

## Secret Codes

**D**uring my last year of high school, I began to move away—emotionally—from the people, the customs and the laws that had confused and then infuriated me as I came to terms with the size of the penalty that's exacted for being a girl instead of a boy, that denied me fair opportunities and even put my life at risk. It took time for this separation to occur. Like a ship that is docked in a harbour and fastened by gangplanks to the land, I was attached to my family, to my country and even to many of our customs, like the way we stay close to our cousins and uncles and aunts. But just as a ship pulls up anchor and begins to slowly but surely shift off the shore, I too was cutting the ties that bound me to pretty much all that I knew.

That's a lot of poignant baggage for a seventeen-year-old to carry around. Not only that, but as I examined the conditions in my life that I now determined to be intolerable, I had to keep all of it to myself because telling would mean risking the wrath not just of my family but even the government of Saudi Arabia. Their response to my decision to reject

what they stood for could run the gamut from shaming and shunning to locking me up or even killing me. Criticizing the religion, the government and the farcical centuries-old customs is not acceptable in Saudi Arabia. So although it was painful to hide what I was feeling for fear of this retribution, my own silence was the protection I needed. But it didn't stop my curiosity, which is what drove me back to the internet and the illegal sites that provided answers to the questions I had been mulling over for most of my life.

I was still searching online for information about people who were in a similar position: atheists, critics, feminists, homosexuals and people who opposed the government. They were perplexed, disgruntled, angry and, like me, they had tried and failed to change the laws that allow families to kill daughters, police to threaten and harass anyone they choose, and the government to refuse to acknowledge human rights. As much as meeting people like this online was liberating and refreshing, this was also a time of psychological pain. I was coming to terms with a life of being forced to do what everyone else demanded that I do, of being beaten and oppressed by people who were supposed to love me, of being educated by teachers who thought they owned my body and my mind.

That was the state I was in when I stumbled upon an online connection that led me to an extraordinary underground network of Saudi women runaways. It was bedtime. I was surfing around various internet sites and, by an amazing coincidence, found the Twitter account of a woman who lived in Canada. I texted her and asked her how she'd managed to get to Canada and what she did to get a visa. She replied right away and told me exactly what she had done. Her informa-

tion was easy to follow. I texted her right back and, after a few more helpful messages, felt safe enough to tell her my story. I trusted her enough to admit that I wanted to run away. I shared my preliminary plan with her and said I was worried about whether or not it would work. By now I was sitting on the edge of my bed, fixated on my phone as though I was holding not, it but the hand of my rescuer. I couldn't believe I was having this conversation with a woman halfway around the world in Canada, a woman who seemed to know everything I needed to know about escaping. She asked me a few questions to make sure I was determined to leave. Then she told me that there was a group on a social media site who had the same feelings and well-thought-out ideas and who knew how to help each other. She explained that they were all girls, most of whom used fictitious names, and that they never shared personal information.

She gave me the secret code to access this site that helped girls escape and told me to create a code name for myself. I felt as though I had just received the keys to my own kingdom when I entered my code name—Sasha, after the cat that I adored—and first met the people in that undercover site who opened the world to me and became my lifeline. Without them I would never have made it to Canada. Once on this clandestine site, I was hooked, and I spent every free hour I had learning, examining, testing and, finally, plotting my escape.

This was a network of young women—a private chat room—who were like-minded in their views about the status of women and girls in places like Saudi Arabia. The girls I met there all shared the same issues and the same desire to either change the country we lived in or leave it. There were

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subgroups, some of them with men as well as women who were also interested in getting away and living in a foreign country. I felt safe with the group of girls. Even though our identities were hidden, they very quickly became a family to me. We shared information, planned together, worried about each other. When one girl recounted a story about her father beating her and denying her one human right after another, the shared angst for her was palpable. Each of us jumped into the conversation with advice about the need to stay hopeful and how to go about making a change in her life. There were so many good ideas being shared, and so much support, that I felt a powerful sense of belonging. For example, they all had tips about how to get a travel permit without asking your guardian, who would never approve of such a thing. These women knew how to get themselves off Absher—the app that allows guardians to control the movements of the women in their lives—and get a travel permit secretly. It was a tricky procedure, and dangerous too, because the government would hunt down any Saudi national who tried to flee the country. The girls provided excellent tips on how to trick the government to get papers, how to know when to make a run for it, and when to use a fictitious name and number to cover your tracks as you created your escape plan.

For me, it was like a homecoming: I was no longer the odd one in the group, with ideas that challenged the status quo. The people I met on this chat site were mostly from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, but also from other countries that use the male guardian law to control the lives of women and girls. Some were ex-Muslims; others had already escaped. But everyone on the network was bound by

solidarity and secrecy. They were all against the guardianship law, and although some planned to stay in their countries and fight for change, others were looking for an exit from the state that mandated a crushing repression in their lives. Most didn't know each other except through the online meetings, but the bond they had built with one another was immediately obvious and the trust factor powerful and useful. It was a support group that worked to help everyone who joined, at whatever stage they were at in their lives. With nowhere else to turn for advice and information, they gathered like supersleuths online and shared their knowledge and tips and support, one to the other. They sustained me and made me feel my dream was possible, that all was not lost.

The stories they told were as inspiring as they were encouraging. One said she had to leave the day before writing her final exam in her last year of university because her escape hatch was closing. Her friend, who was also planning to run away, was arrested. She feared staying even one more day, which meant giving up the degree she'd studied for during the last four years. Another described numerous carefully planned escapes that she had to abandon at the last minute because of an unforeseen glitch. And one girl who escaped still had braces on her teeth; she had to have them removed once she'd claimed asylum. The ones who had already escaped told vivid stories about the snags in their plans and the perils they ran into. That's how I found out that the border guards in Australia might ask to speak to my father when I arrived. The network girl who had escaped to Australia told me to make arrangements with a boy who would take the call and speak as my father. These networkers had planned and presided over many escapes and had all

kinds of useful tips—such as buying some time in the initial stage of the escape by removing the SIM card in my phone and relying on Wi-Fi in airports and cafés so no one could trace my whereabouts.

Until meeting the others, I thought Saudi Arabia was the only country that treated its women like this. In fact, I always saw places like the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait as being much more progressive countries, where the rights of women had made significant strides forward. But ultra-conservative families, the abuse of women and girls, and governments that hand the control of women over to male guardians are common in these places as well.

There was a lot to learn: how to book an airline ticket online and apply for a visa without anyone knowing; how much money to save and how to stash it away in a secret bank account so no one would know about it. Escaping is the toughest step but not the only one to consider. Once arriving safely in another country, you need to know how to apply for asylum, and how to continue your education or find a job so you can pay your way when the money you have saved runs out—these are all critically important steps. The network has that information and feeds it out online like training courses—first this, then that. It taught me almost everything I needed to know. But apart from being a digital how-to-escape guide, this is the organization that pumped up my confidence in myself and assured me that my decision to abandon all that I knew was the right one. And the women all related to the perils involved in eluding family and authorities when secretly booking travel and carefully deciding when to run and where to run to. Authorities in Saudi Arabia are naturally suspicious and are always on the

lookout for girls who step out of the lines they were raised to stay within. These women knew that so-called honour was the noose around all our necks.

As time went by, I became involved in the escapes of several girls. I think it's fair to say that together we shared the exhaustion and the psychological pressure whenever an exit plan failed. But the group was steadfast in helping each girl every step of the way—whether stealing your father's phone to get access to your personal information or finding supporters in the asylum country. Even if you're not a well-known Saudi, the embassy of Saudi Arabia in the country you choose will contact you, try to lure you back and eventually try to have you arrested. Three of the women in the group I joined became my own tightly knit support unit when I came closer to acting on my plan. They were the ones I was texting from the car in Kuwait and from the airport before I left for Bangkok. We had become each other's best friends.

Some of the data I gathered came from a website. The site is visited mostly by women like the networkers I ended up with, those between the ages of eighteen and thirty who are desperate to leave the abuse in their lives and begin anew in a country that's safe for women and girls. Most of the information on this site is from asylum seekers; it's about how to talk to authorities, ways to get your hands on your own identification papers (such as your passport) and how to navigate each step of the escape. The authors understand how frightening the journey is for eighteen-year-olds who have never travelled on their own, never spoken to a man outside the family—never mind a customs officer with complicated questions. There's a lot to deal with for a girl like me, who's been driven to school all her life, who's not only been supervised while shopping but

hasn't even been allowed to hand money to the shopkeeper. In the chat room, the networkers try to teach you and even practise with you so you know how to handle yourself when meeting strangers or if—heaven forbid—you get caught and taken to a detention centre. They remind you that just because you see one country or another as a safe haven, you need to watch out for criminals everywhere. This network, like the clandestine site I'd been on, was another extension of this family of activists—the people who care about your safety, your future, your happiness.

If I could name a single issue that drives women away from our countries and binds us together under the mutual banner of the tormented, it would be the male guardianship law. It is the bedrock for all the discrimination and anti-woman violations and human rights abuses that follow. I discovered in these online chats that although Saudi women have always been less visible than Saudi men, these draconian guardianship laws were not always in effect. Until 1977, women were allowed to travel without a male guardian. But then a princess called Mishaal bint Fahd made the mistake of falling in love. She was the daughter of Prince Fahd bin Muhammad bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and a granddaughter of Prince Muhammad bin Abdulaziz, who was an older brother of King Khalid. For all her connections to princes and kings, the government killed her for her crime of loving a man of her choosing. And then they made a law to make sure no other girl would ever be unaccompanied by a guardian and therefore able to commit the crime of falling in love.

The princess had been in Lebanon attending school.



During a courtesy call to Ali Hassan al-Shaer, the Saudi ambassador to Lebanon, she met Khaled al-Sha'er Mulhallal, the ambassador's nephew. The story starts like any presumably normal girl-meets-boy story. But this is a Saudi story, so there's nothing normal about it. They dated each other, met secretly and eventually had an affair. They were safe as long as they were in Lebanon because of that tried-and-true shibboleth: if nobody knows, nothing is done. A family's honour is tied to public "knowing," and in Lebanon, no one knew. But once she was back in Saudi Arabia the scandalmongers churned out the story and then shame became a wound, and the death of nineteen-year-old Mishaal was the salve used to soothe the family and stop the gossip. That's how it works. She tried to escape. She even faked her death, making it look as though she had drowned, and then dressed herself as a man; she made it as far as the airport before an official at passport control saw through her disguise and sounded the alarm. She was returned forthwith to her family. They wanted blood. And of course they extracted it with the usual Saudi duplicity. They used the Sharia legal system to murder their daughter. It didn't matter that Sharia law requires the testimony of four adult males who claim they witnessed the actual sex act, or a confession of guilt by the victim (who must proclaim "I have committed adultery" three times in court). The reports say her family told her not to confess but to vow she would never see her boyfriend again. They claim she stood up in the court and said, "I have committed adultery. I have committed adultery. I have committed adultery." Of course, there is no record of a trial or her confession.

Both Mishaal and the man she loved were executed in an act of revenge for the dishonour she brought to her tribe: she

was shot; he was beheaded. But the story doesn't end there. Like everything else in my country there are two versions—and no source for truth. The version we talked about in our online chats came to light three years later, when a film crew investigated the love affair and made a movie called *Death of a Princess*. The filmmakers claimed that even the execution of the pair was done without the process of tribal law or religious law, but what followed really told of the lengths to which Saudi Arabia will go to hush up its murderous acts. Apparently, the movie was to be broadcast in Britain on ITN and in the United States on PBS. But a virulent protest threatening diplomatic, political and economic penalties if the film was not cancelled hit the producers. It's been said King Khalid offered a US\$11 million bribe to stop the airing of the film. It did air, but there were repercussions. The British ambassador to Saudi Arabia was expelled, and the Mobil oil corporation—a major sponsor of PBS programming—took out a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*, claiming *Death of a Princess* would damage US relationships with Saudi Arabia. The ad read, in part, "In Saudi Arabia's view, the film misrepresented its social, religious and judicial systems and, in effect, was insulting to an entire people and the heritage of Islam." And it read, "We hope that the management of the Public Broadcasting Service will review its decision to run this film and exercise responsible judgment in the light of what is in the best interest of the United States."

In the chat room, we also talked about the many Saudi women who were hidden away, imprisoned, or killed by their guardians, and about some who committed suicide. The names of Hanan al-Shehri, Khadijah al-Dhafiri, Amna Al Juaid and, of course, Dina Ali, stay with us. Hanan al-Shehri,

twenty-five, committed suicide, but her sister Aisha claims that a family member had been beating Hanan and threatening her the day she died. She had called the police, but they insisted she get medical documents to prove she was being abused by this family member. Then she died in a fire set in the backyard. Her sister also says the fire that took Hanan's life was not set by Hanan. No one who knows her believes she committed suicide. But the police still say Hanan killed herself. We don't believe them.

Amna Al Juaid is another Saudi girl who escaped from her father's house two years ago after claiming her father beat her and threatened to prevent her from going to university because she refused to marry her cousin. She went to live with a foreign family, got a job and began living independently. Then her father found out where she was and began negotiating with her to come home. He said he'd give her passport to her if she came back. She recorded her own story on a video and asked her friends to post it if she disappeared. It's been posted. Human Rights Watch urged Saudi authorities to investigate. No one has heard from her.

Khadijah al-Dhafiri died at the age of twenty. She'd been horribly abused by her husband and eventually jumped off a third-floor balcony to escape him. She survived the fall, but her severe injuries led to paralysis and eventually she died in the hospital after suffering a heart attack. Basically, her husband is responsible for what happened to her. However, he served only four days in prison and walked away because she was the one who jumped.

These are some of the stories of the many women who suffered at the hands of their guardians in a country that executes activists and frees criminals.



I was absorbing data from this group like a sponge. All of it fed into what I had suspected, reinforcing my belief that there had to be change in this country. And it underlined my dilemma: I was an outsider in my country, an infidel to my customs and an undesirable to my family.

In the meantime, my life at home and at school carried on as though nothing unusual was occupying my mind every waking hour. My brothers stayed in private schools while I went to the public high school. Their lives were so different from mine, it was as though we lived on two separate planets. It wasn't just the freedom they had to be outside with their friends, or the right they had to swat me across the face just to show me who's boss, or the liberty they took with our mother, telling her to be quiet, to calm down, to stay in the house once she was vulnerable; it was all of that and a lot more. My brothers could travel. They could go out in the wide world and see the sights of a foreign place, taste its flavours, find out who lived there and what their thoughts were. How I longed for such opportunities! I was hungry for knowledge. After I'd been on the illegal websites and had seen how people lived their lives and discussed forbidden topics, and as I watched their actions in support of their beliefs, all of this astounded me and stirred my soul. I wanted to be part of the world. I wanted to be out there asking my questions, sharing views with others and having fun instead of being forever silenced and subdued and told girls "don't do that."

My brothers were driving their own cars; they'd actually started driving when they were thirteen years old. Mutlaq was attending university—a very religious one—in another city. But at home nothing changed. By the time I was seven-

teen I had very little interaction with them, but I was very close to my younger siblings, Fahad and Joud. Although it wasn't quite as simple as that: Fahad had morphed into a son who controls the women in the family as soon as he was a teenager, but he exercised those rights on Joud and not me. He and I had always been best friends, maybe because he was so sick as a child and couldn't go outside to play with the others. He'd had to stay in the house with me, and we grew up together watching television, playing our own games, drawing and comparing the artwork we had done with each other—basically, we were being nice to each other, which was a fairly unusual trait in our house. Playing together ended when we got older, because he would have been ridiculed for spending all his time with a girl, but I could always count on Fahad to help me get out of the house. He'd come with me as my guardian and we'd go out to eat in restaurants or go shopping at the souk or just sit in the park for hours and talk. He was two years younger than me but had a car, so we could take off and go wherever we wanted—playing music in the car, laughing out loud and doing what kids our age are supposed to do. I loved being with him, and I always wondered about the difference in the relationship I had with him compared to the one I had with my older brothers. I knew in my heart that siblings should care about each other, should stick up for each other, make special memories together. I had that with Fahad. But never ever with Mutlaq or Majed.

Oddly enough, or perhaps it's a telling detail, my mother disliked the relationship I had with Fahad. She insinuated on more than one occasion that he and I might be sexually involved with each other. She would suddenly appear in

a room where we were talking or push open a door as if to surprise us when we were watching television. For me, her actions just reinforced the notion that girls are meant to be distrusted, that girls being happy and sharing their affection for their siblings was not the norm. Eventually—as though my mother was reading a young boy’s mind—Fahad did start touching me inappropriately. The first time it happened, I froze. I didn’t know what to do and sat there dumbfounded, staring at him and wondering what would happen next. He saw the look on my face, and I assumed he understood that I was horrified that my sweet, gentle brother was taking advantage of me—only because he was a boy and I was a girl. A few days later when we were alone, he did it again, this time not just touching my breasts but other parts of my body as well. So I told my mother. Her words were plain: stay away from him and dress more conservatively. She asked, “Did he only touch you or did he do something else?” These were my mother’s parameters when it came to sexual abuse—Fahad could touch me without my permission but could not have sex with me without her permission.

As much as I was truly astonished by Fahad’s advances, I wasn’t surprised by my mother’s interpretation of what had happened. She blamed me! She said I must have provoked him, must have wanted him, acted like a whore and misled him. Then she turned into an inspector and started watching me. It was more like spying, actually, and not just on me but also on my little sister, Joud, so that there would be no evidence of Fahad touching either of us. I believe this was about protecting Fahad’s reputation and not mine. These incidents, if made public, would bring shame upon Fahad and, in turn, our family—not because of his bad behaviour in touching me,

but because of whatever I had supposedly done to tempt him. Thankfully, Fahad got the message and backed off. Our close friendship went back to what it had been, but the experience stayed with me like a warning.

Although I was happy to have my baby brother back, I certainly never shared with him my biggest secret—that every night when the family went to sleep, I was entering a concealed code into my phone and meeting with my new undercover family. I guarded my secret like a satchel of precious jewels, storing my newfound knowledge away, gathering what I needed to know and biding my time.

By now Lamia was married and had moved away from home. But Reem was still there and going to the same school I was going to. Ever since the incident in her bedroom when she had taken my father's gun and tried to run away, she hadn't been the same. She'd been a terrific student before that but now had difficulty at school. She'd been outgoing and popular; now she was timid and withdrawn and needed the rest of the family to take care of her.

I knew from what I was reading online that families in other countries didn't live like this, that daughters weren't treated like shameful additions, that girls had the right to live their lives as the boys did. As a teenager in Saudi Arabia, I was supposed to spend all my time at home. Although I did sneak out, I wasn't allowed to go out or to have fun. There were no activities for girls; we didn't even know what hobbies we might like because we never tried anything. Every day, all the time, I heard over and over again from my family, my teachers, even my friends—home is the right place for girls.

Life for a teenage girl in Saudi is determined by a series of strict rules: I cannot leave the house I was raised in until I

marry and move into the house of another man, who would then control me as my father and brothers had at home. As a young woman I couldn't even open a bank account without my guardian's permission. When shopping, I wasn't allowed to try on clothes, even in a fitting room. What part of this is sinful? I ask. And the advertisements in my country blur the faces of women but not the men. It's like a constant message. Repeat after me: *You are woman. You are invisible. You have no value.* I had to ask permission to go to the doctor. I knew students who wanted to be medical doctors or open their own businesses, but still had to take orders from their younger brothers. There are stories about women studying medicine in the United States and still being bossed about by illiterate male guardians at home.

I was living in a society that forbade me to speak my mind and saw my ideas for changing the rules as a criminal act. It was a form of being in prison, because your real truth is locked inside you. I didn't hate my family—I certainly never saw them as my enemies—but they were the architects of my future, which was set to be a dreary life that didn't allow me to fulfill my dreams and desires. I felt a home should be a place to feel safe and to have the right to speak and debate and express emotions. I wasn't going to find that in this house; by now, I knew that staying there was not the future for me.

There's plenty of evidence throughout the country that speaking for change will make your life a misery. Raif Badawi is a writer, blogger and activist who made headlines when he posted an online message that said, "To me, liberalism means simply to live and let live." It's dangerous to speak about liberalism in Saudi Arabia, but it didn't stop him. He also highlighted the plight of women, and questioned why women



needed a male guardian to walk down the street and why it was extremely difficult for women to access the labour market and employment.

Raif was arrested in 2012 for “insulting Islam”—a life-threatening charge. He was eventually sentenced to seven years in prison and six hundred lashes. In 2014 the sentence was changed to ten years in prison and one thousand lashes, as well as a fine. After the first fifty lashes, the next flogging was postponed because of his health. His wife, Ensaf Haidar, who along with their two children took refuge in Canada, said her husband could not survive more lashings because he has hypertension. The world was watching this case. It still is. However, Raif Badawi is still in jail for speaking out about fairness and justice. The whole world knows, but which country is willing to cut ties with Saudi in order to call out these abuses?

Saudi women learn to subvert the stifling rules so they can survive and stay sane. Plenty have secret apartments they rent from agencies that waive the guardian rule, a place to go to feel free. Some girls take driving lessons from clandestine sources while waiting for the ban against women driving to be lifted. There are even secret soccer leagues for girls. I once asked a teacher to explain the ban on sports for women. My mother had suggested that being active in sports would destroy my virginity. I wondered if being inactive would destroy my health (obesity is a serious problem in Saudi Arabia). But I got the same old tedious reply: *You're a girl. Be quiet. Obey. Don't ask so many questions.* Some soccer stadiums have started allowing women in to watch the games—as long as they sit in a segregated corner of the stands called the “family quarter.” None of that happened in Ha'il.

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But there is evidence of change elsewhere in the country. The year I was seventeen, Princess Reema bint Bandar, who was the director of the Saudi Federation for Community Sports, said, "I've encouraged women to go out on the streets and into the public parks to exercise. I've been telling women they don't need permission to exercise in public, they don't need permission to activate their own sports programs. And more and more they are doing it." Maybe this was in response to an incident the year before, when Malak al-Shehri tweeted a picture of herself without a headscarf and was arrested. Not only that, but there was a public hue and cry for her to be executed. Whether or not reforms such as women playing soccer and driving cars or being out on the streets will stick is another troubling point, because most of the reforms are at the whim of the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, better known as MBS. He presents as the reformer who granted women the right to drive, but he is also responsible for jailing the women activists who lobbied for that right.

The bottom line in Saudi is this: legally, a woman is a nullity. She can vote, but in court her testimony is overturned by a man's because in Sharia court the testimony of one man equals that of two women. Try fighting a case of abuse or assault in that sort of court. And if you aren't Muslim, forget it: in Saudi you have no rights in court at all.

There are examples throughout the short history of this ferocious place that a girl's life is seen either as a reproductive tool or a bargaining chip. For example, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz—who had thirty wives and about thirty-five children before he died in 2015—performed his royal duties with aplomb but used women like disposable possessions. One of his wives, Princess Alanoud Al Fayez, was married off to the

forty-eight-year-old king when she was just fifteen years old, without ever having met him. She gave birth to four daughters but no sons and her life became a misery. Kept in the palace as though she was part of a collection, she found herself in a long line of other wives to compete with and eventually decided her life would be better fulfilled elsewhere. She divorced the king and fled to the United Kingdom. To punish her for not giving him a son and for escaping to the West, the king put their four daughters under house arrest for over a decade and refused them permission to leave the country.

To be fair, King Abdulaziz is also known for his philanthropy; he's donated US\$500 million to the World Food Programme and US\$300 million to rebuild a New Orleans high school after Hurricane Katrina slammed into the United States. But his ability to alter the lives and livelihoods of his daughters because he's mad at their mother is a tale as enduring as the sands of Saudi Arabia.

My life at school continued as before, but during my grade twelve year—my final year in high school—I had a teacher who left a lasting impression on me. She saw me as different from the others. I'd heard that before. My mother kept telling me she wished I wasn't so different from my sisters, and my brothers insisted I had to stop being different and punished me harshly for not being like the other girls. Only my Nourah Mom ever said I was different in a way that made me feel good. Now this teacher was doing the same. I knew I was different, but even with the immense criticism I felt from my family, I always thought being different made me stand out as special, not as damaged. This teacher reinforced that thinking.

She saw my behaviour as proof that I needed more attention than the others. She told me she was trying to understand why I was breaking rules, and not afraid of anyone. She once told me that she felt I had excess energy at school because I couldn't be who I wanted to be at home. And that was true. I could never express myself the way I wanted to at home. But in her classroom I found a voice that I embraced. The course she taught was fun; she gave us work that asked us to describe ourselves and who we thought we were. It was the first time I could say what I was thinking without getting into trouble. She would ask questions that made us talk about our opinions. For example: Do you like wearing a uniform? When I answered and I expressed my feelings and thoughts about wearing uniforms—I hated wearing uniforms because we looked alike, and nobody could wear whatever they wanted—those conversations allowed each of us to show our personalities. That led to conversations I wanted to take part in, rather than boring lessons that I preferred to ignore. She looked at my work with interest and gave me good advice, and she would let me speak and share my answers in front of everyone. I'd marvel at the end of the class, thinking, *She's actually interested in me as a person, as someone with something to say.* I loved those classes.

Being happy at school opened other doors for me. It gave me the confidence to be a leader rather than a troublemaker. One time we were asked to create a project. The assignment was to describe the reason for choosing this particular project, the way to proceed one step at a time, and the results we each expected. I dove into this with gusto, choosing to create a charity to provide winter clothing for poor people. It was easy to describe the reasons for the project, and I knew pre-

cisely what I had to do: identify the people the charity would serve, collect the money to buy the items of clothing they needed, and deliver the items to each family. Then I could test my results by seeing them wearing warmer and more suitable clothing during the winter months and report back to the teacher about the number of families I had served. I was astonished that my classmates wanted to help. We started the charity together and they asked me to be the leader of the team. Everyone in our class wanted to make a donation to this cause, so there was plenty of money to buy what we needed. It was one of the rare times when I felt the flush of pride in myself.

Mind you, my education, especially during my last year of high school, was also peppered with indoctrination. I call it the "good wife" story. The teachers taught us incessantly that a good wife stays at home to cook and clean for her husband, and that Allah and the angels would curse us if we refused to have sex with our husbands. Lessons like this were more than I could abide, so invariably I would ask questions such as, "How can it be that Allah insists on forced sex? That's rape." The teacher said, "No, Rahaf. There's no rape between the husband and the wife!" Then, as if to reinforce her lesson, she kept telling me I should not refuse sex with my husband—first, because it's his right, and second, because he would cheat on me if I refused. "What about my rights?" I wanted to know. The girls in my class looked down when I asked these questions. I could not understand why. Were they shy or scared of what the teacher was talking about? Or did they look the other way because they agreed with her?

The teachers also taught us that a husband has the right to beat his wife as long as the beating doesn't harm her too

much. They quoted from the Quran (4:34), which says, "But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance—[first] advise them; [then if they persist,] forsake them in bed; and [finally,] strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them."

Being a good girl, a good wife, was the mantra we learned year after year at school. The caveat was all about protecting our reputation so that we'd be selected by a prominent family as a bride. The teachers would say, "If you ruin your reputation by doing something haram, the man's family will find out when they come to the school to ask about your behaviour. If you have a ruined reputation no one will have you as a wife." I heard this threat ad nauseam throughout my three years in high school because most teachers thought I was a bad girl.

My family thought the same, because I never gave up on disputing the notion they had that girls were less valuable than boys. That meant my life at home still had all the strain that comes from unhappy relationships. My father continued to travel the nearly two hundred kilometres to Al Sulaimi each week and come back to Ha'il on weekends. All three of his wives lived in Ha'il. I used to wonder how he would decide which wife to stay with on his days back in Ha'il. Did they take turns? Did one wife offer something another wife denied? There must have been a pattern of sorts, or maybe just whims that were decided during the drive back to Ha'il. The process fascinated me, but I would never have dared to ask my father or anyone else for answers to my questions. Maybe there was a master plan, because he fit us in as well. Sometimes I saw him once a week, sometimes many days in a week and sometimes hardly at all. Again, I wasn't privy to his plans or his thinking about how to divide himself up among so many people.

By the time I was in my last year of high school, the second wife had a daughter and the third wife had a daughter and a son. My brothers loved them and showered them with attention and affection, visiting the children every day that they were home and taking them out for car rides or visits to the park or into town for ice cream. I watched all this with a mixture of amusement and disgust. Is this how it works? Out with the old, in with the new? Will they beat that little girl senseless, like they did me, when she is old enough to become an object of distrust and embarrassment? Will they take the new son under their wing and teach him the way of the world by showing him how to invade his sister's room, confiscate her things and punish her for having something as dangerous to her health and her future as a guitar? How did they feel, I wondered, about their own mother, the woman who had given birth to them and allowed them to become masters of her home? Was it disgust I saw on their faces when they looked at our mother, or was that pity? Perhaps they were in transition to becoming husbands and fathers, and the scowl on their faces would in time be replaced with the look of complacent satisfaction that my father wore. As time passed, I was increasingly convinced that there was something enormously wrong with the established status of men and women in my country. My feeling as a high school senior was that this was not sustainable. There were too many people in this country who felt revulsion and disgust for the status quo.

My mother certainly didn't like any part of the new arrangement that she was supposed to—as a good Saudi wife—see as an extended family, but she couldn't leave it alone. She harped about it constantly and was either yelling at my brothers for their betrayal in seeing the other families or

begging them to shun the newcomers and show their loyalty to her. It was a never-ending drama. For me, it wasn't so much a matter of who was guilty as who was innocent. I thought the children were innocent: it wasn't their fault that my dad took their moms. I didn't see them often, but when I did I was drawn to hugging them and playing with them. They were little and beguiling, as children are. My sisters had absolutely nothing to do with them—not with the wives or the children. Their loyalty to our mother was unbreachable. I scored points with my dad and my brothers for the attention I paid to the new family, but this was not an act I wanted to share with my mother. I hoped to keep it from her. Of course she found out. In my house everyone had secrets, but no one kept secrets. We were never the kind of close family that protected each other's inner thoughts. My mother was hurt by my actions and told me so. I tried to explain that these were children who had nothing to do with our family quarrel. I wasn't even sure that I believed that myself, but I did feel guilty about fraternizing with the enemy camp, so to speak, especially when she accused me of being a sellout. Her pain was so real you could practically touch it. She'd been discarded. She cried a lot; she didn't want to talk and kept to herself most of the time.

I was already on a mission myself, and to be honest, I didn't have room for my mother's angst while I was leaving my religion and trying to find a plan for leaving the country. I look back now and feel I was being selfish—she was in such tough shape with no one to take her side except my two older sisters. The relatives—the aunts and uncles and cousins—had to support my father because that's what all of their families did as well. Being cast aside was not supposed to be an agony. It was part of the cycle of life for a good Islamic wife!



It's important to me that people understand the insidious effect the religion can have on an individual. It's one thing to reject it like I did; it's another to believe and practise the faith, and still another to pretend to be a believer like many do and just go along with the pretense. But it's quite something else to become a fanatic, and there are way too many examples of that in Saudi Arabia. My brother Mutlaq is one. Even my parents struggled with his blind devotion. I don't know what it is that takes hold of people and makes them think everything is a conspiracy, that everyone is anti-Islam. They depict Allah as controlling, hateful, devious and punishing. Devout Muslims don't believe that, but fanatics do. They look for people to blame for their troubles, and they see outsiders as apostates, which is the equivalent of a death threat for Saudis. Why can't people choose their faith? How is it that a government can tell you what to believe?

I still struggled mightily with the paradox that was my life, and the debilitating depression that had consumed me the year before continued to skirt the edges of my life. There is an Arabic expression: "*Mwlam 'an yaetaqid klu min hawlik 'anak nayim . . . biaistithna' wasadatk hi alwahidat alty taraa haqiqataka.*" In English it translates to "Painful that everyone around you thinks you are asleep . . . except your pillow is the only one who sees your truth." The words actually mean that what you show to people is the opposite of what is inside you. That was a constant in my life during my last year of high school.

Sasha, my sweet caramel-coloured cat, ran away that year. By then we had three other cats, called Leo, Kato and Lusi, so I adopted Leo to have someone close to me. I wasn't allowed to go anywhere, of course—being a girl, I was stuck in the

house, and being a depressed girl meant even more isolation and shunning. So I started sneaking out to meet my friends in cafés again. Although I'd done it before, now I was even more audacious as I crept down hallways and slipped out the door and scurried along the pathways to the café. I often made myself giggle thinking about how good I was at vanishing without a trace, like some sort of girl detective. I have to admit the act of getting away with these escapades intrigued me. No one was watching, and being with my friends was a huge reward for me. We didn't have to worry about being caught at the coffee shop because the workers were all from India. They didn't know our language and presumably didn't care about our stifling rules. But I knew the consequences of being caught very well. Although my mother was basically ignoring me by now and my brothers were away at school and only bringing their hopelessly oppressive attitudes home on weekends, I knew that they would relish the idea of beating me, as if it enhanced their virility as Saudi men. I would wonder what sort of manhood required its new recruits to beat up girls.

During the last high school term before starting university, I decided to join a gym and get into shape. Majed reacted to that news as though I had planned a murder. He went into one of his rages and forbade me to go to the gym. A lot of men don't accept the idea of women being involved in sports, and many clerics have denied women the right to participate in activities as well. I knew which weapon I had to use to make this happen—my mother. She was the one who could convince my brother to let me join the gym. It worked. But there was a condition: my brother asked my mother to go with me and wait until I finished my exercises. Every day she sat on the floor at the club door, waiting for me to finish. At

first I was excited and happy that she was there for me, as though my working out at the gym made her think better of me. But seeing my mother sitting on the floor waiting for me was painful; it was as if she didn't trust me and had to take her time to guard me like I was a rogue daughter. My girlfriend broke up with me at this time as well, so it felt like everything was caving in on me. I wanted my mother to trust me but she didn't; I wanted my girlfriend to love me but she left; I wanted to leave Saudi Arabia and make my life in another place but I couldn't come up with a plan.

This was during 2018, and a new round of reforms was being talked about. The government suggested it was going to lighten up, relax some of the suffocating rules, maybe even give some rights to women. I was skeptical from the get-go. The rulers of this country rely on a totalitarian absolute monarchy to stay in power; that's a hereditary dictatorship, governed along Islamic lines, that has never even considered accepting anything like the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which I'd been reading about on the illegal internet sites. These new, lightened-up rules might apply to places like Riyadh, but they certainly weren't likely to be adopted where I lived, in the most conservative part of the country. Actually, I really didn't believe things would change even in Riyadh. I had seen the consequences of liberal thinking in my country while surfing the internet. Many liberal thinkers had died because they were considered secular. I was eighteen years old and in my senior year of high school when I learned that forty people were hanged because they'd been heard speaking out about Islam. As students we were secretly

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texting each other to share the details we knew and cursing the denial of freedom of speech.

I admit that my last year of high school had been a challenge because my views on everything from my classmates to the school rules were hard to suppress. I had even switched to another school to make a fresh start. But my questions and curiosity came with me. One day I told my friends at school that I was going to run away; they thought it was a preposterous idea and said, "You'll find your father at the airport gate with a gun, waiting for you." I felt a rift developing between us, just as I had at the other school.

My tolerance for the criticism from some of the teachers who singled me out as a troublemaker was also in increasingly diminished supply. They spoke as though a good woman was infatuated with her husband, as if her role in life was to obey him; they claimed that Allah saw a woman leaving the home as abhorrent. I couldn't swallow any of this and felt they were evading the truth in all of our lives. Our teachers never spoke of the Saudi war in Yemen that was taking so many innocent lives. They never mentioned the crimes of some of the Saudi princes that everyone spoke about in whispers. And there wasn't a word about ISIS—the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (also known as ISIL, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). This terrorist group was very much on the minds of young people in Saudi Arabia because certain clerics were urging them to jihad, which means to fight against the enemies of Islam. So there was all this tormenting dialogue going on outside of the school and nothing but pious admonishments about the length of your skirt and the colour of your hijab inside. Or, in my case, the length of my hair, which was still too short for the liking of the principal. One day a

teacher took my hand and led me to the side of the hallway and told me to start wearing clothes that were pink or red like most girls and to stop wearing clothes that looked like they belonged to men. I told her to leave me alone, but it led to another confrontation with the principal and another bawling out in front of the others. My position was clear: "I'm not a child, I don't feel like a boy no matter what you say about the colour of my clothing, and I didn't do anything wrong. Your standards of beauty and being female don't suit me."

I put up with the harassment because I needed to keep the peace at home and at school while I spent the evenings sharing my stories with my online group and absorbing the fascinating details they provided about how to escape. My grades at school were good, so that made my life at home easier. But there was a missing piece to my new secret life—it was my ex-girlfriend. Finally, I sent her a letter to ask how she'd been getting along since we broke up. Since moving to a new school, I had lost track of her. She responded immediately and we started talking and laughing and got together again. That's when we started putting together a real plan to leave Saudi Arabia.

I had an idea. It wasn't simple and would require patience, but I felt it could work. I had to convince my family to go abroad, and from there I would run away and seek asylum. My girlfriend's family travelled to foreign places, so I figured she could escape from one of them. The first obstacle I had to face was that my family didn't travel to Western countries; we only went to nearby Arab countries. But I had a plan for fixing that. I would have to plant my idea like a seed, give it time to germinate and then water it carefully and consistently until it was ready to bloom. Lamia and her husband had gone

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to Europe for their honeymoon. I began my scheme by asking Lamia to tell us about what she saw and how she liked it. She told us about the landscape—how green everything was compared to our desert land. She talked about the delicious food and the kind people they met in Bosnia. And she told us funny stories about how cold it was and what they did to stay warm. My mother was hanging on every word—it was working. But although it was obvious that my mother wanted to go, she was clearly afraid of being in a country with customs so different to ours. When I suggested we go there for a holiday, she said, “I am afraid for you! Your brother Majed will reject the idea for fear that a drunk Western man will rape you! Then Majed will kill you and kill the man, and he will also kill himself if something like that happens!” What a tirade in response to a trip to see something new! Her dismay made me think my escape plan was in trouble, so I suggested we go to Turkey instead. I was already imagining being in a beautiful new city and even thought about being by the seaside without my niqab, without my abaya. My mother interrupted my daydreaming and said, “Well, give me a chance to talk to your brother Mutlaq. Maybe he’ll agree.”

A few days went by while I worried about whether or not my mother would stick with the plan, but then she did it—she told Mutlaq that we wanted to see a foreign country. And to my everlasting amazement he agreed and began to put plans together. He even said he’d take care of half of the expenses for the trip.

Now I had to skirt around the timing. Ramadan was coming up at the end of May, and it took precedence over everything else. This was the third or fourth Ramadan that I did not fast (no food from dawn to dark), which is a requirement

in Islam. Of course I would be beaten for failing to fast, but the violence in my life had become the norm and so no one paid much attention to it. This time, however, I pretended to fast because I wanted to avoid any consequences that could get in the way of my plan to convince the family to travel. Despite all this careful attention to keeping the family calm, my brother Fahad forgot to pray and didn't go to the mosque and ended up getting such a beating from Majed that I was afraid he'd need to go to the hospital. Majed came at him with an iron bar and struck him across the face until he was bleeding and unable to talk. It was as though he wanted to kill him. Even my mother was scared by this monstrous action. Religion is such a powerful weapon to Saudis, and especially to my older brothers. I see it more as a danger to our lives than a service to Allah.

For this Ramadan, I did every single thing I could to gain favour with my family: I treated everyone with the utmost kindness, and I cooked their favourite foods when we broke the fast at night and served them with love. I saw this as my last Ramadan and wanted it to be full of kindness and goodness. I wanted the abiding memory my family would have of me to be one of a loving daughter.

Eid al-Fitr came immediately after Ramadan. It is the feast to break the fast and my favourite event of the whole year. Everyone gathers early in the morning to pray the Eid prayers, which mark the cleansing of sin everyone has done by fasting. Then all the women and men of the neighbourhood go to the same mosque to pray. Even though I hadn't been a believer in a long time, I loved this tradition because everyone smiles and blesses each other whether they are strangers or old friends or family. Afterwards, we meet with

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our neighbours, usually at our house, and there we have the feast of Eid, which includes tables full of scrumptious food.

Soon after Eid, while I was still quietly encouraging my mother to get the holiday plan moving, I noticed that my older sister Lamia had started dressing differently. She'd always been the fashionable one in the family; in fact, she got away with bending the conservative wardrobe rules more than the other girls in our family. I figured it was because she was the eldest and had a good relationship with our mother. But now she started wearing really plain clothes, drab skirts and blouses, and told us her husband had started controlling her clothing choices. None of us said anything to her, but my heart ached to see a happy, well-dressed girl losing her style and image because of a man. As much as I felt sorry for her, I hoped with all my heart that this wouldn't be my destiny.

At last, Mutlaq announced in July that we would be travelling by plane to Turkey for our holiday. He also said that only four of us would go—Joud, my mother, Mutlaq and me. I wondered if this could be my chance to run away and decided to test my plan once we got there.

The trouble started as soon as we arrived in Trabzon, Turkey, in the middle of the night. When we entered the airport, wearing niqabs, the official asked my mother and I to remove our niqabs so he could see our faces. I knew my brother would be outraged by this and held my breath, waiting to see what would happen next. Mutlaq was so threatening that the man began to stammer and sweat, but he stuck to his rules and said if we wanted to enter the country the face coverings had to come off. I saw it as a delicious win and felt a certain pleasure in watching Mutlaq squirm in the face of a person with more authority than he had.



With that altercation behind us, we picked up the rental car and drove to the hotel. Everything was exciting to me—the beautiful city, the luxurious hotel, the thrill of being in a foreign place. Our rooms were in separate parts of the hotel, with my brother in one wing and my sister, mother and me in another. When my mother and sister slept, I would sneak out without my abaya and niqab and walk around the streets outside. What an adventure—I talked to strangers, drank coffee in the café and felt thoroughly entertained by everyone I met. I also started to think this might be the time to take off, to flee to Georgia, a country north and east of Turkey. My online group had discussed this plan with me before I left, suggesting that I cross the border and ask for asylum at the French embassy. One of my friends had done precisely that—she crossed into the capital city of Tbilisi and asked for asylum at the French embassy, so I figured I could do the same.

While I was marauding around at night, I was busy checking out maps to the border and bus stops and schedules and wondering how I could snatch my passport from my brother's bag. The people I talked to said the road to Georgia was precarious, known for bandits and the hijacking of cars. What's more, they said, it was a route through the mountaintops and very isolated. The more I heard, the less sure I was about leaving. In the end I realized it was not meant to be. I wasn't devastated by the lost opportunity; I felt I had learned a lot and tried out my escape wings, which would better prepare me for the next time. At least I had convinced my family to travel to a foreign country. Next time that part would be easy.

When we got home, I asked immediately when we might go again and reminded everyone about the wonderful time we'd had. My hopes were dashed when my mother

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and brother agreed that it would be two or three years before we'd take another trip like that. I fell into a prolonged silence, wondering what I could do and whether I should have taken the chance open to me while we were in Turkey. I was frustrated and unhappy, and I stayed that way until classes started at the University of Ha'il in September.

I had begged my parents to allow me to go to university in another city—hopefully Riyadh or Jeddah where the rules were slightly less conservative, where boys and girls talked to each other and where I could be away from my family and change my life—but they flat-out refused. So I registered at the University of Ha'il in the fall of 2018. Once inside the campus, we could doff our abayas, but what we wore underneath was not exactly provocative—long skirts and long-sleeved blouses, no makeup. If your hair was long, you could take off the hijab; if it was short, you had to cover it.

I couldn't even choose the courses I wanted to take, and that infuriated me. My mother and Majed used to discuss what I should study at university right in front of me. It was as though I had no opinion and no right to make decisions about my courses, as though they were discussing some other person—not the daughter, the sister, the human being sitting in the room with them. This kind of ostracism was driving my plans to escape. There was a lot of research I needed to do, a lot of very careful planning. My biggest fear at that time was that I would grow old in this place, that I would never be free, never realize my dreams.

Despite all of that, I didn't lose hope. I started school and presented myself as a new person, a quiet girl who didn't like mixing with others. Throughout the first semester, I even started to get closer to my family; it was as though I was try-

ing to say goodbye to everyone. I was determined that this was the year I would start a new life away from Saudi Arabia—no matter how hard the task, no matter the cost to me.

Then my attention turned to Majed, who was bound and determined that I would withdraw as a student from the university and began to thwart me at every turn. Thankfully, my mother got involved and took my side. She was angry, which made me happy, and said in front of everyone, "When I leave this life, I want all my daughters to have a university certificate and a job." Then she said to me, "Men are jealous of women and they don't want to see them be more successful than themselves."

I went off to school with these mixed messages in my head. At last my mother was encouraging me to reach for my dream, but my dream was to escape Saudi Arabia, and I would spend all my spare time finding the key to the exit.

My girlfriend went abroad to study at the same time as I started college. It was an adjustment, to say the least: the university in Ha'il was as big as a small town, with dozens of buildings and beautiful gardens, as well as security women at every gate to search the students, check our bags and prevent us from leaving the campus during classes. There were strict rules that required girls to be on the campus all morning, even if we didn't have classes until noon. But my cohort was lucky because the year I began, the system changed and I was allowed to leave the campus as long as I showed my schedule at the gate to prove that I was not skipping a class. It was easy to falsify a schedule, and I saw that as a means to get out and be free. I took off every chance I had to go out with

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my friends or have a meal in a restaurant or coffee with other students who had also skipped by the guard at the gate. But mostly I went out on my own to be in the sunshine, to feel the air on my face. I'd doff my niqab and do normal things like sit in a park, eat ice cream at a hawker's stand, read books from the library or sometimes just walk down the street exploring the area and the shops.

It wasn't normal or acceptable for people in my city to see a girl without a niqab, so whenever I asked for a driver to take me where I wanted to go, he would ask if I was Saudi or not. When I answered that yes, I was, and that I was also from Ha'il, he would start hitting on me and telling me I looked different from the city girls! Nobody wants a girl on the street. Just as had happened to me before when I ventured out without a guardian, there were bullies and jerks who told me to cover my face and men who made filthy remarks to me about being unaccompanied and bare-faced.

In October 2018 I left the campus to go to the bookstore in town for textbooks that I needed. My next class was at 11 a.m. and I was worried about being there in time, so I hired a driver to take me back to the campus. I was in the back seat of the car as we drove to the school; he was quiet, didn't talk, but kept looking at me in the rear-view mirror. Then he turned around to look at me, as though he wasn't sure about what he had seen in the mirror. Obviously he was surprised that my face wasn't covered. He started asking me personal questions about whether I was married or had a boyfriend to go out with. I didn't answer, but I did laugh in a sarcastic way. Ha'il is surrounded by exits to the desert and the mountains; in a matter of minutes you can go from a busy street to an isolated road. The driver kept looking back at me and then,

suddenly, we were on a road leading out of the city and into the mountains. He kept saying, "Just two minutes, just two minutes." I was freaking out and yelling my head off, but by now the car had pulled into the woods and stopped and he was crawling into the back seat and pinning me down. I begged him to let me walk away. He said to me, "There's no one here. You can't go anywhere." Then he raped me. I wasn't strong enough to fight him off. The whole time he was assaulting me he kept telling me to be calm. When he was finished with me, he simply crawled back into the front seat and drove the car to the university without saying a word. I used my phone to send a text to a friend to tell her where I was in case the monster at the wheel dropped me halfway to the city. When the car stopped at the school, she was there pulling me from the back seat. Both of us were crying while she admonished me for going out alone and for not covering my face. She was actually angry with me. We were yelling at each other so loudly that another girl came along and said, "Be careful, people can hear what you're saying and they'll start talking about this." My friend also reminded me that my family might find out if I didn't keep quiet. And she said, "Everybody knows your father." That was code for *Your life is at stake*.

There it was right in front of me—all the evidence I ever needed to understand where girls stand in Saudi. The driver who raped me simply drove away; he knew he would never have to be accountable for his crime. My friend at the university wanted to guarantee my silence so that my famous father and his family would never find out. Why? Because if anyone knew that I was soiled goods, I would have to be killed—it would be a classic case of honour killing. Of course the driver

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knew that. Of course my friend feared for my life more at the hands of my family than at the hands of the rapist. I was only a girl who wanted to feel the fresh air on her face. I was a target of male rage from a stranger and potentially from my own father.

When I got home, I felt weak, disgusted by my body, full of hatred for everyone who had hurt me or hadn't helped me. I thought about the escape plan that I'd failed to initiate in Turkey and then started blaming myself for everything in my life—the beatings, the ridicule, the rape, the refusals so numerous I couldn't even keep track of them.

It wasn't until I signed on to the secret social media site that night that I found the support I needed to get my fighting spirit back. One of the girls I was very fond of told us she'd been raped. Her words and then mine reminded us of our goal to get away from a life that treats girls like this. Later that month my best friend online managed to escape to Australia. Once she was safely there, I relaunched my dream of leaving Saudi Arabia and starting a new life in Australia. I'd read a lot about the country and thought it was the perfect place for me. I told my girlfriend about the plan and she said she was ready to leave everything and meet me in Australia. The thought of sitting in a café with her in Australia, going to beaches and swimming in the sea in a bathing suit and living in a place where girls were equal to boys was so joyful I could hardly wait to make it all happen. I was determined to make my dream come true, to finish my education in Australia, to become an actor. I uploaded apps and figured out where I wanted to live in Melbourne, and from that app I found new friends to talk to about life in Australia and told them I would move to Australia soon.

It was like weaving a tapestry that brought all the threads of a good life together.

Next I had to work on an exit. I started by chatting with my mother about how nice it would be to visit our relatives in Kuwait at the beginning of the new year. While she was pondering that idea, I used the tip I'd learned from the girls online to hook onto a friend's bank account, deposit my money into it and use that account whenever I needed to buy something I would need for my escape. Students in Saudi Arabia receive a stipend from the government every month. I had started collecting those funds and now deposited them in my account. I also asked my parents—each one separately—to give me money to buy various things that I said I needed. I deposited all of it. And my mother gave me an allowance each month that I added to the tally. Little by little the account grew. I felt so empowered by this; I was taking action and finding my way. When I had enough money, I applied for the Australian visa online and paid for it as soon as I was approved. It was like ticking off items on a shopping list—each tick brought me closer to my escape. I also realized I had to curb my instincts to cut classes, sneak out of the house, meet friends at forbidden cafés. Nothing must get in the way of my plan. I couldn't afford to make trouble that might result in me being grounded at home or expelled from school. I needed to cling to the Saudi state of affairs for the first time in my life.

In the midst of all this clandestine plotting, my sister Lamia gave birth to her first child—a darling, beautiful baby girl who found her way into my heart immediately. Every time I held her and looked into her eyes, I wondered what her mother would say to her about me after I'd gone. When she

turned eighteen, would they tell why I ran away or keep the truth from her and tell her that her aunt Rahaf is dead?

In late November a fight with my brother Majed yanked me out of the reverie I was in following the arrival of my niece. It was over a dentist appointment. He took me there. I knew the dentist so I walked in, had the appointment and came back out to where my brother was waiting. Once we were a few feet away from the clinic Majed grabbed me and started strangling me. He was apoplectic, screaming, "Why did you walk in front of me and say hello to the doctor, a strange man, like I'm not a man with you?" I kept telling myself to calm down, take the beating, get to the other side of this quarrel without too many complications. But he had done the very thing I hated the most about my life in Saudi—he'd acted as though I was an inanimate object or invisible person, just because I'm female. I remember biting my tongue that day but promising myself that I would avenge my brother and everyone in my family who made me feel that I counted for nothing because I'm a woman.

In December, while I was preparing for final exams at university, the family began to talk about a holiday in early January. I held my breath while the plans went ahead and were clawed back and went ahead again. The decisions seemed to change every week. Who would go? Not Reem; she wasn't well enough to travel. Lamia of course had to stay with her baby and husband. All of my brothers said they would go. That scared me, as it would make my escape trickier. At last it was decided: we would leave December 31. It was just a few weeks away.

The conclusion came easily to me. It was time to go. I turned to the network and shared my decision and asked



them to help me hatch the final stage of my plan to flee. The family vacation to Kuwait was set. Now I needed to work on the details—the precise escape tools I would need. Discussing the plan with the network helped me to know what I had to do. Then, very carefully, I turned each piece of the plan into a blueprint. Every step required trust in the network, a bit of luck on my part and more patience than I had ever practised in my whole life. But step by diligent and exacting step, the plan began to come together. I had the visa and money from the undetected bank account—enough to buy a plane ticket and pay my way during what could be several days of hiding and dodging authorities.

I was ready to go.

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