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## **Brides of the Jasmine Land: A Collection of Short Stories Exploring Womanhood in the Middle East**

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**BRIDES OF THE JASMINE LAND: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES**  
**EXPLORING WOMANHOOD IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of  
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Batool Alzubi

May 2021

# **BRIDES OF THE JASMINE LAND: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES**

## **EXPLORING WOMANHOOD IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

English

Missouri State University, May 2021

Master of Arts

Batool Alzubi

### **ABSTRACT**

This creative thesis includes four short fiction stories, introduced by a critical essay about rhyming action in coming of age narratives. I discuss the works of John Gardner, Milan Kundera, Charles Baxter, and Mohamed Makhzangi to explore techniques in symmetrical composition and narrative echo. My hypothesis is that rhyming action in coming of age stories can be used as an effective technique to highlight the characters' change and realization by the end of their stories. When reading about a character's coming of age, the reader is not able to spot rhyming action until completing the work and reflecting on motifs. All of the stories in *Brides of the Jasmine Land* share themes of womanhood, faith vs. doubt, and unfairness and injustice.

**KEYWORDS:** fiction, symmetrical composition, rhyming action, short stories, Middle Eastern literature, literary, creative writing

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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## INTRODUCTION

There's a difference between the circle and the spiral. We say the Earth has a circular orbit around the sun, but of course it doesn't. You never come back to the same place, you just come back to the same point on the spiral. That image is very deep in my thinking.

— Ursula K. Le Guin

As a reader of fiction, before starting my journey with my own fiction, endings always interested me. Many times, endings determined my opinion about a novel or a story. I was a reader who always needed a closure, a persuasion, a logical ending. I was always concerned with the story reaching a solution, or just going back to the starting point where there wasn't any external or internal conflict. Looking back at my younger self, I believe a part of this mindset came from the lifestyle I grew up in. My parents, siblings, and I moved around the Middle East. It felt like we were always in a place where we didn't belong. Our accents were always different; we never looked like the unquestionable locals. I never experienced closure or an ending in my family's and my journey, an ending that looked like returning to a home or country, an unchanging state of living. I enjoyed books that stabilized its characters, and I was baffled when I was left with an open-ended or complex denouement.

When I took my first creative writing class as an undergraduate, I found myself struggling with ending my own stories. During workshops, I heard multiple comments like “The ending feels rushed,” “I would like to see more emotions and reflections in the end,” or “You could expand the ending more.” I found myself getting nervous whenever I tried to end my story. I wanted to satisfy the younger reader I was with a perfect resolution and unproblematic characters. Even when writing about complex issues like the Arab Spring or family immigration,

I still managed to create a satisfying ending to issues that were ongoing. My endings were irrational, even to me, sometimes.

My first attempt of creating a complicated ending was in my ENG 315: Creative Writing: Fiction II class with Ms. Jennifer Murvin. It was my first workshop experience, and I was still extremely shy of sharing vulnerable characters. In the first workshop, I presented a story that I hated, and I knew the ending felt very staged, but I was still in the process of finding what it means to have a good ending. I wasn't satisfied with my workshop experience, and I immediately regretted my attempt of staying within my comfort zone of endings. When the second workshop approached, I felt the need to try something new. I allowed my characters, a mother, daughter and son fleeing Syria, to determine their own complex ending. I ended my story with them arriving to the destination, Europe, but the son was lost in the sea during the journey. I realized that the immigrating family's story is complex and should be more focused on the journey itself. When I received my feedback, I found a comment from Ms. Murvin that helped me understand endings more, "What I would suggest is to remove the more overt 'message' writing in the story ~ the final lines, for example, moves us away from the fictional world into the realm of ideas. If you remember "The Things They Carried," there's an essay-like section toward the end, but the story itself ends within the fictional world as the men are carried away in helicopters." I grasped a sense of what endings should do when I reread "The Things They Carried." An ending shouldn't tell the readers what message, or resolution it's trying to deliver. Readers should be able to see the motif and interpret the ending on their own without obvious or staged instructions from the author.

When I began to read about the craft and form of fiction, I found myself constantly interested in discussions about narrative closure. In his essay "Rhyming Action," Charles Baxter



quotes an interesting statement by Robert Creeley, “I begin where I can, and I end when I see the whole thing returning” (619). As Baxter writes, it’s an unsatisfactory mindset to think about fiction as a cycle. The cycle becomes obvious or apparent. Rhyming in the story is an impactful tool in fiction, but Baxter says, “The immediate return of a story to its beginning would be like a rhyme that insists too quickly and bluntly on itself” (620). An ending can’t be sudden and predictable. It should instead unravel itself slowly as a part of crafted action. “The half-remembered images, the unobvious return to something that sounds familiar but not too familiar,” is what Baxter describes as rhyming action. As I continued crafting my endings, I found rhyming action as a useful technique for showing character development, especially characters who go through transitional events. In this introduction, I will discuss how rhyming action has impacted my own writing and characters. I will explore how it creates characters that present real external and internal conflicts, and it shows how my coming of age characters usually end in up in a rhyming situation with a discovery, a better understanding of the world around them.

When I think of my characters in this thesis, I think of the way Milan Kundera describes his characters in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kundera composes his characters like music, transforming them into a motif (52). To Kundera, rhyming action is what he calls “symmetrical composition,” in which “the same motif appears at the beginning and at the end” (52). I wouldn’t say my characters return to their beginnings with the same state of mind, but they return to a similar space of time and place. In the first short story in this thesis, Dina, the main character in “Brides of the Jasmine Land,” falls into symmetrical composition even when she is in what Kundera calls “time of greatest distress”. She returns to where her story began, the same location, but she is a different character now. This creates an important resonance.

In order for rhyming action to be achieved successfully, it needs to come naturally. It shouldn't be forced, and it could have a negative impact on the reader when it's used the wrong way (Baxter 621). Dramatic repetition works "when [it is] registered but not exactly noticed" (Baxter 621). In other words, a reader shouldn't be able to explain it easily, and it shouldn't be announced directly in the writing. Baxter compares rhyming action to watching an intriguing pattern unfolding before knowing what the actual pattern is (621).

The technique of rhyming action, or symmetrical composition, is successful in portraying characters experiencing drastic events or changes that they are still not aware of. Both the readers and characters know that they will be changed, but they still don't know how. As a reader and writer, I find myself constantly reading stories that follow a rhyming action and discovery pattern. I think a great example for a story that portrays rhyming action is "Rhythmic Exercise," by Mahmoud Makhzangi.

"Rhythmic Exercise" introduces to the reader a family living in a state of war in the Middle East. The setting is not given a name, and the characters are anonymous. Makhzangi directs all our attention to the actions and the motif of the story. A sunset-to-sunrise curfew goes into effect, and they "start to feel that they were leading a prison life." The daughter suggests practicing rhythmic exercises that only require a small space. When first reading the story, the reader might think that the rhyming actions are the rhythmic exercises the family is doing through out the whole story. As the narrator describes, "In no time, the whole household began to seem as if it were dancing, all the time, above the din of explosions, sniper shots, depressing news, and increasing curfew hours. This transformation in the fourth-floor apartment likely came under the scrutiny of one of the opposite buildings somehow" (Makhzangi). When the mother is exercising in the kitchen, a bullet breaks into the apartment, hitting the chef's belly on TV.

Makhzangi ends the story with a specific description of the family's mindset and setting, "He killed off all the rhythmic movement that had reverberated in this home, freezing everyone in a scene drastically different than just a moment before: their wide eyes and gaping mouths now reflected shock and terror, yet their open arms still swung left and right and some of their feet were still in midair while they swayed their hips" (Makhzangi). The obvious, constant rhyming action is stopped, and the reader is suddenly thrown back to the beginning of the story, the whole family in one space, staring at each other.

When looking at the beginning and end of the story, rhyming action or symmetrical composition exists. The reader is first not quite aware of it. The story begins with the whole family aware of their state of war and aware of the situation they are in. Once they start exercising, each one of them becomes in their own mental state, not aware of their surroundings. The narrator writes, "They started linking these exercises to an internal rhythm, one that they let guide their movements on each free moment they could find for practice" (Makhzangi). When the bullet breaks into their apartment, their internal rhythms are interrupted, and they are suddenly back to the beginning of the curfew. In other words, the story forms a rhythm.

Small rhyming actions, like watching the TV, also occur in "Rhythmic Exercise." The narrator explains how the TV is failing to do its job of "lightening them up," displaying only images of violence and the state of war around them. The narrator ends the story with a scene of the mother exercising and watching the cooking show when the bullet interrupts and cuts off every form of entertainment again. Makhzangi's story creates a rhyming action within a rhyming action. The family's life ends up looking like a cycle that they can never leave. Makhzangi's characters transform "the fortuitous occurrence" into a motif, as Kundera writes (52).

Both Kundera and Baxter agree that rhyming action is a way to view the world and is an accurate representation of lived experience. Kundera writes that symmetrical composition might look “novelistic,” but, in order to decide, a reader should “refrain from reading such notions as ‘fictive,’ ‘fabricated,’ and ‘untrue to life,’ into the word ‘novelistic.’ Because human lives are composed in precisely such a fashion” (52). And Baxter agrees with Kundera, to an extent, when he writes, “a pattern can also be understood as fate,” and it’s hard for a culture that’s anti-tragic and believes in progress to discuss fate or see life as a cycle. Baxter asserts that creating rhyming action in stories is simply how some writers may view the world (622). I agree with both Kundera and Baxter when I read Middle Eastern literature or write my own short fiction about Middle Eastern culture. When I first wrote my short stories, I struggled with ending a story because I couldn’t see a resolution to it. This is my view of the world, and this is how I grew up. I realized as I wrote more that my stories and fiction sound more natural and real when stories don’t reach a clear resolution. They can end where they begin, but the characters’ emotions are never the same.

“Rhythmic Exercise” is also written by a Middle Eastern author, who views actions in the Middle East as rhyming actions, maybe without intending to categorizing it under this technique. Makhzangi’s life explains where this perspective comes from. He was born in 1950 in Egypt, lived through the June War of the Middle East in 1967, and the October or Ramadan War in 1973. Later, he moved to Ukraine to study medicine and experienced the Chernobyl disaster in Kiev. Perhaps, this explains why his characters are constantly put in rhyming actions, and their stories move in circles.

My story “Brides of the Jasmine Land” uses rhyming action to represent its conflict. I begin the story with Dina, a sixteen-year-old living in Talkalakh, a small town in Syria. Dina’s

story begins in the kitchen at her parents' house, helping her mother with chores. Her parents insist on accepting a marriage proposal from a thirty-years-old groom, who owns a soap factory. She enters a cycle of preparing for her wedding to her future husband, as her mother plans: "Dina's schedule changed quickly after dropping out of school. Mama advised her to find married girlfriends. Avoid Sima with the college plans and rebellious personality. Dina was engaged now, and, as a result, her schedule became packed with cooking classes, meetings with Ali and shopping trips with Ali's mother" (9). While writing Dina's character, I couldn't decide her ending, but I knew her ending wasn't going to be a perfect resolution. My main focus was Dina's journey, and I found that the rhyming action or dramatic repetition that Dina experienced was usually a grounding moment for her and the reader. In the *Art of Fiction*, John Gardner explains the impact of dramatic repetition to the character and reader: "What moves us is not just that characters, images, and events get some form of recapitulation or recall: We are moved by the increasing connectedness of things, ultimately a connectedness of values" (192). In the beginning of the story, I introduce Dina's admiration for Kabbani's love poems. The reader is able to tell that whenever Dina returns to her books, she is trying to ground herself. As Gardner writes, "The reader feels something of the character's distress" (192).

As Dina's wedding planning progresses, her relationship with Kabbani's words changes. The admiration is gone, and instead, she sees his poetry as a fantasy, words that don't mean anything where she lives. In moments like these, rhyming action represents character development. Every time we return to a scene where Dina is holding Kabbani's books, we are able to see that her mindset is changing. When the reader encounters a repeated situation or image, they are able to compare it and form a realization about the image that had come before.

By the end of Dina's story, she is visiting her parents as a wife. She visits her family every few days to give them money from her husband's business. The reader can see the echo of the beginning, Dina sitting in the living room with her parents discussing the proposals. But, it's what Baxter calls a half-remembered image. The reader is far enough from the beginning and is invested in the tragic events Dina experienced, that they have forgotten about the first few scenes in the story. A symmetrical composition doesn't necessarily have to be noticed by the reader. In Baxter's words, the feeling of a memory can be very light. It doesn't have to press hard; rather, "its reverberations sound softly, almost inaudibly, in the reader's ear" (628).

In stories like "Brides of the Jasmine Land," where there is a coming-of-age character experiencing a chaotic event, rhyming actions work to portray the character's endless inner conflict. The reader is able to see that the repeated images will continue to repeat themselves in the character's head. Dina's story is not ending where the pages end. Characters like Dina start in any action: washing dishes, enjoying a family dinner or lying on bed next to their lover. The action starts, and it almost feels like they've entered a washing machine, circling around themselves. Once they are out of the washing machine, they are same, but wrinkled and wet. The readers recognize them but notice that they are now washing dishes differently, or a family member is now missing at the dinner table.

In my story "Not One of Ms. Aisha's Stories," rhyming action occurs through the tradition of telling cautionary tales to teenage girls in their Islamic private school. The story introduces Reema during a secret meeting with her boyfriend, Ahmad. During their art class, she manages to sneak out with the help of her best friend, the narrator of the story. As the action proceeds, there are images of Ms. Aisha, the religious studies teacher, telling cautionary tales to Reema's classroom. In the beginning of the story, Ms. Aisha's stories function only as a way to

characterize Ms. Aisha. To the reader, they sound unreliable and have a small impact on details in the story. The reader becomes invested in the actual events of Reema's disappearance after getting caught outside of the school's gate with Ahmad. The reader will only be able to see the significance and the harshness of Ms. Aisha's cautionary tale when they reach the end.

In both of my stories, I wasn't planning to use rhyming action. One of them I actually wrote before learning about Baxter, Kundera, and Gardner's theories. To see how rhyming action sometimes naturally composes itself is to agree with Kundera's statement that real life is symmetrical, but sometimes we are not able to spot such coincidences in our daily life (52). Perhaps, as a writer, this is the way I view the world. Perhaps this is the way I've lived in the world, physically moving from one country to another, actions rhyming, echoing.

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## BRIDES OF THE JASMINE LAND

Talkalakh, Syria, 2008

Dina sat next to Mama as she rolled the grape leaves and stuffed them with rice. Mama had spent hours stuffing each leaf, rolling it with her long fingers, laying them inside a big pot next to each other. Dina loved how Mama mastered the process of rolling as if she played the Qanun instrument with her light finger touches.

“The smaller the roll, the better,” Mama had always said.

To Dina, she didn't sit next to Mama to learn, but their touching shoulders, the satisfied lip curl Mama made every time she placed a rolled leaf in the pot, and the aroma of Mama's cooking gown made Dina content enough to stay.

Mama had thrown a blanket on the kitchen's floor, creating a big space for the pot, pan of leaves, rice and Dina. The noon's sun shined from their kitchen's window, hitting Mama's thin gown, revealing the shape of her circled breasts underneath the fabric. Around their kitchen's window spread the white Syrian Jasmine, creating a frame that Mama trimmed whenever it overgrew. Dina admired the way Jasmine grew in her town, Talkalakh. It was in every corner, creeping out of every house, spreading its smell in the streets. She liked how the Syrian jasmine forced its existence in their town, filling wide spaces with its whiteness and its faint and delicate smell. Dina always remembered Kabbani's words: “Living near jasmine is like living inside a bottle of perfume.” She wished she was a jasmine tree sometimes, screaming that she existed in every space she stepped in, but she was Dina, shy and silent. Her mother would stare at her face sometimes and say, “Did someone tie your tongue?”

Later that day, Dina sat next to her sister, Sara, on the bed they shared, braiding her thick hair before they slept. Sara was supposed to be a boy, Mama always said. She was supposed to be a brother for Dina. They needed a boy to support the family, to work hard, but Sara came, and Dina was filled with victory when Mama came home with a baby wrapped in a pink blanket. Even though they were seven years apart, Dina still had conversations with Sara about finding her soulmate, or the religious studies teacher they hated in their school.

“Enough with the chitchat about nonsense,” Mama said, interrupting their conversation. “Put your sister to sleep and come sit in the *sala*.”

It was an order, Dina thought. Everything Mama spoke was an order, never a question or a statement. A to-do list that she followed and managed her day around.

When she entered the *sala*, She saw Baba, sitting with his legs crossed, holding a newspaper that covered his face. Dina knew what conversation they were about to have, and it made her heart heavy. She wanted to be a jasmine tree, to choose her own path and fill her own space.

Mama met Dina’s eyes. “Come sit next to me.”

Dina crossed her legs like Baba and waited for him to reveal his face and start the conversation.

“You already know our opinion, and we won’t change it,” Baba said, still covering his face with the newspaper. “You are seventeen and not married. No one is going to marry you if you stay in school or go to college.”

Dina had prepared for this argument all day yesterday, practicing her reasons in order: I’m not ready for marriage, I want to go to college like Aunt Nadia, and some girls in our class still didn’t drop out. She repeated them the day before, but, now, she was silent, as if she was

born without a mouth. All she wanted to do was to grab the newspaper from Baba's hand, rip it apart and scream.

"You heard your father," Mama said. "We didn't give birth to girls so they could go to college."

Dina looked at her mother as she finally spoke her reasons. "Just give me a chance," she said. "Look at Aunt Nadia, everyone in Talkalakh is proud of her."

Baba lowered the newspaper. "You are a stupid girl. How many times did I say don't compare yourself to Aunt Nadia. She was abandoned by us, her siblings and her parents. We left her in the streets like a lost dog. Do you want this?" he said, kicking the air with his leg as he ended his sentence.

"I will wait for two more proposals. Please, only two more proposals," Dina said.

Baba always swallowed her strength with two sentences. When Baba spoke, she could almost see her strength running out of her body towards Baba, and then him, kicking it, strangling it with both of his hairy hands.

The next Friday morning, Dina stood next to her mother as she boiled the tea and mint. Dina loved Friday mornings, especially, when Fairouz was playing. Fairuz with the calming voice that sang, "Oh bird/ Oh bird atop of the world/ Could you tell my beloved what I'm dealing with?/bird?" And Dina knew that she would find a lover somewhere if given enough time. She knew she wanted to be loved, always she asked for love from Mama, but Mama couldn't see beyond the fact that she was a not married seventeen-year-old.

Dina did as she was told. In the living room, she placed the tray with teacups and sat in between Mama and Baba. Dina observed Sara as she sat on Mama's praying rug, scratching the velvet texture with her nails. Baba sipped his hot mint tea and watched the news. He would

usually curse the Syrian government and then warn Dina and Sara to never curse the government in public, but, today, he was calm. Dina thought about all the men who had proposed so far. In her mind, she created a list:

1: Waseem: Tall, dark, 30, worked in his family's dry cleaning business, didn't go to school, avoided making eyecontact with her and asked her why she was so shy before he left as they stood by the door. All Dina wanted to do was to push him, but she smiled at him, noticing his eyes that felt like they were ripping her bright pink top apart.

2: Jawad: Sweet, young, looked at Dina like a person, no job, no degree, would live in his parents' house if they got married, no sisters and two brothers, his mother wanted a hard working bride who knew how to make cheese and bread, his mom touched Dina's hair and said her curls needed some oil before she left.

3: Yahya: No.

4: Sameer: Young and rich, bald, gray suit that didn't wrinkle, Dina could see him drafting away when Baba spoke of money and his need to reopen his grocery store business. *They are using me*, Dina knew this was what Sameer was thinking as he looked at her, and she figured once he left, he wouldn't return.

5: Came today, and no matter who he was, Baba decided he was the one because Baba had no money to feed her. It's the gambling, Dina thought, but Baba slapped Mama when she talked about the gambling as they were having dinner. Rice came out of Mama's mouth, spreading on the dinner table.

Dina heard a knock on the door after *Maghrib* prayer. Mama had told her to stay in her room until it was time to serve the Turkish coffee. Dina looked at herself in the mirror and avoided making eye contact with herself. She felt disappointed in herself and in the books she

read. It was the poetry she read, Mama had always said. Dina cursed Mahmoud Darwish and Nizar Kabbani, blaming them for showing her how it felt like to be in love, for describing love as a rose, for making her heart believe in their words. She felt an urge to light her books on fire, to be a new person before she came out of her room. Dina stared at herself. The blue wrap up dress Mama tied around her waist and the V-neck made her breasts look bigger. Her curls were oiled and her eyes were lined with eyeliner. Dina felt like a woman and promised that she would act like one. She softened the wrinkled dress with both of her hands and followed Mama when she heard Mama's whispers calling her.

"Come quickly," Mama said, scanning Dina with her eyes as she hurried to the kitchen. "Serve the coffee and when you reach Ali, lean in and stop for few seconds after he takes his cup of coffee."

Dina had memorized the traditions so well. She could perform them anytime, even in her sleep. She had watched her mother serve the Turkish coffee with the tray and sit carefully as she smiled at the guests. Mama was an expert. When Dina entered the living room, she trembled and had already lost half of the confidence she'd convinced herself might be hers at last.

Ali sat on their light blue and gold couch in the middle of the *Sala*. Mama had warned Dina to not look him straight in the eyes, but Dina ignored her warning and saw a thirty-year-old, shaved curls, and a navy suit. She hoped to see something different or someone younger. Mama poured six cups of Turkish coffee, and the tray trembled when Dina reached Ali's knees. He was tall, Dina thought. His knees almost reached her waist as he sat. She focused on his shined leather shoes. He moved like an animal stalking his prey as he grabbed his cup of coffee. Don't look him in the eye, she reminded herself. His smell was strong, metallic Oud perfume, like the factory he talked about.

A Ghar Soap Factory is what his family owned. On her way to school, Dina had observed the factory sometimes. She stood in the middle of her school walks to observe the factory workers, wearing shoes that were covered with the green slimy texture of the Ghar soap. It smelled good whenever she passed by the factory, but not as good as the jasmine trees. Dina watched Ali when he talked about the process of creating soap to her father, and she admired his excitement. It made him look more like a person. She focused on the movement of his hands when he spoke of mixing the olive oil in an in-ground vat with water and lye, and the cooling of the soap. His hands moved less when his mother spoke of Dina, her brown eyes and slim body.

“Dina loves watching over me in the kitchen.” Mama made several comments about what Dina liked.

“*Mashallah, Mashallah.*” Ali’s mother always replied with the same two words.

When Dina looked at Baba, he was always smiling. She could see his greedy eyes observing Ali’s leather shoes, watch, and the navy suit. When Ali and his mother left, Baba said, “Perhaps, the best was really saved for the last.”

That night, Dina couldn’t sleep, staring at the ceiling. Sara was asleep by the time Dina washed the eyeliner off her face and unwrapped the dress. She still felt like a woman even after placing her body in the pink floral pajamas. Dina could hear her parents’ voices muffling. When her eyes almost closed, her father’s loud laugh shook her body again.

The next morning, Mama woke Dina up, rubbing her back with her palm. “Wake up, bride, wake up,” Mama said with a sweet voice that Dina only heard when she finished cleaning the house or washing the dishes. Baba waited in the living room. His cup of boiled red tea was next to him, and there was no newspaper covering his face. Dina knew she couldn’t argue any more. She was graduating soon, and no one wanted an educated girl; a graduated girl is hard to

deal with, as Baba always said. Dina listened to the plans and rules her parents had stated, creating a to-do list in her head.

\*

Dina's schedule changed quickly after dropping out of school. Mama advised her to find married girlfriends. Avoid Sima with the college plans and rebellious personality. Dina was engaged now, and, as a result, her schedule became packed with cooking classes, meetings with Ali, and shopping trips with Ali's mother.

A part of Dina was thankful, thankful that she didn't have to move with the stranger husband somewhere far away from Talkalakh. She heard endless stories about wives moving out of Talkalakh and never returning. Dina thought about the idea of the outside sometimes but pushed against it with all of her force once it sounded like it could happen. She visited the city, Homs, with Mama multiple times and saw city girls working in the furniture stores they visited. She saw city girls laughing, walking around Homs' large squared buildings and taking cramped public transportation, but she never wished to be a city girl. Homs felt like a large maze with people bumping into each other all the time. She knew she could never be a city girl in a large maze. Whenever she returned to Talkalakh after a long day in Homs, comfort filled her chest. Talkalakh was enough, she'd always thought.

Only four Syrian families lived in Talkalakh. She came from the Dandashi family, and most of Talkalakh's residents were Dandashis as well, including Ali. They were all related to each other somehow from an uncle or a great grandmother. Talkalakh only had one store of everything; one store of dresses owned by Om Jameel, one store of exported goods owned by Mohammed Dandashi, and one store of leather shoes owned by Sami. Dina liked walking around Talkalakh, knowing the story of each store and person. She walked to school every day, to

Sima's house, to the grocery store. Talkalakh's houses were colorful, some were green and others were bright blue, and the houses were scattered around Talkalakh's endless hills. Dina was glad she was able to stay and not move to a stranger's house in the city, surrounded by hundreds of tall buildings. At least, she was staying on the land of jasmine.

Saturdays were when Dina usually met with Ali. Dina could always smell him before she entered the *sala*. Ghar soap like his factory. She didn't mind the smell of him, but she wondered how strong it would be when they shared a bed together, or when he would climb her body. Dina always focused her gaze on his tall legs, and whenever she caught him staring at a part of her body, her heart hammered.

"Did you drop out of school?" he asked her.

"Yes," Dina answered, focusing her sight on him, hoping to steal a reaction out of him.

"Do you like school?"

"I actually do," she said, knowing Mama wouldn't like the answer if she heard her.

"I liked school, too, you know, but college is not for us Talkalakhians," he said, rubbing both of his palms together. "After I graduated high school, my father hired me as a manager in our soap factory. I manage the stirring process."

"What did you want to be?" Dina said.

"A dentist."

Ali suddenly looked younger in Dina's eyes. She imagined the ten years younger Ali, a fresh high school graduate, wanting to go to college. She would've liked that Ali more. She waited for him to ask her what she wanted to be, but he didn't.

"An author or a writing teacher," she said.

"What?"



“I wanted to be an author or a writing teacher.”

Ali laughed and paused when she didn't laugh back. “Were you serious?” he asked.

“No,” Dina said, knowing she would have to say goodbye to her Najeeb Mahfouz and Nizar Kabbani books.

Mama joined them and led the rest of their conversations as usual. She showed off Dina's quick learning skills to Ali, and he only smiled when Mama was there. Mama was an expert in leading the conversation. She guided Dina to stop talking with her eyebrows whenever she was about to say something that made her less of a wife.

The marriage arrangements were fast, and Baba only talked of money when Ali's name was mentioned. Dina's Mahr was 200,000 Liras, and Baba grabbed the money with both of his hands when Ali came with it. Dina didn't like the idea of the Mahr, exchanging her whole self for money paid by the groom, but Mama said it was an Islamic tradition, and good Muslims never question God's commands. Later that night, Baba took the Mahr when he left to drink Turkish coffee with his friends and never returned it. Mama didn't dare to ask him, and Dina knew where it went.

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Dina managed to cry less in her bed. She cried when Mama threw her books away and when Sara asked her who would braid her hair once she left. She cried, and Mama told her all brides cry. “I cried,” Mama said. “But, look at me now. *Mashallah*. Married with two kids and a fine husband.” Mama's words made Dina's tears fall faster.

During the week before the wedding, Dina had rolled a whole pot of stuffed grape leaves, managed to iron all of Baba's clothes, and even imitated Mama's special Middle Eastern spices. The night before the wedding, Dina grabbed a Nizar Kabbani book she hid from under her bed,

*The Lover's Dictionary*. She bought most of her books from Abu Mahmoud's small library across the street. Abu Mahmoud with his white beard and suspenders waited for Dina outside his store whenever she walked back home from school.

"I have a new book," he would say. "You don't have to buy it, but return it after three days."

Dina had bought some of the books, especially the ones with many quotes about love. Dina loved love but had never been in love. There was Kareem in her third grade class, who she thought was handsome when he recited the Quraan verses with his quiet voice, but Kareem moved to the boys' school in middle school. Since then, Dina was scared to feel love and be loved. She didn't know what Baba's reaction would be if he caught her with a boy, kissing under a staircase or in a narrow street. She knew Baba would break an arm or a leg, or maybe even worse.

When Dina grabbed *The Lover's Dictionary*, she read, "How miserable you are, my lady,/ After today/ You won't be in the blue notebooks,/ In the pages of the letters,/ In the cry of the candles,/ In the mailman's bag./ You won't be/ Inside the children's sweets/ In the colored kites./ You won't be in the pain of the letters. / In the pain of the poems./ You have exiled yourself/ From the gardens of my childhood/ You are no longer poetry." Dina slammed the book, looking towards Sara to see if she woke her up. She cursed Kabbani under her breath. He spoke to her, and she punished him for that, never opening a Kabbani book after that night.

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Dina observed Mama as she smoothed the bottom of her wedding dress. Mama was impressed with the floral embroidery and traced each flower with her finger. Dina stood like a statues in the middle of the *sala*, the dress forming a big circle around her body. Mama and Om

Jameel worked on the dress together. Every day, for two weeks, Om Jameel would come during the mornings to drink tea and work on the dress. They would sit around it on the floor and chat about their own marriages. Even though Dina didn't know what she wanted yet, she still knew she didn't want to be Mama or Om Jameel one day. The dress had lacy sleeves that covered Dina's thin arms, a hidden corset that snatched her waist and a puffed out bottom that made Sara say Dina looked like a cupcake with cream.

Dina looked at herself in her room's mirror. She had spent the past week packing her clothes. Mama had replaced all of her printed pajamas with satin ones and warned Dina to avoid wearing pants at most times, skirts and dresses only. Dina looked at her empty closet and felt a wave of pain land upon her chest. The same wave she had been pushing away from the day Ali entered their house with his leather shoes. She wondered if she could've fought a little more. She wondered if she could run away from Talkalakh with her white dress, but she had no money and no place to go. How far could she go, anyway? It was too late now, Dina thought. She knew Ali waited outside with his black suit.

Mama gave her a talk last night, reminding her of all the rules she must follow at her husband's house:

- 1: Never say no to sex with him.
- 2: Always have his food prepared before he comes back from work.
- 3: Listen more, talk less.
- 4: Allow him to be the man of the house.
- 5: And Dina wrote one above all the rules: Stay numb.

Dina felt like she was part of a play directed by Mama, ensuring the quality and completeness of the marriage. Dina saw Ali sitting in the *sala* when she left her room for the last

time, wearing the white tool around her body. His face had lately adopted the expression of satisfaction, but Dina couldn't recognize what kind of satisfaction, the satisfaction of getting a bride like her, or the satisfaction of fulfilling his mother's wish. Dina grew closer to Ali during their meetings, but she couldn't love him. She tried to recite some of Kabbani's poetry when she thought of Ali, but the lines didn't suit their arranged love. She wanted to love him, but she couldn't love his stiff body or perfect hairline. "He is a good man, but very quiet," Mama said. "You need to crack him open in bed. Middle Eastern men only speak in bed." And just the idea of being in bed, alone, with him made Dina sick to her stomach.

As people came in to greet them, Dina sat next to Ali in the *sala*. The smell of the hairspray the hairdresser had applied on her straightened curls made her smell nothing else. Ali just smiled when he saw her and touched her hand with the tips of his fingers. She wondered sometimes how would Ali go from being afraid to kiss her on the cheek, or touching a part of her body, to having sex with her. There weren't any signals for a transition.

She was glad her wedding dress was big enough to keep people away from getting too close to her. She saw Om Jameel and everyone in Talkalakh walk around her and place some cash between her breasts or inside her palm. The sound of Syrian drums filled the room, rhyming with her heartbeat. Mama roamed around Dina like a bee, giving her constant instructions, "Smile more." "Touch Ali's hand." "Push off your hair to the back. Show off the gold on your chest." Dine always did as Mama said, and Mama still didn't look pleased with her performance.

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Lying beneath the hot sheets that night, Dina watched Ali as he locked their new furnished room. He avoided looking at her in the eyes, and Dina played a game in her head of wanting to catch his eyes. She watched him as he unbuttoned his wrinkled white shirt and undid

his belt. His fingers moved so fast as if he was playing a string instrument. Dina covered her body with the thick blanket. She wore the white satin lingerie Mama gifted her for her wedding night. She had never worn anything like this. The room was cold, but she could feel the heat of her body warming the whole room. When he got closer to their bed, Dina had a better view of his thin arms and long hairy legs. She closed her eyes for few moments, and every time she opened them, the distance between them became smaller.

She saw his eyes crawl over her breasts, stomach and then thighs. He told her she looked beautiful tonight. She stared at him, not being able to let out a smile for the compliment he just gave her. His naked body was now on top of her. He buried his face between her breasts, and his hands positioned her thighs. She closed her eye and focused on the smell of the hairspray. When she accidentally opened her eyes, she immediately placed them on the ceiling above her, avoiding the sight of his dark mustache and veins on his belly. When it was over, it took Dina few minutes to get up and do as Mama said. "Make sure he is able to see the blood stain on the sheets." Dina stumbled to the bathroom and washed him off her body.

\*

Dina adjusted to her life with Ali, and when she visited Mama, she could spot a pleased look on Mama's face. Baba gambled with the money she brought him from Ali every week. "Why don't you nourish your parents with money from your husband's factory?" her father had said during her first week of marriage as he sat on the *sala's* floor. Dina gave Sara a handful of cash every time she visited. "Save them, create your own savings," she would say to Sara. She told Sara she would need the money one day; they might be her getaway before an arranged marriage. Whenever Dina knocked her parents' door, Sara was the one to run and hug her.

One time, Sara asked Dina why she looked so sad, and Dina just smiled. “I had different goals, but now, my only goal is you,” Dina said as she braided Sara’s hair.

Ali was still a quiet man. Dina couldn’t even chat with him in bed. During sex, he would compliment her, but once it was over, he would get up to wash his body and ask if there was any food to eat.

“It’s a good life,” he once said as they both sat on the kitchen table. Dina watched him eat his food and take his big bites of the chicken breasts. “As my dear mother described it. Marriage is good for the soul,” he continued.

He suddenly looked like an animal to Dina. The image was wiped away when she realized she had to reply to his lines. “It’s good for your soul,” she said, scratching their floral tablecloth with her nails. “Not sure if it’s good for mine.”

“Is there something you want?”

Dina flinched, realizing what she had just said. “No. Don’t get me wrong!” She regretted letting out that line right away. You never should ruin a husband’s meal when he is hungry, her mother had said, and Mama’s voice played in her head. “Thanks for everything.” She smiled.

“You are an appreciative wife, Dina,” he said. “Well-raised wife, well-raised.”

Dina closed her eyes and cursed Kabbani in her head one more time.

## NOT ONE OF MS. AISHA'S STORIES

Syria, 2010

I stood by the front door of our gated school, keeping half of my arm inside to make sure the metallic door didn't close. I peeked inside to see if anyone noticed, and peeked back at Reema every few seconds. She stood by the end of the narrow street that led to our school's gate, an old gate that reminded me of the mistake I made every time I stepped outside during school hours. Reema had rolled the sleeves of her shirt and the hem of her long skirt to make it shorter, and untied her braided hair. It turned to brown waves, and I imagined Ahmad surfing between the waves of her hair sometimes. "I won't be late this time, I promise," she said. She turned towards me with her wide eyes that were for sure darker than her hair and walked, expecting me to follow her.

Reema and Ahmad met once every two weeks. They touched, looked around, and whispered things in each other's ears. He held her arm and played with the hair tie around her wrist. She talked and looked at the hair tie casually. I didn't know why I obligated myself to help her, but I didn't mind watching them, and I enjoyed the secret we shared together.

We could see his school from our classroom. It wasn't gated, but somehow it looked more depressing, maybe because the gate made our school look cozier, but not the best kind of cozy. I had a love-hate relationship with the gate, but I didn't bother myself thinking about it most of the time. Our classroom's window gave us a good view of the boy's school's playground, and sometimes we would gather around the window and watch them play soccer. Cheer for teams that have members with blurry faces and names, cheer for them and fight about who won during each match. Reema smiled, looked at me, and pointed at Ahmad whenever he

played. She sat next to me, and sometimes I would catch her staring at the window, especially during Ms. Amal's math class, and then Ms. Amal would walk slowly with her long yellow ruler and hit Reema on her back.

I don't remember how I became friends with Reema, but she was there, and we never decided that we shouldn't be friends. I never hung out with her outside our school, but we called each other to plan her meetings with Ahmad, or to help her understand Ms. Amal's class better.

Ms. Aisha's class always scared Reema, and I could feel a spark of guilt inside my chest whenever she told us one of her stories. One story was about a girl our age who ran away from her house to see her lover and never came back because he kidnapped her. A few days later, her parents found her body some miles away from the school she had run away from. Another story was also about a girl who didn't obey her mother. Ms. Aisha had once asked the girl to lower the sound of the music as she prayed. But the girl kept playing the loud music, so Allah had made her ears vanish the next day when she woke up. When I first heard this story, I slept with my hands over my ears for few days. There was another story, also about a girl who never prayed because she always slept during the prayers. If the call to prayer woke her up, she would ignore them and go back to sleep. One day, she slept right through the call to prayer and never woke up again. I believed the stories sometimes, not because they seemed reasonable, but because of Ms. Aisha's thin eyebrows, which moved with her as she told the story, and her brown pencil skirt. They made her seem like a credible teller. I once asked Reema after Ms. Aisha's class if she was ever afraid of Ahmad kidnapping her. She covered her mouth with her hand as she laughed and said she wouldn't mind. Reema always moved a part of her body when she laughed. She would stamp her feet on the floor, wrap her arm around her stomach, or use her hand to cover her smile.



A part of her body had to move with her, and it made me laugh even if I didn't think the joke was funny.

It was another Ahmad and Reema meeting, so I stood by the gate and watched them kiss. He was taller than her. He had to bend his already bent back more, and she had to stand on the tips of her toes. Sometimes he would wrap one arm around her waist and pull her to reach his height. She said that Ahmad wanted to marry her once they graduated. I told her he had to find a job, and she said he already started looking for one. This is why she agreed on kissing him. But Ms. Aisha said boys never marry girls their parents didn't choose for them. Reema would do a slow jog toward me with a satisfied smile on her face once she was done with the meeting. She told me once that Ahmad had a friend, who would like to meet me. But I sweated from her suggestion, and we agreed that holding the door of the gate was enough for me.

“I need to meet with Ahmad again this week,” she said.

“Why?” I said.

“He said he got me a gift,” she said. “He really needs to give it to me before the end of this week.” Her voice sounded sharper, and I didn't see a point in saying no, so I stood by the gate the next day.

It was hot, and the metallic door burned my arm. Reema and Ahmad walked away, and I couldn't see them anymore. I stood inside next to the door, waiting for Reema to knock. We usually sneaked out during Ms. Shahad's art class. There were forty of us in her classroom, and she never memorized our names. She thought she did sometimes but always ended calling us the wrong names. Her pregnancy bump got bigger every class period, and I was always afraid she would fall and explode. I got nervous whenever she walked around the classroom and couldn't wait for her to sit down, rub her belly, and stare at the ceiling while we painted. Reema took

longer than I expected, or maybe I was too excited to see what Ahmad planned to give her. I could feel a drop of sweat traveling down back, stopping when it reached my skirt's tight waist. I opened the door again, no Ahmad and Reema. I saw Ms. Amal walking closer to the door, so I stepped back and walked to the bathroom. My face sweated, too.

Reema's spot was empty, and the air conditioner hit my back, but I was still sweaty. Ms. Aisha looked at Reema's desk, but didn't say anything. I imagined Reema in front of the locked gate downstairs with her fizzy wavy hair, mad at me for leaving her that way. I waited ten minutes, listening to Ms. Aisha's story about a girl who insisted on wearing skinny jeans even after her mother's warnings. One day, the girl tried to take them off and she couldn't because they were glued to her legs, so they had to cut them off. I liked to look at Rana's face whenever Ms. Aisha finished one of her stories. Her eyes would become wider and her mouth turned to a little circle. It made me giggle, but the spark of guilt stopped me every time. As I tried to act like Reema was present next to me, I asked Ms. Aisha if I could use the restroom. Her eyes stared at me for two seconds. She nodded with a no.

Reema and I never had a clear plan of what we would do if we ever got caught or, more specifically, if she got caught. But we had agreed on some basics that would get us in less trouble: Never show them that we are afraid, deny everything they say, never tell them the truth of what she was doing outside if they didn't know, and never stare at principal Jehan's eyes for more than three seconds. I knew, though, if we ever got caught, I would tremble and forget that these rules existed.

After Ms. Aisha's class, I opened the door of the gate again, wishing Reema would suddenly appear behind me and show me whatever Ahmad had given her. I wondered why the school decided to keep the door unlocked in first place. It was probably a test to see which girls

would break the rules. Their stories would be told as a warning in Ms. Aisha's class, so girls like Rana could circle their mouths.

The final bell rang. As I walked to the bus stop, I saw Reema sitting inside principal Jehan's office on her black leather couch. My whole body felt sweaty again, and I wanted to stop and listen to what was being said. Ms. Amal waved to me with her hand to keep moving and follow the line. At home, I called Reema's house number twice. Her mother answered the first time and her soft voice scared me even though it sounded regular. She answered with, "Reema is sleeping, I will let her know you called." But she didn't ever call me back.

The next day, we stood in our classes' lines, and a young-looking teacher I'd never noticed before came to do a regular check of the rules we have to follow: no nail polish, braided hair, black shoes and white socks. She didn't seem like she enjoyed her job. She saw two girls with mismatched socks and didn't tell them anything. She moved between us faster than Ms. Aisha did and smiled at a girl who had nail polish on. I waited for Reema to show up and join us while we sang the national anthem, but she never arrived. I didn't know what to expect, but I prayed, feeling the guilt that comes when praying only when I needed something. I felt like I used God sometimes, and I didn't know if that was okay. If I had asked Ms. Aisha, she would probably tell me something like, "God doesn't accept prayers from selfish people who follow their own needs and desires." After quick consideration, I was relieved. Because what I was praying for wasn't actually something I needed. It was Reema's problem. I was praying for Reema.

The day was slow, and girls asked about Reema's absence, looking at me. I wanted to go to the principal's office and ask her what exactly happened, but fear made me selfish. I planned not to say anything, or show my involvement unless I was called to Principal Jehan's office. I

froze every time someone knocked on our class's door or whenever I saw Ms. Jehan walking closer to me. But it never happened. I was never called. Opening the gate for her wasn't part of the story. Reema was a good friend for leaving me out. I thought maybe God understood my prayers in a different way, because of my weak phrasing, and decided to just save me.

I phoned five times after I left her waiting at the gate. Her mother stopped answering my calls. Her younger brother picked up once, and it went like this: Me asking him if Reema was there, heavy breaths from him with no answer, me asking if he was still hearing me, more heavy breaths, the sound of Reema's mother asking him who was on the phone, and then nothing.

When I entered the classroom the next morning, I didn't find Reema's desk next to mine. Everyone stared at me as if they knew what I had done to her. That I'd left her waiting. That she had knocked, expecting me to open. But that someone else had instead. And, whoever that was had turned her to Jehan's office.

When Ms. Aisha's class started, she stood, leaning on the table in front of her body. She did that move when she wanted to get our attention and say something wise.

"God doesn't forgive girls who sneak behind their trusted ones' backs and sin," she said. "Remember, no one wants to marry a girl who sins before marriage."

Reema's story was about to be told, and the mysterious disappearance would be solved to those who didn't know. The girls listened as Ms. Aisha spoke about how a good man saw them hiding and committing a sin and had returned Reema to the school and informed her parents. Ms. Ashia's lips moved faster as she spoke, and she moved her hands with the rhythm of her words. Her voice got sharper when she said words like "sin," "girls" and "God." This was the most exciting story she ever told, and maybe even the only true one.

I stopped calling Reema and stopped expecting her return, but I remembered her at least once a day, which I think was enough for a friendship that consisted of phone calls and me opening and closing the gate. Sometimes her memory made my steps heavy and my breath slow, but I tried to remind myself that it was that good man's fault — not mine. One time, Mama asked me about her. I told her she left school, and she wasn't surprised. It was okay for girls our age to stop attending for marriage, or for other reasons like Reema's. I wondered about Ahmad and if he tried to find another way to contact her. But without me that couldn't be possible, so probably he just kept this whole thing a secret and remembered her during the day sometimes. I'm sure he remembered her more than I did, because their relationship consisted of more things than our friendship did.

We graduated from the gated school. Reema and Rana were the only two missing girls from our class graduation. The girls said that Rana got married to a rich doctor. He proposed to her before finals week. One of the girls attended her wedding and said that her hands looked so small when she held her groom's hand. Her dress was a beautiful white with flowers that popped out, her curly hair was straightened, and her lipstick was a dark red that you could see before she got closer to you. I imagined Rana with her thin and tall body, wide eyes that listened to stories, walking down the aisle next to a groom with a lab coat. I told Mama, and she told me she couldn't wait for me to get married, too. She said Rana was a good girl, and she deserved nothing less than a doctor.

I heard stories about Reema's ending, as well. There were a lot of them, and I didn't know which one to believe: The first one was Reema got married to the first man who proposed to her. Her parents were very excited and afraid that he would find out about her old lover, so the marriage arrangements went very fast. The next story was that Ahmad came to Reema's house

and proposed to her, but her parents didn't know that he was the lover she kissed as I watched the gate and watched them. Her parents approved, but she and Ahmad had to hide this big secret their whole life. I thought the next story was the most exciting one: A different man proposed to Reema, and her parents approved, but she was determined not to marry him because Ahmad still lived in her heart. One week before her wedding day, she ran away with Ahmad to somewhere far away. Her parents looked for her, but their search wasn't successful. This story sounded a lot like Reema, and I replayed it in my head every few months whenever I remembered her. I actually replayed all of them, but that story had a lot more things to imagine and daydream about. I hated the last story. It made me bite my nails, shortened my breath and made my tears almost fall whenever I replayed its telling. After Reema got caught, and her parents came to pick her up from Principal Jehan's leather couch, she tried to run away again as she walked to the car, but her father caught her, tortured her, and she might be dead.

## ILLEGALLY ALIVE

I looked around the walls, the shelves and every corner of my room. Every item begged me to choose it, as if Allah gave everything a soul, a breath and an unheard voice. Even the squishy useless toy I won in my fifth-grade spelling bee contest waited for me to grab it and favor it over everything else.

“Not more than three things; we only have this small suitcase. We will buy everything from there,” Mama said, pointing at a small red suitcase we bought two years ago on a family trip to Lattakia’s beach. I looked at the walls. None of the posters really mattered to me anymore. Even the big one of Nancy Ajram. I’d ripped it out of a magazine that Dad got Mama when she was down with flu and lay on the bed all day. I looked at my bookshelves, knowing already what my hands wanted to grab: *The Forty Rules of Love* by Elen Shafik. I looked at the dresser, my jewelry box. Of course, the turtle necklace Dad placed around my neck when I started high school. One more thing. I closed my eyes, ignoring the unheard voices around me. I finally grabbed my bright yellow coat out of my closet.

Mama sat in her room on the floor, barefoot. Her slender chest leaned towards her hands that counted every Lira she’d saved for the illegal trip. It still didn’t seem enough. “Oh, you’re done; show me what you have,” she said, taking the three winners out of my hands. “This is too heavy.”

“Please. I might need it,” I said. Needing it wasn’t the reason. That winter day when Hussam told me to meet him after school because he had a gift for me, his soft lips pressing on my cheeks after placing the coat over my shoulders was the reason.

“Need it in the summer?” she asked.

“All of my other things aren’t heavy, look,” I said, holding the book in my hand and pointing at the turtle on my chest.

“Go call your brother,” Mama said. She ignored me, which most of the time meant she approved.

I entered Mahmoud’s room. He stood up with his two arms around his waist. He looked at his basket of toys carefully. I could tell unheard voices were getting to him, too. Everything in his room became all of a sudden more present and valuable. Rooms transform when people decide to leave them. “Mama is waiting for you,” I said. He turned his head quickly toward me, as if he would lose everything if he didn’t choose something at that moment.

The three of us lay on Mama’s bed. We’d become used to squeezing our shoulders next to each other since the gunshots and bombs started forcing their sounds inside our house. Dad’s disappearance was a strong reality check that no one was excluded in the war.

“Wars have the ability to swallow everything and everyone,” Dad once said. We were all sitting around our small square television screen. Mahmoud thought our television screen was the reason behind all of this. He asked Dad, “What if we just switch the channel?” And Dad pretended he was too focused, but I could tell he still wanted Mahmoud to think Syria was peaceful for a little while.

Now I looked at Mahmoud, and his eyes were already closed. He held a walkie-talkie that Osama, our neighbor, gave him the day before we decided to leave Haritan, our town. He believed he would still be able to update Osama about his latest toys. Mama told him that might work. I looked at Mama, and her eyes were closed, too, but I knew she wasn’t asleep. Her breath was calmer than the fan sound she made whenever she really fell asleep.



I closed my eyelids, but the thought, “This is the last night you squeeze together on this bed” made me open them again and observe the room one more time. I couldn’t see anything, but I could feel the room more when I opened my eyes, as if the room knew I was looking at it. People always say you never know that it might happen to you, but it’s just not something that people say. I really never knew. It had been just another day, Dad lay his legs on the coffee table, and Mama sat by the end of the couch, painting her nails. “Huda, look at this! Look at this!” Dad said, pointing to the television. His eyes grew wider, and his head turned toward Mama. Hundreds of people stood in the narrow street of a city called Dara’a, holding signs with sentences like “The people want the government to fall,” “We want better jobs” and “Stop fooling your own people.” Mama looked at Dad with eyes even wider than his. “May Allah protect us from what will happen next,” she said, forgetting about her three nails that weren’t painted yet.

I opened my eyes again and looked at Mama. She was staring at the ceiling. I closed my eyes again, hoping Mama didn’t notice that I saw the stress in her eyes. Dad’s disappearance had made her eyes watery and uneven most of the time. Maybe if he’d said goodbye to her it would’ve been easier, but he was simply swallowed by a checkpoint. Mama had asked him for bread that day; he took his keys with his right hand and grabbed his wallet with his left. This was his goodbye. We waited for thirty minutes, an hour, five hours, a week, a month, four months and a year. Our two-bedroom house felt less safe, and we always ended up having leftovers. I cried for three weeks. Sometimes I could feel his presence, and other times I swore I could hear his sharp voice calling me. Mahmoud said he once saw Dad when he got up at night to drink water. He’d hurried to Mama’s room, and she cried with him. Mahmoud started sleeping in Mama’s room, and I slowly followed him and trembled next to her, too. People waited for us to

explain and tell a story, but Mama didn't have one, so we started hearing stories. Ms. Dana said her husband's cousin saw him standing outside of his old Honda at a checkpoint. Mr. Kheder said a friend of his saw him in a government-related car. But it doesn't matter, because in all the stories he ended up in the nowhere.

I don't remember which thought helped me fall asleep, but the next I remember was my mother shaking my shoulder softly with a smile that said, It's time to leave. Mahmood sat on the floor, very still, quietly pressing the colorful buttons of his walkie-talkie. Mama had probably told him to give me few more minutes of sleep. I opened my eyes and looked around Mama's room again. The dresser still had Dad's watch on it, and I wondered if Mama ever moved it. The closet doors were open, full of cloth. "We are not selling anything; we will come back one day," Mama said when we first got the news that the money she'd saved was enough for our immigration trip. I didn't feel like we were really leaving, maybe because we weren't allowed to say goodbye to anyone. Mama said a lot of immigration trips got cancelled when anyone found out about them, and people never got their money back, so no goodbyes was a must. She packed the red suitcase with canned beans, corn, chick peas and lentils. Stuff we weren't allowed to eat a few years ago. No one ate canned food when people could grow and make their own food, but since the war started, we ate everything. We got donations from everywhere, countries we never knew existed.

Our first goal was Turkey, and from there we would flee to Europe. "Greece," Mama said after the smuggler told her he found more luck on his trips there. "After settling in Greece for few weeks, we will save money for another immigration trip to Europe. Okay?"

Mama locked the front door of our house and pushed it back to see if it was going to open. She whispered something under her breath while handing Dad's ID to the first smuggler.

She looked at Mahmoud and said, "If anyone asks you 'Is this your father?,' you nod your head. Don't even answer." We both nodded, agreeing to the rule. I looked around Haritan. It felt like I was riding the fastest car. I needed a little more time to look at Mr. Momen's small grocery shop that was always out of everything, the small corner next to our house where Hussam gave me a kiss on the cheek, Assad's Internet Café (the only place in Haritan where you could find an internet connection), my high school and its shattered walls and the tiny hill with no view. I knew I would miss Haritan's hot summers, chilly winters and narrow, dirty streets. I was sad to leave it with memories of gunshots, the bomb that fell next to Ms. Dana's house and the memory of having a father who disappeared.

"To where are you fleeing?" the smuggler asked, looking at Mama from his front mirror.

Her body jumped. He'd interrupted an important thought. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear what you said."

"Nothing important," he said.

He understood that she was simply scared to answer. Before we'd left our door, Mama had said, "Don't answer any questions if he asks. Even smugglers pretend to be smugglers sometimes." The ride was silent, fearful and awkward. The smuggler parked the car in a big empty land that didn't have an end. Other cars were parked, but they were all far away from each other. He handed Dad's ID pack to Mama. Most of the checkpoints we passed were empty, and she thanked Allah under her breath every time.

"My job ends here," the smuggler said. "My friend Karam, who is standing right there, will help you cross the Turkish border."

"Thank you, brother," Mama said.

"Hurry, before they start registering the names."

Mama carried the red suitcase with one hand and held Mahmoud with her other hand. Her brown headscarf was falling back, and her green eyes looked sleepier than before. My heart ached for her. She was there to protect us, but no one was there to protect her. “Let me hold it,” I said, grabbing the suitcase from her hand.

“I will let you hold it later,” she said with her gap-toothed, soft smile.

We stood in two lines. Families formed one line and singles formed another. The singles’ line carried more sadness, but they were already talking, trying to find a family within each other. A lot of the families were missing a member, but behind us stood a complete family, a young couple with a three or four-year-old daughter. She looked at the walkie-talkie in Mahmoud’s hand. “Does it work?” she asked him. Mahmoud lied by nodding. In front of us stood a middle-aged woman with five children; she wore a dark scarf similar to Mama’s.

The second smuggler called our names with his thin lips, took our IDs, counted our money and looked at faces that held all kind of expressions: excited kids, desperate mothers, hopeful fathers, crying kids, sleeping kids, and confused teenagers.

We walked and walked.

And walked.

Mama carried Mahmoud. I held the suitcase. Mama held the suitcase. I carried Mahmoud. Mahmoud pressed on his walkie-talkie with frustration. Mama tripped and kicked a rock. I stopped and caught my breath. A kid cried and refused to walk. A mother cried. A father screamed at his kid to keep walking. Mama talked with the middle-aged woman with the five kids.

“They are not all my kids,” the woman said. “Two of them are my sister’s, but they are all mine now.” She and Mama shared their sadness of losing their husbands.

Mama prayed. I prayed. Mahmoud tried to pray. The young couple took shifts of carrying their daughter. Their daughter's braid turned into a ponytail. Mahmoud fell asleep on Mama's shoulder. I held Mahmoud's walkie-talkie, pressing on the colorful buttons.

The second smuggler looked at us with eyes full of apologies, as if the war was his fault. "We will rest here."

We stopped at another empty land. The soreness of my legs told me we were getting closer to Turkey. The sun was hot, and the trees weren't giving enough shade. We pretended we weren't strangers anymore and sat close to each other. Mahmoud lay his head on Mama's lap, and I lay my head on her shoulder. Mama lay her head on no one.

I pulled the suitcase near my body and grabbed *The Forty Rules of Love*. "It's special, read it when you are in desperate need of good time," Hussam had said as we sat on the viewless hill for the last time. The week after, he left without a goodbye to a city that I can't pronounce in Europe. I try not to be mad at him, but sometimes I am, and it doesn't make me feel any better.

The smuggler interrupted our short-lived peace. "We have one more hour to reach Turkey. From there will take a boat to Greece. I want you all to be patient; we still have a long way to go."

We walked, walked, and walked.

"Rest," the smuggler said with more apologies.

We stood next to the rubber inflatable boat that was supposed to hold our lives for the next few hours. I looked at it with fear, knowing it had betrayed people and left them lost inside the sea.

"The Mediterranean Sea," a sea that rang fear and hope in our hearts. A sea that contracted itself by giving some people a path to live and swallowing others for being less lucky.

We didn't stand in lines this time. We stood together, forming a giant mess of lines, circles and different shapes, pushing each other to meet the rubber boat for the first time. My legs grew heavier and my arms dangled like a rag doll's. Mama's headscarf fell closer to her shoulders, and Mahmoud held his walkie-talkie closer to his chest.

The smuggler announced, "Families with kids please come first. We will try to keep the kids in the middle of the boat. Singles please sit by the edges. My friend is selling life jackets, \$30 each. If you want please wait on the side." Five single men walked toward the smuggler's friend for life jackets. Mama held Mahmoud with her hand and looked at me to walk faster towards the giant rubber boat. No lifejackets for us. The boat lowered as we stepped into it. It was light and kept reminding us of how unsafe it was.

"Just pray," Mama said, looking at the fearful tears I was unable to stop. Mahmoud was confused about my tears; it was a fun activity to him, safe as long as Mama was next to him. It was always safe when Mama was around, but she was just another human with a greater power to hide her fear.

Next to us sat the young couple and their daughter. Her mother braided her hair again, and her circled green eyes made her look like a doll. Her father carried her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. She was too busy examining the rubber of the boat. "How old are you?" I asked her. "Four," she said, looking at her mom to make sure she said the right number. Her mother nodded and smiled at me. For a second, I felt jealous, and mad for feeling jealous of a four-year-old with a father.

Mama prayed as more people stepped into the boat and as the boat lowered into the water with every new and hopeful step.

The first few minutes of the rubber ride were manageable. The waves hit the boat gently, and they helped Mama close her eyes and put her head on my shoulder. I was still holding *The Forty Rules of Love* in my hand. I opened it and forced myself to believe it would really create a special time. I found myself forgetting where I really was, and I could feel the walls of my room forming around me, my cozy bed supporting my back, Dad's voice telling I've read enough pages today, and Mama's warm voice calling me for dinner.

Rule thirteen caught my attention, "Try not to resist the changes which come your way. Instead let life live through you. And do not worry that your life is turning upside down. How do you know that the side you are used to is better than the one to come?" I read it twice, and disagreed both times. These quotes are for people with a bearable amount of sadness. I would've liked this quote if I'd read it two years earlier when my biggest fear had been Mama or Dad finding out about whatever was between me and Hussam. I disagreed because my life wasn't only turning upside down, my life was falling out of my hands.

I continued reading, stopped again at rule thirty-eight: "It is never too late to ask yourself, 'Am I ready to change the life I am living? Am I ready to change within?' Even if a single day in your life is the same as the day before, it surely is a pity. At every moment and with each new breath, one should be renewed and renewed again. There is only one way to be born into a new life: to die before death." I disagreed again. I wished every single day of my life was the same. I missed sitting at the dinner table every day at 6:00, listening to Dad's loud chews and bites, I missed Mama's less watery eyes and I missed Mahmoud's answerable questions.

The father of the four-year-old screamed, pointing at a five-foot wave that traveled in our direction. There was a rising sound of prayers mixed with the screams of men, women and children crying. Mama opened her eyes fearfully.

“Be quiet, be quiet, be quiet...” the smuggler said, “We are taking a different direction.” The wave got closer, traveling faster. The single men who were sitting by the edges started squeezing themselves inside the boat. We looked like a big rectangle of glued human bodies. A mother holding her baby vomited; no one noticed. Our eyes were glued to the wave, a few feet away from us now. It hit us, swallowing everyone under the water for a few seconds. The rubber boat rose above the water again. Mahmoud climbed to Mama’s upper body, crying with fright. I tried to hug both of them, swallow them with my arms, but my arms were too short. No one was at the edge of the boat anymore.

I, Mama and Mahmoud turned into one body with an amorphous shape. “Allah protect my children Allah end this trip in peace, Allah save us,” Mama whispered underneath her breath, holding me and Mahmoud tightly with everything in her body. Another wave, more prayers, more tears. We looked to the right to see another large wave, ready to crash into us. Mama held us tightly and screamed, “Please, Allah, please, please, please....” It hit us, swallowing one of the single men. His friend screamed with anger and anguish. We all tried to find any signs of him, but nothing. Every time someone thought they saw something, a wave came and blurred our visions again. Mahmoud and Mama’s bodies trembled, and I could feel my body vibrating. We were wet, hopeless. The four-year-old’s braids were wet, but still in place. Her mother held her with her legs and arms, and her father put his head between both of them, screaming Allah’s name.

The sea calmed and decided to be merciful. Mahmoud’s body was still trembling, and I heard him tell Mama, “I peed my pants.” Mama kissed his forehead and told him to not worry about it. His eyes weren’t curious anymore, they were staring at the sea with confusion. Mama



looked at me and wiped my tears, tears I didn't feel. She kissed my wet hair with a hidden apology. Her brown scarf was now on her shoulder, her eyes still warm.

I looked at the guy who just lost his friend. He was ashamed, looking at the sea for any signs of his friend's red t-shirt. I wondered how long they had known each other. What was the last thing his friend told him? What did he want to become when he was young? Did his mom tell him to inform her once he arrives? How would his family receive the news? Which town did he leave, and which street was his favorite? Why was he the unlucky one? Why did the nowhere choose him?

Even though the sea was calm, Mama still held us tightly, turning her head in every direction.

"Ten more minutes," the smuggler said. He wasn't scared. It was probably his third, fourth or fifth trip.

Mama thanked Allah under her breath, and I wished I had her faith, believing in Allah's plan even if it meant almost dying.

"Five more minutes," the smuggler said. We'd lost our sense of time and our sense of place in the sea. We had one thing on our mind: Arrival.

I saw the land getting closer to our rubber boat, Mahmoud was excited and curious again. He had lost his walkie-talkie, but didn't notice. Mama thanked Allah. I held my wet book in my hands.

Closer. Closer. Closer.

Arrival. Everyone started jumping off the boat before we even reached the land, fearing the boat's betrayal. Mama with an effort stood up, holding us tightly, her legs trembling. I couldn't feel the weight of my body. I'd lost it in the sea. I could only feel my soul flying toward

the shore. We stepped on the land. Mama vomited; Mahmoud watched her. I held her hair away from her face; she kissed my hand and kissed Mahmoud's red cheeks.

A man with a light blue and navy uniform said, "Everyone line up here; I won't repeat myself. Line up here or you won't be registered. Here, here, here!" he continued, pointing with a black stick he held in his hand. Mama hurried; we ran with her.

"What's your name?" another man with the same uniform asked.

"Huda," Mama said.<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

"Are these your kids?"<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

Yes," Mama said, nodding her head.

"Huda you are number 7683, and your kids are number 7829 and 7982," he said.

Mama nodded.

## AFTER WE CROSSED THE BORDER

It would be warm day in Turkey, and warm days usually remind us of our hometowns Homs, Aleppo, Latakia, Talkalakh and Kesab. We came from everywhere; from towns that some of us didn't know existed. We look the same, even though we were very different before the war, but, now, we all had that look. The look of someone who understood what it means lose something. Our losses range from a brother killed in a battle, a father kidnapped from a checkpoint, or a sister killed by a bomb. We all know that we were losers in a sense, and we all decided to leave Syria to avoid more losses.

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We had different destination goals when we met in Kesab, but most of us were content with Turkey, a few miles away. Some of us wanted the higher risks and believed we would be able to cross the sea, but many more of us were occupied by fear, and Turkey was near. Before we shared our stories, the smuggler counted us. He counted us in between chats and water breaks. The numbers didn't change for the first part of the trip, but all of us knew that it decreased by the end of the trip.

During the breaks, we talked about the husbands we lost when they left to get us bread, the three children we now have to raise and protect from the bad memories they collected, the sisters who escaped before us and arrived in Germany or Greece, and the brothers and cousins who never did. We talked about the jasmine that grew in our backyards, the factories we owned and lost and our favorite pieces of furniture that we left behind. Talking required deep breaths, and it could never be done without facial expressions, so, we avoided it during our walks and were only allowed to whisper those stories when we lay down on the soft sand. After sharing

stories, we often slept and some of us never did; our eyes were always wide-awake. We always thought and dreamed about home and people we knew, whether we were sleeping or awake. We dreamed about our mothers with their calm voices and white headscarves. We dreamed about our husbands' bodies floating in the air, waiting for us to grab them and bury them the way they wanted, and the wives we left behind with three or four kids. When we woke up, we were shivering and wanted to continue the walking.

Our one job during the trip was to not exist and to not die. We had all practiced not existing during the years of the civil war. We mastered the ability of not focusing anyone's attention on us. Most of us avoided everyone on the Syrian streets except for our families. Others referred to us as the cowards because we didn't fight. We didn't form any alliances, and for the most part we stayed in our houses, only leaving when we are hungry or sick. We held this shame with us, and we knew the shame would grow bigger if we survived and started a good life.

We were kind to each other, but we weren't willing to share our snacks and water with each other. We were prepared with lentils, chickpeas and tuna cans and a lot of water. These were the only things we carried inside our bags and backpacks. Some of us threw a necklace or a bracelet from a loved one or a father between the cans, and some of us didn't want anything from the past to come a long or present itself to us after we had already moved in. Some of us couldn't digest the amount of lentils and chickpeas we ate in three days, and our stomachs were making noises, forcing us to throw up everything we ate sometimes. We traded favorites with each other; oh, you like the chickpeas, give me can of tuna. Some of us didn't trade, didn't eat and gave up on walking. We had to leave them behind, and the smuggler warned us to not look back at their lying bodies. We learned long ago to never look behind when we are losing, but some of us still did, and our bags and legs became heavier.

Most of us were women with colored headscarves, pink, floral, beige. We looked like pinpoints on a map from afar. Some of us were men with thick beards that we once regularly shaved and wondered if we would be able to afford razors upon arrival. Some of us carried kids that we observed in our breaks as they were jumping across rocks, sleeping next to us, and wished we could be them. We wished to be rocks, someone watching the news about us, and the us before the war. We wished to be everything and anything other than our bodies, and the things we carried.

We talked about what was waiting for us further into Turkey. Some of us had never left Syria before the trip, but many of us had travelled around the Middle East, and had visited Turkey, Greece, Europe before as students, doctors, engineers, business owners or tourists. The people in Turkey looked like us but spoke in letters and words we didn't understand. The Turkish didn't speak Arabic, and few spoke English. We saw the streets of Istanbul from Turkish translated series before the war: Taksim square and Gezi Park. The streets were wider. The people looked happier and healthier. Some of them despised us. The mountains were higher. The parks were greener. The Baklava and the stuffed grape leaves tasted different.

More of us gave up and decided to return, but the smuggler warned again that we would regret it. The return without him was dark, and longer and the stops were more dangerous. Most of us stayed and convinced ourselves that we are close, a few more days left until we are facing Turkish officers, waiting to be taken in or shot for our illegal action. Most of us thought about the first option.

We tried to not complain about the mosquitoes, the sun that burnt our necks and faces, or the rocks that left marks on our skin after our naps. We heard stories about others who traveled during the winter, and the wind that froze some of their kids before they arrived. We were

thankful for the summer's sun even when it made us dizzy, running for the nearest shaded tree. We believed that complaining could bring us bad luck, and it was the last thing we needed on the trip. We avoided philosophical questions in our heads: Why were we able to escape this far? Is it luck? Is it Allah? It is Jesus? Or is it the professional smuggler? When one of us asked a question or complained, we would remind each other of luck, Allah and all the untouchable things that could impact our fates if we became ungrateful. Instead, we tried to think about the stories of the ones before us who left and now own Syrian restaurants and businesses, the ones who escaped the camps and paid their way out, but we avoided thinking about the ones we left.

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When our smuggler told us we had crossed the Turkish-Syrian border, and, now, we were on Turkish land and soil, we stopped. Some of us thought about running to the Syrian land again, running back to the houses we left behind, the elderly parents or the jasmine tree on the corner. Some of us were happy and hated the Syrian land itself for the struggle it gave us. But the little pieces we carried from back home suddenly gained value, and the necklaces weren't just necklaces, they were necklaces from our land, Syria. We would show it to our children and say something like, look, this necklace once existed in your home country, the home country you never got to see, but you are still supposed to love it, okay?

After we crossed the border, we cried, and some of us knew that we would never return anytime soon. We had already made plans about bringing the rest of our families. We fixed our headscarves constantly; they were also pieces of back home.

After we crossed the border, we knew our trip would be a secret we wouldn't tell to anyone Turkish. We wouldn't tell the job interviewer, or the shop owner that we crossed the boarder illegally. We wouldn't tell the stranger on the street how we ended up in the same place

as them. We wouldn't tell them about the rocks, the walking journey or the people we lost along the way. We were supposed to look regular, like people who never experienced what we had experienced. Like people who woke up, went to their jobs and returned home safely for every single day of their lives. We knew how to pretend, to not exist and to blend our problems with their problems.

After we crossed the border, we saw the checkpoints and two officers. The shorter one saw us and pointed to the other officer towards us. They were familiar with us; they'd seen hundreds of us. We learned that once we saw their faces, we had two options: ask the officers to transfer us to a Syrian refugee camp or run from the officers to the nearest city or village. Some of us had family in Turkey and wanted to see them, to avoid the cold tents of the camps and the fight for the way out. Some of us were content with the tent. We had already fought, and, now, we were tired of running and walking. The familiarity on the officers' face comforted some of us and made us believe that the camps wouldn't be as bad as we heard. We hoped we would be the lucky ones again.

We ran when the rest of us talked to the officers. We ran like we weren't walking for three days, and we didn't stop when we heard the officers shouting, or when we heard the gunshots. One of us was shot in the leg, and he tried to continue running, but the more he tried to keep up with the rest of us, the more his screams became louder. He crumbled on the ground, and none of us looked behind. The sound of the car engine made us run faster and separate like the pieces of a broken puzzle. We spread between the Turkish hazel and wild maple trees. We blended in between them, and some of us covered our mouths to stop our loud gasps for air.

When we crossed the border and hid between the trees, some of us had plans to contact a brother who had already done this before us. The brother was in Germany and had promised that

working in the Arabic restaurant at the end of the street is enough money to get started. The brother explained that we had to wait for another smuggler in Turkey and take the Mediterranean Sea trip. Some of us wanted to stay in Turkey, but not in a camp. Our cousin had told us about the curse of camps: once you are there, it almost feels impossible to get out. Some of our families were already living in camps, the Altinozu camp was one of them, but we were here to help them get out and work in the city. In the camps, there was the karate teacher who once was the fourth best karate champion in Syria. He has more than fifty students in the camps, imitating his leg kicks. In the camps, there was an art teacher who once taught children how to draw houses and flowers in a school in Aleppo. In the camps, there was a student who came from a family of eleven siblings. Four of them were still in Syria and some were in Jordan. The student was her family's hope to help them escape and reunite in Turkey. In the camps, there was the ex-owner of a soap factory in Syria who convinced two camp managers to bring him some tools and olive oil to start working again. In the camps, everyone was trying to gain back parts of themselves.

When we crossed the border and hid between the trees, some of us walked for three days and ran from the officers to look for their lost husbands. He went on the same trip five weeks ago, but we never received the phone call he promised to make. We asked about him in the camps and wept when the bad scenarios controlled our thoughts. Our houses felt empty without our husband, and the promise for a better life he made before he left us felt impossible. We decided to take the same trip and fulfill the promise by ourselves.

After we walked away from the trees, some of us became friends, and we decided to continue our journey together. We continued walking to Antakya. Our friend who immigrated before us had told us about organizations that would help us once we arrived. We arrived to Antakya late at night. We had little money left, and we knew that sleeping in a cheap hotel for



the night wouldn't be a good idea, but our bodies needed it. We knew what the receptionist thought when we handed him our Syrian IDs and we asked for a room. He knew who we were when he observed our dirty shirts and sunburnt skin. We had tried to clean our bodies with water from a public park fountain, but the signs of our trip needed days to disappear. When we laid our backs on the cheap hotel beds, we realized how exhausted we were, and our heads suddenly felt dizzy. We didn't realize we had fallen asleep until the sun hit different parts of our bodies in the morning, reminding us of the journey we had to continue.

After we walked away from the trees, some of us were exhausted and made the decision to return to the checkpoints, declare our status and ask for a camp refugee transfer. When the two officers saw us coming back, they had a smile on their faces. One said something to his partner in a language we didn't understand, but we knew it was about our lack of courage, again. They moved us to a tent that we didn't see when we were running, and there were hundreds of people like us, waiting to be transferred. The other groups of people told us we might get deported back to Syria, and our bodies shook more when we thought about this possibility. We prayed they would find spaces for us. The other group told us the wait was going to be long, two days or three days sometimes. We didn't mind the wait whenever they turned on the fans and we were drinking as much water as we wanted. A few days later, some of us were deported back to Syria, and some of us were transferred across camps in Turkey.

After we walked away from the trees, some of us knew only the easy part of our journey was over. We met with another smuggler by the Turkish border, whom we paid all of our savings to. The smuggler was sharper than our previous one; a big scar covered half of his face, and he didn't tell stories when we walked to the bus. The bus took us from the Turkish border to Mytilene. He provided us with more canned food, but it had Turkish labels. It made us miss

home more. More of us gathered near the coast of Turkey, and we squeezed ourselves on a little boat heading to Greece. We didn't look back at the ones we lost again.

After we walked away from the trees and had finally arrived to Athens, our smuggler revealed our next options as we stood near Omonia Square. Most of the smugglers were Arabs and Kurdish, who were famous for their trips and work. They competed with each other between the cafés in Omonia Square. No one died in my last trip; come with me. You can get to Europe by boats, by truck and by fuel tank. The smugglers negotiated prices with us, and we turned and counted our money. They told us we can get from Greece to Milan by car for \$6,000, but we knew weren't going to afford this amount of money even in months. We chose the fuel tank, the cheapest and most guaranteed method. The smuggler guaranteed us arrival, but he didn't guarantee us to be alive. Bang on the side of tank when you are giving up, the smuggler warned us. At night, some of us were determined with the fuel tank trip, and another silent smuggler dropped us off at an industrial zone. The smell of fuel and iron filled our lungs before we entered the tank. Some of us started praying as we crawled under the truck, and squeezed our bodies inside a tiny door. Our bodies were now formed like dough, leaving no space for anything to come in between us. One of us gave up when the engine started, banged on the door and left the rest of us behind. He was angry at everything, even us and called everyone on the trip stupid for choosing death. The engine was loud, and we were only able to hear our thoughts. It was hot and our skin burnt, but we imagined ourselves by the beach in Lattakia. We thought about the Lullabies our mothers sang to us before sleep, even though we were adults, but the images that came with lullabies comforted us, "When will Dad come?/ He will come at 6:00/ Will he come on foot or ride?/ He will come riding a bike / Is it red or white?/ It is white like cream?/ Please open the way/ and salute him." Some of us thought about the kids we left behind, waiting for us

to send more savings. When the driver stopped, we realized we had been inside the tank for more than ten hours and, now, it was time for us to leave. The smuggler returned to being a stranger, and we walked away, smelling like oil rubber. Our headscarves, clothes and mustaches were covered in black squishy liquids.

After we walked away from the trees, some of us took a bus to Istanbul where we were planning to meet a father, mother or a sibling. Some of us prepared for the meeting more and spent extra money on a new dress for the husband. We changed in the fitting rooms and noticed how our eyes became hollow when we looked at the mirrors. We didn't know what expression to make when we stared at ourselves for too long. There was an unfamiliarity that crept between our bodies and the images on the mirrors. We wore the new headscarves, the new dresses we replaced the ripped shirt with. Some of us couldn't wait and ran to knock on the doors of our siblings' new apartments. We thanked the god we had prayed to when we saw each other, and then hugged. We observed our siblings' new mattresses, their new cloth and the kitchen appliances we never used when we lived at our parents' houses. Their bodies looked different, thinner but tougher. Our fathers were older, and they couldn't stand up anymore when they practiced the five prayers; they sat on a chair or the edge of a bed. Their prayers were longer. Some of us started praying more, and some of us considered starting to pray.



Ten years after we crossed the border, we are in Germany, Jordan, Turkey, Hungary, the United States and almost everywhere we could pin on a map, except for Syria. We learned their languages, but we are still easily recognizable.

Ten years after we crossed the border, we married, became widows, graduated from colleges, gave birth to children that will never be able to see the Syria we lived in. Some of us fulfilled the promises we made to our families before we left, and, now, we have them with us. Our families packed more pieces of home and followed us after asylum approvals. But, some of us lost more family members. All of us learned how to hold grief by the hand and live with it.

Ten years after we crossed the border, some of us are still in camps teaching karate, arts and Turkish. Some of us paid our way out of the camp and own a beautiful house in the suburbs. Some of us work as smugglers, and some of us are still in the tiny apartment building we rented when we first arrived to our destinations.

Ten years after we crossed the border, we still teach our kids about Syria. Syria is in the songs we play, the documentaries we watch and the prayers we make. Syria is in the people who are still back home, exchanging phone calls with us, telling us to return.

Ten years after we crossed the border, we still dream about our land. We dream about the smell of the faint jasmine tree and swear we smelled it in our sleep. We dream about our grandparents' gardens, the stomachache after eating too much berries. When we are awake, we feel the stomachache. We dream about the beginning of the revolution, us running from explosions and gunshots. When we are awake, our hands are clenched. We dream about Shukri's grocery market across from our house, the sweet Syrian cucumbers, and we write how much money we owe Shukri in his small debt notebook. We dream about boats, seas, fuel tanks and buses with strangers. We dream about running from no one in the woods of Turkey, running from two laughing officers, and getting shot when we are able to see the borderline. Ten years after we crossed the border, we all dream about the ones we left behind and the ones waiting for us to be back.