

The book cover features a high-contrast, black and white portrait of a woman wearing a niqab, with only her eyes visible. The background is a vibrant red. The text is overlaid on the image in white and red.

'An eye-opening look into a closed kingdom'
DAILY MAIL

**MY
ESCAPE
FROM
SAUDI
ARABIA
TO
FREEDOM**

REBEL

**RAHAF
MOHAMMED**

RAHAF MOHAMMED was eighteen years old when she dramatically escaped from Saudi Arabia, capturing world-wide attention through her Twitter account. The daughter of a high-profile politician, Rahaf was raised according to an oppressive interpretation of Islam, where women and girls are given virtually no freedom. Knowing this, she staged an international escape in January 2019, which was sabotaged by the Saudi authorities. Rahaf was eventually granted asylum by Canada, where she still resides.

‘Through her courageous resistance, she has, for a moment, drawn global attention to the ongoing struggle of Saudi women. The striking image of a young woman, wielding nothing but a cell phone, facing down the force of an oppressive government is an apt metaphor for this fraught moment in Saudi Arabia’s history’
Washington Post

‘*Rebel* is an eye-opening look into a closed kingdom, and a grim reminder of a place where women’s rights are still far from recognised’
Daily Mail

‘The raw tale of a young woman’s desperate dash for freedom ... Mohammed brings alive her austere classrooms, the rages of her domineering brothers, the desires of girls like her and the sorrow of such oppression. Her story is that of many more without a voice who cannot rise above their circumstances. She speaks for them in a dignified, raw manner’
Guardian, Book of the Day

'Every so often, a book comes along that challenges our emotional acumen in an almost unbearable way – a story so disturbing and unfathomable, we might find ourselves stepping away from its pages for a few mandatory breathers. The suspense is tight, the stakes too high ... One such story belongs to Rahaf Mohammed ... the action is heart-racingly rendered, almost too unnerving to read ... But books like these are critical for readers living in the west – there are still so many private stories that need to be normalised, so many more Rahafs we will never know or hear about'

Sydney Morning Herald

'Mohammed describes her life in Saudi Arabia as the daughter of a prominent government official, subject to strict laws that restricted women's freedoms and opportunities ... A heartbreaking and tense narrative of discovery and escape'

Library Journal

'Recounts her daring path to liberation in this potent debut ... Her scorching indictment serves as a beacon for women worldwide yearning for freedom'

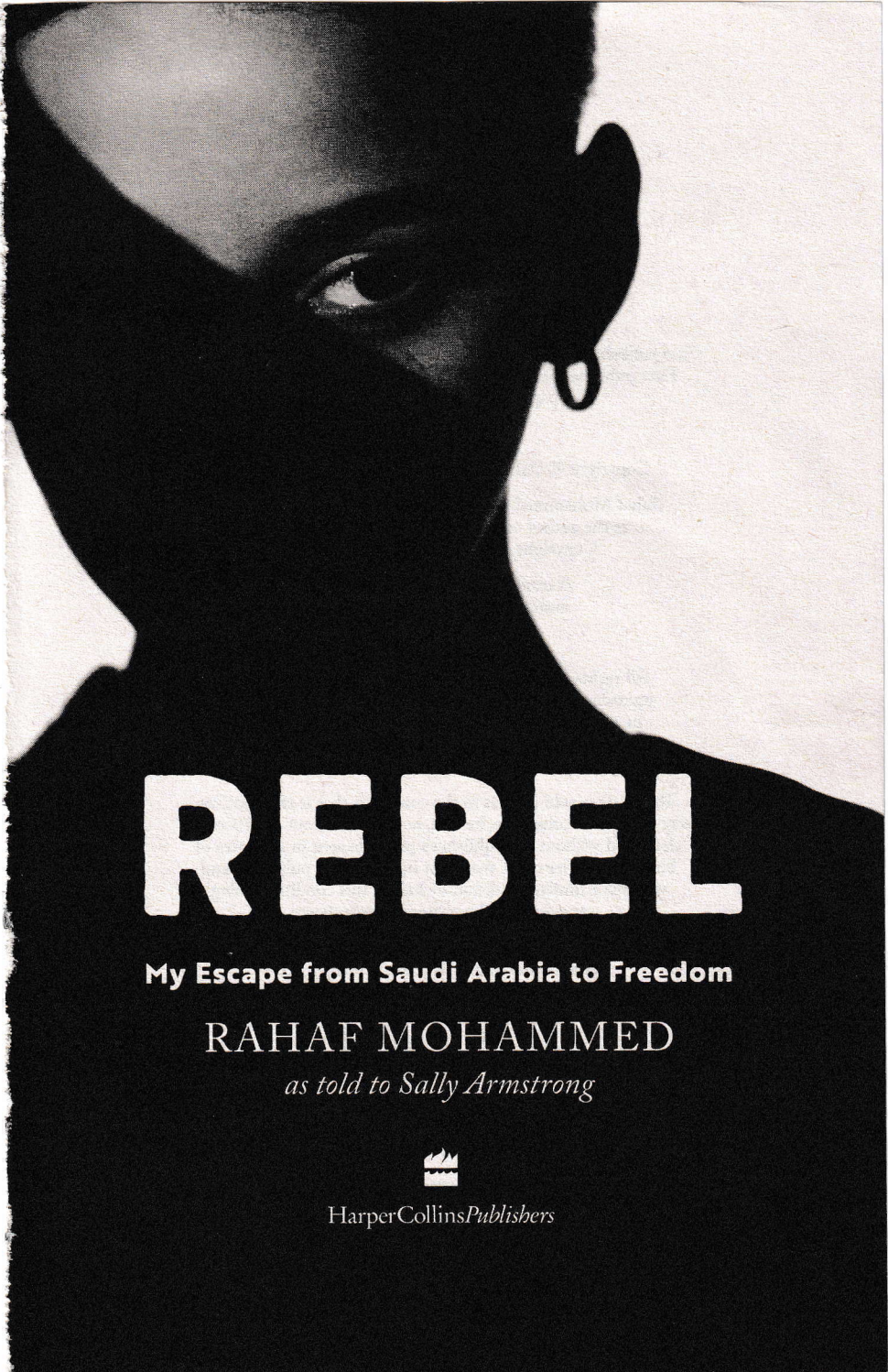
Publishers Weekly

'A harrowing account of a Saudi woman's triumph over oppression ... Mohammed creates a tense narrative of her desperate flight, the efforts of her powerful father to stop her, and the determined journalist who came to her aid. An absorbing chronicle of courage'

Kirkus Reviews

'An inspiring read that will leave you shaking with fury, and then cheering in solidarity'

SOPHIE MCNEILL, author of *We Can't Say We Didn't Know*



REBEL

My Escape from Saudi Arabia to Freedom

RAHAF MOHAMMED

as told to Sally Armstrong



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For all the women who are fighting for their freedom

*Content warning: This book contains scenes of violence,
including sexual assault, as well as suicidal ideation.
Please read with care.*

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REBEL

CHAPTER ONE

On the Run

{DECEMBER 31, 2018}

All that stood between me and freedom was a car ride. For more than a year I'd bided my time, waiting for the right moment to escape. I was eighteen years old and scared to death that my carefully laid plans might backfire. But my heart was full of rebellion against the constant fear, cruel rules and ancient customs that stifle and sometimes kill girls like me in Saudi Arabia. And it soared when I imagined a life away from them.

I had my phone, but my passport was with my eldest brother. Getting it and hiding it so I would have it when the time came to run was key. I was trying to be cool, trying to look like the dutiful daughter packing for a holiday, trying to calm the waves of anxiety as I watched from my bedroom the family prepare for departure and then gather for lunch before setting out for Kuwait.

We were going to Kuwait City, a ten-hour drive from our home in Ha'il, to visit relatives for a one-week family holiday. This was my opportunity to execute my plan. Sitting there watching my brothers carry our suitcases out to the car, I felt

a mixture of sadness and excitement. I was torn between hugging my brothers—which is actually forbidden because it's seen as a sexual act—and hoping nothing would get in the way of my decamping.

The bedroom walls around me were bare, with nothing that might make you think a young woman lived in this room. It was not halal—permissible—in this strict society to have signs of life on your bedroom wall. The opposite is haram—that which is forbidden. I remember the teddy bear I had on my bed as a little girl being taken away from me because it was haram—only the Prophet can be imagined in a photo or a form. The drawings I'd once done of people and animals were confiscated, since anything that has a soul is seen as competing with the Prophet and therefore haram. My textbooks and notebooks were scattered around, reminding me that my first semester at the University of Ha'il was over and I would not be returning. I sat on my bed contemplating my life as the Saudi girl who loved her family but could not abide the no-girls-allowed mantra my family swore by; the rebel daughter and sister being driven away by a toxic mix of cultural contradictions.

I was taught in school that Saudi Arabia is the envy of the world; the richest and best country with the most oil; a country that requires its people to make the hajj, a pilgrimage to Mecca, at least once in a lifetime to renew their sense of purpose in the world. Even as a young girl I wondered why oil and resorts and holy treks made this the country everyone else wanted to live in. And it always irked me that a person could make a hajj and be forgiven for everything he does in his whole life, even if he beats his wife or murders a stranger.

My childhood eyes had feasted on other aspects of Saudi: the mountains near our home that beckoned us to come with our picnics and hike to our hearts' content; the vast, ever-changing deserts that never failed to capture my imagination with their undulating sand dunes that changed colour from cool beige to fiery red as the sun rose and set. When my family went to the desert at night, usually to get away from the suffocating summer heat, we would play hide-and-seek in the dark, struggling to get a footing in the soft sand, chasing rabbits and jerboa (a desert rodent) and each other without a care in the world. We ran races and of course the winner got a prize. We'd sing songs, recite poems and dance the traditional dance called Ardah, which is for men but we danced it with our brothers for fun. And always we heard stories from our parents that were different from the ones we heard in school. Some were about the Al Rasheed family who ran this region before the Saud family killed them and took over; others were about the history of our people and the ability of the nomadic Bedouins to subsist in the desert on minimal food and live with simplicity. But the stories we loved best were the ones our parents used to tell us about falling in love, about when they were young. Sharing old stories is like the glue that holds a family together; we never got tired of hearing about the past. I know now we were making precious memories.

From childhood, however, I was aware of the many contradictions in my homeland. While the landscape is mostly shades of beige and white, with patches of green near a water oasis and mountains of outcropping rocks and trees, the softly muted colours of Saudi Arabia are sharply contrasted by the sight of bodies shrouded in black bags moving on the byways. Women and girls over the age of twelve are covered lest a man

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cast his eyes on their body shapes. In fact, in my family I had to wear an abaya—a loose, shapeless black garment draped over my shoulders and covering my body—at the age of nine, and a niqab, which is like a mask on our faces that exposes only our eyes, at the tender age of twelve. I was a young girl when I began to wonder if this was a form of punishment. If a man can't control himself, why must a woman hide herself behind robes as though it is her fault? And if women do have to be covered, why is it that men who are not in jeans and Western dress wear white robes that deflect the blazing heat, but the women must wear black that absorbs it?

More than half of Saudi Arabia's population of 34 million is under the age of twenty-five, which I felt was a good omen for change. But although the rulers of the kingdom, who claim they act in the name of God, have declared some changes in the strict Islamic rules Saudis live with, and call for tolerance and moderation, they still crucify, behead and torture anyone who doesn't agree with the government. The mutaween—a.k.a. religious police—patrol the streets, even the universities, supposedly making sure the citizens "enjoy good and forbid wrong," which means the shops are closed five times a day during prayers, dress codes for women are strictly enforced and the separation of men and women is fanatically observed, as is the ban on alcohol. In fact, lots of people don't actually pray; girls meet boyfriends in secret places and many drink alcohol without being caught. Since 90 percent of the workforce is made up of foreigners—Saudis don't do blue-collar jobs—if you're sneaking out to meet your friends, the Indian or Afghan man working in the coffee shop isn't going to report you or even understand the language you are speaking. Most of the Saudis who do hold

jobs work for the government, where the men nap in the afternoon and tend to gather at about 5 p.m. to socialize until well after midnight.

My family are Sunni Muslims from the Al-Shammari tribe that used to rule the Ha'il region until the Saud tribe took over. Ha'il is the capital of this northwest region. It's the most conservative part of Saudi Arabia, and its people are famed for their generosity, which is why our home is so often open to others who come for coffee or a meal. My family is part of the elite: we live in Salah Aldin, the wealthy part of Ha'il, where there are no shops, only houses, in a big nine-bedroom house with two kitchens (one on the first floor for cooking, the other on the second floor for snacks), ten bathrooms, six sitting rooms and one small garden. We have a cook, a driver and a housekeeper, and there are six family cars; the one waiting for us in the driveway to take us to Kuwait is a black Mercedes. My family also has privileges and a lot of advantages, such as the ability to take holidays in other Arab states like Jordan, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey.

But when I think about the feeding of my soul, there is so much we are missing. Consider this: there are no balconies on our house—a good woman would never sit outside where someone can see her. And our windows are closed in case a man might see a woman inside the house. A woman—that is, anyone over the age of nine—can't leave home to visit the neighbours or go to the bazaar, even if only to buy lingerie or makeup, or go out for a walk without a husband, brother or son present to monitor her. We're forbidden to go to the cinema, but we watch American films on our computers. Conversion by Muslims to another religion is illegal. Atheists are designated as terrorists; so are feminists. Homosexuality is

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punishable by death. Marriage between cousins is the norm; in fact, so many Saudis have married their cousins that genetic counsellors are trying to convince people to stop, as we have dramatic increases in a variety of severe genetic diseases. Having multiple wives is also common, and a man can divorce his wife simply by saying "I divorce you" three times. It's known as "triple talaq."

These are the ingredients of a tribal country that makes its own laws and defies the outside world. This is a country of such hypocrisy that even though religion rules everything—education, the judiciary, the government—95 percent of Mecca's historic buildings, most of them over a thousand years old, have been demolished out of a fanatical fear they will take attention away from the Prophet. Even the ones linked to Muhammad's family have been destroyed. And while most women are covered in black body bags, the female anchors on the television news station owned by the royal family wear Western clothing. It's all for show. Duplicity is the name of the game in Saudi.

Men are everything in my country. They are the decision makers, the power holders, the keepers of the religious and cultural keys. Women, on the other hand, are dismissed, bullied and serve as the objects of men's distorted obsession with purity. It's a complicated and convoluted house of cards that risks collapse in the face of truth-telling.

My father, Mohammed Mutlaq al Qunun, is one of the leaders in Saudi Arabia because he is the governor of Al Sulaimi, a city about 180 kilometres from Ha'il, and interacts in his job with the royal family. He doesn't live with us. He married a

second wife, which is legal in Saudi Arabia, when I was fourteen, and took another wife, his third, when I was seventeen. That changed everything for me, my mother and my six siblings. My father stopped coming with us on holidays, and my mother, Lulu, became so depressed, hurt and utterly rejected that even her personality changed. She felt that my father had married other wives because, as she got older, he wanted younger women. And she was right.

That's why this holiday was just my mom and my siblings. I am the fifth child of seven. One older sister, Lamia, is married, and the second eldest, Reem, couldn't come with us this time. So we were six in the car—Majed sat in the front with my older brother Mutlaq, who was driving; Mom and I squeezed in the back with my younger brother, Fahad, and my little sister, Joud. I had to sit in the middle because even though I was wearing the abaya as well as a niqab, I was not to be seen through the car windows. That turned out to be an ideal vantage point for seeing where my brother hid the passports and for carrying out a daring bid to grab mine when he was unaware.

Once we were downstairs and getting into the car, my father turned up to say goodbye and to give each of us money for the holiday. I was already in the car when he arrived. My father has a big warm smile, so engaging that he easily draws people to him. It was a good thing my face was covered with the niqab, because although I was smiling back at him, he would have seen my sadness there as I looked at him for the last time. My feelings about him are so mixed. He treated me very badly and did terrible things to my sister and mother, but somehow I still love him. I felt I was being pushed away by what he and even my mother and certainly my brothers

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expected of me. They demanded sacrifices I simply could not make. When I cut my hair they locked me up in a room until they figured out an excuse for my shorn look. They finally made me wear a turban to hide my hair and told everyone there'd been an accident and my hair had been burnt and had to be cut. Going outside without my niqab covering my face was an offence that called for severe punishment, and that's what they delivered to me with fists and kicks and slaps. If they were to discover that I had sexual experiences with a man, I knew they would kill me for the sake of honour. Or, at the very least, they would force me to marry a man I didn't know. I had to leave, otherwise I wouldn't be able to live my own life and would have to pay with my life for any mistake I might make. I saw this voyage as the first day of a new life I'd been waiting for ever since I'd begged for the right to attend university in another city and been flatly refused; this was my chance to avoid the trapped lives of my mother and older sisters.

When the car pulled away from the only home I'd ever known, I didn't look back. But as we left the neighbourhood and drove toward the highway, I couldn't help but see the two mountains Aja and Salma off in the distance, symbols of happiness and tragedy that follow me still. Ha'il is surrounded by mountains, but these two in the northern part of the city are among the biggest and most recognizable in the region. They are well known to everyone here as the site of a love story. Aja, who belonged to the tribe of the Amalekites, fell in love with Salma, who hailed from another tribe. They declared their love one to the other but their parents refused them permission to marry. Alas, the star-crossed lovers ran away together only to be caught and killed by their families.

Aja was crucified on one mountain and Salma on the other. I knew as a child that this was a love story that was being told as a cautionary tale as much as a story of romance.

The reflection about those long-ago days on the mountains didn't last long, as I was almost immediately consumed with figuring out a way to get my passport. I had watched my brother Mutlaq as he got into the car. I knew he had all our passports—his role as the senior male on this trip was to keep the important documents with him. He often kept our passports in his pocket when we were away because he was afraid they would be stolen, but this time everyone felt at ease since we were all together in the car and going to see family in Kuwait. I didn't take my eyes off him from the time he lowered himself into the driver's seat. Then I saw him slip all the passports into the glove compartment of the car. Apart from the passport, I was also worried that somehow I would lose my phone, that someone would ask to use it to make a call and then keep it. Every single one of my plans was in my phone under a code name, including how I could book a flight anywhere, how I could link to websites, how I could get from Kuwait to Thailand; what to do and where to stay in Thailand; and how to book a flight from there to Australia, which was my planned final destination and where I intended to ask for asylum. The list of my friends all over the world who are also runaways was in my phone as well. I'd been communicating with them for more than a year in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Canada, Sweden and Australia. I'd received and relied on loads of advice from these friends about how to avoid pitfalls such as Saudi girls arriving in Australia and being asked to call their fathers by officials who don't want immigrants coming into the country. One of my friends alerted me to this, so I arranged

with a male friend in the UK to have his name and number with me in case I needed to make that call. I had all kinds of tips for all kinds of potential problems stored in my phone. I also had money, about ten thousand Saudi riyals (US\$2,700), stashed away in a friend's bank account. I'd been saving it for about seven months and had the password to the account. My plan was to go to Kuwait with the family and, as soon as I got hold of my passport, escape, get to the airport, buy a ticket to Thailand and connect to Australia. I had friends there who would meet my plane.

It was midnight when we crossed the border into Kuwait. The temperature had dropped to about seven or eight degrees Celsius by the time we arrived at the hotel. I was shivering, but I knew very well it was more from the cold of fear than the night air. It was 2 a.m. by the time we checked into our suite. I still didn't have my passport, as there hadn't been an opportunity to get it. Now I surveyed the hotel suite—two bedrooms (one for my brothers, the other for my sister and mother and me), a bathroom and a sitting room adjoining. I knew this was the place I'd leave from, but having my mother in the same room would create trouble because she's a light sleeper and would wake if I was moving around in the night. So I asked her to sleep in the sitting room. My excuse was that the bedroom was small and had only one big bed for the three of us; she agreed that she'd be better off in the sitting room.

The holiday was nerve-racking. I had to pretend to take part in the shopping and eating and visiting when in fact I was watching and waiting for the best chance to escape. We spent several days shopping at clothing stores in the mall, where I bought a short skirt without any of them knowing and stuffed

it into my bag. It was forbidden to wear clothing that showed my legs at home, but I planned to wear it soon in Australia. And having it in my bag was like fuel for the flight from the family I would soon take. We also went to the beach, which was a new experience for me, an experience that hardened my feelings about the sacrifices a woman has to make in Saudi Arabia. My mother told me the women on the beach who were going into the water in bathing suits were bitches—bad girls. I knew they weren't bad. How could it be okay for the boys—my brothers—to be cavorting in the water, swimming, splashing each other, cooling off, having fun, but somehow sinful for me to do the same? I was stuck on the beach wrapped head to toe in my abaya, sweating and swearing I'd buy a bikini when I got to Australia and swim all I wanted. In fact, I don't even know how to swim—girls weren't taught to do anything like that where I come from in Saudi.

Being on that beach was another kind of eye-opening experience. I'd never been to the ocean before, had never seen the tide, with its crashing waves and currents. I was mesmerized by the sight—the incoming tide, the blue colour of the water farther out in the sea and the white caps of the waves as they came closer to the shore. All day long the waves flowed up to the beach and down to the sea. There was something enduring, almost spiritual about the movement, like a ritual on the edge of the ocean. It was such a powerful contrast for me to be wrapped in a false covering and peeking out from behind a disguise while I watched all of this natural splendour.

There was only one day left in our holiday when at last I spied my chance to grab my passport. It was January 4 at two o'clock in the afternoon; my mother, younger sister and I were in the back of the car waiting for my brother to reserve a room

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for us in the restaurant. The other two boys had gone into the restaurant with him. This was my chance. The front seat was empty. I reached toward the glove compartment of the car and immediately my mom asked, "What do you want?" She couldn't see what I was doing because of the headrest on the seat in front of her. I was still in the middle, but this time I embraced that stifling rule and calmly answered my mother. "I'm trying to charge my phone." I opened the glove compartment, took my passport with my right hand and slid it up the left sleeve of my abaya. Then I brought my right hand back ever so slowly, tilting my left arm up so the passport wouldn't fall out of the sleeve. Once I was sure the passport was safely out of sight, I retracted my left arm into my sleeve until I could get hold of the document and slip it into the small bag I was wearing underneath the abaya. Because the abaya was a flowing garment, no one could tell what I was doing: my dreaded cover became my cover-up. But the act—basically stealing something my brother was entrusted with—had a powerful effect on me. My heart was beating very fast, but I also felt paralyzed; for a moment I couldn't move any part of my body. I could hardly believe what I had just accomplished. I eventually settled back against the seat and sent a text to my friend to say I'd got the passport. I kept writing, "I did it. I did it." But that sense of triumph gave way almost immediately to abject fear that someone in the family would open the glove compartment and see that one of the passports was missing.

By the time we went into the restaurant I was stiff with anxiety, practically like a corpse, unable to talk or laugh with the others. Waiting was an agony. Because we were in a private dining room we could take off our abayas and niqabs. The family could see my face, so I was trying hard to look

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relaxed. We ordered *machboos*, a family favourite of spiced pieces of chicken with basmati rice, and tea, and I relaxed just a little. But then, while we were eating, I had a nosebleed. I knew it was because I was under a lot of stress, but I didn't want to say anything like that. So when my family asked how I was feeling, I said, "I don't know, I think I'm tired," and then I hoped with all my might that no one would read anything else into the incident. It was bleeding a lot and, to make the situation worse, I was nervous and sweating. I wiped my nose and told the family I would go to the bathroom to clean up, hoping I could buy myself some time to calm down. Once there, my nosebleed got worse and I started to vomit. After a while, when I felt I had control of the nosebleed as well as my own nerves, I went back to my family and tried to act normal; I told them I just felt dizzy and forced myself to join the conversation. When we left the restaurant and got into the car, I tried to keep the conversation going so they would be preoccupied and not think of opening the glove compartment; I kept talking to my brother to divert his attention until we returned to the hotel, where we showered and got ready for dinner with my father's sister.

As we drove to my aunt's house in a town about an hour from Kuwait City, I suggested to everyone that they stay away from caffeine and not stay too late because we would have a long drive back home the next morning. This was our last night away and I didn't want anyone having insomnia; I needed them to sleep early and soundly so I could make my escape.

There were a lot of people at dinner—cousins and friends of my aunt. I looked around and decided with all these people—more than twenty of them, crowded into the house—and with everyone talking and visiting, and with my

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mother and brothers thinking I was having fun with the girls in the other room, this was my chance to leave. I googled the number for a taxi and texted a cab to come and take me to the airport in two hours. The driver texted back that he couldn't come; I was in an isolated place and taxis didn't come to this area. I was disappointed but not overly worried. Our hotel back in Kuwait City, while not in the centre of the city, was still within the city limits. I figured Kuwait was a big, noisy place, just the sort of place where a young woman could disappear, so I texted the driver again to say if he couldn't come to my aunt's house, he should come to the hotel at 7 a.m. to take me to the airport. By now it was 11 p.m. Although we usually stayed late at parties, I was trying to convince the family that we should go back to the hotel and sleep. At last we said our farewells.

Back at the hotel, I expected everybody to sleep right away, but my mother and brothers stayed in the sitting room chatting. I didn't dare join them, and kept hoping they would go to bed. I called my little sister to play and talk with me but soon enough she fell asleep. The door was ajar, so I could see what was going on in the sitting room. The rest of my family kept talking for three more hours. I was beside myself with worry. This was my last chance. Then, one by one they withdrew—first one brother, then the other and at last my little brother, and then my mother put out the light. My sister and I were alone in the bedroom. She was sound asleep, and soon so was my mother. At 4 a.m. I booked a ticket on Kuwait Airways from Kuwait to Thailand. I knew that once they figured out I'd run away, my parents would track my trip and monitor my bank account with an app that men in Saudi Arabia use to trace their women. The app, which is provided by the Saudi

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Ministry of the Interior and downloaded through the Google Play store or Apple App Store, alerts the man if a woman uses her phone, her passport, her credit cards. I knew I had to get rid of the SIM card in my phone and switch airlines once I got to Bangkok so they wouldn't be able to find me. I booked a hotel in Bangkok for three days.

The flight was departing Kuwait at 9 a.m. The taxi was to come at seven. I packed my sister's bag because it was smaller than mine and easier to carry. I stuffed in my toiletries, the short skirt, and my mascara and lingerie too. I used my backpack to take a change of clothes and my papers, money and student card, as well as my passport and some loose cash and bank statements. The room was quiet, the lights in the bedroom very dim; it was still dark outside. When I finished packing, I sat on the bed and looked at my sleeping sister. I wanted to hug her and say goodbye, but of course that would wake her. Instead, I stared down at that dear little girl, memorizing every one of her features before leaving—her long, beautiful eyelashes, the little blue mark on her nose, her soft skin, her lips and her hands. As I listened to her gentle snoring, I was trying to make a mental picture of the way she was sleeping curled up like a baby, her tiny hands under her cheeks.

Joud was only twelve years old. She was so little, so innocent; I feared what they would do to her—the same awful things they did to me. I wanted to remember that sweet face because I knew I wouldn't see it again for a long time. As I looked at her, I wondered if she would hate me for leaving. And I wondered if she would feel hurt that I'd left her. I started to cry and began to hesitate: Should I go and start a new life or should I stay with my little sister? Making that

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final decision was terribly difficult. But I knew I had to get away, take a chance on what tomorrow would bring. I finished packing, closed the bag quickly and left the rest of my belongings behind. It was time to go. I took the SIM card out of my phone and flushed it down the toilet. Then I put my backpack over my shoulder, lifted the carry-on bag to my chest so it wouldn't make a sound on the floor, and very carefully and quietly tiptoed out of the bedroom and past my mother, sleeping on the sofa in the sitting room. I was trembling with nervousness, but looking at her and hearing her snoring I was sure she was asleep, and I felt more secure. With extreme care I squeezed the door handle and opened the door to the hall. The slight creaking sound it made ratcheted up my fear again, so I decided to leave it ajar in case the noise of it closing might wake her. I left barefoot, with my bag and my shoes in my hands, and ran to the elevator. I could hear voices out in the hall and worried that the sound would now carry into the suite and wake my mother.

At last I was inside the elevator, another step closer to freedom; I slipped my shoes on, and when the elevator stopped at the ground floor, I stepped out and realized I didn't know where the taxi would be, and I couldn't call because the SIM card for my phone was hopefully soaked and ruined in a sewer pipe. I should have kept it until I got to the airport, because now I was stuck with no working phone and couldn't call the taxi driver to make sure he was coming. I tried to act as though I knew exactly where I was going, to avoid having the hotel staff question me. Here was a young woman wandering around at 6:45 a.m. without an abaya. What would they think? Could they stop me? I kept walking toward the back door of the hotel because there seemed to

be fewer people there. And then, with all the confidence of a person who used the back entrance every day, I opened the door and walked outside.

I stopped in my tracks, stood absolutely still, as I felt the soft breeze blowing on the back of my bare neck—it felt like a taste of freedom, a freedom I hadn't had since I was nine years old and first told I had to wear a hijab. By the time I was twelve I'd lost the freedom to feel fresh air on my face because I had to wear a niqab. I loved the feeling of the air on my neck and felt like shouting, laughing; the wind touching my face and neck was wonderful, like a spontaneous hug from the world. I felt I could fly at that moment and thought to myself: *This is only the beginning of freedom—the best is yet to come.* I walked along the road behind the hotel to avoid the front entrance because it was on a street with shops and people. I kept walking until I reached the main street. Once there I searched for a coffee shop with Wi-Fi so I could find my bearings and contact the taxi, but there was no coffee shop in sight. Luckily, I ran into a young man and asked him if I could use his phone to call the driver; he loaned me the phone, offered to help carry my bag and waited with me. He asked where I was going. I said Thailand. He then asked, "Where are you from?" I said, "Saudi Arabia." He wondered why I wasn't covered with an abaya and niqab and I said, "My parents are very open-minded."

Finally the taxi came. I asked the driver to take me to the airport, and then connected to the internet through his phone's hotspot. Through messaging apps, I texted my friends; I even phoned them. I didn't feel scared at all. One of my runaway friends who lives in Sydney, Australia, was telling me what to do once I got to the airport. I even did a video

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chat from the taxi and kept saying, "I did it, I did it." And I took a photo of myself in the taxi and sent it to my friends. The drivers in Kuwait, just like in Saudi, are mostly from India or Afghanistan, so they speak Urdu or Dari. I knew the driver couldn't understand Arabic, so I was free to talk to my girlfriends. I felt victorious.

Upon reaching the airport, I went to the information desk and asked about my flight. The attendant told me I was at the wrong terminal, that this was the domestic terminal and my flight was leaving from the international one. This news threw me, and made me realize I hadn't figured everything out in advance. I asked for the supervisor and explained to him that I didn't know how to get to the other terminal. He saw that I was worried and was very helpful. He told me there was a shuttle bus that went to the international terminal and where to get it, that it was free and that I still had time. I caught the bus and sat there trying to convince myself it would be only a few more minutes and I'd be okay.

On arrival, I stood in line to check in, but when I gave the agent at the counter my passport and my bag, he seemed to be taking a long time to check me in—longer than for the people ahead of me. My heart started racing again. I was scared and asked if there was a problem. He said, "You cannot go." I could hardly believe what I was hearing. My heart sank. I thought there must be an alert about me that he had seen and that this was the end of my life. He must have been calling the authorities; they must have called my father, and now my father would be coming to get me. And my life was over. I tried to get hold of myself and speak with conviction when I asked, "Why can't I go?" He said, "You cannot go to Bangkok because you don't have a return ticket." I tried to convince

him to overlook this because I was really going to Sydney after Bangkok, but he said he couldn't. He told me I needed to go to another counter and buy a return ticket to Kuwait, as there is a requirement in Thailand for Saudi citizens to leave after fifteen days unless they have a visa. I went quickly to that counter and said I needed a ticket; the agent told me the fare and the departure times. I was so nervous that I had trouble figuring out the different currency—I was trying to count out in Saudi riyals and put them into Kuwaiti dinars. He seemed to take pity on me and also realized that time was passing and my boarding time was near. "All right," he said, "I'll book it for you. Pay when you reach Bangkok." He gave me a copy of the ticket, told me to pick it up and pay for it in Bangkok, and said I only needed to show this booking to get the visa.

As I left the counter, I felt I'd been extremely lucky so far. Everybody had been nice and wanted to help me; no one suspected I was launching a runaway, the flight of my life. My biggest fear was of being refused or stopped and questioned, of having somebody ask, "Where is your guardian? Where are you going?" I knew this had happened to some Saudi women in foreign airports in Dubai, Egypt and Jordan. But no one had stopped me. The best part was hearing the loudspeaker call the passengers to board the flight. I knew then I had made it; I had gotten out before they knew I was gone. Even if they were in the airport, they couldn't get me now.

Once on board, I sat in the middle seat between two Thai women, and even though the trip took six hours I was wide-eyed: watching the flight attendants, looking out the window at the land I was leaving becoming smaller and smaller. I hadn't slept for a whole day, and I hadn't slept well the previous days of the family holiday, but I didn't want to sleep now.

I was too wound up with excitement. I wanted to savour this moment of freedom. I wanted to contemplate the sky and the morning sun, check out the people on the plane around me and examine the map on the screen in front of me that showed us where we were going. The plane was full, mostly with Thais and a few Kuwaitis. There were young Kuwaiti men in the middle three seats across the aisle from me who asked me why I was going to Bangkok. I said confidently, "I'm going there for fun." One of them gave me his number and said, "Call us. We will meet you and have fun."

I knew the weather would be different when we arrived in Bangkok—hot like summer—so as we neared our destination I went to the washroom and put on a summer top with my jeans. It was the first time I'd uncovered my arms, but I didn't uncover my chest. Clothing protocol was so deeply ingrained in me that, even though I had run away, I kept checking to make sure the top I was wearing was high enough that my chest was covered.

When the plane landed in Bangkok, I was bursting with excitement and anxious to disembark. I followed the passengers inside the airport, not really sure about what to do. All I knew was that I needed to get that visa, and so, when I saw the visa counter, I started walking toward it, thinking how well I was managing everything. Then I saw a man holding a sign with my name on it. My brain was saying *caution, caution, caution*, but he seemed to be very friendly and said, "I'm here to issue you a visa and help you get into Bangkok." I thought this was unusual, but I felt confident that, since I'd made the flight, I was safely away from anyone who could stop me. Despite the clear messages my brain was sending me, I trusted this man who was saying he was going

to help me to get a visa. I reckoned the airport office must have sent staff to help visitors. He asked me for all the official documents: the return ticket, my passport and the hotel booking—everything required to issue a visa. I gave all of it to him. He said, "Come with me." We went to a window and he talked to a lady for more than ten minutes. My alarm bells started going off again. The woman looked disconcerted—as if he was telling her to do something she didn't want to do. I badly needed to know what was going on and asked, in the most serious-sounding voice I could muster, for them to speak in English and tell me what they were talking about. They ignored me, and they also stopped talking. A few minutes later I was told I could not enter Bangkok because they could not issue a visa to me. When I repeated that I had all the requirements for obtaining a visa, the woman looked the other way—she would not look at me. I realized the two of them had made some sort of agreement.

And I knew at that moment I had walked into a trap.

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CHAPTER TWO

Girl Child

There's an enduring memory that shaped my early years, one of those suspended, dream-like thoughts that comes back to me as I negotiate a new life. It sustains me and makes me believe that innocence and compassion are part of what shaped me. I'm talking about the years before I was old enough to go to school. What comes to me, like a painting with muted colours and soft focus, is a room full of children playing, laughing, singing and teasing. The sound returns to me today like an echo—a faraway melody that makes my breath catch when it plays in my mind. We are together: my two older sisters, Lamia and Reem, and brothers Mutlaq and Majed, and me—five of us—with our nanny called Sarah. It's a flashback I treasure as it pretty much tells the story of the first six years of my life.

The television room on the first floor of our house was where we gathered. It wasn't a huge space for six of us—maybe nine metres square—and the only things in the room were a TV and cushions on the floor, but this is where I spent most of my childhood, and I thought I was the luckiest kid in

the world. My sister Joud hadn't been born yet. And my little brother, Fahad, was sickly and had to stay with our mother in her room. I didn't know what was wrong with him at the time, only that he had trouble breathing; he couldn't run, couldn't even walk fast, and he was always out of breath. During those early years, he was never separated from our mother. Later I learned that he had asthma, but when I was very small, I only knew he was sick.

Our nanny, Sarah, was from Indonesia. We always had nannies, though most only stayed two years; they all had kids of their own in Indonesia and came to Saudi to work and make enough money to take care of their own children. But some, like Sarah, stayed longer. I think she was with us for four or five years—certainly during the time I was a child. Sarah was like a mother to us: she was tall, fat and funny. I adored her. She'd make faces: closing one eye, sticking her tongue out and making funny sounds. She'd pretend she was a cat and meow at us, or a dog and bark like a yappy little puppy. She'd tickle us and chase us around the room.

I was an inquisitive and active girl. Sarah encouraged me to seek answers to my questions and stick up for myself as the youngest child in the playroom. She would also wrap her big arms around me if I fell or scraped my knee or quarrelled with one of my brothers or sisters. When the family had parties—and there were many, because that's how Saudi families socialize—we would be with our cousins and aunties, but Sarah was somehow always there like a shadow watching over us. She kept chocolate in her pocket, and like the magical nannies we saw on TV, she would slip us a treat, usually to distract us from whatever calamity we were about to get into.

Until I was seven years old, that TV room was the

centre of my world. We dragged everything in there with us—blankets, pillows, sheets. We built forts and sat inside them, pretending we were the royal princes and princesses or just acting like the kids we were during those happy days. Sometimes at night we would turn off all the lights in the room and hide; one of us would have to catch the others. Even as I describe this story, I find myself holding my breath, remembering how quiet I'd have to be, how I'd sit scrunched up in a corner as still as the air and how we'd stalk each other in the room like leopard cubs until the uproarious shouting of discovery would ring out when one of us was found. We watched TV in that room, cartoons and movies and series from India. Then we'd pretend we were the actors and make our own show. I loved acting; in fact, I believe it was during those shows we did as kids that I decided when I grew up I wanted to be an actor.

Sometimes we slept in that room—all of us, even Sarah; we'd sleep on the floor all together. Sarah would hush us, rub our backs, talk of sleep, and we'd drift off to dreamland. Although we never had a camera and didn't take family photos, the picture I have in my mind of those long-ago nights is of a collection of tired-out children, leaning on each other at odd angles and snuggling together in peaceful sleep.

While we played mostly in that room and told each other stories there, we also went outside into the small garden behind the house some days when it wasn't too hot. There we dug worms and sometimes threatened each other with them; we had mud fights and played hide-and-seek and built more forts and fed our imaginations in what was a fairly small space but seemed like a kingdom to us. We knew every nook and cranny of the yard. We acted like snoops checking to see

who or what had been there the night before—gerbils or jirds, which are like mice, but mostly stray cats whose paw prints could be imagined as belonging to wild foxes. And always we produced a show—a play that starred each of us and told a story about five adventurous kids.

There's another memory that feeds my soul when I think about my life in that house with my family. It's the strong, sweet scent of what we call bakhoor. That was the smell of my house. Bakhoor is made from woodchips that have been soaked in fragrant oils such as musk and sandalwood and burned in a traditional incense burner called a mabkhara. The pieces of wood create a rich, thick smoke that billows up and drifts throughout the house. No one wears perfume in Saudi—it's not allowed. But in every house there is the aroma of bakhoor. The smoke wafts onto the walls, the cushions, your clothing and your hair. To me, it is the smell of home. Although it burned in the house throughout my eighteen years at home, today, from afar, the scent of bakhoor brings me back to those years in the TV room and the sense of calm and togetherness created there.

During those early years I don't recall seeing my mother and father very much. Our father had his own bedroom at the far end of our house, with a bathroom and an office attached to it. But usually he was away in Al Sulaimi, where he worked as the governor. There, he lived in a place as big as a palace with a huge garden in front of the entrance, a massive lobby and living rooms for entertaining, and a terrace behind the house that stretched out into another beautifully landscaped enclosure. We stayed there sometimes; there were a dozen other rooms—two kitchens, bedrooms and sitting rooms. But usually he was there without us.

At our home in Ha'il, we saw him on weekends and for special events like parties with our relatives, and also when we went on family holidays or to the mountains in winter or the desert in the summer. All my cousins and friends said the same thing about their fathers—they were pretty much absent from our early lives. As a little girl, I didn't question it. My mom wasn't around very much either. She was a science teacher in a six-room school about a fifteen-minute drive from our house. So our nanny, Sarah, was mother, father and guardian to us.

Then, in 2007, everything changed. It was as though a curtain was drawn over my life—who I was, what I said, the way I could behave. I was seven years old. If I had to put a timeline on the events in my life, I would say this was when I shifted from being a happy-go-lucky child to a girl who no longer understood her place in the family, who wondered why she was being treated so differently, who asked what was wrong with being a girl.

At that tender age, my mother sat me down and told me that the most absolutely prohibited behaviour in the world was for a girl to shout, to be loud, to raise her voice above others. My mother taught me that a woman's voice is like *awra*, which is the word used for the intimate part of a woman's body that she needs to conceal. Some describe *awra* as the "dark, dirty place of a woman." All of a sudden, my brothers started strutting up to me and raising their fists whenever I yelled or laughed out loud. At that time, I worried more about avoiding their punches than suppressing my laughter. Today, though, I wonder about the effect that suppression must have on kids growing up—laugh and you'll be punished; look downcast and sad and you'll be rewarded for being a good girl.

I was utterly perplexed. I had never been allowed to go outside the front of the house to play. But now I saw my brothers going outside with their friends whenever they wanted, riding bicycles, hanging around in the huge park on our street. There was even a barbecue there, and while the boys cooked food and kibitzed with each other, the girls had to stay in the house. I wanted to have a bike, but my mom was shocked by my request. She said, "Girls don't ride bikes. You would lose your virginity if you were riding a bike, and furthermore, you'd become a tomboy or a lesbian." I used to open the front door just a crack—enough so one eye could peer out onto the street and see what was going on. I'd stand there glued to that opening for four or five minutes at a time, even though getting caught doing that would have meant a harsh punishment for me. Seeing the boys outside having fun made me laugh and smile at first; their good times seemed to be contagious. But then it made me angry—jealous that I couldn't do that too. My brothers played video games indoors; that was also forbidden for girls. I wanted to go to swimming lessons as my brothers did, but I was told that was certainly not for girls. By the time I went to school I knew that boys could play outside, cook in the park, ride bikes and take swimming lessons and that girls were supposed to stay out of sight. I asked my mother why I couldn't play outside. I asked her why older girls and women wore hijab. But she would only say, "If you're a girl, you behave like a girl. Good girls learn to take care of a house for a husband; they wear hijab to show that they are good. They don't do what boys do." They sure didn't. The boys wore jeans and T-shirts; little girls like me wore a *jalabiya*, which is a long, shapeless dress that comes in many different colours and covers your whole body.

We lived on a very quiet street filled with great big houses, but I was never allowed to run over to a neighbour's house to play. My brother used to say that if I was outside alone, someone would rape me. Sometimes I was invited to go to a neighbour's house to play with one of the daughters, but my brother had to walk me there—across the street and down a few houses from our place. When our cousins came, the boys played outside but the girls had to stay inside. When we thought no one was watching we would race around the house hiding in the folds of the curtains and calling out to each other. My mother would say, "Be quiet—I don't want the neighbours to know you are playing." These comments kept reinforcing my feeling that, on the one hand, we were normal kids who liked to play, but on the other, there was something wrong with us so we had to hide our desires. Or was it my mother who was promoting this duplicity?

I wondered sometimes if my mom was different from other moms. She was the only girl in her family, which might have put more pressure on her to conform. But all her friends were married young, while she went away to school to become a teacher and didn't marry until she was twenty-five. Moreover, she was two years older than my dad, while most women were younger than their husbands. It was an arranged marriage, of course—they all are—but my mom told me her parents allowed her to decide whether or not she wanted the marriage they chose for her. She is a very beautiful woman, always has been. And she was meticulous about her appearance; for example, she has one blue eye and one brown eye. She hated that and wore a brown contact lens to cover up the blue eye.

She had plenty of friends, and unlike other women in our family who were not allowed to socialize, my father allowed

my mother to go out and visit, so we were with other people a lot. But still the stifling rules for girls prevailed. Whether we were at our house or visiting someone else, women and girls had to sit in the *majlis*—the sitting room—on the floor, perched on what we call cushioned sofas to drink tea and visit each other while boys played outdoors. The lesson for me, as I understood it, was this: a girl should always stay indoors; she should stay calm and never think that playing active games is suitable for her. Although presented as good guidance, it was in fact a strict command that playing is wrong for girls and subservience is right. That was the mantra I began to struggle with even as a seven-year-old. Those customs and traditions stick to me even today, still scratching at my new life, still trying to remind me that people who play and laugh are bad.

There were other customs I began to wonder about as the roles of boys and girls were being defined. At the beginning of my parents' marriage and before my father was working for the royal family as governor of Al Sulaimi, it was my mother who paid the bills. With the money she earned as a teacher, she actually bought our house and took care of the loans for the cars my father bought. There was a stretch of time when I was seven and eight years old that my father was away in Egypt studying. He wasn't away all the time—it was one of those distance-learning schools—but he was gone for weeks, sometimes months. During that period, although we had nannies who basically ran the house, my mother took charge of most things: directing the care of the children, cooking for the family, entertaining the relatives, hiring contractors and cleaners to work in the house. She told us that Dad was away at school because he wanted a university degree that would be useful to the work he was doing as governor.

Most of my friends' mothers did not work outside the home as my mom did. When I was young, the only job women were allowed to have in my region of the country was teaching, because it meant they would work with girls and other women and be separated from men. Still, my mother seemed to me to be a contradiction: she was independent, had her own money and had a career as a teacher, but she was also religious and conservative and forever fussing and worrying about the girls in the family, accusing me of having awra if I dared to laugh out loud, and making sure we were being pious and docile. But at the same time, she was always letting my brothers do whatever they wanted.

I noticed even before I was old enough to go to school that she was conflicted. It wasn't about the difference between a child and her mother—it was something greater than that, as if she had sacrificed the woman she wanted to be and was now insisting that I make the same sacrifice. I felt she was somehow paying a price for her obedience, but as a little girl, I couldn't figure out such nuanced behaviour; I only saw her demands as mean and unfair to me. She didn't let me visit with other children on my street as my brothers did. I wasn't allowed to wear jeans like they did. And I wasn't allowed to talk about what I'd like to be when I grew up, even though I heard the boys talking the way kids do about what they would become when they grew up.

At the age of seven, my world was shrinking—where I played and who I played with defined my whole life. My cousins and I would play "house," arranging the cushions on the floor as if we were mothers with babies visiting each other. We would put a piece of cloth on our heads as though we were wearing hijab and pretend to be mothers. Since having a

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doll was forbidden because of our religion, we'd scrunch up a pillow and hold it as if it was a baby.

The "no girls allowed" mantra began to seep into my soul like a stain. By now that room that was once full of laughing children had emptied out. Sarah had gone home to Indonesia. Mutlaq and Majed—who were ten and eight years old—had their own room, and they started acting like they didn't want to be with me and like they had the right to boss me around. My sisters Lamia and Reem were thirteen and twelve years old by the time I turned seven and was ready to start school; they also had their own bedroom, and although they watched over me and protected me as big sisters do, they behaved the way girls were supposed to behave—always cleaning the house and learning to cook and doing jobs that pleased my mother. I tried to get out of doing those things. But I felt I had lost my best friends: my brothers and sisters had moved on—without me. I felt very lonely at that young stage of my life. Then my sister Joud was born. Even though she was a baby and had to stay with my mother in her room, I knew there would be a new sister for me to play with. And my little brother, Fahad, who was five, moved out of my mother's room and into my room. He was so special to me, maybe because everything was hard for him or maybe because he was still young and didn't see me as a girl who wasn't worthy of his company the way my older brothers were now treating me. Whatever it was, Fahad became my best friend, and Joud soon became my beloved baby sister.

I remember the day I started school; I was driven there by our driver. All the girls were driven to school. We weren't allowed to walk because there was an unspoken fear that we'd

be snatched by men who wanted to have sex with us. I didn't understand what that was about, but I did feel the tension and the fact that somehow I had to be hidden because I was a girl. Some girls saw that as being special. I didn't. I saw it as being denied. And I didn't like it.

But all that aside, going to school felt like embarking on a new adventure that opened all kinds of doors for me—having twenty new acquaintances in the classroom, for example. Even the uniform we were required to wear—a long, pink, shapeless dress and a white blouse—made me feel as though I was part of an important club, a club whose members would become *somebody*. I wore that uniform like a badge of belonging. We brought our lunch to school each day, usually falafels and chocolates, and after lunch we played outside, which to me was a delicious taste of freedom. The tall fence around the school hid us away from prying eyes and allowed us to play games such as hide-and-go-seek. There was a spontaneity about that—running, hiding, calculating my position and trying not to get caught—that thrilled me; it made me feel less confined and it fed my urge to bolt, to be creative and to outsmart the others. But being outside and feeling the wind on my face and the freedom of games of chase wasn't the biggest impetus for me. School was a place to learn and I was thirsty for knowledge. I wanted to know how things worked, why rules were made the way they were, who decided these things. My mother was my teacher for my first two years at school. I felt her watching me, telling everyone I was her daughter, and I liked that a lot. Coming from a family of seven kids meant you didn't get singled out very often, and certainly not if you were a girl. But at school she made me feel special. All the kids at school loved her. I sometimes wondered if she

was a liberal person at school and another, more conservative person who thought she had to be tough at home.

Our lessons during the first six years of school included reading, writing, studying the Quran, and my absolute favourite—art. I loved art. I can draw. I'm good at it; everyone knows that. But even with my art there were rules I wondered about. I was never allowed to draw humans. Once, when I was older, I started drawing women's bodies. When my mom found out she was furious—it was as though I'd become a terrorist. Drawing a human was forbidden. Just like the teddy bear that was taken away from me as a child, it's not permitted in Islam. So I drew an eye or a hand; as long as it didn't have a body attached to it, it was not haram. And I drew scenery and food like bananas. And I painted. I escaped into a world of art when I was drawing. Making something beautiful, designing something different gave me an enormous sense of pleasure as well as a boost to my self-esteem, because everyone loved my drawings. I remember one time having an argument with my mom when she refused to buy me a bike. When I started crying, she went out and bought me paints and papers and coloured pencils.

Although I never understood the rule about not drawing people and not owning a teddy bear, I went along with it. Later, when I left Saudi Arabia, I learned there were many other forbidden aspects to our lives that I'd never even heard about. For example, a friend in Canada once asked me how I celebrated my birthday in Saudi. She wondered if boys and girls came together for the party, if we dressed in our best "party dresses and party shoes," if we had cake and ice cream, if we blew out the candles on the cake. She wondered what kinds of presents the kids brought for the birthday girl. And

she asked how we sang "Happy Birthday" in Arabic. I was flabbergasted. I'd never heard of such things. We don't have birthday parties, ever! It would be the same as drawing a human being or having a teddy bear—all of it against Islam. I only knew that I was born in the winter. I didn't even know my birthdate until I was nine years old, and that was in the Hijri calendar, which is a lunar calendar of twelve months and 354 or 355 days. As I write, the Gregorian year is 2020; the Hijri year is 1439. I didn't know my birthdate in the Gregorian calendar until I was fourteen; we were travelling and I saw the date on my passport. It's March 11, 2000. It meant a lot to me to know my birthdate, but I'd never heard of birthday parties so didn't consider them.

I think if I could have replaced the word *don't* with *do*, a lot of my childhood would have been very different. For example, the summer when I was eight years old, my father bought a swimming pool. I remember that day as though it was yesterday. It was three o'clock in the afternoon on a sultry, hot day when you could hardly stay outside in the punishing heat. My father was filling the pool with water so we could swim. I was standing next to him, smiling and touching the water, watching the pretty designs it made as I moved my fingers through it. When the pool was full, he smiled at me and reminded me to be careful in the water and then he left. I knew other people had swimming pools, but this was a first for our house. I went inside and I called my brothers and told them the pool was ready for swimming. They raced out of the house enthusiastically and immediately stripped off their clothes and jumped into the pool, swimming in their underwear. I couldn't decide what I should wear in the pool—my jalabiya didn't seem like a good idea, but I knew I could not

take it off. I had nothing else to put on, so I held on to the pool and lifted my leg over the side to get into the water in my dress. Well, you'd think the backyard had been bombed. My brothers started screaming and yelling as though their lives were at risk—not my life, theirs! They insisted I get out of the water and inside the house. They were raising their fists at me and seemed to be out of control. I didn't say anything; I was frightened by their bullying and went inside. I was never close to a swimming pool again.

What stuck with me was my father smiling at me and reminding me to be careful in the water. He would have allowed me to go in the pool. Surely he had more clout than my brothers. But as odd as it sounds, these were issues I would never dare to raise with my father. I always had a feeling that if I'd asked him for a bike, he'd have gotten one for me; if I'd asked him for swimming lessons like my brothers had, I would have had them too. But I never asked. It was one of those unspoken taboos: you just never asked your father. None of us did. I never heard my cousins ask their fathers for anything; it's something that just wasn't done. Maybe that's why I always thought that he would've allowed the things I wanted to do. But I never tested that theory.

Soon enough, my older brothers turned into self-appointed guardians; they began to control me, to check my every move. By the time I turned nine, new rules had seeped into my life and begun erasing the girl I thought I was. I was no longer allowed to sit with my brothers. I could not lie down if my brothers were in the room. I was told not to open my legs ever and to always sit up straight with my legs crossed.

And I learned that I couldn't hug Fahad because it could be interpreted as a sexual act. A girl can kiss her brother on his hair, near the hairline, and a brother can kiss a sister on the forehead. You can kiss your father on his cheek, but now that you're nine you cannot sit on his lap. And you cannot sit outside—ever. You can't open the window, even in your own bedroom. The curtains must be drawn; sunshine never touched the walls of my bedroom. If there's a knock at the door, you cannot answer; you can't say, "Who is there?" No one should hear a girl's voice. I was told you can never walk in public, and if you must work, you can only become a teacher in an all-girls school.

Those are the messages that were delivered to me all day long by my mother and my brothers when I was nine years old. They tried to make me feel that I was less than the boys. I didn't like it and I never believed that it was true, but I didn't know how to defeat it. I never spoke to my older sisters about this as I felt our age difference had created a barrier between us; they seemed to be mature, and to them I was the young, bratty sister. Mostly I felt all alone as a young girl—always thinking, wondering, questioning but not speaking. I worried that there was something wrong with me and wondered why I didn't fit with the others. My life was like a puzzle, but I couldn't put the pieces together at that age. I kept examining the way we were being raised as girls: my mother and brothers would scream at us, punish us, but nothing ever happened to the boys. If I asked why, she would say, "You are a girl; you have to do that," as though I should feel ashamed of questioning her. But I was not ashamed; I thought they were wrong.

It was at about that time that I began to realize I was different from my family in more than my personality. I was the

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only child with curly hair. I was the only one with brown skin. My sisters had light skin and soft, straight hair. And I was fat, which made me a target for my brothers. They made fun of me and called me nasty names that I try not to remember now. Even my mom made mean remarks about my size. They thought it was funny, but all it did was make me hate my body.

At the age of nine, girls where I lived in Saudi are told that it's time to cover themselves, to start wearing an abaya and hijab. Nobody says why; nobody explains that you have to hide yourself so men won't see you. I saw the abaya as a boring black bag and the hijab as a nuisance that was forever slipping off my head, but I adopted the garb immediately. My family members, who saw me as a rebel, were pleased that I had somehow seen the light and become calm and religious like a good girl, but that wasn't my reasoning at all. I saw the abaya as a way to cover my body, to hide the fat. My mother would even say "Never mind the abaya" sometimes when we were going out, but I was on a mission—determined to cover myself up and stop the cruel teasing.

There were plenty of mixed messages in my young life. For example, we watched movies on television—not American movies (I saw those privately on my computer when I was older) but plenty of love stories and family dramas out of Egypt and India. Although we were not allowed to do any of the things we saw on TV—men being with women, flirting and falling in love—it made me wonder why my mom and dad didn't act like that. I asked my mom why she didn't kiss my dad; she just laughed. They never showed affection to each other. They talked to each other, of course, and shared anecdotes about the events of the day, and they even told us stories. On rare occasions

they told us love stories, occasionally about how they met but usually about star-crossed lovers. But I never saw them kiss each other. As far as I know my dad never put his arm around my mom or used terms of endearment like *honey* or *sweetheart* or other words I heard in the movies. Their relationship was something I couldn't figure out.

My father didn't control my mom—she followed the rules for women more because of society's expectations than my father's—but they fought a lot with each other and, to my child's eye, didn't set much of an example of marital love. The one place that true love and unshakable support were abundant was at the home of my cherished grandmother—my mother's mom, who we called Nourah Mom. She was my safe haven through all these years. Although she had more than twenty grandchildren, she always said I was her favourite; we had a wonderful relationship. Sometimes she stayed with us; sometimes I stayed with her. I loved being with her, hearing the tales of her life and taking care of her with all of my heart. She hugged me and listened to my stories and always made a big fuss when I came home from school, as though it made her happy to see me. She fed me whatever she was eating—always with her hands, which was typical of the way older people ate their food. I even slept next to her and remember how she would kiss my forehead as I was dropping off to sleep. If I got up in the night to go to the washroom, she'd come with me and wait at the door just in case I was scared. She seemed to know instinctively when I was upset about something, and I always shared my little-girl woes with her. She understood me and used to say, "You will be a great teacher someday. You will make money; you will do what you want." She made it clear to me that whatever I wanted to do,

I could do. She made me believe in myself. I hung on to her messages as though they were sent by Allah. Even when my mother complained to Nourah Mom about me, my grandmother would say, "Leave Rahaf alone."

One time I took a photo of myself with a camera my brother bought because he was going away to travel and a camera was halal for him. But it was certainly not allowed for me to use it. My mother was horrified, and since she knew I was very close to my Nourah Mom she told her what I had done and expected her to reprimand me. She didn't. Instead, she said to my mother, "Let Rahaf live her own life." I always thought Nourah Mom was open-minded, and I suspected she was trying to set an example for me, to show me that I could also be open-minded if I chose my words and acts carefully. She had benefited from some of the changes for women over the last several decades—girls could go to school starting in 1955 and university as of 1970—but the rules for women had mostly been just as oppressive for her as they were for me. I think she was one of those women who figured out how to play the system, and I felt she was teaching me to do the same. She saw me as different and made me feel that being different was special. My mom made me feel it was bad to be different. I used to think—maybe fantasize—that if my father had spent more time with us, he would think I was different too, would see me the way Nourah Mom saw me and wouldn't allow my brothers to control me. But that fantasy never materialized. Ever since I left Saudi, I have been checking my family's social media posts to see what they say about Nourah Mom; if something happened to her, the family would post it, and all this long distance away, I know I would weep at the thought of not being by her side if she was sick or struggling.

Like me, my friends and cousins were all controlled by their brothers. It's just the way things were. At home, I knew I had to obey whatever my brothers said or I would be punished. They forced me to bring them food, because they said it was my duty as a girl. They even told me how to wear my hair and which words to use while speaking. I had to accept the abuse and the humiliation because there was nothing I could do to stop it.

My brother Majed was the toughest; he had very strong opinions about girls—their appearance and behaviour usually enraged him, and he was never shy about expressing his angry comments. He thought all women were basically bad and that their evilness only needed to be found out. He'd instruct me to take a ribbon out of my hair. When we watched TV he would say things like, "That girl on the television is bad; she's probably cheating on her husband. I bet she smokes and drinks." If an actor was wearing a short dress, he'd be shaking his fist at the TV screen and yelling, "Where is her family?"

Once when I asked my brothers to explain why I had to cover myself and why I couldn't do what they did, the only answer I got was a threat. They told me that if I ever dared to ask these questions in a public place I would be put in jail. They tried to scare me into conforming by saying the mutaween would come and get me. At this stage, I never saw these religious police, but I heard plenty about them: they were the vice-and-virtue squad that went around enforcing the religious rules, such as women covering themselves and men and women staying apart. They claim they do this to protect public morality, and say they have the right to intervene when a Muslim is acting incorrectly. The phrase they use—that I heard a lot when I was growing up—is "enjoining

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good and forbidding wrong." I always wondered how it was good to hit a girl who was laughing out loud and wrong for a girl to ride a bike. I never saw the mutaween at my school, but I knew that they would give people money if they reported someone who wasn't "enjoining good and forbidding wrong."

For all the criticism I have about the way I was raised, there is a part of my upbringing that was enchanting, just like the blissful days in the TV room with our nanny, Sarah. The day trips we took to the mountains or the desert made a powerful impression on me about how families can be when they are hiking on Aja, the mountain near Ha'il, barbecuing mutton, making delicious salads and devouring sweets. But there was more to those outings: we would pick wildflowers, and since no one was around and we had doffed our abayas, we'd pin the flowers in our hair. It was always winter when we went to the mountains, because the sweltering heat of the summer made it too difficult to hike to where we wanted to go. We'd pick hamadai—little green leaves—to eat. When we were small, our father was with us. He would tell scary stories once it was dark and we'd stay until one or two in the morning. I have such happy memories of those days; I can still smell the wood of the fire and taste the hamadai leaves. My mother had a big jacket called a farwa; she would tuck me in under one arm and Joud and Fahad under the other arm and then sing songs to us. The sky was full of stars, and we often went during a full moon that shone a bright light on our family. My brother Mutlaq carried a gun to keep the family safe from animals that might be drawn to our fire.

And every year we would go on an extended family holi-

day. We travelled by car—seven kids and two adults crammed in together. The youngest always sat on my mother's lap in the front seat—we didn't have seat belts then—but the rest of us, despite the quarrelling kids do and the stifling rules for girls, rode in the back. We put in ten-hour days sometimes, driving from our home in the north to wherever we were going. And we had fun. We talked all the time, told jokes, played games and sang traditional songs from our tribe, like this one:

عجلوا إلى المجد والسمو
سيحوا خالق السموات
وطن الشجعان وطن الأوطان
للسعودية نحبي روحك
إلى الوطن أنت مخلص دائما
حمل العلم الأخضر

It translates to:

*Hasten to glory and supremacy
Glorify the creator of the heavens
The homeland of braves, the homeland of all homelands
To the Saudi, we salute your soul
To the homeland, you are always sincere
Carrying the green flag*

And:

انا بدوي من السعودية
أنقذ أعز دولتي.
انا بدوي من السعودية
أنا مشهور باللون الأسود.

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Which translates to:

*I am a Bedouin from Saudi Arabia,
I save my dearest country.
I am a Bedouin from Saudi Arabia,
I am famous for my black colour.*

And:

الله أكبر!
يا بلدي! بلدي ،
عش فخر المسلمين!
يعيش الملك
للعلم. والوطن!

Which translates to:

*Allahu Akbar!
O my country! My country,
Live as the pride of Muslims!
Long live the king
The homeland! For the flag.*

For some reason that I still don't understand, we didn't act like this with each other when we were at home. Except for those early years when we were together with our nanny, Sarah, in the TV room, we were not close to each other. We didn't share secrets. No one talked about how they felt, what they hated, what they loved. But somehow we had a bond that existed on those holidays. It was a time when I learned the most about my family and their personalities: that Lamia's

mood swung a lot; Majed loved to give advice; Fahad was a good listener; and that Joud, when she started talking, never stopped. Reem and Mutlaq were quiet people—they didn't talk much and they loved food—and I learned that my parents were different from each other. My father was usually calm, easygoing, smiling, but my mother was the opposite. She was worried, anxious, always on guard, as though she was the one being judged.

We'd stop the car in the middle of the desert for praying, and then my mother would spread a big cloth on the sand and lay out a picnic lunch that was a feast—the chicken and rice dishes, the sweets and the fruit; every meal on our holiday was like a celebration. My father would tell us stories about each of the towns we drove by, their history and the things that made each place well known: one town had diamonds underground; another was known as a ghost town that looked spooky because no one was there; and another was known for the wolves circling its perimeter. Both parents told us love stories—invariably about two people who fell in love but were killed because their love was a crime, or who couldn't marry because they were from different tribes. These are stories that are usually not shared in Saudi families. I wondered if the car was a safe place for telling them, or whether it was a way of reminding us to be careful with romantic notions. I remember one trip when we were going to Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, a six-hour drive from home. They told us a story about a prince who raped and killed a woman and then threw her body in the street. We asked my parents if the government would punish him or if he would be spared because he was a prince. We didn't get an answer to that question. Being young, we felt scared because we were going to the capital,

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where most of the princes live, and we were frightened that something bad would happen to us the same way it happened to that woman.

I knew when I was a child that my family was rich; our house was bigger than my cousins' houses, we travelled more than the others and we had things others didn't have, like bicycles and big TVs. I also knew that my parents were serious about the obligations of Islam—not just keeping girls and boys apart but also doing what we call zakat, which means “charity.” My home city of Ha'il is famous for the generosity of its people because it is the home of the poet Hatim al-Tai, who is known throughout history for extraordinarily generous acts. Our parents told us stories about him; he is mentioned in some of the Hadiths of the Prophet and is one of the characters in *One Thousand and One Nights*, the collection of Middle Eastern folktales compiled during the Islamic Golden Age, between 800 CE and 1258 CE. That's why our home was often open to others who would come for coffee or a meal. There were often people eating at our table, people who didn't have enough food themselves. They came to the door—never in groups, only one by one—and my mother would give them clothes, food and money. She'd keep these things wrapped up in bags like presents; I loved being allowed to hand that bag to a stranger. But I wondered why I could answer the door for zakat but not to greet my own relatives.

By the time I was ten, I had my own phone, but as much as the phone belonged to me, it was my brothers who decided if I could use it, who I would call, how long I would talk. They would go through my phone to see if I had called anyone without their permission. Nobody dared to do this. Since being a girl means being tested all the time, your brother will call your

cellphone to see if you answer. If you don't, he decides, "Okay, she's a good girl." And if your phone rings, he will answer it and decide if you can talk to the person who has called. I soon learned to hide my phone when my father or brothers were around so that they couldn't interfere with my calls. These rules extended to everything I did. For example, as weird as it sounds, I wasn't allowed to leave the table when I finished my meal until I was told I could go. My brothers left whenever they wanted to, whether or not they had finished their food. They'd run outside to play football, which I couldn't do in case it made me a tomboy or a lesbian!

Later, my mother told me she didn't want me to be around my brothers at all because, she said, I would be a woman soon. I was ten years old when she told me that. Afterwards, she made sure that my brothers and I were always separated and not sitting next to each other. We were siblings; what was she thinking would happen if we sat next to each other?

This is when I learned the meaning of *honour*. My mother sat me down beside her, struck a match and held the flame very near to my body. She said, "Your body will get burned in life and even in the afterlife if you soil your honour or your family's honour." I didn't know what she meant by actions that would "soil" the honour of the family, but I was terrified by this unknown menace called honour, as if it were a monster that was going to devour my soul and torture me.

I remember that day so well. My mother held my head tightly with her two hands and forced me to look downward and said, "This is how you should look—with your eyes cast down at the ground if a man passes by you in public places." Then she squeezed my fingers together and told me that the snakes would eat them up if I moved my fingers between my

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legs and touched myself. Then she let go of my fingers and moved her face very close to mine and said, in a voice thick with alarm, "You have something that only your husband should take and you will know what that thing is when you grow up." I was utterly perplexed. What was "that thing" I wasn't allowed to know? I wondered if she'd had the same conversation with my older sisters when they were my age, and if Joud, who was only three years old, would be subjected to a lecture like this when she turned ten. I also wondered what my mother had said to my brothers about honour, or if these messages were only for girls. I wondered if boys didn't have to worry about this thing called honour because the girls carried it with them alone.

After that, I was forever being reprimanded, reminded to preserve my honour, to be careful because you could lose it if you sat the wrong way, if you didn't keep your knees tightly together. Our teachers at school reinforced this lesson—that a girl's honour is everything and if it is lost, she might as well be dead. I had a lot of questions, but didn't ask anyone for fear of being singled out as dishonourable. Those were my first lessons about honour, but they wouldn't be my last. My mother said it was because I was about to become a woman. I didn't want to become a woman; I wanted to be a kid.

One day, my paternal uncle came to visit us when my father and brothers weren't home. I saw him coming toward the house and went to open the door to greet him. My mother was literally gasping when she caught up to me and yelled, "Wait! Your uncle is a grown, unmarried man and I won't let you be with him alone." My uncle? What would my father's brother do to me? Why could he not be near me? I had already heard all the speeches about honour and figured it

must be connected, so I just backed away and stayed out of sight. Her words didn't surprise me; I had learned that all prohibitions come because of men.

Despite the attempts to keep me in some sort of infantile stage, I became an eleven-year-old with all the meddling curiosity I had carried throughout my childhood. But this turned out to be a year unlike any other, with a tumultuous collection of events that I will never forget. First, we received news that my paternal grandmother had died. I wasn't particularly close to her, so losing her wasn't painful, but seeing my father's reaction to her death was baffling to the point of being shocking for me. I had never seen him cry before. He was enormously sad. I was confused by his show of emotion, something I had never seen in my life. Then, on the heels of that commotion, Joud was diagnosed with diabetes; she was only four years old. Even as I write this so many years later, I relive the agony I felt when I learned that my sweet little innocent sister was sick. I remember crying at the time and fearing that I'd lose her. My mother couldn't stop crying and kept saying that the diabetes would stay with Joud forever. After that, I devoted myself to her, stayed with her, played games with her and made her laugh. Although there was a maid to care for her, I saw myself as her guardian and vowed I would protect her and never let my brothers make her feel the way they made me feel.

But that wasn't all the year had to offer. Months after Joud's diagnosis, my brother Mutlaq made an astonishing discovery. He looked terrified when he came to our mother and said that the closet where my father's weapon was stored was open and the weapon was missing. The whole family clamoured to hear the details. Everyone except Reem. No one

could find her. So we immediately presumed she had taken the gun and was going to hurt herself or someone else.

My sister Reem was one of the smartest students in her school; she was absolutely beloved by everybody, and we looked on her as our second mother during our childhood. She took care of everyone. She nurtured us and cooked for us and helped us with our chores. She would spend hours cleaning my father's shoes and washing his socks before he left on a business trip and again when he came back. She was the peacemaker, the one who dried tears and made sure everybody was happy, but she had totally changed that year. She'd become withdrawn, had left the bedroom she shared with Lamia, and preferred to be alone in her own room. She stopped sitting with us at meals and no longer wanted to go to school.

When Mutlaq reported that the weapon had gone missing, we all rushed to her room. I was just behind my mother when she stormed into Reem's bedroom demanding to know where the gun was. It was right there beside her. My mother lunged at the bed and held Reem while Mutlaq grabbed the weapon and left the room with it. I could hardly believe what I saw—Reem was dressed like a man, her suitcase was packed with some of her clothes, and there beside her was a piece of paper detailing her escape plan. She looked scared to death. I had slipped in behind one of the curtains because I wanted to stay, to see what would happen to Reem, and I was certain I would be told to leave. I watched what followed, but from my hiding place I was thinking: *Why does Reem want to run away?* What could have happened to make a fifteen-year-old girl want to leave her home? She looked so scared. She was sobbing and her hands were shaking when she said, "I cannot

live in this house any longer." My mother never left her side, but she used her phone to call her brother, my father and my paternal uncle. They all came at once, and with everyone in the room watching, they beat my sister up. They punched her and slapped her, kicked her and knocked her down. It was an almost incomprehensible scene—Reem trying to get away from them, and all of them together snatching her back and hitting her some more. She was bleeding, screaming, begging them to stop. Then, when they thought they had subdued her, she made a bolt for the door and got all the way to the street before they caught her again and pummelled that girl into submission. Her body was beaten but her voice was strong when she ducked another blow from our father and yelled, "You are not my father. You cannot be my father. You know what you did to me, you attacked me. I will not be your daughter ever again." It seemed like she was spewing crazy words. My father said she needed to be taken to a mental institution. I wasn't sure what that meant, but no one left the house that night. I went back to the room I shared with Fahad; we were scared for Reem.

The next day, Reem kept crying all the time. We were told to watch her constantly. All the doors were locked. I understood that Reem had done something wrong by stealing our father's weapon. But what had happened to her? I only knew that Reem, the sister who had helped each of us, needed help now. You could feel the tension in the house, like a taut wire that could snap at any minute. Everyone was whispering, tiptoeing, looking as though there was a powerful secret to keep.

For the next few days, my father spent most of his time at home with my mother, both of them pacing the floor, speaking in whispers. It felt like there was a siege going on.

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Then my brothers and I came back from school and found my mother sitting by herself, looking very worried. There was no sign of Reem or our father, so we asked her what had happened. She said, "They took Reem to the mental institution." Although I still didn't know what a mental institution was, her words scared me. I hovered around the front hall, waiting for my protective big sister to come home, and when the door opened and she was half carried, half led into the house, my heart broke. She looked like they'd swapped her for another person. Her face was pale, she was dead quiet, and she didn't look at anyone. She kept her eyes downcast and went to her bedroom and fell into a deep sleep right away. People wearing white clothes like doctors followed Reem and my father into the house to give her injections every few hours so she would stay asleep. Of course I asked questions: What is it that they are giving her? Why do they make her sleep all the time? When will she get up and be Reem again? And of course I was told to be quiet, that this was none of my business. I didn't know my sister Reem's secret. I only knew that she was hurting and wasn't feeling safe, and that's why she had tried to run away. And I wondered why.

After that, my mother took up the vigil and sat hour after hour in the living room observing Reem and trying to calm her down when she became agitated. I could tell my mother was scared. I tried to be a good daughter, to stay with her so she wouldn't feel lonely sitting there all day long. I said I would help; I could watch over Reem so my mother could get some rest. I saw this as a chance to get close to my mom. Reem couldn't go out for a visit to our relatives, of course—she was dazed, nervous, unable to manage. The rest of the family went out, but I stayed with my mom to keep her com-

pany. Eventually Reem began to feel better, and the three of us sat together, telling each other stories. I liked taking care of them. It made me feel as though I was fitting in, and I wasn't as lonely when I was there with them. I became close to my mom and to Reem and that's what I wanted, because I felt I was helping them and they in turn were helping me.

Nothing stays the same—nothing ever does. Reem became a girl who needed constant care, someone who couldn't manage on her own. I didn't know why, and I wondered about the injections she was getting. Did those drugs somehow dull her memory? Did they make her so dependent on my parents that she couldn't speak for herself? I didn't find answers to those questions. But I do know that as a family we moved on—unchanged. If there was a catastrophe around my big sister, no one learned any lessons from it.

One day when I was almost twelve years old, my older sister Lamia wanted to go and buy some makeup she needed and asked me to go with her. I jumped at the chance. Of course, we had to be accompanied by Majed. I put on my abaya and hijab and got into the car with them. All of a sudden, Majed glanced at me and said, "From now on you won't leave the house without a niqab to cover your face." He raised his voice and spit out that command to me as though he was a royal prince. There was a mixture of arrogance and pride in the way he spoke to me, as if controlling me meant he was somehow a more successful man. In fact, my life was in his hands; his authority was the essence of my being. I had no other option than to accept this reality, so I bought a niqab and put it on. I no sooner slipped the niqab over my head than I felt like I

no longer existed. We walked in the busy street, and I felt that I was invisible; I could see everybody but no one could see me. No one knew whether I was smiling or crying. I wasn't Rahaf but a woman who, like all the women covered in black, was nobody. The girls—or were they women?—walking in front of me couldn't turn around and see my face. I couldn't see their faces. We'd all been erased. It felt hot under that face covering, claustrophobic. I was breathing against a piece of cloth that had started to get damp, making me feel like I was breathing stale air. I wondered if I would suffocate. I was scared that I couldn't breathe but didn't dare tell Majed. Lamia knew instinctively what I was thinking and leaned in close to me and said, "Don't be afraid, you'll get used to it."

There was a lot I was having trouble "getting used to." There seemed to be a game that was played between men and women; it had unwritten rules but everyone knew instinctively how to play. If perchance you didn't know how to play or refused the subterfuge, there were consequences that came in the form of being sidelined. *Ostracized* would be too severe a description, because like the invisible rules of the game, it was never fully obvious that you were not playing by the rules, nor was it always clear that you had been censored.

I had grown up in a family that wasn't open to discussion, that didn't accept each other easily—a family where love was conditional. Now I was supposed to get used to being invisible. I wondered what would come next.