorry she wasn't there when Wudood woke up; she was worried for her 'Peanut'.

"It's all right, Mom," I said in order to make her feel better. "I told her she's going to become the smartest girl in her classroom."

"Really?" asked Mom. "How is that?"

"I said I'm going to teach her how to read so well, when she goes back to school, she'll impress everybody."

"Hmmm!" said Mom. "And what did she

say?”

“She said, ‘Are you out of your mind, Moumoud? Who wants to be the smartest?’”

Mom chuckled. “That’s my girl. And you, Mahmoud, have you answered some of your questions? How are you doing? You look pale.”

“I’m fine, Mom. There’s no way I can catch the varicella or is there, Mom?”

“There is very little chance, 2 in 10 actually.”

“Good. I wasn’t planning on it. I’m sore enough as it is with all my classmates planning to kill me.”

Dad smiled sadly. So far he had refrained from talking.

Mom asked, “Mahmoud? Do you still want to know what your Dad thinks about suffering?”

Maybe he will have a fresh point of view.”

Dad, startled, put down his newspaper.

“How you go, girl! Am I an expert on suffering? Since when?”

“Duh,” Mom said. “We used to have a lot of discussions on that, especially when your dad got his first operation.”

“Right. I had forgotten about that.”

Dad took a breath, thought hard and then said, “It is the nature of man to suffer, you know.”

I looked up, surprised. He continued, “If we did not suffer, we would not be men; we would be angels or maybe another creature. Allah testes our faith with fear, hunger, and loss. Misfortune is Allah’s discipline.”

I frowned and declared, “If it does good to the one who suffers, it certainly doesn’t do any

good to the people who are close to her.”

Dad braced himself. “Well, not really, Mahmoud. Suffering always equips us better to sympathize with others, don’t you think so? Allah sometimes allows some people to suffer to test others. When you see a person who is sick, poor and needy, then you are tested by Allah. Allah is there with that suffering person to test your charity and your faith. In a very moving saying of the Prophet, it says: *“Allah will say on the Day of Judgment, ‘O son of Adam. I was sick and you did not visit Me.’ By son of Adam, Allah means you and I, we, the people. So, the son of Adam will say, ‘O my Lord, how could I visit You, when you are the Lord of the Worlds?’ Allah will say, ‘Did you not know that My servant so-and-so was sick and you did not visit him? Did you not know that if you had visited him,*

you would have found Me there?' Allah will say, 'O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not.' The son of Adam will say, 'O my Lord, how could I feed you and you are the Lord of the Worlds?' And Allah will say, 'Did you not know that My servant so-and-so was in need of food and you did not feed him? Did you not know that if you had fed him, you would have found that to have been for Me?' 'O son of Adam, I asked you for water and you did not give Me to drink.' The man shall say, 'O my Lord, how could I give You water, when You are the Lord of the Worlds?' Allah will say, 'My servant so-and-so asked you for water and you did not give him to drink water. Did you not know that if you had given him to drink, you would have found that to have been for Me.'"

“I see, Dad.” I said with things clicking in

my head. “Suffering may help us learn to study and pray, and be more grateful.”

Dad concluded, “Yes, my son. Helen Keller said, *“Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.”*” He pondered a moment and then added, “So true...”

Yes, so true.

B4N (Bye For Now)

CHAPTER 20



Today, at the therapists', we were playing a new game. It's called pétanque. The ball I have is made of heavy plastic. I have to throw it and make it reach as close as possible to a little wooden ball on the floor. While we were doing this, he was asking me questions and he tried hard to make it seem like a casual conversation.

“Mahmoud? What makes you sad in a general sense?”

At first I did not feel like talking about that sort of thing. I stood up to go get my balls at the end of the game, but then I told myself it was okay on my way back to the throwing line. It was safe to talk here. I hesitated. I was not sure where to start, and then I just let go, holding the pebble in my hand.

“They say I pray to a stone.”

He lifted his eyeglasses up to have a better look at me.

“Do you pray to a stone?”

I replied back, “I don’t pray to a stone! Are you kiddin’ me?” I paused, thinking about how I was going to explain that to someone who was not even Muslim. I shrugged. Better not try.

I suddenly smiled to myself. The therapist seemed surprised. He asked me what was so funny and if I could share with him. I explained that once the teacher of my sister’s Islamic studies class asked the students to draw an Islamic picture, anything they thought represented Islam for them. As she watched them, she noticed my little sister Wudood was working very hard on her picture. When she asked her what she was drawing, Wudood said,

"GOD!!" The teacher then stated that no one knows what GOD looks like!! But Wudood said very innocently, "When I finish this picture they will!!!!!!!" We still laugh when we remember this. Of course, it is forbidden to draw a picture of God; nobody has seen God."

The therapist sat in front of me. He looked very serious.

"So people at your school think you pray to a stone? What is it to them?"

"I don't know, maybe they think it's wrong. I think it's wrong too."

"Those bullies," he said meditatively. "How do you handle them?"

"I lay low; this way they let me be."

"You know that you will not be able to keep this up forever?"

“I guess.”

He nodded. A few minutes later, he was back on topic again.

“Do you have a strategy?”

“A strategy for what?”

“To get ahead of those bullies?”

“Well... I’m taking Karate classes for self defense,” I said brightly.

“Defense is the best strategy.”

“I agree...”

“And what about learning?”

“Learning?” I said, intrigued.

He answered, reciting a quote from Marian Wright Edelman: *“If you as parents cut corners, your children will too. If you lie, they will too. If you spend all your money on yourselves and tithed no portion of it for charities, colleges, churches,*

synagogues, and civic causes, your children won't either. And if parents snicker at racial and gender jokes, another generation will pass on the poison adults still have not had the courage to snuff out.”

I thought about it.

“You mean, you want to have a joint meeting or something? No way!”

“Why not?”

“This would be so embarrassing and scary. Besides, bullying is not a conflict. That can't be mediated.”

“You're right, Mahmoud. Bullying is a form of victimization, not a conflict. But see, there is something you can do.”

“What is it?”

“In most schools, there are the bullies, the bullied — and the vast majority in between who let

it all happen. If you don't want to get bullied, jump in when you see it happening to others. You must educate them someday. Think about how this can be done. Education is the brain of the brainless.”

I giggled, but inside I was like sizzled. How could I stand for someone else when I could not stand for myself? He sure had given me food for thought.

After that conversation, I played a new board game for the first time. Since we started this therapy, we have played a lot of therapeutic board games. This one is my favorite. It is called ‘Don't Be Difficult’. This game helps children understand the nature of positive and negative consequences and learn the benefits of choosing the "right" way.

The therapist asked me a few questions about it, “How do you rate this game?”

“I give it a rating of 4 out of 5 stars.”

The therapist asked, “It’s a “high praise” but why didn’t you give it 5 stars?”

“Hmmm. I don’t know... I thought some of the cards were too difficult and not appropriate.”

Actually, I remember a card that I particularly did not like. Reading it, Mr. Shrink asked matter of factly, “Do your parents smack you?”

I was dumbfounded. Why would he ask such a question? I hesitated, not knowing where he wanted to go with that, but very curious.

I said, “No.”

“Do you think it is okay?” And I remembered how I reacted to bullying at first. It felt

wrong, really wrong. He paused and then declared,
“Do you know that France is the only country in the
world that has a law against verbal abuse?”

I shrugged. No kidding! No wonder I was expelled.

I also felt very angry. These bullies should have
been expelled too if it is the law. I looked at him
with understanding. Not bad for a therapist.

@+ (At Plus)

CHAPTER 21



Mom was in the kitchen and we were getting ready to go to Bibi's place when Dad called on the phone.

“Hello, son, do you guys need a ride today?”

“I don't know, Dad, I need to ask Mom.”

Dad did not like us going all by ourselves to La Zone. Every time we were scheduled to go, he called us to inquire about our projects. If one of us had a cold he told us we cannot go today. If one of us sounded tired, he said you do not need to go today; they can do without you one day. Mom argued, “These people count on us, they are waiting for us and besides they do not have a phone, so how are we going to let them know they will wait in vain?”

So, today, Dad had another excuse.

“As you wish,” said Dad, “but there is a storm coming upon us later this evening, nobody should go out by this weather; it’s dangerous.”

“Allah will keep us safe,” said Mom with a smile. “What will happen to us is already written.”

Sometimes Dad called us to let us know he is inviting us somewhere and we’ve got to be ready when he arrives. Mom didn’t like it when he did that, but she could not refuse and she felt embarrassed in front of our “protégées” afterwards. When she said something about cheating on “her” people, Dad said we had to live our life before living the life of others. That’s how Dad operated; he liked us to be involved in charity but he would like us to be slightly involved, just enough to feel better but not to the point it caused delays or caused

us any discomfort.

Mom said, “How are we going to help other people if we do not feel any discomfort? It is not easy to give in charity. Allah said: *“One will not have faith until he sacrifices some of what he likes most.”*”

For now, Mom was in the kitchen trying hard to get the ketchup out of the jar to go with our *halal* chicken nuggets.

“What is she doing?” Dad inquired.

“I don’t know; I’m going to see what’s going on in the kitchen; I’ll be back in a jiffy, Dad.” Wudood was close to me and she asked me to give her the phone.

“Okay, Dad, Wudood wants to talk to you.”

I walked away and the minute Wudood picked up

the phone, she yelled into the phone because she thought Dad could not hear her. “Salam alikum Daddy. Mommy can't come to the phone to talk to you right now. She's hitting the bottle.”

“Barely!” said Mom amused and arriving on the scene with me.

When Mom was done talking to Dad, I picked up the phone.

“I miss you all,” said Dad. “Come back quickly.”

“I miss you more,” I replied. “We promise we won't get lost on the way to and from La Zone.”

“How was school today?” A tinge of worry underlined his words.

“Well...” I said with hesitation, and I know for a fact that Mom had been talking. Why did she have to do that?

“Uh... I got punched in the face by a ninth grader.” I hate those kids. Really I hate them.

“A 9th Grader!” Dad exclaimed in surprise. “But this guy is not even in your class!” Then, he calmed down and said sadly, “That’s too bad,” said Dad. “Does it hurt?”

“No, Mom put some homeopathic ointment on it; it’s almost gone now.”

“Did you provoke this guy?”

“No!”

“So, why did he punch you? He did not start punching you out of the blue!”

“I got mad. He kicked me in the legs when I was crossing the school hall.”

“O, Mahmoud,” said Dad a little sad. I could hear a sigh on the other side of the phone. “It used to be easy. I would drive you to school, you would

study and I would fetch you at the end of the day. You were happy; I was happy. There was nothing more to it. And then we moved.”

“Yes, Dad, we moved,” I yelled, not able anymore to keep the foaming rage that had built up inside my chest. “We moved to this stupid country where people hate me, not because I’m a bad person but because my religion is a shade darker than theirs and my name is Mahmoud. By the way, they don’t call me Momo anymore, they call me Bozo, you know, like Bozo the stupid clown!!”

Dad stayed silent for a moment, and then he said ceremoniously, “Do not go hurting yourself like that, son. The Messenger of Allah said, *“I guarantee a house in Jannah for one who gives up arguing, even if he is in the right; and I guarantee a home in the middle of Jannah for one who*

abandons lying even for the sake of fun; and I guarantee a house in the highest part of Jannah for one who has good manners." You are a Muslim and you do not get angry. You keep calm, Mahmoud, no matter what they say."

"I'll exchange my skin for your skin anytime, Dad, and let's see if you can stand those jackals."

"This is becoming serious, son. I'll go talk to your principal."

"There's no need Dad."

"I insist. These bullies have gone a step too far."

"But... Dad! This will only make it worse. Please, don't mingle."

"Listen, son. Schools have to take precautions for your safety and for the safety of

these bullies themselves. You have a problem, but they have a problem too. They should be helped too. In the end, most bullies wind up in trouble. If they keep acting mean and hurtful, sooner or later they get into bigger problems.”

“I see, Dad. Okay. I’ll make a deal with you. You go see the principal and I change school?”

“Son,” said Dad reassuringly. “Do not fear. We are still looking into this homeschooling thing. Allah will show you a way out. Those bullies will not be strong for ever. Bullies have only a few friends — usually other kids who are just like them. The power they want slips away fast. Other kids move on and leave bullies behind. In a few months, the situation may be better than you think. Do not despair.”

“You speak like a pro,” I said doubtfully.

“Son... I had my share of bullies in my youth.”

We soon left home for La Zone. The travel was uneventful and Wudood napped most of the time.

Bibi was waiting for us with hummus and home baked bread. She wrapped it for us to take home and we were very pleased. This stuff was delicious. I wished Mom would learn how to make this. Bibi and her grandma cook for people, mostly students; that is how they make a living, pay the rent and all the rest. Today they seemed to be late and very busy with pots and pans all over the place. However, clean vegetables were neatly put together over the main table, ready for the cooking part. Bibi now understood more of the French language and

we understood more about her life. We had some kind of routine. Actually, my French was a lot better than hers but her getting around skills were much more developed. She gestured to tell me she needed to go to the grocery. Today, I brought a wagon for her so that she didn't have to carry potatoes and such all the way home by herself. We left together because I had still to teach her French while Mom taught her grandma something about a citizenship interview.

Wudood wanted to come with us and Mom was inclined to let her go.

I told Mom in English, "It's better if Wudood comes with us, this way we will not be alone together; that's more correct in Islam."

Mom said, "I'd like Wudood to come with you but this part of town is not very safe. I'm not

sure I want to let you go either...”

“But she needs to learn French!” I said indignant. “And she is street savvy. She can guide me.”

Mom hesitated, but the girl put a gentle hand on Mom’s arm and expressed that I would be safe with her. Mom believed her. She said, “That’s her territory, isn’t it? Go now before I change my mind.”

On the way to the grocery, we chatted a great deal. She was not as shy as she was the first day we met, and I think it’s because she’d known us for a few months and she could now say a few things. She looked more confident. Every now and then she pulled the sleeve of my shirt to guide me towards deserted pathways and stopped a few minutes behind pillars. I wondered what came over

her; she looked strange.

I asked her, “Why are you doing that?”

She smiled and said, “Don't give bully a chance.”

I was relieved; she was just preventing a run-in with the bullies. O, my. I thought she was getting weird for a minute. And, O my God, I had them only at school while she got her bullies every time she went out. I guess I felt I was more well off than she was.

“Do you have a lot of bullies here?” I asked very concerned. It seemed to me that she should be safer here among her own people. But then I figured that poor immigrants from the third world had little future here and the only fun they had was in the street.

Poor Bibi. There was no place on earth without deranged people who liked to hurt others. I

tried to remember what Dad said to me the other day: “Bullies do not go towards the strong; they are like most criminals; they choose the weakest. Look arrogant, look grand, look strong. Practice karate in the playground.”

“Really, Dad?” I said because I was amused. “And soon, they’ll not call me the Bozo, they’ll call me the Weirdo.”

“Better to be called weirdo than sorry,” stated Dad sternly.

I was still thinking about his advice and how I could implement it. A karate club, maybe. That should do the trick. But who would be part of it? The cats and the dogs from the street? Sometimes I thought adults had totally unrealistic conception. Maybe they forgot what it was like to be a kid. Dad had added almost as a conclusion, “Listen to your

parents. Maybe we say a few interesting things.

Listen, Mahmoud. I'll tell you a secret. When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the man knew."

I shrugged myself. Dad did not advise playing hide and seek. Really, I was surprised about Bibi's tactic. You couldn't go into hiding all your life, or skip classes in my case, of course. I walked into the open and she pulled the back of my shirt in order to avoid touching me.

"There's nobody here!" I told her losing some of my patience. She looked worried and waved her hand towards her to ask me to come back. "Why should we feel afraid of people? That's acting coward!" She gave me a pained look. She

tried hard to speak clearly, “As much as you can, avoid the bully.”

But all her efforts did not bring any fruits. I was determined to face anyone. I was tired of being bullied everywhere I went. This time, I had more than myself to protect; I had Bibi too.

At the entrance of the local grocery store, a band of children saw us. One of them came running towards us, looking very cocky.

He talked to Bibi.

“So now you’ve got a boyfriend? Maybe one of us can be your boyfriend instead of this white frog.”

She plucked her nose high in the air and declared, looking straight into their eyes, “He’s not frog; he brother.”

She was not technically wrong; we were

brother and sister in Islam.

What a brave little girl!

I also stood tall and I tried to send the message 'Don't mess with me'. It was easier to feel brave when you felt good about yourself and when you were not alone.

Two is better than one if you're trying to avoid being bullied. Just a tip for you guys out there. My two cents. I suddenly realized this.

We walked away, ready to run if we had to.

Bibi whispered, "Don't show angry or upset; bullies like that."

I nodded assent.

Now, Bibi pretended she didn't hear them and walked past them quickly, me following behind into the grocery store. Well done, Bibi.

I wondered about those boys. Islam made us responsible for our brothers and sisters, but they were pushing the protection team way too far. They were not protective anymore; they had become sharks. Same as with sharks, it helped to stand in group or to divert their attention. But what got me, is that they really thought Bibi was theirs. Man, the nerves!

Maybe they even had already chosen someone to hitch her with in the fashion of the old Arabian tribes back home where they came from. But this was France, sore eyes!

When we came out of the shop, our wagon full of vegetables, they were still here! O, bother! I would have given anything to be somewhere else very, very far away. I was done with them all bullies.

They came around me and started teasing, looking us up and down and pulling at our clothes.

“Keep those hands to yourself, dudes.” I suddenly yelled at the top of my voice.

"No! Stop it!"

Some adults walked outside and the bullies waved their hands in the air as if to say we did not do a thing. We were safe now. We walked home without saying a word. I think we were both upset.

When we left to go home, Bibi gave me a wrapped present. I wondered what it was. I started removing the tape around the package, but she signaled to wait.

“Home. Open home,” she said mysteriously. Inside, there was a blanket made of wool, probably weaved by hand the Algerian way. The blanket had

the image of the Kaba weaved into it. A prayer rug!
In another packet there was also a scarf with calligraphy on it, a gift for Mom. I had no idea what it meant but it looked like the waves of the ocean, maybe a reminder that Bibi's country is far away over the ocean as Mom explained later. It was made of silk with colorful patterns.

Wudood also received a gift. She opened her present quickly, without being invited. She was kind of rude sometimes. It was a beautiful black dress like the one I saw Bibi wear with lots of colored wool threads spun into it. Gorgeous! I made them both promise they would let me take a picture of them both wearing this costume. They both agreed.

When I got home, I put my gift on the wall. It was too beautiful for any other use. It was like a painting

or a wallpaper. It would just stand as decoration and memory.

CHAPTER 22



So, today after Sunday school, I got to visit Bibi like I always did. I was excited to tell her I had stood up against the bullies. There was this Muslim girl who had put a headscarf on at school in order to pray and she had forgotten to remove it. A bunch of guys had come to rip it off her head yelling all the while, “This is forbidden, you scum.” So, I stepped in and gave them an ultimatum. I told them verbal abuse was punishable by law and my dad was a lawyer. Well, they did not have to know it wasn’t true. That made a mark, a good mark. I almost can’t wait to score more points. I feel liberated. Bibi taught me this. Number is strength against bullies. I started talking to all the kids who were bullied and they agreed to step in whenever someone was

aggressed. I think next I am going to ask for a school meeting. Wishful thinking, I know. There is no such thing as a school meeting in France, but I feel assured that would do the school a lot of good.

So I went to Bibi's house for her French lesson.

Bibi wasn't cooking today; Sunday is her day off. When we were in the middle of the lesson, someone knocked at the door.

Bibi yelled, "Who is here!" but nobody answered. Her grandma went to open the door because we were busy; she usually never opened the door. Big mistake! She was so small she could not reach the peep hole on the door to see who was on the other side.

"Who is it, Jaddati?" Bibi asked again. She got restless when Jaddati did not answer. We

stopped and looked at each other anxiously. Mom got Wudood and put her in a closet and told her to keep it quiet. And then we walked towards the front door.

A male voice was saying, “Are you alone, Granny? Where is the little babe?”

I saw two men armed with knives. I didn’t like the sight of them. What did they want? I backed up. Too late, they had seen us. They suddenly smiled in a mean way.

“Ah! And she’s here.” They laughed. “Want to introduce us, Riff Raff?”

We were all afraid and I thought all of a sudden that Dad was right; this place was totally unsafe. What were we all doing here? My legs went all marsh mallowy.

“Get *“le blé”* here growled the thief,

showing a bag. He meant the ‘coins’. He looked very commanding.

They had probably heard of Bibi’s business and had come for an easy steal.

“Give them the money, Bibi,” said Mom slowly. “Money is not worth your life.”

“Eh! Not bad for a Riff-Raff this one,” said one of the men.

Bibi listened to Mom. She was now bringing all their savings in a little silk satchel. One of the men opened it up rapidly and pulled out a handful of bills, enough to pay the rent and eat for a few weeks.

Wudood had emerged from the closet. We didn’t see her. She looked very angry. She suddenly erupted behind us unexpectedly.

She shouted. “This is not yours! Give it

back! Police!”

Mom could not catch Wudood in time and she plunged towards the satchel.

Mom yelled. “No!”

Her eyes grew wide open when the man took Wudood’s hair and jerked her to the side, jawing, “I’ll show you, Scum.”

Wudood was trying to resist with no use.

Bibi said, “Leave her alone. You have your money now. Go!”

Mom trembled and grabbed her daughter while she was still being pulled. It looked like the guy was going to throw her down the stairs.

Suddenly, he waved a knife high in the air, ready to strike.

My mushy legs were no use to me.

Bibi looked at me desperately and with trust.

I suddenly realized that I was the only man here to defend all the girls, and I had been studying martial arts so that I could use it one day to help those I loved. What was the use now? If I didn't do anything right now, this minute, I would never be able to forgive myself. That gave me enough courage.

I yelled a little too loud, "Leave my sister alone, you Dirtsies."

The guys turned around with Wudood dragged behind them along with Mom and Bibi draped around her waist. The first man moved his knife towards the girls and me.

"You back off, Scums, or I'll cut you."

I suddenly noticed a soda can at the entrance and, without thinking, sipped some of it quickly before I spit it in his face.

He got his hands to his face and let the girls go. I threw myself on the other man, pushing my index finger into his throat in the middle of his trachea. He fell down on his knees. Mom immediately took the cue and scrubbed her foot on his shin and stamped on his foot. Very painful. Finally, Wudood grabbed onto Bibi's purse that had fallen on the floor and we all ran inside the apartment. Bolts were on as fast as we could get them.

“Call the police! Call the police!” I told Mom as she reached for her cell phone, but the men were already gone and what's the use of calling the police now?

Mom still called them and she stayed talking on the phone with them a long time repeating herself several times. The rest of us were trying to recuperate from the shock of the attack. Wudood

was with Mom; she was clinging to her dress and listened to all the words Mom was saying with a growing concern. Bibi looked from time to time towards the door to see if it was correctly bolted. She shivered and then turned back towards me and smiled feebly as if pleading. I offered to serve them some tea. There was some left on the stove. Finally, Mom came back while carrying Wudood in her arms.

“The police are NOT coming,” she said.

“But why?” asked Bibi’s grandmother.

“This is police work, no?”

“They say since there is no evidence of thief or assault, no broken door or the like there is nothing they can do.”

“But what about identifying the men; we all saw them and we can recognize them. They’ve

probably done something like this before. They seemed sure.”

“All the same. They are not interested. They say this kind of incident is frequent in La Zone. If they had to come here every time something like this happens, they would have to make a base camp outside.”

“O!” exclaimed the grandma dazed.

“Well,” said Mom while examining the front door carefully. “You just cannot stay here anymore. They might come back.”

Bibi ate her fingernails, completely mute.

Where would they go?

“But...but...” said Bibi’s grandma. “They are gone now.”

Mom said firmly, “If they are desperate enough they will finish the job as soon as they

recuperate, and this time you will not have the advantage of the surprise. They will be prepared for you. They know there is only the two of you; they did not expect us to be here today.”

“But we have nowhere to go!”

I said confidently, “Take your things with you and come with us. Is it okay, Mom?”

“Yes, of course. We can put you up for a few days, but we need to find a safe solution for you in the future. Look at this door, a crow bar and it’s gone. I’d be scared to live here. And I certainly can’t let you stay here tonight; that would be criminal.”

They thanked us warmly but still looked very pale and helpless. They didn’t expect this to happen, ever.

“So many people know us here,” explained

Bibi on the way home. “I felt like this was a protection. People respect us. We work for the good of the community.”

“I understand,” said Mom with empathy.

“However, it seems like this community has its own needs too. And they are prepared to do anything to get a few notes, even hurt a little girl.”

When we arrived home, Dad was surprised to find us with two guests for the night. We soon prepared the guest room and Bibi and her grandma asked to go to bed early because they felt exhausted. Mom brought them soup and bread with chunks of cheese and olives, and then let them alone to sort things out.

We ate in silence. Everybody had a lot on their minds. Afterwards, Wudood and I got to bed. Mom and Dad stayed up late to discuss the events of the

day and to try to find a solution for our guests. I know they did because I woke up every hour and I could see the light under my bedroom door until very... very late.

In the middle of the night, I heard a faint knock on the door. Wudood asked to come in my bed because she was having nightmares. Poor thing. She climbed in and made a ball grabbing her knees to her chest. I put my arms around her shoulders and she fell fast asleep. From time to time she spoke in her sleep and seemed to be punching the air with her feet and arms. I squeezed her gently and she went back to sleep without waking up.

I thought it must be tough to be an orphan. I thanked Allah for having my family and for all I had, like a sister and a place to live that's not scary. I also prayed that Bibi found a permanent solution

to her problems.

CHAPTER 23



The day after we learned about Bibi, I decided to teach my Buddy karate. Silly, right? She's not the type, but, eh, she's the only person in my school I know. To my surprise, she was interested and she asked me a lot of questions in her slow kind of fashion.

“You know how?” She exclaimed in surprise.

“Yep, sure, I'm taking classes.”

“Great!” she said.

“Right.” I said a little embarrassed.

“So, are you going to make me invincible, Mahmoud?” asked Christine.

“Maybe not, but I'll try.”

I knew the “moves that kill” as Christine says with a

lot of humor. I didn't know she had any humor.

“Can you call me Ninja?” she asked. She could be weird sometimes.

“Okay, Ninja number one,” I replied. “Show me what you've got.” She was actually my number one student, but I was not telling her that.

Soon, a few more kids joined us and wanted to learn more. I was suddenly, what, popular?

“Where did you learn all that, Mahmoud?”

“I've been practicing.”

“Can you break planks with your hands?”

That was a silly question.

“I don't know; I have never tried.”

“Can you fly in the air?” asked someone who had seen too many Chinese Kungfu movies.

“Not if I don't have wings.”

My bullies don't look at me the same way

anymore. They traversed the play ground a few times while I was teaching Christine some kicks.

Each time the vultures circled closer until they thought it was safe for their reputation to associate with a Riff Raff.

“Hey, Dojo!” they said unexpectedly.

“Hey!” I said.

“Think you can beat me?”

“Depends...”

“Depends on what?”

“How much you bet.”

“I bet 10 Euros.”

“Not worth it.”

“20 Euros, then?!”

“Not interested.”

“What do you want?”

“You leave the kids alone.”

The bullies puffed up, consulted for a few seconds and then agreed.

Today, for the first time, they did not call me Momo or Bozo, but they called me Dojo. It was not really a better name but at least it was a name that had some pride to it.

One of the bullies even started a fake fight with me and I pinned him to the floor easy. He was amazed. Not me, I had done it a hundred times during practice. But, yeah, I was amazed I could do it in real time. They looked at me strangely. I think they did not understand why I didn't use karate before. I did not understand either. They gained a new respect for me. I think as long as it was only me, I did not have enough confidence in myself. Now that I was doing this for all the kids who were being bullied, it felt different. I did not feel powerless

anymore.

This makes a huge difference now. I do not act like a victim anymore or like a foreigner. I feel like myself. It feels good to be in my own skin.

When I went back home, Mom waited for me at the door. She had finally decided it was safe for me to walk home unescorted. Yeah, really. She took me in her arms and wiped her eyes a few times with a handkerchief. I saw Bibi inside the house reciting the Qur'an, and Wudood was nowhere to be seen. I got scared.

“What happened, Mom?” I said in a contrite voice. How could I have such a victory at school when maybe something bigger happened at home?

“Bibi’s grandma passed,” said Mom in a sorrowful voice. “I think it was too much for her.”

“How did it happen? A heart attack?”

“I’m not sure. She went to bed last night and she never awoke.”

This was so tough on Bibi. She was now all alone in the world and there was nobody to remind her of her past or make a link between her and her legacy. We had to do something. Mom didn’t let me talk to her; she said it was too much for her now. Let’s hold the horses.

The burial was scheduled the same day. Only men were allowed to go to the graveyard so Mom and us, kids, stayed at home but we still prayed the funeral prayer for her.

The order of eviction came in and Bibi was scheduled to leave at the end of next week. I did not know how to say goodbye. She didn’t cry anymore.

She stayed put in the couch and didn't move, not even one little bit. She had become like a statue, just like her grandmother yesterday. She looked very white. I was scared for her. When we talked to her, she barely answered, so Mom took her in her arms and recited Qur'an or told her stories to get her mind out of her thoughts.

Nice try, Mom.

Finally, after a few days Dad came home with more news.

“We are going to adopt Wudood! What do you think, Mahmoud?”

“What? Is this even possible, Dad?”

“Yes, it is. She is an orphan, isn't she?”

Hodding Carter said, *‘There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One is*

roots; the other, wings.’ We are going to give roots to this little lady, with the help of Allah.”

I refused to take it as a victory; I did not want to build false hopes. I was not worried about the wings here.

Mom came quickly and looked very surprised. She asked without any hesitation, “Okay, what do we need?”

“I went to make the child abuse clearance today; I need those papers from France and from the USA. They are sending me those from overseas by fax. Some people take these orphans and sell them; it’s not unheard of, so they must also investigate us.”

“Don’t you need to extend her visa, Darling?”

“Right, Dear,” said Dad tired. “I almost

forgot that. There is so much to do and so little time. Bibi needs to live with us for six months before she can be adopted. I checked today. But if she has a visa, she can officially live in our house. There is paper work to be done and then a court hearing, and she'll be able to become our daughter if Allah wills, at least she'll stay in the family. She can stay with us as long as she is a minor."

"Fantastic!" I hugged my dad in excitement.

"I'll go tell Bibi right away."

"Wait! Wait a minute, son. There is only one complication."

"What is it, Dad? Is it gonna ruin our chances?"

"I frankly don't know."

Me *shuddered*.

Mom chimed in, "We have not asked Bibi

yet. That's all. We do not know if she would like that or not, and she is now in shock and not really in a state of mind to make decisions for herself."

"Maybe it's a case where we can make the decision for her, Dad? She doesn't have a lot of options you know, and besides, she's like family, right?"

"That's another problem," added Mom. Dad nodded in agreement, already knowing what she was going to say. These two had been talking all night, again I could tell.

"We do not want her to be forced to do something she is not ready for. Adopting a new family is not that easy. You see, it is like changing all her perspectives."

"And there is the Islamic legality in all this. And plus, we have very little time left," explained

Dad.

Mom cut in, “There is no problem, Dear! In France, there are two ways of adopting, I checked on the Internet today. One is a plenary adoption, which results in the adopter and the adopted child assuming the same legal relationship as if the child had been born to the adoptive family within marriage. As we know, this is not acceptable in Islam because it is not right. A child must keep her name and legacy, no matter what. However, France gives the option of an ordinary adoption order, which results in the adopted child keeping some legal bond with her original family while being given a legal relationship with her new family. We must work this out so that Bibi can keep her legal name while still being part of our family.”

“Great!” said Dad. “Now, who is going to

talk to her?”

Big silence. Wudood walked in, her eyes moist. She shyly asked, “I’d like to.”

I could not recognize my sister. Her, shy? This was terribly important to her.

I spoke faster than my parents and said, “You may, but we all have to be with you. We have to do this as a family.”

“That’s right,” agreed my parents. “One for all and all for one!”

Mom popped in. “Before we go, I must make sure that I can get a baby sitter for tomorrow. We have to go to a lot of places to get all this done. Bibi must go with us, but I would prefer Mahmoud and Wudood to stay home. This Baby sitter is not going to be home later tonight; I must catch her before she leaves.”

“Okay,” said Dad. “But we do not know what Bibi will say.”

“Of course, she’ll say yes!” said Mom. “If she doesn’t, I’ll cancel. No big deal.”

“All right then, make it quick.”

Mom looked in her purse, then in her vest jacket pockets. She could not find her blackberry.

“That’s funny,” she said. “I would have sworn...”

“Where did you put it last night?”

“My phoned died, so I plugged it in and then went to run some errands. I am sure I put it in the corridor, on the charging table before I left. Now, it is nowhere to be seen. Just when I need it.”

“Er, Mom...” said Wudood.

“Do you know anything about that, Pumpkin?”

“But you said it died, so I... huh... kind of... buried it.”

Mom raised her hands to the sky, “What? A \$200 phone! O my God!”

And she immediately put one hand over her mouth to stop herself from yelling.

“Can you show me where it is?” asked Dad struggling to keep a smile hidden.

“Okay, Dad. I’m sorry I did not know it was still alive.”

“That’s all right, Dear. You did not know.”

Dad added more tenderly, “*When I approach a child, he inspires in me two sentiments; tenderness for what he is, and respect for what he may become.*” Louis Pasteur. That was very thoughtful, Wudood, very thoughtful.”

Fortunately, she had wrapped a white clothe

around the phone the Muslim way, so there was no damage to it. After we unburied the phone, Mom called the babysitter and we were all set to go talk to Bibi.

In the guest room, Bibi was holding her grandma's things in her hands. She had put them carefully all over the bed and she was now sleeping curled up among them.

Wudood came swiftly towards Bibi and held her hands until she woke up a few minutes later. We all smiled at her. She smiled politely back. She looked surprised we were all gathered around her bed.

Wudood asked her, "Would you like to be my sister, Bibi?" She looked confused. Wudood said, "We are going to adopt you."

"What does 'adopt' mean?" she asked

perplexed.

“That means you can live with us forever.”

Bibi didn't register our intention. We spent the rest of the afternoon trying to explain, and finally she realized that we wanted her to be part of our family. She didn't know what to say. She was not sure if she was happy or sad but she felt more at ease. She ended up saying yes and we all hugged her, even I. It is not really customary, but the occasion was exceptional and our hearts were so full it seemed very natural.

To celebrate, we all went to the mosque. We spent a long time there praying that Bibi's visa would be accepted and that her adoption would go smoothly. I prayed to become the best brother she would ever have. We also prayed for the soul of her

grandmother. In the excitement, we almost forgot about her. We were proud that, in a moment like this, we could all offer her a family's beating heart and a faith she could hold onto more strongly.

Now I had two sisters, and both my sister Wudood and I had a best friend now. I was glad now to live in France and I didn't regret any minute because all this past year had had a purpose. I know it now. All this past year was given to us by Allah as a gift. We all struggled but in the struggle we had found each other. We had fallen in love with new people who had fallen in love with us, and that was the best gift in life. What would life be without love, without people?

CHAPTER 24



WB (Welcome back).

The therapist said, “I think this imaginary friend has made Mahmoud more confident about himself. I see less problems he is struggling with. I see him more sure of himself. The principal called me the other day to inquire about him. I am happy to say that the therapy has been a success and that I can release Mahmoud. Today was his last session.”

Dad looked happy.

I rather enjoyed these meetings; they helped me see things through more clearly, but I guess I don’t need them anymore. I’m not sorry they end.

“What are you going to do during your vacations?” asked Mister Shrink.

“We are going to see my grandparents and

spend a few days with them,” I said confidently.

“These two are the joy of my eyes, you know.”

He smiled.

“Send me a postcard, okay?”

It’s almost the end of the school year. I wonder how I survived that long. As time goes on, people don’t seem as interested in bugging me as they were at the beginning. Maybe they have learned that I was no threat to them, no threat to the French secularity or way of life. Maybe they find me more exciting now.

Retrospectively, I think the first day was the worst. I was scared I wouldn't find my way around school. It was hard because I had a hard time becoming accustomed to a whole country, speaking French with everybody and not just my dad, so I thought

everybody was talking about me and how dumb I looked.

Every night I went home and I prayed to Allah that I would learn more French in order to appreciate more the language and culture. And then the bullying started and this turned me off. I wasn't as much interested in knowing more. It showed. I think you deserve what your attitude is. I missed my friends in my country. It's very hard not to go back and see your home anymore... ever. I missed my country, the only country I had ever known. And it showed. It's more than just better confidence. I have learned to respect others — treat them the way I want to be treated. And now I respect myself more because of that. Now, everybody call me Mahmoud. It's true, my name is a silver lining. It feels great to

have people calling you by your real name. It makes me feel included.

And no, I do not dream of this girl and Jannah. Not anymore.

But there is another silver lining in my life. Bibi finally made it to the French test and she can join my school. Next year, she will be with me in the same school. I hope in the same classroom, but I try not to hope too much. At least we will be together during recess and at home we can do our homework together. We are so happy, Masha Allah.

But there is a shadow over all my happiness. I will not be allowed to hang around girls. Just when I was getting a “sister” and a best friend in the same spot. Life sucks. Really does. How is Bibi going to be my sister if she has to wear her hijab inside all the time and I have to lower my eyes when I talk to

her? Weird! But it's no use to worry now. And I know that when Allah closes a door, He opens another one. I can prove it too. This story is the proof.

I can't wait to see what other doors Allah will open for me.

UNTNT (Until The Next Time)