

## Triumphs and Consequences

I opened my eyes in the early morning of the first day of my new life to three pieces of news: there were one hundred death threats on my phone; my father had disowned me; and a snowstorm was about to hit Toronto, the city where I was launching the new me as a Canadian. I hadn't come this far to be undone by such barriers. I shut down my social media account, dropped my family name al Qunun and went out to find a store where I could buy a parka that would keep me warm.

The death threats had begun while I was in Bangkok—furious postings from Saudis who were outraged that I would dare to run away, leave my religion and my family. They came mostly from my own tribe, from people I had never met but who felt I had stained our lineage and desecrated their reputation. And, in Saudi fashion, they wanted revenge. Most called for a public hanging; some suggested I be whipped to death. Other threats came from Muslims in Arab and non-Arab countries warning me to return to Islam or face death at their hands.

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As I scrolled though Twitter I read:

I will pay someone a few thousand dollars just to kill you

we will follow you to kill you

I swear to God that I will let you suffer before I cut your head

you deserve death and I will be the one who sends you to Allah

One thing I noticed immediately was that all the threats, every single one, came from men. There were no women threatening me. As I scrolled through the tweets from the safety of my new home, I wondered again what it is about the men and boys in Saudi that makes them think these hateful thoughts. Before, I examined this as an insider who was frightened about the consequences of coming under the scrutiny of a father or brother or, heaven forbid, the mutaween. But this time I was on the outside, and my observations as a free woman were much more troublesome. This was misogyny, the hatred of women, and it's sanctioned by the government. How does it continue—the guardianship laws, the disgraceful gender apartheid inside and outside the home, the dismissal of a woman's voice? I have to conclude that it is fear that drives these men—fear of women; that, if given the rights other humans have, Saudi women are seen by Saudi men as competition for jobs, for rank, for the very virility men cling to like a lifeline. I would like to have an honest discussion with a man who thinks that as a fifty-year-

old it is okay for him to marry a twelve-year-old. Or a man who thinks having four wives is really, honestly something Allah wants him to do, and that it has nothing to do with his view of male power.

The death threats worried me, of course, but they also made me lament my homeland, a country that sees its mothers, wives, sisters and daughters as evil Jezebels that the men need to be protected from, even though their foolish pretense is that we are fragile creatures that need their protection.

After deleting the death threats, I moved on to the news from my family, who had released a statement claiming they had disowned me. It read: "We are the family of Mohammed El Qanun in Saudi Arabia. We disavow the so-called 'Rahaf Al-Qanun' the mentally unstable daughter who has displayed insulting and disgraceful behaviour." Those were familiar words—*mentally unstable*—the ones my father used to describe Reem when she said he had attacked her. I was actually surprised at the size of the hurt I felt reading those words. Not the mentally ill part—that was just a ruse my father was using—it was the "disavow" part that squeezed my heart. I love my family—even my older brothers, who beat me so severely; even my mother, who rarely took my side but did give me sound advice about making sure a man never had control over me; and even my father, who I always thought would take my side if he was ever at home long enough to know what my side was. And I thought about my sweet little brother, Fahad, and the absolutely adorable Joud, and of course Nourah Mom. Did they all disown me? Did they vow not to be related to me ever again? The statement from the family—a.k.a. my father—made me cry, but it didn't stop me from following my dream for one minute. That's why I

dropped the family name al Qunun and decided henceforth to be known as Rahaf Mohammed.

There are several runaways from Saudi Arabia living in Toronto, and just like my online family that got me here, they became my survival guide, telling me where to buy a parka and boots to deal with this startling event called winter. I could see my breath when walking outside, and the sidewalks were slick with hardened snow that challenged every step I took at first. But the trees laden with soft puffs of snow were like a drawing I could only have imagined before. Icicles hung from branches and caught the light, refracting colour that dazzled the artist in me, and as much as the frosty air nearly made me gasp, there was something about this winter wonderland that had an appeal to me, as though I was a pioneer in my new life. However, as much as I embraced the changes, I was continually drawn—almost daily at first—to my Saudi side. That ingrained second skin Saudis wear, the one that says that girls don't count and girls should be silent and invisible, struck me like car brakes when I walked outside alone, when I met my friends at a café, even when I shopped for a pair of winter boots.

My runaway friends took me to their favourite cafés, and we often talked about news from Saudi. For example, while I was in flight mode, the mutaween struck again, this time ferociously. We read the story online from the *New Straits Times* claiming the religious police had arrested more than two hundred people for supposedly violating public decency. Viewing this news from a different and safe place, I saw it even more clearly for what it was—harassment and that

ever wilful need to punish women and girls, this time for so-called inappropriate clothing, which translates to colourful abayas and less suffocating niqabs. The *New Strait Times* ran a photo online of a woman with a headband and a face mask. I thought it was clever, but the mutaween said it was a sinful act that showed too much of her pretty eyes. They claimed people dressing like this were offending public morals. And this was happening just after Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman vowed to loosen the ridiculous ancient restrictions. Tourist visas were issued for the first time and the ban on cinemas was cancelled; so was the ban on women driving cars. And for those who live in Riyadh (certainly not Ha'il), concerts and sporting events were allowing women to enter. However, it was at a concert—the Beast Music Festival in Riyadh—that another eighty-eight attendees were arrested for wearing immodest clothes (make that tight-fitting clothes, or clothes with so-called profane language or images) and also for public displays of affection. My friends at home texted me to say they were all afraid the religious police were on the prowl again.

Those early days in Toronto also allowed me time to unpack the events that occurred in Bangkok and find out how truly fortunate I was to escape. It had seemed like an eternity while I waited minute by minute in that hotel room, concentrating on staying alive; now I could examine the complicated details that happened around me during that desperate forty-eight-hour period. Imagine the reporter Sophie McNeill buying a plane ticket and flying from Sydney to Bangkok to get my story. That's what reporters do; I understand that. But I also learned that Sophie insisted on covering this story because she knew the Dina Ali story. She knew that

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there should have been some form of protection in airports for girls like me, or anyone who is in mortal danger. Putting the airport authorities under a blazing media light was the way to find justice. She knew that the best hope I had was the Twitter campaign coupled with human rights organizations that could sound the alarm and basically scare the Thais into letting me go. She had to clear a lot of barriers to get to me, not the least of which was a nine-hour flight from Australia to Thailand, but she was determined.

I also learned more about what the UNHCR people and government officials refer to as back channels. The people at UNHCR were on the phone all over the world, talking to human rights organizations and governments, trying to make a plan to get me safely to another country. While I was in Bangkok—once the UNHCR rescued me—they worked with lawyers in Thailand to file an injunction preventing my forced deportation. I also learned that Thailand's chief of immigration police admitted that authorities in his country had acted at the behest of Saudi Arabia. There was a lot I didn't know until later—some of it shocking. I knew the UN people were worried because my father and brother were in the city, making threats and using their Saudi power to get what they wanted. And I easily imagined how concerned they were, because I know what my father can do. But I didn't know the depth of their concern until later. They said the reason they approached Canada to take me in was that Australia was taking so long to make a decision, and with my father and brother in town, they wondered if they could in fact protect me. I also found out that the wretched man who pretended he was helping me when he asked for my passport as I arrived in the airport was really an agent sent by the Saudi embassy to

stop me. How does a Saudi agent get into the secure area of an airport? And how is it that airport staff are told to knock on my hotel room door and lie to me—I can still hear that Thai woman's voice saying I could stay in Bangkok and didn't have to worry because the UN was here. How many governments allow their officials to lie and pose as the UN, using criminal behaviour in an airport full of foreigners?

I also learned that the number of asylum seekers from Saudi Arabia on the UNHCR radar has quadrupled in the last five years. Most claim asylum in the United States. Canada is the second choice. And the networkers' website says there's an increase in people seeking help on their site since my escape to Canada was in world headlines. An exodus. I hoped it would fuel the fire in the anti-guardianship law protest I had secretly signed.

But as much as these facts occupied my mind, I was more caught up with learning to live in a new place and in an entirely different way. While I felt that I had been reborn, my abiding fear in those early days was that my family would find me, that I would disappear and no one would know what happened to me after that.

Running away is not easy, especially for a girl my age who has no life experience. I had to learn how to do most things that girls in Canada do without a second thought—going to a shop without supervision, trying on clothes, paying for my purchases (my brother always did this). I hardly knew what to say and worried about making mistakes. If you have never lived under guardianship, you cannot know how restricted a person can be. In Canada, young women my age do their banking privately and as a matter of course. I was not only unfamiliar with the currency, I had no idea how to

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bank using automated teller machines. I began to realize that Saudi Arabia was still inside me and I needed to find a way to cut the customs and obligations that were tailing my every step. In the early months, I felt afraid to enjoy the freedom I had, reluctant to take steps on my own, the very steps I'd run away to take. I hesitated to go out to buy coffee, so I asked the settlement counsellor from the organization that helps refugees to go with me and to do the talking and even the purchasing. It wasn't because the currency was new to me or that I didn't know what I wanted. It was because my brother's voice was playing in my mind. The way you wouldn't walk into a burning building even if you wanted to rescue someone, I felt the censorship and control I'd been raised with holding me back from the other side of the world.

As though extrasensory perception was controlling the Saudi part of my mind, I continually felt I was being watched, judged, exposing myself to harm by doing something forbidden, even though I had defied my brothers often and easily at home. Walking alone on the street was part of the pleasure of being free, having the sun shine on my face, the wind blow my hair, even the snowflakes fall on my cheeks was a celebration of liberation. But those Saudi laws were stamped on my soul, so I had to actually grow accustomed to being free. That same feeling came over me when I went to the market to buy food or to the bank to open an account or to the hospital to have a checkup. I was like a child with no experience in life or in doing things on my own.

My daily life was so different in Canada I could have been on another planet, but one thing was certain: I liked this place and knew I would become acclimatized quickly; I was finding my voice and learning to use it efficiently. With



help from the refugee settlement organization, I was offered a room in the home of a Jewish family. It was a good decision, as I learned their way of life simply by being at the dinner table and watching the goings-on in the household. In Saudi Arabia we have our meals around a cloth called the *dastarkhān* on the floor; we sit cross-legged and eat with our hands. But this family ate with knives and forks and spoons and sat at a table. I had to learn to use the cutlery, and angle myself at the table so that I could manage this new custom. I felt awkward at first, especially as the family watched me as though I was from a different planet, but I learned to eat just as they did. Living with Canadians was the quickest way to acclimatize to this new country. For example, the family was hockey crazy—as I found out so many Canadians are. They watched all the games on television, talked about the players as if they were part of the family and the complicated rankings of the teams—if this team beats that team then the other team becomes the one to beat—as though it was a game of mathematics. I quickly learned the rules of this game that was played on ice at breakneck speed, and although I never attended a game and still haven't learned to skate, I became a fan of the home team—the Toronto Maple Leafs. It was good for me to live in that house because I was part of the everyday habits and lifestyles of Canadians, but eventually it was better for me to move on. I found a room in a hostel where many refugees and immigrants stay and took the next step toward independent living.

Although it was not easy, one of the lessons I learned is that freedom requires work—it means making choices, living with the consequences of your choices, finding your way, righting the wrongs when you make a mistake. I was like a

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butterfly that had just burst out of its cocoon and was flapping its wings frantically for the first time, not knowing how long it would take me to soar.

In the beginning, I spent a lot of time by myself in my room trying to figure this out, asking myself what I was afraid of and why the Saudi rules that I hated kept seeping their way into my thoughts. I began to realize that freedom is more than avoiding a beating or being able to do what you want to do. It's being mentally and psychologically free as well as physically free. That was a pretty big leap in my thinking. It led me to decide I needed help sorting out these demons from the past that kept creeping into my new life. If Sophie McNeill played a major role in helping me in Bangkok, the people I relied on in Toronto came from the refugee settlement organization that was on hand from my very first moments in the city, after I was greeted at Pearson International Airport by the minister of foreign affairs and before I exited to a very welcoming crowd of supporters who made me feel loved and protected. This team had ideas and answers and tips I could not have imagined. They helped me find a place to live and guided me through the banking and shopping I would need to do. As for my education, the founder of a private school came forward to become another welcoming port in the storm I was going through. I was introduced to him by Chrystia Freeland, who was concerned about me completing my education. He took me under his protective and generous wing and invited me to join the classes at his school in Toronto.

But above all of that, these settlement counsellors understand the trauma a frightened newcomer encounters, even one like me who risked her life to get here. I asked them how to cope, and soon after, I started attending therapy sessions

that focused on my thinking as a Saudi daughter and a Canadian newcomer.

By the time I'd had a few months of therapy sessions, the warm weather had arrived and I witnessed the rebirth of spring that Canadians embrace after a long cold winter and saw my own thinking blossom along with the flowers. I ventured out into the city, found new friends and learned a lot about myself.

I had to finally accept that the past is part of my future, that I need to find a way to weave my memories—even the dreadful ones—into the life I have chosen for myself. There was so much that was unfamiliar—the language, the behaviour, the socializing, even the laws. I was absorbing the new as much as I was sorting the old. In the process I felt I was unleashing skills I didn't even know I had. As it turns out, I pick up languages easily, and I can navigate the subway system, the bus routes and find my way without a brother leashing me in.

Not only that—this was a city like no other place I had ever been in. I had never imagined so many races and religions in one place, not to mention the huge numbers of immigrants and refugees in Toronto. A mix like this is unheard of in Saudi Arabia. They call it multiculturalism here, and everyone seems to be very proud of the fact that Toronto is one of the most multicultural and multiracial cities in the world. There's proof everywhere you go, from the subway to the streets, the shops, the restaurants; I hear there are more than 250 ethnicities and 170 languages spoken just in this city. And about half the citizens are from a visible minority—Asian, Black, Latin American, Arab. In fact, one chart I read said there are sixteen countries that have over 50,000 people represented in the

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Toronto region, including 337,000 from India, 300,000 from China and 200,000 from the Philippines. I had no idea before coming here that I was joining what I now see as a worldwide experiment in multiculturalism, and I liked it immediately. In Saudi Arabia other ethnicities and cultures are frowned upon—in fact rejected outright. We tend to be very closed, maybe because we don't learn anything about other places in school or maybe because the government doesn't want Saudi citizens exposed to any other lifestyle. In Toronto, multiculturalism *is* a lifestyle; it's part of everything—food, fashion, art, music and city events. I was impressed right from the beginning by the way the people here take all this for granted. While I was whirling my head around to examine something I had never seen before or asking questions about foods I'd never heard of in restaurants, I knew I was becoming part of the fabric that weaves a multicultural city together.

I had such a fervent mixture of hope and fear, of excitement and occasionally despair, I knew I was a work in progress. For example, a lot of people stopped me on the street and told me, "You're the girl in the news." That was exciting, reaffirming and it made me feel like a celebrity, but it also created anxiety. It suggested I was abnormal, not fitting in, when all I wanted was to be a normal girl walking down the street minding my own business, rather than a peculiarity or an unusual object noticed by others. Having said that, I have to add this: people were very good to me; they never hesitated to say they were proud of me, some even wanted to hug me! It felt very reassuring to know that people were on my side in this quarrel I had with my family, my country and even a country like Thailand. It's natural to seek approval, so I really enjoyed that gift of acceptance and affection they

were giving me. But anonymity was my goal and I hoped that soon enough I would become a natural part of the Toronto landscape—just another girl living her life, rather than “that Saudi girl runaway.”

At first I was very attracted to doing things that were forbidden in Saudi Arabia—drinking alcohol, going to nightclubs and wearing shorts. I remember on my nineteenth birthday, just two months after I arrived, I was with my best friends in a restaurant and I ordered a glass of red wine. Suddenly I felt I had made a mistake, that I should not be drinking wine, even though everyone else was. That was the Saudi fear still living inside me.

Toronto is known as a city of neighbourhoods, so getting around the city was important as I had friends in one neighbourhood and events I wanted to go to in another, and I was attending school in still another part of the city. So I became a regular on what everyone calls the TTC—that’s the Toronto Transit Commission. The intricate subway and streetcar system became my byway as well as an education of its own while I watched the people around me as though I had wandered onto a movie set. So many different faces, so many languages; my trips to school were an ongoing source of entertainment and allowed me to permeate the outer layers of this new place as if by osmosis, and to feel, little by little, as though I belonged.

In the meantime, the smear campaign from Saudi Arabia was relentless. Some said I was miserable and homesick in Canada. Others claimed I would be waiting tables for drunkards at Toronto bars. I was called everything from a drug addict to a whore by the Saudi media. But I knew where that was coming from. I had busted the Saudi code of conduct,

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but I was free of that wretched guardianship law and could now live my own life. The main newspaper in Riyadh, called *Al Riyadh*, used my escape to claim the need for families to protect their daughters from such dangerous ideas and to stop the brainwashing I must have been subjected to by some unknown assailant. People who helped me, such as Mona Eltahawy, were viciously attacked on social media in Saudi. She was no stranger to attacks from woman-hating men. I was becoming immune to it as well.

I discovered the high-octane power of a Twitter campaign, in particular the one I conducted from my hotel room in the Bangkok airport, when I learned the European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights, which documents and promotes human rights in Saudi Arabia, enlisted a lawyer to defend me in Bangkok against deportation back to Saudi Arabia. He said my tweets played an overwhelming role in preventing my deportation and that once the Thai authorities understood the strength of the international support my tweets were getting, their attitude changed completely.

I don't know whether the authorities understood the strength of the decision I had already made while I was detained in the Miracle Transit Hotel in the Bangkok airport. I decided that I would not be sent home, that I would end my life first. I wrote a goodbye letter to my closest friends and told them to publish it if I was forced back to Saudi Arabia. I still have that letter to remind me about the level of desperation I was experiencing, but I have tucked it away with some of the other memorabilia that's best kept in the past.

I knew early on that I was winning the refugee battle—finding my way, learning the language, figuring out the currency, making new friends—but no matter how hard I tried

to reject the past and no matter how much time went by, I still had regular jolts like lightning bolts from my family that covered the gamut of emotions—rage, heartbreak and worry. For example, in March, I called my mother via WhatsApp to see how she was doing. In truth I wanted to hear her voice; she is my mother, after all. I hoped to know about the goings-on of our family, including my beloved grandmother Nourah Mom, who I worried about. I hoped that by reaching out to my mother I would repair the wound my sudden exit had opened, that she would be happy to hear from me and would want to know how I was managing. I especially wanted to know about Joud—the little sister I last saw when I was preparing to leave the hotel room in Kuwait. I'd looked at her—sleeping peacefully that early morning—and tried to record the image of her on the back of my eyelids so she would stay with me forever. I loved that little girl with all my heart. My mother answered her phone, and as soon as she heard my voice she started shouting—cursing my friends and saying they were the ones who changed me and brainwashed me with their insane ideas. She told me to go immediately to the Saudi embassy in Canada, to hand myself over to them and beg them to take me to Saudi Arabia. I tried to help her to understand that living in Canada was my choice and that I was happy here and hoped she would keep in touch with me and share news about the family. She disconnected the phone and then immediately texted me a message with the voice of my little sister crying and saying, "I love you, Rahaf." She knows that Joud is my weak point; she was using that girl's tears to make me return to a country that would probably see me dead even before they let me comfort Joud. I wept bitter tears afterwards and worried about the way they might be

using Joud to trap me into returning. I had learned about the many burdens of freedom but also the empowerment it gives. I dried my tears and deleted my mother's phone number.

Later that month, my girlfriend from Saudi came to Toronto and we were reunited. It seemed to many like the denouement of a romantic novel—one where we had found each other in the chaos and confines of a country that would have had each of us killed for being in a lesbian relationship. Experiencing the freedom to be together on the street in Toronto and holding hands in public and staying together was like a dream come true. At first I was giddy with joy—this was the life I'd been searching for. We were even planning to get married. Then as time went by and the illicit part of the relationship turned into normalcy, the loving bond between us dimmed and our love affair turned into a friendship. By the end of May we had gone our separate ways, and although (like so many romances) we tried to be partners again during the summer months, it was not to be. By October we had parted once more, but we remain friends—partners in an extraordinary journey.

In July when I had finally recovered from my mother's harsh response to my phone call, I decided to call my father and ask to speak to Joud. He didn't seem to be surprised to hear from me but he asked no questions at all—nothing about how I was or where I was living, none of the concerns one would expect a father to have about his daughter, even a wayward one. Instead he said bluntly, "Joud is sleeping." That was the end of the call. I tried again a few months later because I heard from a friend that Joud, at age twelve, was being married off. My friend didn't know who Joud was marrying (I kept picturing some old man with my dear little sister), but



she did say everyone was talking about it and presuming they wanted to get her married so that she couldn't escape as I did. My father only created excuses about why I could not speak to Joud and shared not a word about her. It made me think my friend was right about her impending marriage. But it also created a huge swell of nostalgia for me, thinking about the last time I saw all my sisters: Lamia wearing plain, dowdy clothing to please her husband, when she'd always found a way to add a bit of flair to the clothes we were expected to wear; Reem stumbling through her life as though she had left her potential in the mental hospital my father had taken her to, or lost it in the fog of drugs she was given; and now Joud, that little angel girl who loved me and looked up to me as her brave big sister. Was she being punished into a forced marriage because of me? These were painful thoughts that made me re-examine the steps I had taken. I wondered for a while if I should go back, endure the consequences I would suffer if only I could see my sisters one more time, if only Joud could be spared the fate that awaited.

In the fall of 2019, I phoned my oldest brother, Mutlaq, because again I was hungry for family news and hoped he'd give it to me. He was reasonably nice to me on the phone, asked a few questions about my new life and then, in a voice as hard as steel, he said, "Don't ever come back." I asked him if he had some information about what would happen to me if I returned, but all he said was "Forget about your family. Continue your new life in Canada."

I tried to reach out to him again in February 2020, again hoping to hear news about Joud, Nourah Mom and the rest of the family, but our conversation twisted its way into other issues that I wanted to share—issues he clearly didn't want to

know about. I told him that I'd been raped in the back seat of a taxi while at university and that the beast who did that to me knew he would get away with it because I would be found guilty of losing the family's honour, and my life would be the price paid to restore that honour. I asked him how any society could condone such barbarity. He responded, as men in Saudi Arabia do, by saying if I had stayed in the house it wouldn't have happened. So I decided to let him know one of the many secrets I had about the so-called safety of our home—his friend had been harassing me for months before I left and was trying to have sex with me while he was in our house as a visitor. It was apparently too much for my strict, religious fanatic brother to absorb. He didn't say one word. He disconnected the line and blocked my number so that I could never call him again.

Now I depend on social media in Saudi to search for information. If Nourah Mom died, it would be on social media. If Joud is married, I think I would see it there too. I found out in the early summer of 2020 that Mutlaq was married, although I don't know who the bride is, and I learned that Majed moved away to another city. That's all I know, but I have never stopped wondering about them and am drawn still to various apps in the kingdom and invariably see that I still make the news on social media in Saudi. The haters, as I call them, still post horrid stories about me—mostly untrue and almost always calling for my death by hanging. But there is also news that allows me to know how the protests are going. For example, at about the same time as I arrived in Canada, the Shura Council (the legislative council in Saudi Arabia that advises the king) banned marriage under the age of eighteen but with an exception: they allowed mar-

riage between fifteen and eighteen as long as there was court approval. By 2020 the courts had banned outright any marriage under the age of eighteen. So there's been a step of progress. And I hoped that could mean Joud is safe.

But if I dared to think the kingdom was advancing the rights of women, I soon found out I was dead wrong. Much of what was being changed—the child marriage law, for example—was more about show than reality. The deputy Middle East director of Human Rights Watch posted a comment on the organization's blog: "Rahaf Mohammed's courageous quest for freedom has exposed anew an array of discriminatory practices and policies that disempower Saudi women and leave them vulnerable to abuse." And he said, "Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman wants to be viewed as a women's rights reformer, but Rahaf showed just how laughably at odds this is from reality when the authorities try to hunt down fleeing women and torture women's rights activists in prison." Sadly, I knew that to be true. Human rights organizations had been reporting that some of the women activists who were arrested were tortured with electric shocks, whipped, sexually harassed and assaulted in prison.

There were new rules in the kingdom, all right, and I continue to follow them: women can open a business without a husband's permission, and a woman was appointed head of the stock exchange, and mothers can keep custody of the children after divorce. But as for women being free to travel abroad, register a divorce or a marriage, or apply for documents such as passports without a guardian overseeing every step of the way—that doesn't happen where I come from.

There are still perils and consequences to pay for the drastic steps I took in running away. The freedom I sought is

still up for grabs when my name is posted all over the place and everyone recognizes my face. I still frequently feel the conflict between the new Rahaf and the old Rahaf. And I know that even eighteen months after my exit from that suffocating place, its obligations and customs still swirl around my thinking the way thunderstorms bump into view, dump their contents and blow away. But I also feel joyously free—that no one can stop me from doing anything.

My goal in writing this book is to alert the world about the facts of a girl's life in Saudi Arabia and, even more, to send a message of hope to all the women who have had experiences similar to mine. Many of them have traded in everything—family, familiarity and a level of security, albeit laced with abuse—for uncertainty, often poverty and potential hazards that include being rejected by your chosen country and even being deported. Those of us who have landed safely in other countries still depend on the network that launched our escape—the people who acted like family as we navigated the fear, the loneliness and the dilemmas of making a home elsewhere, the ones who still watch out for each other.

I vowed to use my newfound freedom to campaign for women's rights in Saudi Arabia, and to call for an end to the male guardianship system enforced by the regime. There's no doubt that the number of women fleeing from the Saudi administration and abuse will increase, especially since the system they have in place right now isn't always able to stop them. I'm sure that as I write these words there are women using a secret code to get online and find out how to break away from the misery they live with. I hope my story encourages them to be brave and find freedom. But I also hope it prompts a change

to the laws in Saudi, and that rather than being one girl's story of escape, this book becomes a change agent at home.

Gaining my freedom meant losing my family. Living in Canada means being mostly safe but also knowing that my face is familiar and my story is known, so I'm not 100 percent secure—but who is? My journey has been rocky, but it has allowed me to grow and learn and fulfill my dreams. Would I ever go back? I considered that once, when I feared for my little sister, but not now—I have goals to graduate from university and dreams to become an actor and plans to help refugee women settle. That's what I want to achieve. I have what it takes to make a good life.

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no. 1

A LETTER TO MY SISTERS  
WHO NEED TO ESCAPE  
THE LIVES THEY ARE LIVING

**Y**ou are not alone. My life resembles that of many girls and women around the world who have experienced injustice, abuse and the denial of the rights that women deserve. I was beaten, threatened, raped by a stranger and hunted down as though I was a criminal by my family and the Saudi Arabian government during my escape. Like so many girls caught in the cage of oppression, I suffered through a depression so severe I felt internally dead and wanted to commit suicide. My recovery meant finding the way forward to a life that I felt I deserved, a life that would fulfill my dreams. I left everything behind, my family who I love and all that was familiar to me, because I believe I deserve a better life than the one they were forcing me to live.

You also deserve freedom. You have the right to say no. You have the right to say yes. Do not allow another person to define your rights. Follow your dreams and fight to change whatever is holding you back. I surrendered twice, thinking I had to give in to my family and give up my hope for freedom. But then I gathered my courage and fought again. I fought the awful rules

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*and the disgraceful presumptions about girls and women and I fought my fear of resisting. You need to fight too. Your place is not at the kitchen stove and the bed. You are a precious human being with a future that relies on work and play and happiness.*

*For the rest of my life, there will be people who will curse me and call me nasty names because I chose my lifestyle myself and broke Arabic and Islamic restrictions. I have already faced a heap of criticism and hurtful comments because I decided to be "me" and not the obedient, silent, invisible woman they wanted me to be.*

*My advice to you is this: Believe in yourself, be brave; don't wait for someone to help you, to set you free, to make you happy. You can do this for yourself. As I write this letter to you, I realize that eighteen months have passed since I ran away. During that time, I failed, I made mistakes, but I got up again, I learned and matured. Today, I can say that I have never felt better psychologically and physically, and I've never felt so happy and safe. The fight for freedom was worth it.*

*Remember, nothing is impossible, nothing is too difficult to try. I am an example of this. I fought the government and even the authorities in a foreign airport; I fought my family and my tribe; I fought everyone who tried to block my path to freedom and here I am.*

*Many women have fled, many others have tried and failed to get out of the clutches of a government that defies international laws and human rights norms. I don't want to encourage you to put your lives at risk, which is what you do when you decide to run away. I'd rather you keep up the quarrel with the government, the guardianship law and the mutaween brutes at home. But if that doesn't work, I have one word for you—ESCAPE.*



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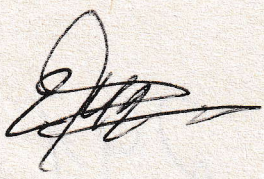
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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

RAHAF MOHAMMED was eighteen years old when she dramatically escaped from Saudi Arabia, capturing worldwide attention through her Twitter account. The daughter of a politician, Rahaf was raised according to an oppressive interpretation of Islam in which women and girls are given virtually no freedom. Thanks to a public plea for her life made on social media, she was eventually granted asylum in Canada, where she still resides, advocating for the freedom and empowerment of women.

SALLY ARMSTRONG is an award-winning author, journalist and human rights activist. She is the author of five bestselling books: the 2019 CBC Massey Lecture *Power Shift, Ascent of Women*, *The Nine Lives of Charlotte Taylor*, *Veiled Threat* and *Bitter Roots, Tender Shoots*. Armstrong was the first journalist to bring the story of the women of Afghanistan to the world and has also covered stories in conflict zones in Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda, Iraq, South Sudan, Jordan and Israel. A four-time winner of the Amnesty International Canada Media Award, she holds ten honorary doctorates and is an Officer of the Order of Canada.

**'Through her courageous resistance, she has, for a moment, drawn global attention to the ongoing struggle of Saudi women'**

**WASHINGTON POST**

What is it like to grow up in an oppressive regime, where mixing with men and boys is strictly limited, unmarried women are under the full control of their male relatives and secretive underground networks help girls plan their escapes?

In *Rebel*, Rahaf Mohammed tells the gripping true story of her escape from Saudi Arabia aged just eighteen – a journey that risked everything she had and captivated the world.

**'Brings alive her austere classrooms, the rages of her domineering brothers, the desires of girls like her and the sorrow of such oppression'**

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WE CAN'T SAY WE DIDN'T KNOW**

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