

Holy Orders

By the time I was thirteen and registered at a new school after the summer break in 2012, my life had changed. I was now officially a woman, wrapped up in an abaya fit for an adult—which means it was so big you could fit two of us under it. Not only that, but this abaya had a head covering built into it, so I was hooded as well as robed. Between that and the niqab to cover my face, I looked like some sort of ambulating parcel. There were some perks that came with being a thirteen-year-old. I had moved into a bigger bedroom with my own television (albeit with a restricted number of channels to watch), and I had slightly more control over my own phone. My brothers could still check it whenever they wanted, but I could make my own calls. Best of all, I was now attending intermediate school, which felt like a breathing space away from my family who were at other schools. I had lots of female friends who went to the same school; we knew each other well, but I was the one considered to be mischievous.

This was a time when the emphasis on our role in Saudi society switched gears from “dutiful daughter” to “wife-in-

training.” The message in the classroom was clear: women were less than men and were created to obey them, care for them and provide them with sexual gratification. I began to examine Islamic laws in my country, laws that allow the state to control people in the name of religion. As a twelve-year-old, I knew that there was no minimum age for marriage; in fact, a man could even marry a five-year-old. And we all knew about the famous camel festivals, held every September in Ta’if, about an eight-hour drive from Ha’il, and about the practice that took place there called akheth—which means “taking”—when girls aged fourteen to sixteen are given as gifts to the elderly members of the monarchy for a few days or weeks. And we knew that child marriage was very common and that most girls in my region were either married or promised in marriage by the age of twelve. It made me wonder what value a girl has other than being somebody’s possession.

We started each school day by saying prayers from the Quran and then singing the Saudi national anthem. Immediately after that, while we were still standing, the teachers would check each of us for our appearance—skirts long enough, no short hair (we didn’t wear the abaya or the niqab in the classroom). The older girls were checked for makeup and jewellery, which were forbidden. Even the bags we carried had to be plain, without design.

Then the school lessons began, and although we studied geography, history, sewing and housekeeping, religion was the most important subject; its influence affected everything else. Islam is the state religion of Saudi Arabia. The holy book called the Quran is the constitution of the country. Sharia—which means “the way” and comes from the Quran and the

Hadiths, which are the words of the Prophet—are the laws that govern everything from religious rituals to everyday living. And the state police known as the mutaween are the enforcers of those laws.

Saudi Arabia, or “the kingdom,” as many call it, is the official home of Islam; the two holiest sites in the Muslim world—Mecca and Medina—are located here, and this is where the Prophet Muhammad lived and died. In fact, the king of Saudi Arabia has an additional title; he is also known as the custodian of two mosques: Al Masjid al-Haram in Mecca and Al Masjid al-Nabawi in Medina. Because the legal system is based on religious law, the leaders of Saudi Arabia govern with what they call divine guidance. That makes the country a theocracy rather than a democracy.

Here is the short version of Islam: it is an Abrahamic, monotheistic religion that teaches that there is only one God—Allah—and that Muhammad is a messenger from Allah. There are more than 1.8 billion followers, which make up 24.1 percent of the world’s population. The beliefs of the religion were revealed through prophets, including Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam teaches that there is a final Judgment Day when the righteous are rewarded in paradise and the unrighteous punished in hell. Muslims are Sunni (the majority in Saudi Arabia) or Shia (the minority).

There are five pillars of the religion. They differ between Sunni and Shia, but we are Sunni, so these are the pillars we’re taught: shahada, which proclaims the faith and says that there is only one God called Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger; salat, which means prayer, a requirement that is performed five times a day; zakat, which means charity and

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states that a Muslim must give alms to the poor; sawm, which is fasting done from dawn to dark during the holy month of Ramadan; and hajj, which means making a pilgrimage once in a lifetime to Mecca.

The overriding version of Islam, particularly in my region, is known as Wahhabism, which is an Islamic movement founded by an imam called Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia is a descendent of the founder and has close ties to the royal family. His name—Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdullah Aal Al-Sheikh—is so long it reads more like a URL. An Islamic scholar, he's a scary-looking man based in Mecca and he controls the whole country as far as religion and justice are concerned. I remember that when King Abdullah said he was considering allowing women to vote in the 2015 elections, the Grand Mufti was quick to respond, saying that women's involvement in politics would be "opening the door to evil."

I was still in intermediate school when there was a big fuss made because he went on television to say that the game of chess was haram. Although I didn't know how to play chess and none of the women in my family played, most of the men in our tribe played regularly. It is a very popular game in Saudi. But the Grand Mufti thought it should be otherwise and said, "The game of chess is a waste of time and an opportunity to squander money. It causes enmity and hatred between people." That was a pretty powerful message to the men in the kingdom. Many kept playing but worried that the pastime they loved would soon be forbidden. When I listened to those angry words, as my whole family did, they sounded like another bizarre example of a rule that made no sense. Chess makes you hate your opponent. Really? As a young

teenager I knew that was ridiculous and wondered how come others didn't see it the way I did.

When I was a student, we were only taught the Wahhabi version of Islam—a strict, harsh, unforgiving and repressive doctrine driven by coercion and fear. For example, I knew even as a child that it was the leaders of Wahhabism that had destroyed the historic shrines, mausoleums and other Muslim and non-Muslim sites in my country that should have been preserved. Even as a twelve-year-old I thought the education I was getting was mostly religious propaganda that dispersed hate to non-Muslims or anyone who didn't follow Wahhabism.

The thing about studying religion from the very first year of school, as we do, is that we are only taught about one religion, according to one imam. There is no discussion, no questioning—just rote learning and endlessly repeating passages from the Quran. Even though we are all Muslims, we don't learn anything at all about Christians or Jews or Hindus; we only learn about Islam. It wasn't until I was older that I discovered there are many interpretations of Islam, from harshly conservative, like the ones we live with in Ha'il, to more liberal ones elsewhere. I found out that the majority of Sunni and Shia Muslims worldwide disagree with the interpretation of Wahhabism, and many Muslims denounce it; some even claim Wahhabism is a source of global terrorism. But at my school and in my home in Ha'il, we were taught that the only acceptable interpretation of Islam was Wahhabism. All others were considered evil, sinful, even punishable by death.

I sometimes thought Wahhabism should be called the la-la religion, which means "no-no" in English. No, you can't do this. No, you can't do that. The list of rules we were taught at school was withering, especially for young people anxious

to learn about the world. No performing or listening to music unless you adhere to strictly prescribed types (like singing the national anthem and, I suppose, like the songs my mother sang to us as children; those must have been halal). Even then, you may mistakenly be drawn into music considered haram. No dancing or fortune-telling, no amulets—those are the small charms Arab people often wear to ward off evil. Only religious television programs were allowed, though we watched TV all the time and it wasn't religious, but I didn't mention that at school. The lists were long: no smoking, playing backgammon, chess or cards, absolutely no drawing of human or animal figures. They're considered graven images, but I'd learned that as a small child when I took up drawing with a passion. No acting in a play (we did that in the TV room with Sarah and no one said anything to us) or writing fiction—both are considered forms of lying. No recorded music played over telephones, no sending of flowers to friends or relatives who are in the hospital. Believe it or not, Wahhabism even says whistling is a sin.

I knew there were many practices that other Muslims did, such as celebrating the Prophet's birthday and using ornamentation at mosques, but our Wahhabi interpretation of the Quran forbade such activities. More no-no, I thought. Women were allowed to drive cars in other countries but not when I was growing up in Saudi Arabia. Dream interpretation was seen as sinful. Our teachers told us that dissecting bodies, even in criminal investigations and for the purposes of medical research, was forbidden. But I wasn't interested in dissecting cadavers at that point in my life, so I struck that no-no off my list as something I didn't have to fret about.

We were also taught to avoid friendships with non-Muslims, and all the cultural practices foreigners have, such as Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, celebrating birthdays or having a dog as a pet. We were even taught not to wish a non-Muslim well on any of their holidays. More no-no. They taught us that Islam forbids women to travel or work outside the home without a husband's permission. Sexual intercourse out of wedlock may be punished with beheading, and gender mixing of men and women is forbidden, as is the mixing of Muslims and non-Muslims. Atheists are viewed as heretics in Islam and can be punished by death.

But as I looked around and asked questions, I found there were invariably exceptions to the rules. My mother was a teacher, but I don't think she had to ask my father for permission to go out and teach school. And at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, Muslims and non-Muslims could mix.

It's certainly a no-no for women to break the dress code. Men are required to wear a thobe, which is a long, white robe, and a red-and-white-checkered scarf called a ghutrah, but most men I knew only wore that for special occasions; usually they wore Western-style clothes like pants and a jacket, or jeans. For women there were no exceptions—at age nine, a black abaya that covers every bit of your body except your hands, and by twelve, a niqab that covers your face is absolutely required. To disobey is to beg a harsh punishment.

Some men in Saudi Arabia still think education for girls should be another no-no. There's an expression they use: "Letting a girl go to school is like letting a camel put his nose in the tent—eventually the beast will push his whole body inside and take up all the room in the tent."

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In addition to religious instruction, school was also the place to hear bits and pieces about the West—that life in the West was good, that the people there had freedom, that they don't kill girls for doing things that are wrong. I was really shocked when I heard that girls had boyfriends that everyone knew about and that they walked outside together—holding hands.

I learned early to keep a secret—to lie if I must—to avoid punishment, even death. For example, as I was turning twelve years old, something happened to alter my thinking as well as my life. I developed a crush on a girl. At first, I felt something strange was happening to me. My sisters and all the girl cousins in my family loved boys, even though they were always kept apart, but I liked a girl. My feelings were part of me and I couldn't suppress them. I remember the day when we were playing alone in her room. I came close to her and kissed her. She kissed me back, and then we had sex, just like adults. It was the first experience for both of us. After that, I was always thinking about girls, and I couldn't imagine myself with a boy. When I watched TV, I never saw two girls in love with each other. I began to wonder why there were only boys and girls together. It was one question I didn't dare to ask. If I'd been caught with that girl, the consequences would have been grave; everyone at home and at school talked about honour, forever reminding us that we were “clean people.”

Honour—having it, keeping it, protecting it or losing it—was the backstory of every single part of our lives. I knew my family would kill to protect their honour, to eliminate shame. All the suffocating restrictions for women and girls, wherever they were—at home or school or visiting relatives or shopping—were for the sake of honour. And that burden was

carried by girls and women exclusively. So having sex with a girl would have been seen as the ultimate in scandalous dishonour. If I'd been caught, my family might have killed me, claiming I'd brought shame to the family, or they might have married me off to some old man who would have had total control of me. Thankfully, I wasn't caught that time.

But I developed a new radar for checking my surroundings. After the really ugly incident with my sister Reem, I didn't feel safe at home. I wasn't sure about what had happened to her, but I knew instinctively it was something that could happen to me as well. This foreboding hung on to me like a fog; I could feel it surrounding me, but I could never be clear about whether I was being warned or if I was carrying the emotional consequences of having been a witness to what happened to Reem. I felt there was an unspoken threat and that if I stumbled into a mistake, I might wind up in the mental institution my father had taken Reem to, or worse. I was so frightened, I started having nightmares where my family came into my room, saw suitcases beside the door and pounced on me and took me away. I was screaming in the nightmare. When I woke up, I took all the suitcases out of my room. I even took satchels and big shoulder bags, anything that could possibly be used for travelling. I was absolutely terrified that my parents might be thinking that one day I would run away like Reem had tried to do. At that stage in my life, running away had never entered my mind.

This was a time when I began to be much more aware of a woman's role in society, and I didn't like what I was seeing. As much as I watched and listened, I could not figure out why the men were always being served and the women were always waiting on them; when men came into the house, the

women became silent and subservient. The duties and rules I was being taught were humiliating. And I couldn't figure out why this was accepted by everyone. For example, during parties or family gatherings, the women—me included, now that I was thirteen—prepared the food and cooked lunch or dinner for the men and then didn't even eat with them. The men ate what they wanted and left. The women ate the leftovers. It's an accepted habit among most tribes and is still practised. But it's a practice that infuriated me because it reinforced the notion that women are below men, that women don't even have the right to eat the freshly prepared food. And that's not all. Even in a car, women had to always ride in the back. Although when we were little and away on holidays, my mom would sit in the front with my dad, as soon as the boys were old enough, she was relegated to the back seat. Women endure this second-class status even in small, perhaps inconsequential ways. In our majlis, which is the sitting room, there are couches against the wall for the men to sit on and cushions on the floor where the women sit. The messaging touches every aspect of our lives: you are less—less valuable, less important, less useful, easily erased.

When I was a little girl, I thought that the biggest difference between boys and girls was that boys were allowed to play outside and girls weren't, but as I got older I learned that the low status of women was all-inclusive—it affected everything from what we wore and did to even the way we spoke. I remember a day when Fahad was on his iPad and I started teasing him, calling him names the way siblings do. I was telling him he was stupid and weak and easily scared. He and I were always joking with each other. We even swore at each other using words that would get us into trouble if we

were caught. The more ridiculous the name-calling the harder we'd laugh; the more gross the swearing the better the insult. Well, on this day my mother overheard us. You would have thought I was threatening Fahad's life. My mother was furious and erupted with a diatribe I've never forgotten, saying I must never ever speak to him that way, that I could injure his arujula, which means "virility" in English. She said I must never subject a boy to cursing or violence because it makes them weak. Then, as though to make amends with Fahad, she told me that I was a stupid girl, worthless, that I belonged on the street. She took my heart apart with her words that day. I even feel the pain now as I remember the sound of her voice, filled with hatred toward me. I was so angry I shot back, "You don't deserve children and a husband and a big family like us." My reaction was so potent I even felt a grudge toward my little brother, who I adored. I realize now that my grudge was misplaced. I wasn't angry at Fahad; I was angry because my mother was making it perfectly clear that Fahad was more important than me, that she favoured and protected him because he was a boy. She was telling me that girls need to hear words like the ones she seared into my soul because girls need to be broken, that weakness and submission make a girl beautiful. I will never forget that fight. It's carved into my memory like a scar.

At school, as an intermediate schoolgirl, I was hanging around with other teenagers and I thoroughly enjoyed that, but at family gatherings, I liked being with the older women. Most of them were several decades older than me, and they gathered in a separate room from the teenagers. I liked listening

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to their conversations and learned a lot about our society from their recounting of tales and sharing of secrets and tips for survival. For example, they would talk about how to cope when your husband screams at you: "Look down and be quiet so he will see that you are a good woman." Or what to do when visiting his family: "When he forces you to cook and clean for them, just do it." And when he comes home from work, "Massage him and clean his feet." I absorbed these narratives like foul-tasting medicine. The men don't do any of those things for their wives. There's no pleasure or romance or love in these acts; they are all about service. And to my young eye it was about women fulfilling their role as being stupid and weak because that's what the men want—just what my mother told me I needed to be.

They also talked about sex, mostly about how to make sure your husband didn't take another wife. I'd always thought talk about sex was prohibited, but that wasn't the case among married women. They talked a lot about their sex lives—what was good in bed, what wasn't. Some would laugh and tell the others what they loved about sex; others would complain about having sex when they didn't want to; and still others would quickly tell the complainers to force themselves, to pretend to enjoy it so their husbands wouldn't cheat and get another wife.

As schoolgirls we used to gossip about sex and about an organization called the Obedient Wives Club, which claimed its role was to teach wives how to be submissive to their husbands. I don't think they have members in Saudi, but their book, called *Islamic Sex*, tells wives how to act like "first-class whores" in order to keep husbands from straying. One of their members claims "a man married to a woman who is as

good or better than a prostitute in bed has no reason to stray. Rather than allowing him to sin, a woman must do all she can to ensure his desires are met." Some of the gossip reported that the Obedient Wives promoted group sex between a man and all his wives. The book was banned everywhere, but we all knew about it.

I enjoyed the gossip at school as well as the gossip my mother and her friends shared about sex, but it did lead me to examine the contradictions and confusion in our lives. Why was it allowed for married women to enjoy talking and laughing about sex when it was forbidden for girls to even think about it? Not only that, at these family gatherings there was always gossip about this woman or that girl who was bad—bad because she refused to cook daily for her husband, bad because she had a job and travelled to other cities to work, bad for attracting attention to herself and bad because she rejected a marriage arrangement. I remember once, when the conversation turned to the demands women were starting to make about driving, my mother said, "Any woman who wants to drive a car is a whore."

At school we traded these stories, including one about a professor called Kamal Subhi who claimed that allowing women to drive would spell "the end of virginity" in the kingdom. I wondered about those words. How could the act of driving a car take away your virginity? It was always about women and girls being bad and being punished, and never about men and boys doing anything wrong.

Whether we were visiting Nourah Mom or anyone else, we had to be segregated; the boys and girls were separated from each other at our relatives' homes, in our schools, in public places and even in our own homes if someone was

visiting. It was our lifestyle, whether we liked it or not, and it taught us to be uncomfortable around boys, even our male cousins. Like most girls in Saudi Arabia, I became scared of my brothers and my father. I knew they had power over me. I didn't like it, but every year as I got older I better understood the consequences of disobeying them or being in their way or even becoming an object of their fury.

This duplicity in terms of men and women (or boys and girls, for that matter), in terms of relationships and the strict rules we had for everything from speaking quietly to acting as though cooking and cleaning were the most pleasing things a girl could do, became more and more perplexing to me. Sometimes the rules seemed to be simply foolish. For example, my cousins came over to our house a lot but we played in different rooms; the girls played together and the boys were in another room. I remember two of our cousins really loved each other; they were nine years old at the time. The boy told his mom he wanted to marry the girl, but of course that didn't get him permission to be in the same room with her. We thought they were sweet together, so we would hide them behind furniture or distract the adults so they wouldn't notice that we'd found a way to get the two nine-year-olds together. We turned the foolish rules into a game to see how cleverly we could trick the adults into thinking we were obeying their silly edicts.

As a child, I was never allowed to go with my friends to public places, but once I was thirteen, it was permissible to go to my relatives' houses as long as I took Fahad and Joud with me. That's how I got myself to exciting places like the souk, which is our marketplace, without my parents knowing. The girls in my relatives' houses were allowed to go out, but

we kept our destination secret. That taste of freedom fed my soul as well as my sense of adventure. Just walking in the park or sitting together on a bench made me feel I was part of the world rather than hidden at home. The souk had everything—food and drink and activities and shops. I remember one time, we ate dinner at a restaurant and went to an indoor amusement park and played a game called Kite Flyer that involved a lot of running and screaming and laughing out loud, which are forbidden behaviours for girls in my family. Some old people nearby got mad at us and told us we should not be laughing and shouting in front of men, but we ignored them. It sounds so innocent, but it was so haram that to this day I remember the pleasure of breaking those rules.

Mind you, there were plenty of near misses with our she-nanigans. One afternoon while we were carousing around the souk, we saw a friend of Majed's who seemed to look straight at us. I worried he might have recognized Joud, whose face wasn't covered because of her age, and realized he could see me as one of the seven teenage girls alone in the souk. I held my breath until we passed him, knowing that if he'd seen me he would have run to my brother and reported us all as bad girls. Another time, we ran into the religious police, who called us dirty girls because we were outside without a male guardian. In Saudi Arabia calling someone a foreigner is very insulting, so of course the police accused us of looking like foreigners who don't have men at home to properly raise the daughters. They threatened us with being taken to jail if we didn't go home and, to quote them, "take your filthy bodies off the street." The men in the souk also harassed us, grabbing us from behind, pulling my niqab and hijab off my face and head. One bunch of boys brushed by us, pressing their bodies

into ours. They called us sluts and invited us out on a one-night stand; they even pulled money from their pockets to say they would pay for time with bad girls. One boy even hit a girl because she was wearing high-heeled shoes.

This is very common behaviour when boys run into unaccompanied girls. It's all about Saudi justice: you broke the rules about being invisible, so you will pay the price of your crime. They feel they have every right to harass us verbally and physically and that we deserve their rudeness and brutality because we dared to be outside the confines of our homes—where we belong. In our society, there's no protection for women and girls from sexual harassment or abuse. In fact, the very opposite situation exists: the draconian regulations that perpetuate a stranglehold on the status of women are rigorously enforced. Women try to seek justice by exposing men who harass them on Twitter—posting a tag that says #افضح_متحرش, which means #exposetheharasser—but invariably there's an onslaught of replies that accuse the woman of causing the behaviour: “You deserve that because you didn't cover yourself,” or “It's because you were by yourself,” or “If you were at your home that wouldn't happen to you.”

All of this is done in the name of religion, which is the real Saudi enforcer: behave the way we tell you to behave or you will be punished by Allah, by the government, by the police, by your family and even by hooligans on the street. It didn't stop me from sneaking out with my friends, because going to public places with my brothers, which was the only acceptable way for me to be outside, was like being a robot—one that couldn't talk or listen or even think. In the souk, I wasn't supposed to talk to the seller; if I had a question, I had to whisper it in my brother's ear and he then asked the seller

on my behalf. I wasn't allowed to give the money by hand to the seller or take the bag with whatever I had purchased from him. Even at a medical appointment, when the doctor would ask me questions about why I was there or what was wrong, my father or my brother would answer and explain to him what I was feeling. A conversation would go like this:

DOCTOR: Hello, Rahaf. How do you feel? What's happening to you?

MY FATHER: She feels sick in her stomach and she vomited this morning.

DOCTOR: How long have you been feeling sick?

If my father didn't know the answer, he would turn and look at me. I would tell him the answer and then he would tell the doctor. This may be hard to believe, but these are the facts of life for girls in Saudi. And if the doctor had to give me a physical examination, a nurse would stay with me while he drew a curtain around me and reached the stethoscope under the curtain, but only under my guardian's observation. Is that not ridiculous?

It was events like this that made me think I was caught in a nightmare. I mean, who can think it is reasonable that a girl cannot tell the doctor her symptoms, that she must tell her father the answer to the doctor's question—which the doctor can hear, of course—and then her father becomes her voice. I used to sit through events like this and wonder to myself, *Who's crazy—them or me?* This kind of inexplicable behaviour in all parts of my life kept telling me that I didn't exist, that I was only on this earth to serve a man, to wash his feet, make his meals and act as his sex slave and baby-making machine.

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But why did other girls and women go along with it? How could Lamia, my lovely older sister, think that this was okay? And how about my mother, a strong, seemingly independent woman who had a job and earned her own money—how on earth could she stoop to what I saw as a masquerade? What did the fathers and brothers, the government and the religious leaders think would happen? Did my father really think the doctor would attack me sexually, or did he suppose that a young girl like me would jump into the arms of this middle-aged doctor if he wasn't watching over both of us? No matter where I was—at a doctor's appointment or in a restaurant or a shop—I could not use my voice.

Mind you, I needed to use my voice in self-defence often enough. One day, a student in my school told the teachers that I'd kissed a girl and had relationships with other girls. The story spread around my school like a fire. I knew there would be trouble, I just didn't know what form it would take. I was summoned to the principal's office, and so were the other girls I'd been involved with. We were cross-examined, scolded and called names like "dirty dykes." Then the principal wrote a report claiming that we had admitted our mistake and told us to get out of her sight. Now I became a pariah to all the teachers, who kept taking me to the side and telling me what a disgrace I was and that I must pray to Allah for forgiveness and start living a clean life. While the reaction from the other students wasn't that bad, since most of them also had relationships with other girls, the response from the teachers was ferocious. I was singled out with a few other girls while the others made sure their relationships were kept secret.

It got worse. After the principal and most of the teachers had chastised us, the math teacher made me and the other girls

sit in front of the whole class—facing our fellow students—while she yelled at us and portrayed us as homosexuals whose bodies would burn in hell. She didn't stop there. She made us watch a video on her computer about damnation and burning in hell forever. It was the scariest thing I've ever seen in my life, with scenes of people screaming in agony and flames burning them and their bodies turning into ashes. The teacher kept saying, "You will burn like them." I was so distraught I started crying uncontrollably. Even as I tried to stop weeping and trembling and compose myself, I could see that she was enjoying my distress, seeing me scared to death. It was so awful that the images still haunt me, and all these years later, I still quiver with fright when recalling that video.

But I knew very well that the worst was yet to come. The real terror came when the principal told me with a wicked smirk on her face that she had informed my mother, who was waiting for me at home. I wished the school day would never end. I sat in my classes feeling like I might throw up, so nauseated by the anticipation of my mother confronting me that I couldn't speak. As we left at the end of the school day, my friends gathered around and tried to reassure me. They suggested I deny the whole story and tell my mother the teachers had made it up because they didn't like me.

No one was around when I got home, so I went straight to my room and locked the door, hoping for a reprieve, hoping some other problem had occurred in the family and that my mother would forget about me. That was wishful thinking. Soon enough she was at my door, pounding on it as if to smash it down. I opened it up, sobbing. She grabbed me and started choking me, calling me an infidel and a dishonourable daughter. She was wildly angry, pulling my hair, punching me;

she even bit me. I realized that for my own safety I needed to calm her down, but the more I tried to reason with her, the heavier the blows came down on me. Finally, she let me go, but it was only so she could grab things in the room to throw at me. At that point, with her screaming and me bawling, I tried to hide under my bed. She kept shrieking about her reputation, the family's reputation. I realized then that it was all about the knowing, the need to save face. If no one knows about your so-called crime, you may be spared or get off with a light punishment. But if others know, heaven help you. Your life may be the tool used to silence the gossips and rescue the family's reputation. Honour gets in the way of justice. My goal, from under the bed, was to distract her into shifting from action to talking, to beg her forgiveness, to stop her from doing something really crazy. She came to the edge of my bed and hissed, "The end of your life may be near—ask Allah to forgive you." Then she left and took the door key with her. I was so exhausted that when I crawled out from under the bed and lay down, I fell immediately asleep. I woke up with a pillow over my face. My mother was holding the pillow. Was she trying to kill me or frighten me? I couldn't tell, but I knew I was in danger. When I pushed back and started crying, she turned away abruptly and left my room.

I didn't leave my room for the rest of the day, not even for dinner. When morning came and no one spoke to me about going to school, I knew another step had been taken to control my life. My mother announced that she'd had me suspended from school. That began a treacherous guessing game, with my life being the bargaining tool and my mother's fury driving the episodes. One time, while I was going to sleep, she rushed into my room, came to my bed and put the

blade of a pair of scissors against my neck, saying, "Wake up, you homosexual." I gasped and threw a pillow at her. Her face was flushed and the rage was spewing from her with such force that I became scared enough to implore her to forgive me. I promised her that I would never make her angry again and would carry the burden of the pain I had caused her for the rest of my life. It seemed to be slightly effective, because she put the scissors down and said flatly, "You're not going to school and you're staying home until a man comes to marry you." I said, "I accept your decision," and felt it was a cheap enough bargain to get me through this period.

I was home for two weeks. My siblings were told that my grades were so poor I would not be returning to school. My mother and I didn't speak. But the single victory for me was that my mother didn't tell my father anything about this transgression of mine. One afternoon when I saw her sitting by herself, I asked if we could talk. By now I was overwhelmed with feelings of rejection, as well as horror and regret, and I desperately wanted everything to go back to how it had been before. I longed for forgiveness from my mother. I sat beside her and admitted my mistake; I cried for her forgiveness. Suddenly, she reached her arms out and held me in a hug. She put my head on her chest and, stroking my hair, said she forgave me because I was young and had made a mistake. Then she announced that I would be going back to school, but it would be a different school, away from the girls who had led me astray. I stayed by her side for the rest of the day. Despite my mother's forgiveness that day, I knew that I had lost her trust, and I knew she had decided I was not what she would call a good girl.

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The new school was small, only thirteen girls in my class. I made friends quickly and vowed to myself as well as to my mother that I'd steer clear of the girls having homosexual relationships. My mother had become stricter with me and commanded my brothers to keep an eye on me and punish me if I stepped out of line. They did. I prayed as required five times a day, but if I strayed even a few minutes they'd threaten to hit me. I had chores to do in the house, and there was a firm understanding that I'd complete the work or face the consequences. I chose to clean the garden and the patio because this only required splashing some water around and I could be outside in the sunshine.

The scolding, hitting and violence in my life were not unique. Every girl I knew endured similar discipline. Even though my phone felt like my personal property, after the incident at school my mother and brothers would take it from me whenever they wanted and check to see what I was up to. One time, my mother was rifling through my phone and came across a porn movie I had downloaded that featured sex between two girls. Her silence and inaction petrified me. I knew what was coming—she was going to tell my father. He didn't engage in disciplining us unless it was very severe, like the time Reem took his gun and was going to run away. So I figured I was in for the beating of my life. But it didn't happen. He had that look of grave disappointment on his face. Then he took my phone, told me he would decide when I could have it again and left.

Two months later I got my phone back as we were leaving on a family holiday to Dubai. I'd been following all the strict rules, so I was in the good graces of the family. Mutlaq, who had become exceedingly religious and therefore excessively

judgmental, decided not to come with us because there were lots of women in Dubai who wore Western clothes, and he felt he must not be exposed to their naked flesh. My mother decided to stay at home to take care of Joud and Reem, who were both having health problems. So that left Lamia, Majed, Fahad and myself to go with our father. I was looking forward to a fabulous holiday. I held my passport for the first time on that trip; that's when I found out my birthdate in the Gregorian calendar. Somehow, I felt empowered knowing something like that about myself.

Dubai was very surprising for me: pubs everywhere, alcohol (which is forbidden in Saudi Arabia) being served and foreign women all over the place in short skirts and very high heels. As much as I was supposed to be disgusted with these women, I was in fact envious. I had never thought of ditching my abaya, but watching those girls in their makeup and pretty clothes with the breeze blowing their hair made me start mulling over the idea. They looked so confident, laughing out loud and calling to each other as if they belonged there and were doing nothing wrong. I watched them through a small slit in my niqab. If they'd happened to look my way, they would barely have seen my eyes. I noticed that my father and brothers had their eyes fixated on these women—on their bodies and their breasts. I wondered what Lamia was thinking when she saw the women. Did she want to toss off the black bag that covered her and show her identity, dress as they dressed? Did she want to show the makeup on her beautiful face? Or was I the only one having these thoughts? I decided I shouldn't ask her. And what about the Emirati women who lived here and were wrapped up, like I was, in abayas and yet saw these

foreign women every day? I wondered how they must feel. Did they wonder, *Why her and not me? Who decided she would be free and I would be invisible?*

Apart from the time I spent filling my mental playbook with more evidence of discrimination against girls like me, we had a lot of fun as a family on the holiday. But on the way home I wondered about what my father and brothers were thinking when they looked at the breasts of those women. I saw the looks on their faces when they stared at their bodies; this thinking lingered with me on the drive home. It was a lot to contemplate.

I was trying to figure all this out, and how I fit in this family as well as my place in this world, when my father took a second wife and basically my family imploded.

The news arrived by way of air-splitting shrieks coming from the front of the house a few days after we arrived home from the vacation. We all raced out of our rooms to find out what was going on. My mother had collapsed on the floor. She was crying, beating her fists on the carpet and calling my father bad names. Then she jumped to her feet and tried to hit him. He fended off her blows easily, laughed at her emotional outburst and told her to cool off. We presumed she was indulging in a dramatic reaction to some fight they'd just had. When my father saw that all of us had rushed into the room, he turned on his heel and left, saying, "Calm your crazy mother down." She was still weeping uncontrollably when she looked at us and said, "Your father is taking a second wife. He will marry again soon."

Having several wives—four, to be precise—is allowed in Saudi Arabia because it's part of Islam's Sharia law. It comes from an old interpretation of the Quran written when there

were many wars and therefore many widows. The intention was that widows needed protection, the kind of protection that comes from marriage. So apparently the Prophet said men could marry more than one woman, up to four, so that women would not be destitute. The actual verse we were taught in school comes from the Quran. It says, "Marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly [with them], then only one."

The caveat is that the husband must treat them equally and share his wealth with however many wives he has. It may sound good, but it is not. Most of the men in my family have more than one wife. They like it—see it as their right—as though they are somehow serving Islam, which in my opinion is nonsense. I'd say all of the women hate it. Think about it: You marry a person (that someone else has chosen for you), give birth to his children, run his household, and then he chooses someone else. He goes and lives with her and you're supposed to say that's okay. It is not. The second (or third or fourth) wife is invariably younger and brings her own entourage to the marriage—her family and, soon enough, babies that we are supposed to embrace and include as additions to our family.

My sisters and I were outraged and sided with our heart-broken mother, but my brothers believed in a man's religious right to take a second woman and told us we should shut up and obey Sharia law. They attended my father's wedding despite my mother's tears and pleas to side with her. I thought it was selfish of my father to leave my mother and marry another woman, but there were signs that I'd picked up early, such as the way my parents acted toward each other

when they were together. There was never a show of emotion—they reacted to each other with respect, but not love. For a long time I thought maybe that was normal for my tribe, the way married people behaved. My mom was shy around my father; she didn't sit beside him. But at the same time, I saw some older women in our family who covered their faces in front of their husbands, so part of me decided that must be normal too. My mother also bought into the rules that I saw as so damaging to women. For example, when women first started advocating for the right to drive a car, she would attack any girl in the family who talked about driving. It was as though she was trying to prove to my father that she was a good wife. Now I started thinking those were early signs that meant there was something wrong with the relationship. But why now? Maybe my father wanted a younger woman—the second wife he chose was twenty-eight years old; my father was forty-five. Or maybe he felt my mother was too focused on Reem, who needed a lot of attention.

What followed were terrific quarrels between our parents and accusations hurled by my mother about what she saw as betrayal. She reminded my father that at the beginning of their marriage she was the one who bought the house and paid off the loans for his cars and put up with him being away when he went to Egypt to study. Now she found out he'd put the house and the cars in his name and she owned nothing. She'd say, "I did everything for you, cooking and entertaining guests even when I was pregnant, and this is how you repay me."

My sisters and I felt a second marriage was the same as my father cheating on our mom. Lots of women speak up

against men taking second, third and fourth wives, but they can't change it. Some women in my family had even asked for a divorce when their husbands married another woman, and my mother wanted to divorce my father then. But he wouldn't allow it, and she couldn't get a divorce on her own.

Our family life turned into a tragedy as dramatic as a theatrical production as events unfolded, leaving the players wounded and resentful. My father talked about his new wife in front of us when he came for his weekly visit. He talked about her beauty, even though we thought she wasn't nearly as pretty as our mother, and he talked about taking her shopping and to restaurants, like she was some sort of trophy. He thought he was helping us to warm up to this woman. Clearly, he didn't understand that he was fuelling the fire of hatred we had toward her. My brothers visited them in their new house, which created even more tension at our home. And now that my brothers were the men of our house, they started controlling our mother, claiming she wasn't stable enough to leave the house.

During that time my mother gave me advice I have never forgotten. She told me to always make sure I had my own money, to protect myself so I'd never have to ask my husband for anything. She said I should never trust a husband, because no matter how the marriage begins, he will eventually take another wife, and maybe a third and even a fourth, and then he wouldn't be able to give me any money. She advised me and my sisters to continue our studies and seek financial independence "because it is the sole weapon in the future; men don't benefit women." I believed what she was saying and took her words seriously as I navigated my own life and relationships.

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In the meantime, her life was a living lesson about dishonour and infidelity. I was a witness to the breakdown, the sorrow in my mother's eyes. I tried to comfort her when she cried and to understand when she was easily irritated. She became impatient, short-tempered and eventually sank into a depression. Rejection does that. It makes you feel unwanted, undesirable—a used-up old wife who's seen her sons welcome this other woman (which to me was more evidence of the duplicity we lived with) and go off to the house my father bought for her and spend time there with them.

While second, third and fourth marriages is not a topic many women speak of publicly, it's certainly popular among lunatic clerics who use their ranting to reinforce the low status of women. There's one called Abdullah al-Mutlaq who regularly sounds off about the goodness of men and the foolishness of women. He claims that if a woman is angry about her husband taking a second, third and fourth wife, she is actually sinning against Allah, which is a very serious allegation in my country. Moreover, he goes on to say the woman should instead pray for the man and his new wife. Once, on a television program, he said, "We always hear about a woman finding out her husband got married and she goes crazy. She turns psychotic. This, my brothers, is haram." Then he said, as though his holy remarks were useful, "If she bothers you about it just divorce her. Men love peace."

Sentiments like this provide further evidence that a Saudi man controls every aspect of a woman's life from her birth until her death. My father and then my brothers, when they became old enough, were in fact my guardians and had the power to make any decisions about my life. I am forever a

child in their eyes. So, it seems, is my mother. Even a professional woman who earns her own money could be humiliated and tossed aside, with no recourse. I had always felt she had escaped that fate. But she hadn't.

I was fourteen years old and confronting some tough truths. I felt vulnerable, lonely. I didn't know what to do. So I turned to Allah. I became religious. And as with everything else in my life, when I embrace something, I do it on a grand scale. I had never taken the religious edicts we lived with seriously because I didn't agree with them. But now I was begging for understanding. I started saying the daily prayers at the five appointed hours, and I would chastise my family members if they were not bowing to the east to pray as well. I was reading the Quran to find answers to my questions about marital love and broken promises and told my siblings that we needed to be close to Allah and to ask his forgiveness for our sins and the sinning of those around us. I started talking to Allah—weeping, in fact—hoping I would find salvation. I admit there was a lot of comfort in confiding my considerable worries to Allah. And I also have to say my family heaped admiration and trust on me once I told them I was a child of Allah. I was so over-the-top religious that my younger sister and brother would even bring their troubles to me and ask me to help them.

I kept this up for months, imploring Allah to change our lives, to make everything right again, but nothing happened. On the contrary, things got worse. My weeping turned to anger, and pretty soon my prayers became a litany of accusatory questions: Why does Allah prefer men over women in life and the afterlife? Why do men have the right to marry four wives when women can marry only one man? Why must

women wear black and cover themselves when men can wear whatever they like? Why is sex muharram (*really* forbidden, more so than haram) unless you are a wife? And why are dogs considered impure in the religion? I even raged about how getting a tattoo, plucking my eyebrows or having hair extensions were all makruh (hated) in the religion. What does Allah get from forbidding things that don't harm anybody? I found that these questions had no answers in the Quran. What's more, I wanted to ask Allah about the hatred and ruthlessness that had taken over my family. My invocations turned from confessions to demanding to know how a merciful Allah would allow the children in my family to suffer so much. Soon enough I quit praying and lost hope in what Allah could do.

During my last year in intermediate school, I met a boy from my city via a social media platform. We started chatting online, talking about art and music, and after a while we began speaking on the phone and sharing our thoughts and secrets. I developed strong feelings toward him, mostly because we could talk about things I could not discuss with my family. For example, I loathed the notion of an arranged marriage, of having to marry a man before I got to know him and probably without falling in love with him. I shared my views about traditional marriage (as I had seen it) with this new boyfriend, my fury that this would be my fate, and how truly abhorrent I found the thought of any husband of mine taking another wife. He agreed. We were so in sync that I began to consider if I could actually be attracted to a future husband and feel as relaxed with him as I was beginning to

feel with this boy. It was reassuring and heartwarming that we were so totally connected. Although I had to make sure my brothers had no idea who I was on the phone with, even with that concern my heart would sing at the thought of talking to him and I would watch the clock, waiting for the time we could meet on the phone and trade our stories with each other.

Our texting and talking developed into a soulful and intellectual relationship that grew with time. I started to wonder what it would be like to have sex with him. I told him that. I wanted to know what it would be like to give myself to a man that I liked and admired and had such strong feelings for, because I was certain that I would never feel this way about a man picked for me in the arranged marriage that I saw in my future. He was a bit surprised by my suggestion but agreed to come to my room.

Since our house is immense, there are lots of rooms that are never used, so one night I figured out a way to let him in and led him to a dark room where we could be alone. There was no flirting or preamble or teasing. We went straight to it on the floor behind a couch. He entered me. I liked it. Afterwards, when we tiptoed out so as not to be discovered, I saw him to the door and closed it softly behind him. I had no regrets, but I realized that although I'd had relationships with girls and thought I was lesbian, in fact I am bisexual.

I continued seeing him but not at our house. I would sneak out when everyone was sleeping and take the key with me and make sure I was back before my brothers woke up to go to the mosque for morning prayers. One of the problems all the girls who had relationships with boys faced was the issue of blackmail. It was like a recurring nightmare. I know one

girl who ran away to France because, after she broke up with the boy she had sex with, he threatened to tell her parents and post compromising photos of them online. In my case, the boy knew everything about me and about my family, even where I lived. So I could have been a target. But he was a nice guy and eventually we drifted away from each other.

As much as I was seemingly unscathed by these shenanigans, I knew I was walking an extremely dangerous line. If anyone found out about my relationship with the boy, death would be my fate. Despite the fact that sex outside of marriage is strictly forbidden by the religion, and therefore Saudi society, we all know it goes on behind closed doors. But everyone has also heard stories about two people facing death because they got caught. It's all about honour—the girl and boy are killed to clear the reputation of her family. If the family is forgiving and decides she needs punishment rather than death, they send her to one of the prisons called Dar Al-Reaya, the worst places on earth.

Sometimes called “care homes,” the Dar Al-Reaya house girls and young women between the ages of seven and thirty for crimes such as disobedience—defying the dress code, for example, or an unacceptable sexual orientation, or refusing to marry the man of the family's choice. Everybody knows about these prisons for girls, but hardly anyone talks about them. They're scattered all over Saudi Arabia and are basically a dumping ground for families who claim their daughters have brought them shame—often for an offence that can be hooked to sex, because sexual crimes always get the most attention and the biggest punishment. Most of the

girls in these places, though, are actually victims of rape and abuse by male guardians in the family, or they are activists who are demanding change.

There are whispers about what goes on there: nine-year-olds locked away in filthy, tiny cells that are infested with rats, being deprived of meals as a form of punishment, sent to solitary confinement to contemplate their rebellious ways. And then there are the infamous "lashes on Thursdays." Depending on your crime, the judge gives you a minimum of forty lashes—every week. The biggest fear on the inside is that girls may have a sexual relationship, so if they're caught touching each other or even looking at each other, they're immediately labelled as homosexuals, forced to wear a cap, subjected to additional lashings or even murdered.

Getting out of a Dar Al-Reaya depends on your parents. If they want you back, they can get you out, usually with an agreement that you will relinquish any claims you may have made about being violently abused physically or sexually by your father, mother and brothers, as well as a promise to reform—and the menacing threat of tossing you back into that awful place if you disobey again. If your parents don't want you released, you're stuck there until the prison officials marry you off to some horrid man who can't otherwise find a woman to marry, or kill you for committing a crime (like having sex with another inmate), or shuffle you off at age thirty to the women's prison, which is just as bad.

There are lots of truly disturbed girls in these places who need help; they need therapy and get none. There are always fresh reports floating around schools that prove these Dars are cauldrons of the mentally ill, the furiously angry and the rebels, and about girls crying and screaming in their cells,

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making noises like animals and begging for help. These kinds of rumours run rampant in Saudi, but as schoolgirls we only whispered about these places. No one dares to speak out about them for fear of being arrested by the religious police and hauled away to one of them, or being sent away by a family who wants to get rid of a rebellious daughter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hard Truths

The air of excitement was palpable; it was the last day of intermediate school. The “tomorrow” promise was in the air—the feeling that you have now completed the first steps and the world is going to open up to you because the hallmark experience called high school is about to begin. When I was dropped off at school that day, I was anticipating an event that would mark the end of a confusing and often painful time in my life.

As soon as classes were over, we gathered outside in the garden for the graduation party. We were wearing our school uniforms, but the teachers had placed a ring of flowers around each of our necks. Rows of chairs were set up in front of a makeshift stage. Curtains were draped on either side so it would look like a real theatre. There were tables laden with food and sweet cakes, and decorations in the trees. It was hot and sunny when they opened the gates for the mothers to come in. All eyes were on the arrivals as moms carrying presents and flowers flowed into the garden. There were shrieks of joy as each girl spotted her mom and

ran to hug her. Some of the mothers cried with pride as they wrapped their arms around their girls. I kept my eyes glued to the gate—where was she? Probably late, I thought. After all, she was the only one of the mothers who had a job. *She'll be here shortly*, I assured myself. I manoeuvred myself to the back of the group to be sure I could see everyone, just in case my mom had slipped in without me seeing her. The girls were opening their presents—bracelets, earrings, gold rings and makeup to mark this special occasion. When the principal started waving everyone toward the seats, announcing that the commencement ceremony was about to begin, I thought, *Wait a minute, what's the rush? My mom hasn't arrived yet*. And then, like the rumble of distant thunder, my gut began to tell me that my mom wasn't caught in traffic or detained at her job or any of the concocted excuses I'd been running through my mind while my eyes were stuck on the gate, waiting to see her breeze through it. She wasn't coming to my graduation. I felt the sting of tears in my eyes, the growing lump in my throat as the heartsick feeling of abandonment began to overwhelm me. I was the only girl in the class whose mom wasn't there. It felt like a punishment, like an announcement—made in front of the whole class and all the teachers—that I was not a valued daughter, that I was unloved and the child of a woman who was ashamed of me and didn't want to be seen with me. It took all the stubborn willpower I could muster to hold back my tears and find my way to the row of chairs designated for graduates and sit with my classmates.

The certificates were handed out and then the principal began giving out prizes. As the teachers and students from grades seven to nine and all the mothers and sisters looked

on, I heard her call my name and announce that I had won a prize for best marks. No one in my family was there to watch me walk up to the podium and thank the principal. No one. I was alone. I stumbled through the reception afterwards, congratulating my classmates and trying to make sure they didn't know how crushed I was or even that I cared that my mother had not turned up. Trying to hide my sorrow was hard.

When I returned home and my mom asked me about the party, I burst into tears and demanded an explanation. I asked her how she could have missed an occasion like this; how did she think it felt for me to be the only girl in the school who had no one at graduation, no one to be proud of her, to show their love for her? She told me she hadn't been able to leave work and immediately hugged me and said, "I will make up for this. We will celebrate together." The next day, she came home with a cake and surprised me with the gift of a new phone. I was easily won over by this attention, but the memory of being the sole girl at graduation without her mom stayed with me like a bruise needing time to disappear.

Two weeks later, my oldest brother came to my bedroom and knocked on the door. When I opened it, he started a speech about me being a graduate of the intermediate school and how I was a mature woman now. It was so unusual for him to say such nice things to me. I thanked him and wondered if this meant we could now be more like a brother and sister rather than a guard and a girl. Then he said, "I know that Mom bought you a new phone for your graduation gift. Give it to me so I can see it and check it." I was accustomed to having my phone checked by my brothers, and I unfailingly

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erased anything I didn't want them to see. But that day he caught me by surprise. I hadn't removed the conversation I was having with the boy I'd had sex with, and I had pictures of myself in my phone, which is totally haram. I felt a rush of heat to my face and a pressure like goosebumps building in my head. I tried to be calm, knowing he would kill me if he found out what was on my phone, while I frantically tried to come up with a reason why I could not give it to him.

I blurted out, "Wait, I need to charge my phone." That didn't work. He ordered me to give him the phone and reached his hand toward me. I felt trapped—and like an animal that's been cornered, I instinctively attacked. I lunged at him with so much speed and strength that I caught him off balance, even surprising myself, and with the power that comes from abject fear, I managed to push him out of my room and lock the door. I figured he'd smash down the door and knew time was scarce, but I hoped I'd bought myself the minutes it would take to delete everything from my phone. To the sounds of his hollering and vile words—he called me a prostitute—and the heavy thud of his fists on the door, I wiped the offensive material off my phone. Then, to my amazement, there was silence outside in the hall. I crept to the door and listened for his breathing, his footsteps, anything. I was sure it was a trick to make me open the door, that he was hiding out there laying a trap for me. Little did I know he'd gone to the kitchen to fetch a cleaver. Soon enough, he was splintering the wood of my bedroom door. Fortunately for me, my older sister Lamia heard the ruckus and came to see what was going on. She knew immediately that I was in peril, and since our mother was away from the house and our father was out of town, she called my mother's brother, who

lives in our neighbourhood, and told him we were in danger. Then she told my brother that he'd better calm down as our uncle was on the way.

A few minutes later the most bizarre exchange took place, with me on one side of the door, and my brother, uncle and sister on the other. My brother told them that I was hiding something on my phone and that I'd attacked him and then locked myself in the bedroom, which was proof of my guilt. Then my mother arrived home and joined the inquisitors at my door. In a voice so soft and sweet I hardly recognized it, I heard my mom say, "Dear Rahaf, don't be afraid. Tell us what is in your phone?" All I said to her was "If I am killed by Mutlaq for not giving him the phone, he will have murdered an innocent person." To be honest, I was so scared, shaking and sweating on the other side of that door, but I knew I needed to hide my fear, so I decided to raise my voice and make my own demands known instead. "From the first day you gave me this phone, I have been under your horrid surveillance." Hoping for even a touch of remorse from them, I continued the diatribe: "It's so painful and embarrassing to me to have you always infringing on my personal belongings." I begged them to consider what it would be like if someone grabbed their phones and checked them—how humiliating that is, how much it shows a lack of trust. No one answered. The quiet was nerve-racking. Then my mom's voice broke the spooky silence. She began to calm everyone, reminding them that there were other things for them to do that day and that this confrontation was over and they should leave. Miraculously, that was the end of it.

Over time, I found the confidence to use my phone not just for social interaction but also to find answers to the

questions I had been posing—about the rules in this country, the politics, the treatment of women—and not getting answers for.

The summer holiday was almost over and the long-anticipated high school term was about to begin when my mom and Lamia sat me down to explain that girls in high school are watched by others, who check each girl out to see if she's ready for marriage. They explained that I needed to attract the attention of other mothers, who would see me as a potential bride for their sons. In fact, to have multiple other mothers checking me out would be the goal. That, they told me, requires beauty. They announced that we were going to the salon to make my hair straight and soft and change its colour to a lighter shade of black. From there we went to the esthetician, who applied makeup that supposedly suited me, taught me how to put it on and sent me home with what they called a "beautiful mature look." I loved the attention and liked what they did to my hair, and I also enjoyed the fact that makeup was now halal, but all the while I was wondering what this was about. Even our appearance must change to the standards that this society wants so that we are not who we look like on the outside or who we feel like on the inside. As before, I thought our customs were a sham.

The high school my family had chosen for me was a public school about a five-minute walk away from our house that included all grades—nursery, primary, intermediate and high school. After twenty years as a science teacher, my mother had switched to teaching at the nursery level in 2013. So she was there, as was my youngest sister, who was in the primary level.

I felt a sense of family solidarity when my brother dropped the three of us off on the first day of the new term. Most of my friends from intermediate school had decided to go to this school as well, and we felt lucky that we were all in the same class. There were thirty of us—the teachers called us the “spoiled section” because we all came from the same private intermediate school.

The rules in the public schools were stricter; my girlfriends and I were more rebellious than the other students, but this was a new adventure and I was excited about it. When the day was over, I walked home. My mother and sister had walked the short distance to our house, and I knew that Lamia used to walk home from school, so I didn't think a thing about it. But when I entered the house and started telling my mom and sister about my day, and the new school, there was an odd lack of interest in what I was saying. My mother was pre-occupied, as if she was waiting for me to stop talking. Then she said, “Your brother Majed is looking for you.” Right away, that flush of fear crawled over my body. I asked what she meant, and my mom said he had called and was angry that he couldn't find me at school when he went to pick me up. I tried to lighten the conversation by saying that he shouldn't worry, that I was home safe and sound. But I could see the anxiety on my mother's face and I knew there was going to be trouble.

All of a sudden my brother was there in the house, screaming my name like a person out of control. I thought it might have something to do with me daring to walk home but I felt I had done nothing wrong, so I went straight up to him, feigning surprise and amazement, and asked what on earth was wrong. He slapped me so hard across the face I almost fell down. Of course, he'd presumed that I'd gone somewhere

after school rather than coming home and just assumed I was off with a strange man, fornicating. I tried to explain the five-minute walk, the fact that our mother and sister had walked home, but he wouldn't hear any of it. He punched me in the mouth. I was wearing braces on my teeth then, and the blow was so hard it cut my lips and made me bleed. By the time he was finished with me, I had a black eye and he had a clump of my hair in his hand. Beating me up was not enough: he took all my treasured possessions—the computer, PlayStation, phone, and even the key to my room. My mother witnessed all of this. But she spoke not a word to Majed. To me, this was the ultimate mother-daughter betrayal.

Later she told me that she'd felt sorry for me, that she'd sent a message scolding Majed for what he had done and told him that he was wrong and that walking from the school to our home was not a crime. But ever the mother of sons, she then said that she told him that I wanted to apologize, because I now understood that he didn't want me to walk alone. Ever since my father had moved out, my older brothers had taken charge of the house, even telling my mother what to do and how to behave. I could see she was now trying to make a deal with the devil—taking my side but telling Majed I would apologize. I often wondered why he was so hard on me and thought it was perhaps because he was only eighteen months older and felt the need to exert his right to control me. But with my mother basically allowing him to smash my mouth and make me bleed, and not being willing to interfere when he grabbed my personal belongings and stomped off with them, I figured the only way to get them back was to say I was sorry.

I got my belongings back—but Majed won the round because I had to promise I would wait at the school for him

to pick me up every single day. He had no trust in women and girls, especially teenagers. He assumed we were all immoral, even his own mother and sisters. He was always suspicious, thinking we had something to hide, so he kept watching us like he was some sort of secret-service agent. And despite the fact that he was only seventeen years old, he was able to control everyone in the house. Why? Because Majed filled the role our society demanded—he was the man in the house and it was his job to boss us around, mete out punishments and generally become the king of our little fiefdom. An outsider could be entertained by the farce of it all, but living with it was anything but comical. It's a terrifying and oppressive thing, to be guarded by someone who forces you to weave deceptive paths through your life.

During those years, the politics of my country were giving me a wake-up call. We'd already been told that this country was so wonderful it was like paradise. We knew that it was an absolute monarchy, which meant the king had power over the state and the government; in other words, he controlled the constitution and the law—everything—and didn't answer to anyone. I wondered why that was a good thing. I also learned, actually had to memorize, that this is one of the youngest countries in the world, founded in 1932 by the House of Saud—a collection of powerful, tribal men descended from Muhammad bin Saud, who was the founder of the Emirate of Diriyah in 1744 and who also unified many states on the Arabian Peninsula to free them from Ottoman rule.

I wanted to know more about the way we lived, so I started exploring online books and articles that were forbidden and

learned that my country ranked 141st out of 149 on the Global Gender Gap Index. We have one of the worst human rights records in the world and the most draconian rules for women. While the king and the princes appear in the newspapers and on television all the time, standing with presidents and prime ministers, the women and girls in this country live in a state of threat all of their lives. What I read was that the kingdom was formed with no attention at all paid to role-modelling the women who went before—the Prophet's wife, for example, who owned her own businesses. Instead it adopted this puritanical form of Sunni Islam called Wahhabism.

Even though those rules are now being challenged by women who are driving reform, progress is agonizingly slow because the laws are not codified and jurisprudence is managed by the personal views and whims of men. Stoning, amputation and lashing are used to punish everything from murder and witchcraft to flirting and robbery. Homosexual acts are punishable by death. An eye for an eye is still practised—the eye of the guilty surgically removed. There's no such thing as a jury trial, and often no lawyer. And the presumption of guilt comes with torture for anyone who doesn't confess.

There was a lot of talk when I was in high school about reform—the country certainly had a long way to go. Even though girls were permitted to attend school and university (unlike some of our mothers and grandmothers), we still had guardians—a father, husband, brother or son who controlled our every move. The kingdom claims to be easing restrictions on women: forced marriage became illegal in 2005; a woman joined the ranks of government ministers in 2009; Saudi women were allowed to compete in the Olympic Games as of 2012; and we gained the right to vote in 2015.

The curriculum at my school included math, biology, chemistry, physics and Islamic jurisprudence, which meant studying the interpretations of the Quran. The interpretations invariably came back to how women should behave. When the teacher said, "Never say no to your husband," I asked, "Why not?" Her response was to stage a play about how to clothe yourself. The good girl was hidden under shapeless garments; the other girl was wearing jeans and a shirt and was described as a wicked girl who was trying to seduce men. I asked why men didn't have to wear hijab or cover themselves. We were never encouraged to examine or analyze anything. The teacher told me to stop overthinking the rules, that Allah knows everything. And she warned me that my kind of questions led to atheism, a crime that would land me in prison. To make her point more directly, she said those who preach atheism are put to death. But I couldn't help myself—the rules simply never fit the reality. Consider that going to the cinema was forbidden, but I was watching Netflix on my computer and gobbling up American films and lifestyles and wishing what I saw there was my life.

My illegal online reading also led me to the House of Saud. The king is Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. He's worth US\$17 billion. There are fifteen thousand members of the royal family, and about two thousand are key players. Their net worth is said to be US\$1.4 trillion, which makes them the richest family in the world. Members of the immediate royal family have the title "prince" or "princess"; the lesser members are called "royal highness."

We always gossiped about them at school. Most of the royals have four wives, but they can and do divorce them at will, so the names of the wives change. We'd guess at who

was rising in power, who was being dumped or jailed or even killed. And we'd gossip about where the wives were shopping and what they bought. The lifestyle is lavish—marble palaces with multi-million-dollar pieces of art bought at auction; gold-trimmed chairs and yachts; and estates in the country as well as homes in the UK and châteaux in France and smaller palaces in Switzerland and Morocco. But like everything else in my country, these advantages are all for men. Their wives and mothers and sisters and daughters and lovers don't fare as well. The same rules that restricted me, a high school student, restricted them. Saudi women are unable to do anything without permission from a male guardian. These things include, but are not limited to: applying for a passport, travelling abroad, getting married, opening a bank account, starting a business, and getting elective surgery. I read that the guardianship system has created the most gender-unequal country in the Middle East. You can't even use social media without permission. To disobey is to die. Honour killing is part of the religious code.

The Absher app is part of what the men call guardianship. I call it abuse. No wonder we learned to use fake names online and dreamed up elaborate ways to sneak out of the house—or, in my case, to sneak someone in.

I used to see photos of the royal princesses mixing with foreigners at state dinners; while the foreign women looked spectacular in their beautiful gowns, the Saudi women were wearing abayas. They could only strut their own fabulous wardrobes while out of the country. I wondered how it must feel to look but not touch, to want but not have, to admire at a distance. Those princesses didn't dare embrace that lifestyle at home. If they did they could be seen as disobedient, a crime

punishable by being sent to the horrid Dar Al-Reaya prison for girls.

Riyadh and Jeddah are very different from Ha'il, where I lived. Women have started wearing colourful abayas and you can hear music coming from some of the cafés. There aren't as many mutaween on the streets. We never went to the movies in Ha'il, but in Riyadh both men and women go to the movies; my friend was there and saw the American movie *Black Panther*.

Still, even in the capital city you wouldn't dare criticize the government or question the lack of human rights. The restaurants are still segregated, but there are rap concerts attended by men and women, as long as they stay three feet apart. Women have more freedom, for sure. Some even own their own businesses. But at the time I was in high school, none of these reforms were happening where I lived.

The summer holidays after my first year in high school were filled with family weddings, neighbourhood and family gatherings, all the usual events. I was spending a lot of time in my room alone, like any other teenager searching for answers, going deeper into social media on my phone, finding new networks and meeting new people online. Although most of them had lived in Saudi Arabia their whole lives, these were Saudis I had never met and who had ideas I hadn't even imagined. There was lots of talk on these internet sites between both boys and girls about drinking, doing drugs, having sex. The girls online were wearing sexy clothes, short skirts, see-through blouses—I could hardly believe what I was seeing. It shocked me, but it answered some of my questions. I was apparently not the only one hiding her sexual practices. I started to wonder how many Saudis were really like the

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ones I saw online, and did they prefer to hide their behaviour or did they hide their behaviour only because of the rules we lived with? All of it made me think again about the delicate net of deception that weaves its way through our society, and that most people likely do whatever they want as long as they can keep it a secret.

In the process of surfing the net I came across a posting from a person who listed the names of books that are banned in Saudi Arabia as well as in most Middle Eastern countries. The post said some of the authors had been killed for what they wrote because their views opposed the state and the religion. The Saudi government blocks many websites, movies and books on the internet, so I began searching for a way to unblock those sites. When I found it, I clicked on the site immediately. Although my curiosity got the best of me, I admit to feeling some hesitation in delving into these sites. What if my mind changed completely? What if I became like those authors who were expressing the same points of view that I had—sharing my opinions, getting my words banned or being banished myself? As women, we'd been conditioned to think the same way, to never question authority, to abide by the rules of the customs and the religion. Opening that door to new ideas, new thinking, scared me a bit. But I was desperate to free my mind, to find the answers to the questions that had lingered with me since my childhood. So I started downloading the books and the movies that were banned, and exploring the websites the Saudi government blocks.

One of the illegal books I read is called *The Absent Truth* by Farag Foda. He explains that most of the customs we use today are based on historical accounts that relied on oral history. In other words, they are so distorted and so out of step

with today that they need to be questioned. I was also very drawn to his comments about the Islamists (those who have extreme views and think Islam should influence politics) using intimidation and distortion as a means of exerting power over the people. He says, "They are seeking political power, not paradise or spiritual salvation."

He even says, "As Muslims, we should not be terrorized by self-appointed representatives of Islam. Islam does not give sanctity to anyone but the Prophet." Foda ends his introduction to *The Absent Truth* by saying that violent Islamists should know that the "future can be made only with pen, not the sword, by work and not by retreat, by reason not by Darwish life, by logic not by bullets, and most important they have to know the truth that has escaped them, namely that they are not alone . . . [in] the community of Muslims."

Then I read that in June 1992, two members of the Islamic Jihad shot Farag Foda dead as he left his office with his fifteen-year-old son. He was forty-seven years old. He was simply expressing his opinion. It made me understand that evil is winning over good.

I remember the day I discovered another illegal book online and read it over and over again: *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* by Nawal El Saadawi. She writes:

All children who are born healthy and normal feel that they are complete human beings. This, however, is not so for the female child.

From the moment she is born and even before she learns to pronounce words, the way people look at her, the expression in their eyes, and their glances somehow indicate that she was born "incomplete" or "with something missing." From the day

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of her birth to the moment of death, a question will continue to haunt her: "Why?" Why is it that preference is given to her brother, despite the fact that they are the same, or that she may even be superior to him in many ways, or at least in some aspects?

The first aggression experienced by the female child in society is the feeling that people do not welcome her coming into the world. In some families, and especially in rural areas, this "coldness" may go even further, and become an atmosphere of depression and sadness, or even lead to the punishment of the mother with insults or blows or even divorce.

I felt she was speaking directly to me. She captured my thoughts and feelings, the truth in my life. I read more and began to understand there was something grotesquely wrong with the way I was being raised. She says, "We are all the products of our economic, social and political life and our education." And she says, "There is a backlash against feminism all over the world today because of the revival of religions . . . we have had a global and religious fundamentalist movement."

Another book she wrote, called *Women and Sex*, introduced me to misogyny, a term I had never heard before. Basically, it means the hatred of women. The more I read online, the more I realized that the religion and political tools I was living with were based on the notion that women and girls had to be strictly controlled lest their true selves escape the confines of the abaya and the niqab and upset the selfish sensibilities of the men and the boys. What is honour killing if not misogyny? What is child marriage? What is denying girls the right to speak to men if not pent-up fury about

what girls could really do if they expressed their opinions? And how about men having four wives and women having one husband—what's that about if it's not a deep-seated denouncement of women?

Nawal El Saadawi also wrote about female genital mutilation. It's a topic I knew only a little about. For all the terrible things done to girls in my country in the name of religion and custom, it was one hideous affliction that I was spared from. Not all of us—female genital mutilation is practised by some tribes in the south of Saudi. We hardly ever spoke of it, but we knew it was done as a so-called rite of passage for girls; that their external genitalia is cut off with a razor when they're about five years old and then they're told they are now women. If they don't bleed to death from the procedure, or die from shock or infection, they face a lifetime of medical problems caused directly by this barbarous act. Some say it's a religious requirement but it is not. It is illegal in Saudi Arabia, but we all know it happens because of people who think it's the right thing for girls. In fact, at my school one day a girl was saying she wondered what it would be like to kiss a boy and another girl said, "I wish your family did the female genital circumcision to you, dirty girl."

Nawal El Saadawi weaves religion, sex and politics into her books so effectively that I began to see them like a triple whammy: a combination that turns into a single assault on women and girls, and that made me change the way I looked at everything in my life. It also taught me that speaking out and demanding change comes with a price. Saadawi lost her job and was even jailed for her writing. There's a personal story about her that stays with me. While she was in prison, she used an eyebrow pencil and a roll of toilet paper to write

of her terrible experience and published the results in another book called *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. She eventually had to flee her native Egypt for the United States, as her life was in danger. I admired her courage and wondered if I could follow in her footsteps.

I was not alone in my thinking at that time. I had friends through social media who were sharing their opinions online. R was one of those friends. Her dream was to live in Britain with her Lebanese lover, which was a thoroughly impossible plan because of our customs and religion. She fumed about these unfair customs and claimed that because she didn't believe in the existence of Allah the rules should not apply to her. In her other life, R the online rebel was a student in a religious school who dressed in black clothes and was always making Islamic speeches and giving Islamic lectures for young girls. She was the picture of piety. No one in her family or among her friends knew her niqab was really a mask that hid who she was. Again, I thought, *How many people are like R and hiding who they really are? How many are religious fakes? How many are living the life they want?*

At school, I went back to dating girls, as many students did, and broke the solemn promise I had made to my mother to never date girls again. For teenage girls in Saudi Arabia, having sex with girls is not unusual. Sex with a boy or a girl can lead to death via honour killing—but families are less likely to take this drastic action when two girls are involved. They are likely to shame the girls and punish them in other ways.

I had a bad reputation at school because I dated a lot of girls at one time, but I felt no remorse or regret. My friends

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and I talked openly about prohibited subjects. We were surprisingly frank with each other about getting rid of the veil (hijab), attending parties, travelling, having sex. The difference between them and me was they stuck to the customs and religion despite their cravings, but I went after what I wanted and usually found it online.

We had seven classes a day for forty-five minutes each. School rules that focused on our uniform—long skirt and loose-fitting blouse, light makeup, long hair and a black abaya—were often the source of my transgressions. The school principal was tough. When any girl disagreed with a rule or arrived late, she was punished, which meant standing outside for almost an hour in the blazing-hot sun or the freezing cold. I spent my share of time out there with my face to the wall because I kept challenging the rules, kept asking for explanations but never ever getting any.

The problem for me was that for every single one of my altercations or violations, the principal called my mother. This was very embarrassing for her, especially since she was known as a good teacher and a strict disciplinarian. As if that wasn't enough, my older sister Lamia had been at the same school, and the teachers were forever comparing us—the brat and the angel. Lamia never broke the rules or fought with teachers or students, as I did. Although I asked that they stop comparing us because we were different individuals, the teachers always had the same reply: You are from the same household and upbringing; how can you be different? I did not reply. I chose to remain silent. The truth was that Lamia and I not only had different personalities, we had very different thoughts, beliefs and desires. Even as a seven-year-old those differences had made me feel like I was alone, with no one to support me.

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Those attempts to question the rules put me on another collision course with my mother. She answered my questions with comments such as, "Your sisters don't ask questions like this. What's wrong with you?" If I asked her for money to buy something, she'd say, "I'll give you the money when you are normal." Then I'd ask my dad and he would just give it to me. But even my friends began to turn away from me when I pressed ahead with questions about love and sex and women and religion; because that was all haram, I think they were afraid I would change their minds. So they steered clear of my constant critiques of the life we were living.

Nawal El Saadawi spoke the words I felt. "As a girl there was something wrong in the world around me, in my family, school, in the streets. I also felt there was something wrong with the way society treated me." And she admits being furious when her grandmother said, "A boy is worth fifteen girls at least because girls are a blight." I related to every word she wrote.

My research also showed me that no other country restricts the freedom of women to travel, or to get a passport, more than Saudi Arabia. And that having a male guardian who controls everything from where you go to who you marry is not the law in other countries. It certainly makes violence against women a national sport in my country. And having a medical appointment is a farce, since your father has to do all the talking on your behalf.

What's more, I discovered that because Sharia law rules everything in our country, we have no such thing as family law, so a woman's right to divorce is more restricted than a man's. Divorce is fairly rare except among the royal family, where it's common, but for the rest of us it's more compli-

cated and much more expensive for a woman to get a divorce. She has to pay back the dowry she received for the marriage and prove that she's been mistreated—a pretty tough requirement when men are in charge of everything. Not only that, a woman has no right to be the legal guardian of her children. She may start out with custody, but at the age of seven girls are transferred to their father's custody and at the age of nine boys can decide which parent they want to live with. And when it comes to inheritance, a woman is entitled to only half of what a male heir inherits.

The rules are never-ending. A woman from my district can't study abroad without a guardian tagging along with her. If she's in prison she can only be released to a male guardian after serving her term, and if he decides he doesn't want her, she doesn't get out.

In February 2016, while I was surfing social media, I came across an account on Path (an app we use like Facebook) that caught my attention. The girl's photo looked familiar, she lived in the same city I lived in, and although I didn't know her, I was immediately interested in her. I clicked on her photo and waited for her to accept my friend request. A day later she did. The back-and-forth conversation that followed filled in the details of her life and mine, and I discovered we were both at the same school. We exchanged phone numbers and started chatting. After a while, I started hinting to her about sexual relationships because I wanted to know how she felt about a lesbian relationship. I wasn't suggesting that she become my girlfriend at that point; I just wanted to know her thoughts. Well, she said she did

lean toward girls rather than boys, but she also made it clear that her behaviour in public was the opposite to that. I got to know her at school and discovered she was shy and quiet and not one to break the rules. We kept up the conversation throughout the term as friends, not lovers. In July 2016 she told me she wanted to be my girlfriend. I already had a girlfriend, but there was something about my new friend that made me want to keep this relationship special—I didn't want to let her go. Despite the many homosexual relationships I'd had, there was always the unhappy truth that eventually I would have to marry according to the customs and forget the girls I had dated in the past. This time was different. I began to wonder how I could skirt the demands of my country and the laws of this land.

I was preoccupied with those thoughts when the school year ended. Once at home for summer holidays, I turned my attention to my mother, who seemed to have shed her domineering side and become pathetically vulnerable after my father left us to live with his second wife. She was even trying to alter my behaviour at school by way of spoiling me with gifts and treats and affection. For the first time, I could see the look of embarrassment on her face when the school called to report that I'd had fight with a teacher or a student, or that I'd skipped a class or broken a rule (like pulling up my skirt to make it look shorter). I knew she had to apologize to everyone on my behalf, and seeing her shame because of me hurt me. I understood my behaviour was typical of teenagers acting out, but I began to realize that the price my mother was paying for my actions was too high given the unhappy position she'd been in since my father had broken her heart.

That summer, our family trip was to Mecca to do the hajj. This is a religious pilgrimage dictated by the Prophet that every able-bodied Muslim who can afford to is obligated to make at least once in their lifetime. It takes place from the eighth through the twelfth day of the last month of the Islamic year. *Umrah*, which is a short version of hajj, can be performed at any time of the year and can be done in a few hours as opposed to a few days. Whether hajj or umrah, the point of the pilgrimage is to prove that you submit yourself to God—Allah—and to show solidarity among people of the Muslim faith and cleanse your soul of the sins you committed in the past.

Despite the fact that by now I knew I was an atheist and lacking any level of faith, I felt I couldn't refuse the trip with the family. The rituals once we reached Mecca included washing our bodies, cutting a piece of our hair and nails, and entering the holy mosque Al Masjid al-Haram barefoot. I'd done this before, but now, as a non-believer, it felt very strange to realize the mind could be both blindly believing and brilliantly analytical when viewing the black cubic box known as the kabba, which is Allah's home. You need to suspend disbelief to be holy. Millions of people from around the world come here to touch and kiss this black box. We started the required walk—seven times around the kabba. This represents the story of how the wife of the Prophet walked a path among the mountains seven times in scorching heat in search of water for her baby son while her husband was away serving Allah. The Hadith says that as the baby Ismail cried and rubbed his feet on the ground, water began to flow from the mountain—and will flow until Judgment Day. It takes about three hours, walking and praying, to complete the circuit. I saw it as good exercise.

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Afterwards, we rested at the hotel in Mecca and then continued our journey to Jeddah to enjoy the rest of the vacation.

At the end of the holiday I convinced my family that we should have a cat. We'd never had a pet before, and although dogs are not allowed (they are haram), I figured I could talk them into a cat. My father was visiting when I raised the idea and he agreed to go with me and Lamia to the animal shelter. I think Lamia went along to supervise, worried that I would choose a cat that was too big or too scary or too wild. We had no sooner entered the shop than all three of us spied the same one—a beautiful, quiet, gentle cat with silky caramel-coloured hair. I named her Sasha. Everyone fell in love with that cat.

There'd been a Twitter campaign that summer that called for the government to "Drop the Parental Guardian Rule." The action gave birth to a slogan—#IAmMyOwnGuardian—which was very popular among women in Saudi. I didn't sign on at first, but watched and listened to what they were demanding. More than 2500 women sent petitions to the king demanding that guardianship end. The petition itself received 14,682 signatures on Twitter. The clarion call was that "women should be treated as full citizens." I was scared to sign in case my brothers saw my name, but I really wanted to be part of this, so finally, during the third week of the campaign, I used a pseudonym and a different email account and added my vote. I felt a flood of empowerment as I hit send because I was at last doing something to change the unfair rules I hated in my country.



Like lots of young Saudi girls, my girlfriend was away with her family during those summer holidays; she was studying, but I knew she'd be back in time for the start of the school year. My relationship with her was different than with the others. I could relax with her; she never judged me and always accepted me for who I was. Like me, she confessed that she didn't like to pray, and told me she would only act as though she was praying in front of her family. I did the same. I felt hesitant to tell her that I was an atheist, but when I asked her if she believed in the presence of God, she said she didn't really believe in religion. I started sending her information I found online. We had lots of discussions about all the prayers and requirements we'd been taught and agreed finally that it wasn't something that either of us could believe.

I was becoming more and more dependent on this relationship. I didn't want to lose her, but I wasn't fully committed to her. Having someone in my life who knew my truth and still liked me was a gift I'd never received before. I didn't want to tell her that I had thoughts about living outside of Saudi Arabia, but she'd been to North America and I wanted to know what she'd learned—what it was like to live there. I asked about the laws and the lifestyles. She showed me her photos and let me read her diary. Despite being in North America she was forced by her family to wear her abaya and the niqab and wasn't ever allowed outside without them.

Although Saudi Arabia claims racism is against the law, there's an abundance of it everywhere—in the workplace, in the shops, even at school. Anti-Semitism is common even in the media. As for Black Arabs and Africans who work in Saudi, being subjected to derogatory language and outright mockery is common. There's obvious contempt for

anyone who is Black or African. Television comedy series use blackface at will and depict Black people as lazy, stupid and engaging in sorcery. There is a lot of judgment in Saudi around who your family is, what your skin colour is, how you wear your hair. Many of my classmates were guilty of racial and religious slurs. It left me wondering who I would be if I didn't match their description of "good" and "beautiful" and "successful." One day in February 2017, I was showering and looking in the mirror and wondering who I would be if I cut my long hair off. Would my family, my classmates, my society still like me if I had short hair? Without giving it another thought, I picked up a pair of shears and started cutting. As long swaths of hair fell into the sink, I got bolder and cut more and more and more until my hair was short. I felt a surge of freedom. *This is me! This is who I want to be. I am not a superficial example of my society. I am Rahaf!*

I have to admit that the new look was shocking—and that I hadn't done a very good job. I convinced Fahad to act as my guardian and come with me to the hair salon where I had my hair cut even shorter to make it even. I knew I needed to face the others, but since it was the cold weather months, I decided to wear a hat that covered my head entirely

My family was caught up with the preparations for Lamia's wedding at that time, so I escaped their scrutiny for a while. She was marrying the son of a family in our city; my brothers were friends of his younger brothers. Lamia had never met him but agreed to the marriage, which was arranged by our father. The two families went to a popular estate outside of Ha'il called The Farm so we could have a gathering and get to know each other. We were staying there overnight; I wanted to tell Lamia that I'd cut my hair but hadn't found a chance to

do so. Here at this retreat I called her to my room and told her what I had done. Even though my words were plain—"I cut my hair"—she could not comprehend such an act and asked me to show her what I meant. I took my hat off and she started sobbing. Then she slapped my face and scratched her fingernails down my neck and screamed for our mother to come. Of course my mother beat me. Why? Because both of them were terrified that my short hair might jeopardize the marriage. I kept trying to persuade them that my hair would grow, that this was not the end of anything. They produced a turban for me to wear and forbade me to take it off.

But the story about my short hair did not end with the planning of the wedding festivities. It was like I was under house arrest—no school, not even a walk in our garden; I had to stay in my room so that no one would see me, especially not my brothers, who would have lost their minds had they known what I'd done. I was expected to stay hidden away until my hair grew back. Desperate to get out of the house and back to school, I convinced my mother that my reputation at school was already damaged because of the fights I had been in, so having short hair would not likely make things any worse. She came up with a plan—a genius plan, I thought. As long as I said that there'd been an accident—that my hair had been burnt and had to be cut—I could return to school. A very small price to pay. So off I went.

During the singing of the national anthem at school the next morning, the principal spotted me and my very short hair and called me to come to her office. She wanted an explanation. I told her about my hair being burnt. She didn't buy my excuse. "Do you know that cutting your hair is a violation which gives me the right to dismiss you from school and

that will ruin your academic record, which will mean that no school will accept you and you will be forced to sit at home without any certificates?" I wasn't surprised by the diatribe, but it did reinforce my thinking about the value of girls in this place. I told the principal that it was not fair to destroy the future of a girl because her hair was short. She snapped right back with, "It is not normal for a girl to act like a boy."

I suppose I could have let it go and taken her threat as my punishment, but I invariably strike back at injustice, and this time I shot back, "Are you saying that I act like a boy because of a haircut?" She told me to get out of her office and threatened to fine me if my hair didn't grow back to a suitable length. On my way out the door I said, "This is the stupidest thing I have ever heard. What if my hair does not grow? It's not my fault." Then she said she'd call my mother. Again, I wasn't going to leave her with the last word, so as I closed the door I said, "Don't you dare bring my mother into this because of these ridiculous rules."

It didn't end there. When I told my classmates what had transpired, their response was, "Rules are rules and they're not meant to be broken." My hair had become a crime. Everyone in the school was talking about my hair. This was the beginning of a downward spiral that eventually swirled me into a depression. I began to see the people around me as curses in my life. I realized I couldn't live like this and told my girlfriend about my secret desire to go away, to live abroad. She seemed a bit shocked at first and asked if I was serious. But when I explained that I wanted to escape all the things that are forbidden, she liked the idea and reminded me that even our relationship was haram, and we could be killed for it. That's when we began to dream together of escape. I cut off

my friendships with the other girls at school and spent all my time with my girlfriend as we plotted a plan to get away. But all the time I knew that if I waited too long, my family would marry me off to a man and I would not be able to run away with this girl who I now realized I had fallen in love with.

As if on cue, in the midst of my own conundrum, my father came one evening to tell us that he was going to marry again. The whole family was at home. He told our mother first and then called all of us to the living room to share the news. He sounded triumphant when he said, "I'm marrying a third wife." My poor devastated mother tried not to look at him or at us. Mutlaq and Majed thrust themselves into his arms to congratulate him, as though he had just scored an impressive win. Fahad was silent. That's what I loved about my little brother; he was an observer and could maintain silence while absorbing the consequences of injustice. Lamia rushed immediately to our mom and tried to console her while she wept and purposely kept her back to the room. It was a repulsive sight—the wounded woman warrior and the conquering hero man—the consequences of a mean and lopsided system. My father left with his two older sons by his side; my mother asked us to leave her alone.

The girl my father married was in her late twenties, maybe early thirties—young enough to have been an older sister in our house. Although men having more than one wife is common in Saudi Arabia, in parts of the country marriage is becoming increasingly monogamous as incomes decline and Western ideas about mutual compatibility between a husband and wife are taking hold. But in Ha'il, where I lived, that was not the case. The marriages are all arranged and usually cousins marry cousins. If a woman is divorced, she

cannot marry again. Men can remarry as often as they like.

Although my parents were not divorced, my mother didn't want my father in the house again after he married his third wife. She only partially won that argument. My father didn't sleep at our house after that, but he claimed that the part of the house that was for men only—the sitting room—was still his private territory, and he invited his friends to gather there whenever he chose to. The main part of the house was separated from the sitting room by a door that could be closed and locked, so it seemed that he was in another house, but we all knew his life was going on as before while our mother was on this side of the door weeping. When he came to visit us, he had to come via the front door of the house. It was complicated and difficult and usually unpleasant.

While my mother was devastated and her confidence took another hit, my father's marriage affected me personally and made me question the men in my family and what their values were. Of the dozens of fathers and brothers in our clan I could only think of two—my mother's brothers—who I would consider decent men. My Nourah Mom had raised good men. One of them was always like a dad to me, treating me as if I were his own little daughter. I recall once when I was young and sick, he came and carried me everywhere on his shoulders. It was wintertime, unusually cold outside, and he put his big warm coat on me and tried to convince me he wasn't feeling the cold, even though I could see his hands were shaking. When I was older and wanted to go shopping, my brother would often say he didn't feel like taking me, but my uncle would come without hesitation and he would protect me like I was something precious to him, taking my arm to cross the street and always smiling

and encouraging me and building my confidence. I had a wonderful relationship with my uncle; I don't know another man in my country like that.

By now my father had two more wives, one new baby with the second wife, and a first wife who was suffering from depression in a household where no one was sure about who was in charge. One day I came back from school with traces of kisses on my neck that I had forgotten to cover, and while I was talking with my older sister she noticed the traces, came close to be sure, and suddenly started yelling for my mother to come, as though there was an emergency. Mom raced to the room, and when she saw what the so-called crisis was, she showed no reaction to me at all and simply said to my sister, "This is not her first time and I don't know how to control her." And she left the room. Lamia must have thought it was now her job to torment me, and she started scolding me and calling me a whore.

After that, Lamia would drop into my room randomly to check on what I was doing and call me names to let me know she didn't approve of me. She told the driver he had to pick me up at school because my brother was often late and she didn't want me having any opportunity to hang around with the other girls. I felt like the walls were closing in on me. There was no safe place I could be myself.

In March, a friend of mine gave me a gift for my birthday. We don't celebrate birthdays, and the giving of gifts is taboo in our culture, but the guitar she bought for me made me very happy. Of course it was haram, so I decided to hide it in my room and teach myself to play when no one was around. And of course I got caught—everyone in the house was rummaging through my things looking for reasons to

punish me. This time it was Majed. He was waiting for me when I came in from school and walked with me to my room. My guitar was lying on the floor; Majed pointed at it and demanded to know where I'd gotten it. Then he pulled me to the side of the room and bashed my head against the wall, demanding I tell him the name of the boy who gave me the guitar. He wouldn't stop beating me until I gave up the name of this phantom boy. Joud came into the room and, trying to save me, said, "I saw her friend come and give this to her. It was not a boy." He seemed to calm down but insisted I give him the name of the girl who gave me the guitar. I told him her name. With that, he picked up the guitar and smashed it down on my head. It was such a painful blow that I wondered what had broken—my head or the guitar or both. I wanted to remind him that he'd found the guitar because he was invading my personal space and that he should be ashamed of himself, but I decided my head hurt enough. I'd keep my thoughts to myself.

In the meantime, my girlfriend and I continued to plan for our escape from Saudi Arabia. We didn't know which country would suit us, so we started looking at the places I'd read about. I also discovered the word *refugee* in my readings and found out what that meant and how it might apply to us. There was a lot to learn—travel arrangements, obtaining a visa, figuring out refugee claims. I'd started gathering information and planning this huge exodus when somehow my body began to stop, slow down, feel like lead. The pressure I was feeling from my family, the school, our society in general began to get to me in a way I wasn't able to handle. Even though I was planning an escape, I started to feel overwhelmed by being under observation all the time, by

the threats that came from my mother and sister, and by the peculiar things going on in my home—such as Reem’s mental condition and Majed’s domineering and hurtful way of treating our mother and me. I wasn’t able to be myself, and I started to feel as though I didn’t want to carry on living like this. I stayed in my room, lying down the whole time, looking at the ceiling. Only Sasha the cat was with me. She’d rub her head on my face, as if asking me to get up. She seemed to know something was wrong with me; she even licked my tears when I cried. But most of the time she lay on my chest and watched me.

I was so depressed I didn’t know what to do. Every day was worse than the day before. Then Mutlaq came into my room. I didn’t even have the energy to be afraid of him. When he asked why I was staying in bed, I told him that I needed help, that I needed an appointment with a psychologist. He was hesitant because in our society getting help like that is seen as a weakness and not acceptable. Furthermore, there aren’t many clinics in Ha’il, and the available ones are a long distance away. But he knew I was in trouble and said he would make arrangements for me to speak to a therapist over the phone. I agreed. He didn’t want my parents or siblings to know about this and paid for the sessions with the psychologist himself. It was unusual for him to help me this way, and I wasn’t sure I understood his motive, but I needed help and accepted it without question. The therapist told me about drugs that would help and didn’t require a prescription, so my brother bought them for me and I took them for several months without anyone in the family knowing.

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Lamia's wedding was approaching, and the family and relatives were absorbed with the planning and preparations. Lamia was a beautiful bride in a dazzling white gown and gold and silver jewellery. There were more than four hundred guests invited to the ceremony that began at 8 p.m. and went on until 4 a.m. The hall was beautifully decorated and the food tables were spilling over with meats and sweets. It was lavish to the max. But as required, the men and women were in separate rooms—we ate and danced separately.

The bride price the groom paid for my sister was 150,000 Saudi riyals (US\$40,000). The money is a religious right called mahar, and its value varies depending on the financial ability of the man and the status of the woman. If she is a widow or divorced, she is less valuable. I saw the joy on Lamia's face and asked her if she was really happy with the price given for her. She said, "Of course I am, there's nothing wrong in this, it's my right."

I didn't say anything to upset her but thought how insulting mahar is—a strange man who she doesn't know pays an amount of money calculated by my father and buys her, as though she's a vehicle or a house. I had read comments on social media about mahar that said a bride becomes the property of the groom and he then has the right to do anything to her, even rape her, because he bought her.

I had to wear a wig to the wedding party so that no one would know that my hair was still short. My sister, dressed in her expensive and gorgeous gown, had to stay in a room by herself, which is our tradition. If she showed herself or her joy she would risk being called a shameless woman. In some cities the bride and groom come together at the end. But not in Ha'il. When the last guests left, my brothers walked

Lamia to her husband and the new couple left for a hotel.

My life went back to staring at the ceiling in my bedroom with Sasha beside me playing with my fingers as if to say, *Come on, get going*. The medications I'd been taking had run out. I was so sad and despondent and I'd lost a lot of weight, which normally would have been something that made me happy, but being so lethargic and pale, I hardly noticed the changes in my body. I wondered if I would ever be okay again. I didn't want to leave my room, but I knew I needed more medication, so I used my phone to call my mother and ask her to come right away. She did, and when I gave her the empty medicine package and asked her to refill it, she presumed I'd been taking illegal drugs and said, "Are you on drugs now?" I said, "No, it's not what you think. It's treatment for depression and my brother knows about it." The look on her face changed from disgust to amazement and she said, "If you had told me you were a drug addict, it would have been easier than knowing you're crazy and will be rejected by the world for your illness." She left my room and told everyone in the house that I was insane, and that now they would never find a man to marry me.

A few days later my dad came to my room. He found me with a turban on my head to hide my short hair, which was the least flattering thing I could imagine, and looking emaciated and feeling dejected. He sat on the side of my bed, took my hand in his and said he knew that I was suffering from depression. He wondered if someone had done this to me, if I was attached to someone who had hurt my feelings. He was trying to get me to open up about my emotional life; I wasn't about to do that, but I did confess that I was simply incapable of joy and all I wanted was to leave this life. He started to

cry and, with tears pouring down his face, this man who had rejected all of us for not one but two more wives wrapped his arms around me and kept assuring me that everything would be okay. He said he would bring me vitamins to cure my depression and that I should leave those other drugs alone. I agreed to do that for him, but I knew my depression was getting worse and there was no one in the house to support me.

One day when I was feeling particularly low, I saw my mother sitting at the door of my room, chatting to a friend on the phone and keeping an eye on me. I picked up a knife and positioned the blade over my wrist and said loudly, "I will end my life now." She put the phone down, looked squarely at me and said, "You're crazy. Finish your life. You will go to hell for killing yourself. Allah will not be pleased with you, so how can I be pleased or satisfied with you?" As I cut into my wrist, the blood came spurting out, spilling everywhere. I felt dizzy. All my mother did was call out to my little sister, saying, "Go give your crazy sister some bandages." Joud brought me towels, alcohol and bandages and sat with me until I calmed down. It was the last time I tried to get my mother's attention.

Eventually the depression began to lift. When it did, and I recovered, I went back to my old habits, sneaking out of the house and getting together with friends—both boys and girls—that I met on social media. This was a different crowd. My friends at school would never go out like this and didn't know any of these people. But even at the beginning of meeting these rebels like me, I was careful about the ideas I shared with them; the parties they held took place in secret, and although I attended them, I thought they were scary, too wrong for me. It was a secret world in Saudi Arabia, a world occupied by minor girls and older men who were distributing

drugs and cannabis to everyone for free. The government knew about these parties, so it would have been easy for them to raid the party and arrest us, but they didn't. I saw people at that party who worked with the religious police and other famous people from social media who were known for the advice they gave about honour and religion—all of them secretly fooling around with minor girls. I figured this was beyond what I was willing to risk and decided to stop attending the parties. This wasn't about breaking the rules that I didn't approve of; this was about flouting the rules and indulging in different but equally despicable behaviour. It was about hypocrisy and, in my opinion, it contributed to the duplicity I despised. So I quit that crowd, but it was an experience I will never forget.

There's a story we all knew about but were careful not to comment on—a story that illustrates the enormity of the double standard in our country. I was only two years old when a fire broke out in a girls' boarding school in Mecca, but the consequences of that catastrophe cling to our lives like a parable. It began on March 11, 2002. The blaze was reported to have started on the top floor of Makkah Intermediate School No. 31 at about eight in the morning. Firefighters said it was caused by "an unattended cigarette." There were eight hundred girls registered at the school, most of them from Saudi Arabia but also international students from Egypt, Chad, Guinea, Niger and Nigeria. The school was overcrowded, and it didn't have the required safety features and equipment such as emergency exits, fire extinguishers and alarms. The flames spread quickly and the school filled with smoke. The girls, most still in their rooms getting ready for breakfast and morning classes, raced

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to the exits, but the guards posted there refused to unlock the gates so they could escape. Why? In their haste to leave the burning building, the girls had not dressed properly—they were not wearing head scarves—and their male relatives were not there to receive them on the street. The girls were screaming to be let out, and passersby stopped to help as the school turned into an inferno.

Then the mutaween turned up and beat back the crowd, reminding them that the girls would be committing a sin if they came out of the school without covering their heads. According to eyewitness accounts, they told the incredulous crowd, which now included parents of some of the girls, that they (the religious police) did not want physical contact to take place between the girls and the firefighters for fear of sexual enticement. Some reporters claimed that the few girls who got out were pushed back into the burning building by the guards and the mutaween. When the firefighters rushed inside to rescue the girls, they were also admonished by the religious police.

Fourteen girls died in the fire. More than fifty were injured. I shudder every time I recall that terrible story and ask myself what sort of barbarism was at work when innocent girls were forbidden to escape from a burning building.

This is all done in the name of honour. It's the silencer in every conversation. The phrase "we are clean people" is as common as saying good morning. Saudi society is fixated on honour—in whatever convoluted description works to cover the unequal and unacceptable behaviour of the people who own the power. To think that fourteen girls died a horrible death and fifty suffered such awful injuries—burns and broken bones—because of so-called honour is repulsive to me. But

it means everything to my family and to all families in the kingdom. Saudi Arabians will kill—make that murder—for honour.

Those tensions seeped into our bones as girls growing up in this country. By the time I was sixteen years old, I knew the path I was on—to alter the course of my life and embrace my identity as a feminist and an atheist who opposed the laws of a state that deprived its citizens the rights of expression and freedom of lifestyle—was the correct one. My dream was to live in a country far from the Middle East that believed in gender equality and human rights. But I couldn't even convince my family to let me go to high school in another city in Saudi Arabia. I remember the day I asked my mother and brother if I could go to high school in Riyadh. My brother laughed at me, saying, "Are you serious?" while my mom interrupted the discussion and ended the conversation by saying, "We do not allow our girls to study away from their family." I did not argue with them because I knew that they would never consider my point of view. It was left to me to seek change.

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