

Write,
She yelled in my ears.
In writing you will be.
Stop scattering the parts of yourself.
Stop hiding in the shadows of others.

You are your own God.
Do not allow another human to become your God
Or your inspiration,
For you are the inspiration of your own self.
God is within you.

Let this inspiration guide your way.
Write.
In writing lies life.
Writing is a virtue many don't possess
And you are elaborately flowing.
Writing is creativity
And creativity is existence.

I see you standing at a crossroads
Looking at yourself
Unsure which path to take.
The road everyone chooses?
Becoming like everyone else?
Or to be you,

You the writer.
Writing is your creativity drawn in words.
Do not leave it,
But hold it up.
Marry writing.
It is what remains.
Be you,

You the Goddess.
Do not allow a god to drive you or inspire you.
You are the path
And the inspiration.
Write and inspire.

(1) The Beginning

I was born in a patriarchal society, into a conventional family with ordinary behaviors and average education. My mother was fifteen when her family arranged for her to marry my nineteen-year-old father; marriage was one way to keep his behavior in check.

My mother gave birth to me shortly after she turned sixteen—a child giving birth to a child, I always thought. I was raised in the midst of my parents' teenage dreams and the uncertainty of their new adult lives. Memories became lost in the flow of life. This made us forget what had been and simply carry on moment to moment.

Each of us grows, and inside are the lost dreams and thwarted wishes of our mothers. You are the origin of her dreams' demise. You are asked to rise to the appointed challenges because, in spite of being a woman, you will face this world and prove you are worthy to exist within it.

Girl after girl after girl was born, and the dreams of our mother broke around us, their shrapnel scattered and then reshaped into another dream far away from us—the dream of the male. The boy. No matter how abundant and

well-bred girls may be, they can never make up for the absence of a boy.

As I grew up, this conflict left a crack in my identity. I was the eldest daughter, the one responsible for the long line of sisters that followed. Each time my mother gave birth to another girl, faces would frown and the sky's colors would fade. Strangely, I didn't see this disappointment in the males of the family. But the tears of my mother, the gossip of my grandmother, and the words of my neighbors haunted me. "It's okay. May God compensate you." Even the word *mabrouk*—congratulations—went unspoken. However, we girls continued to grow, one after the other, and we were treated with compassion.

My memories of my father during my childhood are limited. He was a workaholic, too busy providing a life my mother insisted should be better. She would not accept the idea of sending us to public school, despite the fact that we were girls. Instead, we were sent to expensive private schools that only the rich and highly educated could attend.

Though my grandfather was a tyrant, he invested in our education, as he had done for our aunts before us. Perhaps he had done the same for the boys as well, but his sons were not as diligent as his daughters. One of my aunts attended college in Egypt in the 1960s, and my youngest aunt, who is not much older than me, went to a private school, the same school my sisters and I would later attend.

I can't say whether or not the school was a fundamental turning point in the formation of my character, or if my life changed there. The school community was completely different from that of my home environment. My classmates came mostly from elite, educated families, and their religious backgrounds varied. I had a more modest upbringing. Nevertheless, the fact that my parents could afford the expensive tuition for decades made my classmates assume we were rich.

From my father, I learned modesty and self-sufficiency. From my mother, I learned to face and overcome challenges. I lived my life by these qualities—modesty and richness, contentment and ambition. Still, there was always one thing I had to remember : I am a girl.

Behave like a man but *remain* a female. Be responsible and never forget that your strongest weapon is your beauty. Grow tired, strive, struggle, and resist, yet, of that one thing always remain aware: You are a woman. Your horizons are limited. Your mother keeps your freedom locked up, and your father holds the key. Your actions come with great responsibility. Any misstep is a black mark that will later reflect on your sisters. Never forget that your arrival was a good omen, but only conditionally. After all, seven more girls trailed behind you.

(2) As days pass by

Days pass by, and the fuzzy edges of memories remain shaped by the shadows of men. Or maybe by the shade the men provide. There is a wish to be in their presence and enjoy certain protections, like the cool relief you find under a tree after a long day working in the fields. However, men are filled with contradictions and weaknesses, and their behavior is feeble and defective most of the time. Yet, power and dominance are theirs in the end. For they are men.

My grandfather was my role model. In my imagination, he was God-like. Maybe I thought he was God himself. I imagined a God who looked and spoke like my grandfather. He died at the young age of fifty-two, but he was always present in my life. After his death, I continued to search for a God in the form of that great man.

My grandfather was tough. Everyone in the family feared him, but I was his favorite. He protected me from the tyranny of my mother and the beatings of my grandmother and the teasing of my aunt. He preferred me

to my cousin (or so I imagined), the first grandson, who was the eldest and, of course, a male.

Inside of me still resides a child that does not grow, a childhood made of memories that begin with the first moment of my life. Childhood departed but never left me. The realities of this time are different than what my memory tells me, but my memory is shaped by the repetition of idealized events that linger on the tongues of adults.

What mostly distinguishes my oh-so-heroic childhood are the first hours and months of my life, and I don't know if my connection to the place where I was born is related to those memories.

Jericho is the city I love. We are alike. The people call Jericho "the city of the moon." The moon embeds itself in the sky, and you see it touching the earth where the land is flat, spacious, and green. The sun burns, but the moon brings a chill.

In Jericho, there is a tree we call "The Crazy." It is abougainvillea, and it belongs to the carnation family. People also describe it as hellish because it grows and erupts in crazy ways after a long lull. Its colors vary from

violet and lilac to orange and white. It always hangs from the balconies of the house and spreads into the streets. Some years, when we returned to Jericho at the winter season season, we would arrive to find a fine from the city. In our absence the Crazy had grown so much it had blocked the road.

This tree is very much like me. I feel that my spirit contains a part of its craziness—its lulls and sudden eruptions. It is a stranger, and yet it comes too close. It grows in a land that is not its home and conveniently finds itself an owner there. The olive tree, however, cannot find a life in Jericho. Neither can the almond. Jericho is the city of the delicious citrus trees, Askadinya, and “The Crazy.”

My grandfather bought a winter house in Jericho. I like to say he did this in celebration of my birth, but that’s not the truth. Telling the story this way makes me feel as though I were his favorite. The house is dreamlike in my memory, a castle. In reality, it was just a normal house. Still, it embraced us all, the entire family, my uncles and their children too. Each uncle had his own room. How spacious it felt, though it wasn’t a very large house. There was a small fountain that in my eyes seemed the size of a

swimming pool. Happiness makes things grow larger than they really are.

Before my birth, my mother, grandmother, and aunt were busy preparing the Jericho house that my mother loved so. My grandfather spoiled her. The pain of her contractions and labor were all felt in that house. At that time, Jericho seemed very far away from Jerusalem.

My mother gave birth to me in Jerusalem, and my first months were spent in Jericho. I was born in a sun month—the flaming August they call it. In those years summer arrived with immense strength, unlike these days, when we don't know when it will start or when it will leave us.

I was a small baby; my weight didn't exceed three kilos. My grandmother used to wipe me with olive oil and wrap a piece of cloth tightly around my tiny body to strengthen my bones. My mother used to put me on the terrace in the courtyard of the house and leave me there until she finished her chores. Sometimes she'd forget me, and my grandfather would scream, "Come and take her before the cat eats her!"

No wonder my skin was darker than my sisters'. The rays of Jericho's sun brushed me for many hours, day after day, to make my bones stronger and harder. And yet, what was inside of me always frightened me: *Slow down. You are a girl. Your sphere will always be limited. You don't need a man, but you will never be anything without one. No matter how hard you and your sisters work to make up for the absence of a boy, you will never be able to fill the gap in your mother's heart.*

When a boy arrived, life began to flourish in our home. My mother's happiness flooded the earth and sky, and it overwhelmed us. Finally, we were bonded with this world. Finally, we had an existence. Finally, we had a brother.

Time had passed, and it was too late to grow beyond what had been ingrained in me for years. Yes, I broke from tradition and convention, but I remained within the structure created by men. The ceiling above me was represented by my mother telling me, "Be careful. You are a girl. Be educated so that education can be your weapon. Work hard so you won't need anyone to support you." And yet no sooner do your dreams start to fly than

spinsterhood becomes a threat on the horizon, and you haven't even yet surpassed the age of twenty. "You have to marry," my mother told me, "for you are the eldest, and everything you do will reflect on your many sisters behind you."

In this way, my moderate, soft revolution was an attempt to escape what was required of me and to maneuver toward what I wanted for myself.

I threw myself wherever life hurled me and said, "It is written and destined." I insisted on the challenge, on creating a reality that looked like my revolution, on manifesting the enlightenment I wanted to exist somewhere inside me.

Before the age of four, I asked my mother whether God was male or female. I thought he had to be male because everyone preferred males. I silently questioned the masculine dominance of this "fact," because the origins of life are from femininity. How could my mother, the creator of children, remain in the shadow of my father, who we rarely saw? How could the branch be stronger than the tree, and more dominating, while the tree, the origin, remained subordinate and obedient?

(3) Growing to be a mother

I married to become a mother after my dreams of becoming a lawyer or journalist or ambassador dissipated. It was as if life were stubbornly opposing me. I grew so accustomed to bending under its weight that I no longer knew my true height or worth. Until only recently, I hardly knew who I was or where I was going. I was young, and restless, and I started to dream. I started to feel there might be something out there awaiting me. But a slap from my father after a small act of disobedience would send me back to my cage without resistance or hesitation.

I started to walk when I was very little, my mother always told me. As a continuous warning, my grandfather would tie a rope around my ankle and tie the other end to a black iron rod planted deeply in the ground. I still remember the rod's shape and size. For some reason, the memory of this doesn't bring me any fear. I don't remember if it hurt me, and I don't remember if I ever tried to untie the rope and escape. I don't remember anything except what my mother told me—that my grandfather was forced to tie my ankle because the neighbors had to keep

bringing me back home. My grandfather often said, “This girl is not a girl made for this life.”

This phrase has echoed throughout my life. Though we told this story many times, laughing about it, the rope stayed with me. Whatever I did, I remained tied to something that always held me back. I felt its effects for many years. At one point, the feeling almost overwhelmed me, my eyes filling with tears. I tried to suppress it. My grandfather is an idol that I will not tarnish.

I have many strange memories from childhood, memories of accomplishing things only adults should have to do. I was a little girl with a giant living inside me. I could no longer differentiate between my childhood and my maturity. It took a lifetime before I understood what had taken place.

Shortly after I divorced, in the midst of wars being waged against me, depression hit me forcefully. I wasn't able to move in any one direction. I was like a camel stuck in place as knife-wielding men race towards it. I was that camel, taking blows from all directions to protect my four little children.

There was a moment when a social worker asked me to recall certain memories from my youth. “Did you experience a traumatic event in your childhood?” she asked. I told her my childhood was pleasant and very normal. I don’t know why the question seemed so dramatic and strange, and I don’t know why I suddenly felt as if something traumatic *had* happened to me, a rape or an assault. Perhaps those things happened behind other closed doors, but not in my house. I had always been proud of my family.

When the social worker insisted I plumb the depths of my childhood memories, I stopped at an event I had always considered heroic. I was not yet four years old when one morning my father dropped me off in front of the school gate and drove off to take my aunt to her school.

I was still in preschool then, and it was around this time that I first heard about the “rats chamber,” which is where the principal locked up mischievous children. One of my distant cousins, who was much older than me, used to tell me horror stories about that chamber during breaks.

I actually enjoyed listening to these stories, but wanted to make sure I never became one of the principal's victims.

On that day, my father dropped me off as usual. He left and I entered the gate, but I was the only one there.

After several failed attempts to walk to my father's workplace, I finally made it. This became a heroic story the family told with pride for years and years. My mother would repeat the details with so much specificity I almost thought she had been there with me. I even memorized the story as my mother told it and used to enjoy hearing my great accomplishment relived in front of other family members. How could a four-year-old child travel from her school to her father's office on her own? As I grew up, this memory helped me imagine myself as Supergirl.

The social worker forced me to return to that memory. "When you get home, I want you to write down what happened on that day," she said.

"Don't write it the way you're used to talking about it. Find the four-year-old girl inside you and let her tell you what happened."

I scoffed at this idea, and told myself that these specialists are too obsessed with tragedy. But I went back

home, locked myself behind closed doors, took out my pen and paper, closed my eyes, and started to call to the young child inside me. Perhaps becoming a mother made this easier. There was a huge distance between me and the young child within me, but I called on her with a softness I was not used to treating myself with. For many years, I had spoken to myself with only cruelty. Calling on that little child was extremely difficult. My tears erupted as if a great misfortune had befallen me. I cried for hours. I was afraid of what was happening to me. Suddenly, that child stopped in front of me, and I could see her standing alone near the big cypress tree in the school garden. I let her tell me what she felt for the very first time in my life. I allowed her to cry. I allowed her to feel scared. I allowed her to tell the story in her own way, with her own emotions. I allowed the child in me to speak for the first time in my life.

A great comfort came over me later. When I sat down afterwards with my family to tell them what had happened, I said to my father, “On that day, I lost the most valuable thing one can lose.” My father almost jumped out of his chair, and my mother stared into my eyes, asking

herself, *Could there have been a detail she failed to tell me?* However, I quickly calmed their anxiety and said with a laugh, “Don’t worry. I didn’t lose my virginity on that day. I lost my childhood.” Of course, my father felt relieved, and my mother assured me ... by calling me mad.

I realized I lost my childhood that day and reached maturity. I was no longer a child. From that day on, I became the girl in charge, the one who could do everything. I carried this responsibility proudly, in the hopes of winning praise from my parents. The more mature we become as children, the more we free our parents from their own responsibilities.

What should I have done on that day as a child? Why didn’t I ask for help in the nearby shop? The clerk must have seen me pass by the roundabout many times. How did everyone disappear that day? Was I walking with such confidence that not a single person thought to stop and offer assistance? I could have cried and asked for help. I could have waited for my father until noon, when he planned to pick me up. I was truly scared—this is what I told myself when I was able to look back at that moment.

Instead, I went on living, pretending to be unafraid, trying to conquer that moment any time I felt it resurfacing.

Afterwards, I understood what the social worker was trying to do—help me to understand why I behave the way I do. Why do I always have to make sure everything is under control? Why do I accept everything and try to carry on? Why do I always try to save the situation? Why was I the way I was with my husband?

My feelings towards my father often made me wonder. His presence in my life was like a flowing spring. No stone or rock could stop his love from flooding over me.

He was a stranger to his feelings, and he still is. He doesn't know how to express his emotions, but he is so full of love that it flows from him, and you can almost wash yourself in it and drink from it until it satisfies your thirst. He was far away from my heart when I was young, but he became part of my heart and life when I grew up, especially when I got divorced.

He fears to express what is happening inside him. Yet he has entered into an unusual state of reconciliation with himself, and this makes him powerful. He doesn't pretend

and doesn't attempt to change. He has his own set of beliefs, and he never imposes his ideas on others. My father is like the ancient palm tree with deep roots, proudly upright, carrying its dates every season, not caring about the wind or a burning sun. He is a real believer, in a way that is striking to me now, as compared to what I knew of him when I was young.

Inside my father is the man I wish to find—a man with a heart like his, with a pure love like his love.

(4) My Marriage

My marriage of more than a decade brought me four children. This alone may seem a prize worth suffering under the roof of a man who oppressed and degraded me until my dignity was driven into the ground. During our marriage, I tried to create a family portrait filled with intricate detail until I could see it hanging in front of me, adding an aesthetic sense of beauty to my life, like valuable belongings and collectibles.

I was like a Sufi—symbols and objects of status meant nothing to me. I was looking only for what could give my life greater meaning. I was trying to find answers without a religious or ideological fight. I wanted an escape from the reality that I had to confront when I began questioning absolutes. In order not to fall into the hollowness of atheism, I tried to form a foundation of belief. Still, sometimes in choosing a more simplified and spiritual path, we are actually trying to escape the problems in our lives and avoid self-examination.

True change requires that we break from the associations and ideas formed by our parents and religion

and culture, and stand naked again, as blank slates. But often, we simply replace one set of ideas with another. We fix what we can on the surface, pretending we are fixing from within, when in reality, we are nowhere close to what lies inside. True change requires reconstruction. But in order to reconstruct, we must first demolish, and demolition requires moving, shaking, cleaning, digging, burying, and bringing in new components to replace what existed before.

At times, I looked at the family portrait I had created so carefully—all the details I had included with extreme caution and care—and I saw only how false it was. I looked around to see my husband and his family—his mother, his sister, his father, his brother. I saw myself in my mother-in-law; I saw my daughter in his sister and my son in his brother.

I saw my husband in the face of his father, and myself I saw in the decayed body of his mother. I was deeply afraid, as I could suddenly see my future with absolute clarity. There it was, walking ahead of me, without any falsehood or mystery, like a tape fast-forwarding. How could I attempt to create a portrait of my family in such an

environment? I suddenly understood my mother-in-law. I understood her panic and madness, and I understood it would be only a matter of time before they would become my own. My husband, he too was bound to become like his father. I would have to accept such a bitter reality, driven by the same old admonition: “You are no better than anyone else. Everyone lives this way.” But I was living a life filled with false decorations. My entire life had been about adaptation and adjustment. I didn’t want to see my children forced into this same reality.

I was secretly raising my children to pursue dreams hidden from them by the patriarchy. I wanted them to dream of a reality in which a human can become who he truly is. I wanted my children to hear a single message from me: Become who you want to become. I didn’t want to expose them to the conflicting message my parents gave me—become who you are, so long as who you are is what we want you to be. I wanted my actions to match my words. How could I tell my daughter not to allow a man to hit her when she had seen her mother beaten by a man? How could I raise her to be strong—to safeguard her rights and her worthiness as a female—when she had seen her

mother in the corner of the room writhing from a severe beating the night before? How could I raise my son to respect his wife when he lived in a house where his mother was beaten and later prepared the *hookah* for his father, who waited on the sofa, praising his own virility, while his mother was stricken with shame and weakness? How could I teach my children to live a life built on virtue and manner when vice decorated the throne of the patriarch we obeyed and bowed before?

I lost any desire to pursue my own pleasures, and I decided to devote my life completely to my children, believing they represented the dream and the hope. I continued to live as though I were that same modern, moderate Muslim woman, but in truth I had submitted myself completely to God. I became a Sufi without Sufism, the believer without a veil. I studied the lessons of Amro Khalid, who taught patience and endurance, and Tareq Suwaidan, and other virtuous religious men I followed along the path to God, to help me endure the pain of life. I went forward with blind obedience and righteousness. I lived according to the stricture that the woman is meant to worship the husband as though he is a

God on earth. I fulfilled all of my commitments in that regard, living in total compliance, climbing higher and higher towards God. I told myself: *All of your good deeds will bring you rewards in the afterlife. Don't give up on the mercy of God.* I even began to feel a perverse delight in my husband's tyranny, and I would laugh to myself, saying: *Here, you have done another good deed through submission. Be happy.*

And one good deed after another piled up until my good deeds filled the skies, and I told myself: *God Himself has grown tired of all these good deeds. There are others out there who need the heavens.*

My mind filled with a collage of images—the heavens built on my good deeds, opposite my humiliation and compliance—and the idea that these images would one day form my children's future.

How could I pretend to raise the next generation with better values when I could not be a good example myself? How could I aspire to raise a son who was different from his father when he absorbed what was happening in the house and saw his mother enduring it all, screaming, crying, and defeated? How could my daughters grow to be

any stronger than me? How would they protect themselves in the future after seeing their mother humiliated, choosing to be silent and meek?

I imagined climbing out of myself and shattering the family portrait I had been drawing with such care and accuracy for more than ten years. I shattered it with all my power, and I removed my children from it forever.

I realized the unknown was more beautiful for its ambiguity and darkness, for its distance from the reality I had submitted to.

I gathered myself and my children and left behind a life built on glory and money and social status. I withdrew.

That was the first time I made a decision not to turn away, but to face the reality of my life.

(5) The Chaos of my sense

It must have been *The Chaos of Senses*. I don't remember how the novel reached me. My husband didn't allow me to have books or visit libraries. If only he understood: Liberation lies in reading, even in the most oppressive prison cells and behind locked doors. By reading, one can escape gloomy loneliness and the surreal isolation of a soul that longs for inner peace. I still don't understand what happened to me as I read that novel, how it scattered chaos through me, as if my senses were released and let go. I wasn't like the woman in the novel. I despised her. Nothing she did appealed to me, but I felt the way she did. She swiped the neatly stacked papers off the desk of my inner self, awakening memories that had been idle inside me.

For many years, Ahlam Mosteghanemi and her trilogy, *Memory of the Flesh*, *The Chaos of Senses*, and *Bed Hopper*, was my strange guide towards an unknown that my inner being longed for, as if the woman inside me had woken from her slumber, while all the while I had been going through this waking life. Inside me was a

woman emerging from her own shell, as if a rebellion had taken place inside her and she no longer fit into her own body. Suddenly, I began to breathe as though I had a body much larger than my own.

Everyone asked about the secret to my slim figure and perfect shape, despite having had four children. I used to answer that it was a certain oatmeal bar I had discovered, that it must have expanded in my stomach and prevented me from feeling hunger. But inside, I was saying: *Treachery and betrayal and oppression are enough to melt the fat from even the thickest body.* My suppressed thoughts were eating away at my mind, and my body gradually eroded until it suited the demands of my husband and society.

My husband was demanding, and he complained constantly. Nothing I did ever satisfied him, and nothing ever satisfied his obsession with my weight. No matter how much weight I lost or how thin my waist became, he always demanded that I strive for a smaller size. At some point, I became obsessed with his obsession. I was lucky in one sense—I had a figure that became more beautiful with age, which is what my father always said about my

mother. Yet I lived with a man whose expectations could never be met. To have four children and not lose control of my weight wasn't easy. The body quickly fills out in ways that surprise us and get beyond our control. How easy it is to gain weight, and how difficult it is to lose it. Women become obsessive about their bodies because of the requirements men and society place on them. This is exactly like the situation outside our bodies. We long to become what is required of us, rather than what we want to be. My relationship with my body and my weight created challenges for me. Or maybe it was a continuation of the same challenge already within me: *I have to be the best of what a woman can be. I am beautiful, good, and smart. But...*

I struggled to be myself and not give thought to physical ideals and norms, but I could not break myself from this entirely. I had to hide who I wanted to be behind a veneer of femininity so that I could move through society without drawing attention for my rebelliousness. I did this in order to ensure that others would not feel threatened. Everyone wants a quiet female with limited

intellect because, in the minds of the patriarchal clan, the rules will never change.

The chaos of my senses exploded inside me and erupted in all directions within me, and I was no longer capable of controlling it or even calming it down.

The writer's words marched against me, or they accompanied me—I don't know which. What they did to me was as strange as this sentence in *The Chaos of Senses*: "Strange is life in its contradicting logic. You run behind things, breathless, so things run away from you. And the moment you sit and convince yourself that it is not worthy of all this racing, it comes to you breathlessly."

(6) In the midst of all

In the midst of all those mysterious things I still do not understand, I gathered myself. Was fear my motivation? Perhaps I was controlled by fear, but it gave me a mysterious strength I could not describe.

In that moment, I saw God. I saw myself as a human worthy of life. In that moment, I felt God taking me by the hand and leading me to a higher spiritual plane.

I have no idea where I gained that power. It was as if a supernatural woman had been living inside me, storing up strength for all those years. That strength suddenly erupted inside me and created a protective fortress around me. How thick would its walls need to be in order to confront the coming decade? How long would God's hand continue to hold me up? My burdens in that decade became so overwhelming, even God could not keep His hands away.

I went lower than rock bottom. I rose from the lowest point in my life and could hardly realize that I was doing so. To even get back to bottom became my highest dream.

The darkness of the world had thrown me into a massive, hollow bottom where everything felt unjust.

I fully believed God's hand was more powerful and righteous than that of human beings. How many times had I heard the saying, "And they were plotting and Allah was plotting and Allah is the best of those who plot" ? However, I also believed human beings have the capacity to commit injustices so cruel even the gods cannot comprehend and endure them. The evil that resides in the human soul can be invincible and oppressive in the name of God, as if men have signed a contract to preserve masculinity no matter how brutal it becomes, no matter how unjust it may be. So long as the man is superior.

How do you say no? How do you leave a life filled with glory and money? How do you rebel against a life that most women dream of? What do you want? Do you think you are the only woman who was ever insulted in her home? He hit you? You must have been deserving of that... You used to hit him, too. He betrayed you? You must be the root of the problem. If you were able to satisfy him, he wouldn't have looked outside the marriage. He yelled at you? He dragged your dignity across the floor?

You are difficult to handle and you never put your head down. You never do your house chores. You don't respect the rights of your husband. You are deficient as a mother. You sleep excessively. You leave the tables dusty. You don't even know how to cook. May Allah guide you. Go pray, and put down these books that have influenced what is left of your brain.

I used to pray, and my prayer mat bore witness to my tears and my pleas to God. I used to jump up and hide the prayer mat when I heard the sound of my husband's or his mother's footsteps approaching. I didn't want them to say I was deficient in my house chores and responsibilities, or that I amused myself with stupid things like reading, or even praying.

I was torn apart being what they wanted me to be—obedient and in control, a servant and a master, a submissive housekeeper, a prostitute, and a saint.

Yes, you take the kids to school and bring them back. You take them to all of their swimming, piano, and tennis lessons. You follow up on all of their needs with amazing detail. You follow up with school staff and trainers and doctors. You clean the house whenever the housekeeper,

who your husband hired so you can better serve him, is not around. You manage your husband's business, which you built with him step by step. Yes, you are the one who took his hand and helped him earn money and status. And yes, he had never in his life tasted vine leaves, stuffed zucchini, and stuffed lamb like yours, served at dinners where he proudly boasted to family and friends about your cooking talents.

But you are also a deficient, miserable rebel, because you broke the bond of holy marriage.

(7) Threat of divorce

It was as if my divorce threatened to break apart all the marriages in society. Suddenly, I became a threat to every man and woman, and a threat to my own family—both my married and unmarried sisters. I brought disgrace when I asked for divorce.

In the midst of the aggression that came at me from all directions, my father's was the only kind, calm voice, as he asked me, "What is it that you want?"

"I want a man who carries piety towards the God in me," I said. "If there is a store that sells piety for such a man, please take me there."

All I wanted and still want is this piety.

Until that moment, I had been a strong believer in marriage. Everything I knew in life revolved around marriage. I walked out of my father's house and the abiding shade he provided, and into my husband's house and his heavy shadow. I had even come to believe that the sadness of life gave off its own beautiful color. I genuinely believed the verse that says, "And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that

ye may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts: verily in that are Signs for those who reflect.” For the entire thirteen years of our marriage, I tried to live with my husband, believing I was created from his rib. Until he broke my rib and distorted my body, creating a scar that could not be erased, even now, many years later. His blow struck my heart. But I needed it, perhaps, to wake me from my deep, submissive slumber.

In those days, I was living life like an addict. My sedatives were religious books and advisory opinions—*fatwa*. For a time, I hated Amro Khalid, and yet I felt he was my painkiller. But he was never truly medicine. Everything he said was but an invitation to keep the man elevated above the woman. The woman was obligated to be obedient, patient, and enduring, and God would reward her later.

As much as I needed a man, I needed religion. In that moment, when I began living without a man who defined the boundaries of my life, I was not able to remove religion from my existence. I held to it even more tightly. I read more texts—I set aside the writings of Amro Khalid

and held tightly to *The Revival of Religious Sciences* (al-Ghazali) and *In the Shade of the Qur'an* (Sayyid Qutb).

I dove into the deliverance and doom of al-Ghazali and came to rest on his customs and worship. And when I wanted something more in-depth, I would go to *In the Shade of the Qur'an* and consider the imprisonment and isolation of Sayyid Qutb. I didn't understand most of what I was reading, but I continued on, as if I were part of a recital gathering of the *kuttab* in a previous age.

It wasn't important whether I understood. Reading was enough to make me virtuous. I was sure there were many things my limited brain could not completely comprehend. After all, I was "inferior," so this was to be expected. God did not create anything out of mere emptiness. What was written was beyond my comprehension, beyond what I, a limited person with limited knowledge of religious sciences and *Shari'ah* philosophy, could possibly grasp. Yet I continued to mutter my recitals and readings.

I don't know how coincidental it all was. Was it just my curiosity for the books already there in my father-in-law's library? Were they all I could reach? I wanted to

constantly escape into the books, and I would not dare borrow a book from a library or even enter a library because there was not a single step I took without my husband's permission. An obedient wife is a good wife in the eyes of God. I truly hoped to add more good deeds to my name by being obedient in the face of his oppression.

Divorce was never something that entered my mind. I didn't know anything about life, except that I was living it, and my husband was confident I wasn't capable of walking out. He would meet my goodness with harshness and mutiny and arrogance until, eventually, I became his private property. I became his property, and yet he never paid a penny for me. I came free, and yet he could not have afforded to pay half of my worth. It was like a slap. Each time I tried to elevate him closer to my world, he would force me to descend into his.

The difference in our status was not about competency or education or social level, nor was it a question of wealth. There was something else defining us that was more difficult to measure. It's true I was better than him in all of the above respects, but that wasn't the issue. The real difference was in the emptiness and

inferiority a human being can endure, a self-imposed inferiority that can't be filled with money or certificates or houses or buildings, a sense of inferiority that continued to increase until it created a friction between us that, to me, sounded like an annoying squeak. There was no resolution to his feelings of inferiority, no matter how I tried to ease them, no matter how I emptied what I had within me in order to reach out to him. I almost became that emptiness residing within him, until its rasping became too much and deafened me, and I ran away.

He tried to seduce me with jewelry. I had already sold what I owned so he could build a business, which could only be successful with my help. I would save penny after penny, collect them, and give him a pound of gold.

At one point, while I was still living in the illusion of our life together, I insisted that he buy me a wristwatch I liked. I wanted it for my birthday, an event he didn't care much about. Later I insisted on the watch for our wedding anniversary. I was constantly fighting and testing him. The watch itself wasn't important. What mattered was his willingness to make me happy and fulfill my wishes. In the early years of our marriage, when he had very little

money, he used to tell me he wished to buy me gifts, but he worried my taste was too expensive, so he avoided buying me anything. Maybe he was right. But I would have been just as genuinely fulfilled if he picked for me a flower from the street. The intention was more important to me than the deed.

My insistence on the watch was crazy and irresponsible; it was more than we could afford at the time. Still, I didn't give up until he took me to buy it. In that instant, I felt irresponsible and ridiculous, and I said I was satisfied with a different watch. Maybe that was the moment he realized I had a price.

A few months after I asked for a divorce, he came to me with a seductive offer, saying, "If you come back, I will buy you that Cartier watch set you liked so much." I was tempted for less than a moment, but I enjoyed flirting with the idea. I knew that accepting the offer would mean joining the convoy of women who exchanged their happiness and dignity for a piece of jewelry. How easy it could have been to become that wife whose fingers are adorned with diamond rings and whose neck glows with gold chains and jewels, each alight with betrayal and

disaster. The price would be there on my body, the glowing jewels a sign of treason that I would have chosen to ignore.

(8) Determination

With determination, I decided to get a divorce. I believed it was my right as a free Muslim woman. I was told I was free, and I decided to regain my freedom at that moment. I didn't realize, of course, that freedom for a woman in a patriarchal society is impossible. All I aspired to do was take a breath without a man watching over me. My heart was pleading for life. It was pleading to take a breath—a breath to make me myself again. A breath to free the soul I was created to be, not the creature enslaved by another, one devoid of mercy, feelings, or piety.

I held something inside, a dream created for me by Ahlam Mosteghanemi and her trilogy's heroine. It was as if I recalled it by force and allowed her to flow inside me, carrying her dreams within me. I wanted to raise my children the way I aspired to raise them. I wanted to save them from an inescapable hell. I wanted to save them from that future at any price.

I thought the price, giving up money and glory, would allow me my freedom. And it did. After conceding all my marriage and work entitlements, my divorce from that

egoist was easy. I gave him everything we had attained in our marriage, like someone throwing a dog a bone. And he soon woke to find himself alone in that spacious house with money he thought he'd gained by himself. A servant, a cook, and his mistresses could substitute for the wife he lost, he told himself. Until he found himself overcome with a loneliness he couldn't comprehend.

How men resemble dogs in our patriarchal societies. A dog will discover his tail and immediately begin to attack it, trying to reach and catch. He turns around and around, circling aimlessly until he forgets why he was running in the first place. He continues in circles until he becomes dizzy and faints from exhaustion, only to wake and begin again.

Don't get me wrong, I love dogs. We brought home two at my children's instance in the years following the divorce. I feel guilty using them for such metaphors because I know dogs to be full of loyalty, dedication, sincerity, and real love. They only want a kind look, a little empathy, and access to your affection.

The moment my husband woke from the shame of his ignorance, he realized how much he had lost. He

understood that money could never fulfill his yearning for the love of his son, and that a wife cannot be replaced by a slave, a servant, or a mistress installed only to attend to a man's wants and needs. I don't know whether or not he understood that every woman is unique, even when he finds in her a resemblance to another woman. A woman is more than a beautiful body a man uses to fulfill his unbridled lust, and she is not an eternal fountain where the thirsty can drink. Nor is she a machine over which a man exercises his control, a simple appliance he uses to manufacture successors.

A woman is not a wife who meets demands. She is not a mistress with whom a man can extinguish his desires. A woman is not a servant created to fulfill his dreams of a sultan's harem.

And not all women are purely feminine in their characteristics. Not all women are exuberant mothers just because they have conceived and borne children. Nor are all men the full expression of manhood.

The man continues to search for a real woman. He wants her to be real yet elusive. He doesn't stop searching for her until he reaches despair and becomes satisfied with

a woman who commends him for his exclusivity, strength, genius, and exceptional existence. How alike women are and how easy it is to read them, those women the man searches among. But...

How can a man see things any differently when everything is organized around him, when the world teaches him to see the universe in only one way—with himself at the center? His upbringing is no different than that of a girl, except he is brought up to be dominant, she submissive.

What is required of the boy is to be a man from the moment of his creation. He has to bear the responsibility of the females around him. He has to hold his father's throne on his shoulders and carry in it his parents and his sisters and all of the responsibilities God gave him. Man must have adapted to these responsibilities over time until he became Samson the Invincible and sat on the majestic throne of the universe in all his masculinity. As boys in our society grow up, the whip of obedience and righteousness lashes at their backs. They must forge ahead in their path to return the favor, to become the deserving heirs to their parents' fortunes.

And each bite of food we place in the mouths of our male children is an investment in the continuation of the cycle. But we feed our girls something different. The bite fed to the daughter is one of gratitude and charity. We raise her to be a gift, a donation to be given to a man one day. Whereas the investment in the boy is, by extension, an investment in a woman who will one day become his property.

The injustice of our patriarchal society is that the male receives a greater portion of the benefits as he grows older. Life throws him down its many ragged and thorny roads, while the girl is all alone or kept in the control of the man in charge of her. The man, as he comes of age, is now carried on the shoulders of his parents until they secure him in a wealthy life with a virtuous woman. Then they give their permission for him to proceed as his own man, though they never quite give up control, and, after that, he is the one who grants or denies permission, the one with the power to control.

The mother is a facilitator in this; the female is the one who helps reinforce the terms of masculinity in our societies. It's as if the dreams she's lost in her submission

and the misery of marriage are erased by her son. Through him she fulfills herself and takes revenge for her lost dignity so that she may regain her vigor. She raises a male to become what she could not, and she is finally able to control others and make them submit to her. She reminds her son with each breath that she is the reason he is alive.

I might have realized this later in my marriage when I gave birth to my male child. I admit that my obsession with a male child came from my own family, who believed that only a boy would give meaning to life. The wife does not justify her marriage until she gives birth to a male child; he is the true validation of her existence.

I remember a moment when my boy was not yet a month old, and I felt hatred toward his future wife. I was overcome with jealousy and malevolence toward the woman who would come and take my love from me once he grew into a man. Suddenly, I understood the hatred my mother-in-law felt towards me. At that moment, I let go of my son and his future wife.

It was not easy to let go of that feeling of possessiveness that came over me so easily. I wanted my son to be everything his father was not, as a husband and

as a man. At that stage, I wanted my son to appreciate me and understand me as an independent person with her own obsessions, feelings, and space. I started to turn all my energy toward my son, as if, with him, the scattered dreams could be achieved. I started seeing myself in the form of my mother.

(9) We are extensions to our mothers

How much we become an extension of our mothers without even realizing it. We forget our childhoods quickly, and immediately take on the role of the mother. We forget we were also children. We forget the emotions of our youth and their warnings. We forgive and tolerate until we become a copy of the women who raised us.

We live as Alice Miller, the psychologist, described in her book, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*: “I have never known a patient to portray his parents more negatively than he actually experienced them in childhood but always more positively—because idealization of his parents was essential for his survival.” According to Miller in *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, we avoid learning anything about our origins. “Without realizing that the past is constantly determining their present actions, [adults] avoid learning anything about their history. They continue to live in their repressed childhood situation, ignoring the fact that it no longer exists, continuing to fear and avoid dangers that, although once real, have not been real for a long time.”

I became the copy of my mother that I didn't want to become. I understood her and tolerated her, but after my childhood, I wanted to be nothing like her. This was not because she was not a role model, but because she was not satisfied with her life and her circumstances and where she ended up. How did I become my mother in my adulthood? I wanted to be what she frequently aspired to be, and to achieve the fading dreams she could not follow.

Once I realized this, I allowed the child in me to take over and help me prepare. She whispered reminders and played along with me and my children. I would give my daughter a harsh glance if she misbehaved, and I would run to the closet for a shoe I could raise against her. But suddenly, the child in me would appear with her arms folded, scolding me: "Do you remember how you felt when your mother did this to you?" I was about to throw the shoe, but I stopped in an instant, reliving that deep memory from the past. Then I put the shoe down and called my daughter to me, embracing her and showering her with kisses.

In this way, my inner child and my motherhood joined forces. We became friends and began to get to know one

another. As a result, motherhood became an amusing childhood journey filled with adventures and independence.

(10) Marriage

Since my divorce, I've studied and considered marriage carefully. It cannot be dismantled. No wonder marriage is described as an unbreakable charter. How can divorce be allowed to disassemble such an institution, when a nation of people, despite their many differences, has united around the singular idea that a full life must and should include marriage?

After my divorce, I fully trusted that the worst in my life had passed. I left behind the money and the glory and ran out with my children. *I can work*, I told myself. *I am the one who built an empire with my husband. Why can't I build another on my own?* All I wanted was to lay my head on a pillow at the end of the day without someone else's breath suppressing my own. To be able to wake up when I wanted to wake up. To get up and work or not work or do whatever I pleased. I wanted to breathe freely. I wanted to breathe without someone watching over every single breath.

Was that too much to ask?

For a time, it seemed impossible.

By getting a divorce, I challenged the very essence of a society in which marriage at its best was a marriage like mine. Women conspired against me, even my mother and my sisters. My husband was backed by an army of men dedicated to serving him and distorting me. They formed an entourage that surrounded him and stood by to help him and his family. Then there was me and my children... and God, perhaps. Or maybe He was busy protecting me on the multiple fronts that stretched beyond the horizon.

Each time I inhaled the air of freedom, I found myself besieged. I felt like a cat trying to protect her newborn kittens from encroaching and hungry felines. I forgot myself. I even forgot why I wanted a divorce in the first place—there were so many calamities coming from all directions. The moment I lifted my head, a new calamity appeared, as if the planets had united against me, as if the universe decided to oppose me, as if I were walking against a current each step of the way.

I raised my hands as an invocation to God, seeking sanctuary through my prayers. I started visiting graveyards in search of serenity. I wanted to sit with my grandfather. I

wanted to talk to him, to cry on his knees. How I yearned to be consoled in his arms, to feel a kind hand expressing compassion for me. But the graveyard was dreary and fierce and filled with thorns.

There were more family members laid to rest there—more than I even realized—and the cemetery was crowded with the dead. I tried to clear the place of thorns, but they were too thick. The fierce loneliness of the place befuddled me, and I rushed to leave. I was astonished by how overrun the graveyard had become. The graveyards of Jerusalem are much like the city itself, with everyone scrambling for an eternal presence.

I left the graveyard adjacent to Lion's Gate. I like this place for the way it gathers together the dead who were divided in life— Muslims, Christians, and Jews laid to rest on those different plateaus of the Jerusalem mountains. Our Islamic cemetery on both sides of the entrance to the plateau embraces Lion's Gate, passes all the way through Via Dolorosa, and takes you from all directions to the Dome of the Rock. Our deaths embrace al-Aqsa from that direction.

The Jews look down from the opposite plateau, and Christians with their Gethsemane Church oversee the location. It creates a strange harmony that doesn't otherwise exist in this city of collision. I wanted to get closer to God by praying at al-Aqsa. After all, a prayer there is like five hundred regular prayers elsewhere. I don't actually like al-Aqsa much. It is a modest mosque. I don't know why I always thought it was for men only. I like the Dome of the Rock more. It is pleasant, with a glorified beauty. There is much about it to observe and admire—its impressive artwork and architecture. It sits amid the courtyards like a beautiful bride that never ages. It only grows more beautiful with time. And maybe, the Dome of the Rock brings back warm memories from childhood.

When I accompanied my grandmother to Friday prayers as a child, other children would gather around me while I led the prayer like an *imam*. I recited prayers in such an impressive way that women and girls, and even my grandmother, would listen with pride. How I loved those days of my childhood. And how I feel transported back there when I'm within the stones of this ancient city.

I don't understand the charm of this place, and I don't know if Jerusalem is a beautiful city. I often ask myself why so much fighting takes place here. It is definitely not among the most beautiful cities. Jerusalem is a way station for great civilizations. Its ancient stones affirm its origins. They tell of an emperor who brought with him a stone from his civilization and laid it in Jerusalem. It is a splendid place, however, with the various civilizations that passed through it and blew across it. It has a strange but real charm. It touches me the moment I enter any of its gates. The city is filled with the scent of history and contains a wondrous serenity despite the pollution in the air. It makes me feel warm and contained, despite the harshness of the surroundings and the eyes of the people.

I entered the mosque beseeching, dreaming, crying, complaining. I pretended to forget what was taking place around me—women sitting on the side of the room eating nuts and chatting. In another area, a gathering of women around a man discussing a *fatwa* or a religious issue that concerned them, perhaps. Children ran and played between other clusters of praying women. It was not yet prayer time. As if everybody were in that time between prayer—talking, entertaining, and gossiping.

I found a spot in a corner and was about to pray when a woman rushed towards me with a surprising attitude that befuddled me. “Some of your hair is showing from beneath your head cover,” she said. I was confused, and I started thinking of my hair, concentrating on what could be seen by others in the mosque more than on the prayer itself. But I wanted to find that certain place within where I could connect with God in His own house. So I ignored the thought of my hair. But no sooner had I bowed down with my head to the carpet than I sprang back up. The smell of the carpet was mixed with the smell of feet. *I should have brought my own prayer rug*, I told myself.

The odor was very strong, and I could not tolerate it. Sometimes I hate this aspect of myself. All of my senses are weak, except for my sense of smell. It is far stronger than my senses of hearing or sight. How can Islam be a religion of cleanliness? How can people wash five times a day for prayer (*wudu*) and their bodies still remain unclean? How can a person separate the cleanliness of his body from odors, from sweat in his unwashed clothes? Cleanliness is a part of faith. Why does our faith lack cleanliness? Ablution is mentioned in the Quran many

more times than prayer. Don't Muslims realize that ablution is a very clear demand for cleanliness?

I insisted on using the moment to become closer to God. I silently cried out to Him, begging Him, calling Him to save me. But the place was filled with children's voices and women's gossiping murmurs and the stinking odor in the air.

That was the last time I went to the mosque in search of God.

God must have been somewhere outside His own house. He must have left it to the masses over many generations.

I went back home. I don't know how much time passed—days, months, or maybe years before that moment arrived. I was praying at night, crying and begging to God. At that moment, I was trying to demonstrate my submission so that God might hear me in the heavens and have some mercy on me. I had lowered my head to the ground in prayer, but then felt something pulling me up, as if God were trying to speak to me without uttering a word.

(11) Searching for a man

I began searching for a man who could give me shade and comfort, a man whose comfort I could not live without. God was living inside me, silent and immobile, not providing any comfort. I was filled with distrust while a storm raged around me. I was searching for support that could shoulder me and my burdens. As soon as I felt closeness and support from someone, they would evaporate in front of me, floating away like water vapor in the cold.

I was plagued with loneliness. From all sides my ears were flooded with the words of the whole of society: “You will not be able to do it alone. You have to find a man to protect you.”

I resisted those words and tried to deflect them, but they invaded my depths. I hadn’t known life any other way but with a man to protect me, to complete me. I was nothing without the shelter provided by a man.

I also feared the men who awaited me on the other side, the predatory men looking for an opportunity. How many close male friends of mine transformed into wolves

after my divorce? How terrible that image of a wolf man waiting to find a space where he can drag you and dig his claws in.

How many male idols broke in front of me, belonging to those I thought were virtuous and righteous? How many women transformed into jackals right before my eyes, laughing in my face and digging in their claws, attempting to distort me because, in an instant, I had become dangerous. I became a threat to other women because of their husbands, believed to be awaiting his wife's absence so he could fulfill his lust for me. I was surrounded by hyenas while possible friendships and promised company fell away.

In an instant, I became like a contagious disease. Everyone tried to stay far away from me. In another sense, I was like an uncovered sweet in an open marketplace where flies, attracted by the sweetness, gather to feed... and then contaminate.

Divorce became a divorce from society, not just from the man. As if leaving the flock makes the sky smaller, no matter how spacious it seems. It remains a sky controlled by preset rules. The moment you leave your flock, you

deserve only to burn at the bottom of the abyss. Those continuous cliffs plunging to the bottom of the abyss become tunnels of darkness. As soon as one ray from the sun breaks through, a new darkness prevails.

I was sent on a journey to the depths of that barren, rugged abyss—a journey that continued for years. Moments passed like hours. Days stopped moving forward, as if time were stuck in place, like a clock with broken hands. It continued to beat—*tick tock, tick tock*—but the hands didn't move. Yet the time passed and passed, on me and through me, and I became lost in its mazes, not understanding or knowing what was going on. I dug within those depths, trying to find an exit, but as soon as I found a rock to hold my feet, I fell again, to an even greater depth.

How long can a human endure such difficulties? The endless attacks that come from all directions, infringing? The street dog the neighborhood boys are always kicking simply because they can. Everyone racing to assert control, as if she is chattel or a slave.

(12) As years pass by

Many years passed, and still I didn't feel like myself. I looked as though I were drowning. In many ways, I resembled the images of refugee women trying to escape with their children to unknown lands, throwing themselves on lifeboats and risking their lives. Nevertheless, they jump and place their families in the bosom of the sea, riding its waves, preferring its deception, rage, and anger to the flaming earth of their home.

I found myself clinging to a scrap of wood after the collapse of my lifeboat. So many times, the sea threw me and I dove into its depths, rescuing one of my children from being swallowed by the waves. How many whales besieged us? How many waves threw us, and how many carried us until we reached a shore I did not recognize?

“Be fearful of the fierceness of the female if her child is endangered... and if she falls deeply in love.” I came across this statement while reading *The Jurisprudence of Love* by Youssef Ziedan.

This statement describes me. It summarizes many of the waves on my journey towards those islands where I

searched for shelter, a shelter that could provide more than just a ceiling and warmth, something warmer than four walls surrounding me and my children. I could transform from a quiet, silent cat into a lioness. I hardly knew where that lioness came from. I had never felt the instinct of a cat the way I felt it in those years. Inside me was a cat taking its own refuge in isolation, keeping watch, and transforming into a wild beast if anyone came close to my children. That cat was ready to attack every expected danger. I could feel it strongly inside me, to the point that I felt scared of myself, and estranged from the strength contained within me.

I became the same way when men approached me like hyenas. Suddenly, a glow would erupt from my eyes and my body that perhaps scared them off and made them quickly run away. I enjoyed my inner, hidden strength, that was obvious to those around me.

But I also held on to the motherhood that poured out of me, filling my heart and enlivening my surroundings with springs and gardens of compassion, love, and dedication. The woman inside me was searching for herself, and there were many emotions mixing and

blending strangely inside me. I threw myself at what I was searching for without realizing it. Somewhere inside me, that woman was searching for a great love—a great love the size of all the love I carried, a love that flowed from me. I was like a nursing mother whose breasts are always filled with milk. My emotions and my motherhood shared a strange unity.

My entire life became strange to me, and I could no longer understand or realize or know what was going on with or around me. The only thing I realized was that something had taken me by the hand to lead me towards a certain destiny, towards a belief that something good would happen, even if it was not yet close.

(13) Road map

When I left my husband, I took with me a map that I drew carefully and modestly. The most important thing was that I would never again rely on a man. I had to remember that the greatest gain from the divorce was getting away, unlocking those chains and freeing myself from the requirements of a man and his constraints on me. I was like a thirsty tree, a tree with a drained stem whose roots remain alive, holding to the earth, wishing to extend its many branches and provide shade and blossoms. I felt my own dryness. I resembled the olive tree in my country. You can uproot it, and yet it continues to grow. You leave it without water, and it is not bothered by thirst. Time and cultures and history pass through, and it continues to blossom steadfastly, giving off an inspiring glow, even though it is not the most beautiful of trees. The world notices when its flowers disappear, giving way to olives anxious to ripen. No beauty distinguishes it, yet it is there and eternal. You see its strength in its trunk. Age does not tire it or uproot it or dislocate it. Others see me in much the same way. We cannot know what the olive tree has

witnessed and experienced in its long existence—earthquakes and floods and droughts. Yet it appears ordinary.

The experiences in my life changed me deeply, and yet they left no trace for the outside world to see. Much like the olive tree uprooted from a land which is guarded by a settler who doesn't understand that land or know anything about it except its ancient appeal. I imagined men saw me much like an olive tree—beautiful, tall, pleasant. But as soon as a man drew closer, he could see in my eyes a despair that surpassed the tragedies of civilization. The moment he rested in the shadow of my branches, he would think that the olives were easy to pick and ready to eat. I am that tree, and I am also that fruit. That man couldn't understand the difference. He wanted the shade, the amusement, and the food, all in one place. The moment he started chewing the olive, its bitterness bit him and its harsh taste roared through his raging stomach. So he spit it out with anger, thinking that he made a mistake and must have eaten from the *Zaqqum*—a tree that, according to the Qur'an springs out of the bottom of hellfire.

Where he once saw me as a tree of life, he now sees me as a tree of hell. He was once a glowing fire where I could warm myself, and now he is a scattering of sparks and ashes that brings tears to my eyes. I wash him from my eyes and rush to a spring to drink from the water and satisfy a thirst that has not yet reached its peak. But as this continued on, repeating itself several times with one man and then another, I became satisfied at the end with just a dry ablution. I could wipe my hands of him with a bit of water and earth.

I saw him run away when the taste tricked him—he thought the olive could be like the almond. Blossoms and fruits picked and eaten. In my country, the olive and almond share a lifelong connection that cannot be broken by the greediness of men, and no one understands the subtlety of their similarities or differences, except those who understand earth, water, and air. The experiences of human beings allow them specific expertise, but many begin to think they know it all. The man believes himself experienced and knowledgeable, specialized in the issues of women, so that he begins to think she is his exclusive

creation, part of his enormous self, and that she ought to aspire to please and serve him.

The almond is compassionate, and the olive contains the secret of life. Its fruits, or the beauty of its colorful blossoms and its long-standing trunk, shouldn't fool you. Nor should the olive trick you with its silence and steadfast roots and its unlimited expansion in the depths of the earth. It is the witness of what was and what will be.

As the late Palestinian author Hussein Barghouti wrote, "I will be between the almonds.... Nothing awakens in isolation except that which is silent within.... We have grown so accustomed to it, that we forgot that it existed." We and the olive and almonds are like this.

(14) Forcefulness in love

My forcefulness in love was weakened by constant disappointments. How many times the beloved shrank in front of me and transformed from an elephant to a mouse, annoyed by a cat. I tried tirelessly to catch him, aiming for a delicious meal, only to find myself exhausted from flirting and annoyed at running circles around him and myself. I left him realizing that, at most, he would be a mere meal that could not even satisfy the hunger of my children. So I watched as he went back to his hole, waiting for him to come out sooner or later to flirt with me, and follow me, and stir up my appetite. I looked at him without hunger, without any interest. I had seen him as an elephant before. How can a lioness follow a mouse into the hole that is his shelter?

“There is tenderness in love, and enslavement in adoration,” “Love is a life preserver.” These phrases amused me as I scrolled through the pages of *The Jurisprudence of Love* like waves rolling to shore on a sunny, pleasant day. Yes, it is so. But how can love be a lifeline when your boat is adrift with no sails? How can it

be a lifeline when your island is your only home, an island surrounded by the depths of the sea where the unknown is buried? A life preserver then becomes a pillow on which to lay your head, a buoy in the wake of life's wild tornados, a shelter amid earthquakes and the flames of volcanoes. Love is an escape from a bitter reality into tenderness, care, and nostalgia. But no sooner does it turn to adoration then you become a slave under its power. The life preserver transforms into a chain around your neck, dragging you down into submission until you give up entirely.

In my case, it was impossible to surrender. I did not even own myself. How could I be in a dual devotion with a beloved one, even if his buoy was a golden chain and yachts instead of a life boat?

In love, there may be a desire to escape to a shelter that can alleviate the heart's aches and fears. Yet in love there is also a certain selfishness. The lover cannot give up the moment he falls into the bosom of adoration. It cannot hold together, except when two unite, two bodies and a single soul. The other becomes part of your breath. You inhale him. His smell surrounds you and moves inside

you. It can never leave you, no matter how distant you become.

In love, there are hopes and disappointments. Expectations grow larger than the lovers themselves. Emotions fill the air, and the loved one becomes the oxygen and the carbon dioxide. From him and through him comes photosynthesis—and he becomes the destination.

Love is an escape and an asylum. In love, I searched for a path towards a certain hope that could change my life in an instant, the hope of a man who could fill me with the emotions I longed to feel. Inside me was a flow of emotions that surprised me when I fell in love. It was as if I had a crack, and at any moment the crack could open and out would flood springs and waterfalls.

Every time I resorted to a safe shelter in love, I found myself trapped behind an impervious dam. If it didn't open to release what was happening within me, I would drown.

Love, admiration, fondness, and adoration. All gathered in an instant to become strong emotions, though we dwelled in his universe, rather than in mine. I became

dedicated to him despite the responsibilities of my life. I missed him even while he was near me. I wanted more, despite being too full with him. I dreamed of a great love, but once I started living it, I found myself in the emptiness of distance and space, plagued by the echo of my own voice and the shadows of my soul. I was alone with a man I no longer knew. Did he really exist? Or was he the creation of a dream, an exciting fascination born of my imagination? The dream kept fading away until it disappeared, and I looked around to find myself alone.

With every defeat, I learned to grasp the next opportunity. With every heartbreak, I learned to close my wounds. Perhaps the old break of my ribs was the reason, as if inside me there was a fracture that could never be healed, a wound that would bleed the moment it was scratched. I had become accustomed, during that past decade, to heal and to endure that wound's pain and cry on my own, quietly and in silence.

Each time, I gathered myself and my pain and my disappointment and carried them all on the wings of a new dream, whispering to myself, "Don't be sad. Imagine if he stayed and you were stuck with him forever." Each time a

man left, I told myself there must be a better opportunity, a better man who could fill me with emotions once again. What is the heart but a pump that must work continuously in order to properly function?

The feeling of love is exceptional. Nothing is equal to it. It is a feeling I love to live in. Sometimes I feel that I love love itself, rather than the beloved. I want to live in love. It's as if my heart flows with this feeling. Sometimes I think of the shape of my heart, its four chambers filled with love for my children. I admit that all of this love doesn't give me the fulfillment I need. It's as if there is an equation between motherhood and womanhood, between the love I give to my children and the love I want to take from a beloved. But soon enough, the moment comes when the man nestles between the ribs of a woman like her breastfed child. The difference is that the child grows and is weaned and leaves to live his life and find his own path, but the man returns to the bosom of the woman, as if he wants to eternally live inside her. He wants an eternal life he doesn't understand, except that it connects him to a love he considers more refined, sincere, and giving—the love of his mother.

You see him searching for his mother in the hidden parts of the woman, like a puppy looking for a teat to ease his pain and provide security. I don't know how, but breastfeeding must create an instinctive connection between motherhood and femininity. It's as if with the cutting of the umbilical cord the child begins his lifelong attachment to the breast of the mother, the woman.

This may perhaps be the supreme trauma in the life of that embryo that has emerged from the uterus, where the breast remains the only place for eternal connection, a place where he can feel attached forever. That is why the moment he is weaned, his instinct pulls him towards the breast of a woman, where, perhaps, motherhood and femininity and instinct mix—and he becomes confused as a result, the way the men in our lives are confused. He doesn't know whether the woman is a mother or a mistress. His emotions are confused, so he oppresses the woman without realizing it. In an instant, the mother—the center of his life and, through the breast that fed him, its origin—leads to the center of lust and becomes the driver of his instinct. He appears to be a complete man to others and his new female companion, but inside he refuses to be

weaned, and searches continuously for a breast to fulfill his thirst, the breast that fulfilled him when the cutting of the umbilical cord separated him from his mother.

And while he is reaching for a mother in another female, the woman searches for a man. He searches for safety in a breast like that of his mother, and she searches for a man who can give her the safety she longs for, in a culture that has raised her to seek the security of a man, his comfort and protection.

(15) Masculinity in femininity

Masculinity lies in femininity, and from it emerges the state of schizophrenia we live in as part of a patriarchal society. It's a schizophrenia that starts with the mother, who breeds and gives birth, attaching that newborn to her breast and feeding him, filling him with love, until soon she weans him and strengthens him with harshness and despotism. That despotism comes from an existing male—a father or a brother or a husband. She immerses the newborn in a tenderness that is soon taken from him. Love, in his dictionary, turns from warmth to hardness, and generosity becomes a source of exhaustion due to the effort he must put forth in order to get it. His emotions become calculated and measured. To express them would reveal his weakness and cause him shame. Manliness becomes the source of his decisions, his entire existence. Roughness is manly, and softness is feminine. Femininity is a blemish, even though the female is his mother. Manliness is strength, and femininity is weakness, even though the female gave birth to him. And those labor pains still shake his being, her pains that started along a journey

where death and life walk parallel lines. She sees death staring her in the face, threatening her existence, but she is compensated with a new existence, where she sits at the center. Only, she soon realizes that the true center is the newborn creature. But the two become intertwined. You find this complicated puzzle more pronounced with male children than with female children. Raising a female is healthier and easier. Tenderness towards the female is easy to give without limitation, until she grows up and her feminine shape begins to emerge, and the journey of obliteration begins. We throw the dolls into her hands before she busies herself with herself and her body. And we claim that it is instinct that guided her to become the bride doll. In her early childhood, she begins talking to the doll until it becomes her sole amusement. The doll becomes her future child, and later she wakes up with the realization that she wants a father for her future child. Meanwhile, the boy is released to the streets of the neighborhood and the enormous universe, for he is the man of the future. He needs to search and discover. He needs to watch other men, to become like his father.

Become a future supporter. Be the source of your security after the departure of your father.

And while she waits for his arrival, she amuses herself and keeps busy by raising her “child,” the bride doll. She makes dresses and sweets and cleans the house and imitates her mother’s behaviors, follows her, and sees herself in her mother, not out of love or fascination, but because this is the rule. She gets closer to her mother, who wants her to be a woman, a young wife to be. The mother prepares her daughter for motherhood, which will become part of her daughter’s inheritance. Motherhood becomes engraved in the daughter’s mind in accordance with what she has grown accustomed to holding in her hands.

And we all screamed with pleasure, our laughter filling our skies. How instinctive motherhood is.

We choose carefully what happens to our children as they grow up, before we set them loose to live their own lives freely. We tie them with the strings of motherhood and responsibility, and we tell them to leave, to be independent. Yet we pull them back to us the moment they seem far away, even if it’s only for an instant.

The boy walks out to become a man. He is not flawed as a man, unless he has an empty pocket or a lack of carnal knowledge. Disgracing femininity is a credit to a man. But if a man is raped, that is a disgrace he cannot recover from. A man can disgrace whomever and however, as long as his masculinity is intact.

Though she grows up with a doll in her arms, the roles she chooses later will change. Her dream is to become a bride. She dreams and plans and adorns herself and learns to dance and sing and twist and flirt to attract a man, amid a life filled with slogans that include the words “blemish,” “beware,” and “self-protect.” Become your mother or grandmother or aunt or neighbor so that you will have good luck as “a good housewife.” With you lies the hope of a marriage better and happier than theirs.

He comes, from his immense leisure, to choose. We ask him to love, and he loves. We ask him to be responsible, and he becomes responsible. We ask him to be manly, and he does so.

But she, over there, waits on a chair in the backyard, wearing shyness on her face like a veil. She walks timidly with the hope that her steps will catch his attention. He

becomes her universe and her future, her religion and her destiny. We tell her, “Be yourself... but don’t forget virtue, obedience, and timidity. Adorn yourself for him and protect yourself. Be daring in the bedroom, but don’t forget virtue when you walk out.”

And then the bride stands in front of her groom, knowing nothing about marriage except what she learns from his manliness, which is instinctive, just like her hidden motherhood. At that moment, all the dreams and thrones in the sky fall apart.

The groom looks at his tremendous, spacious self, and he sees a newborn man. She looks at her little self, which is contained in the uterus of her awaiting motherhood, and she sees the possibility of a newborn she hasn’t given birth to yet.

He begins distancing himself from her. After all, he is the origin of all things. He is the man. Her mother comes to visit the next day, and his mother carries with her songs of celebration and words of praise.

The desperate, dreamy bride stands there, not understanding. *Was this the dream I’ve had ever since my hands first touched the toy dolls?* She glances in her

daughter's eyes, perhaps remembering her own old, hidden disappointments. "Congratulations," the bride's mother says. His mother throws the *zaghrouta*—a celebration from her mouth—perhaps bringing back memories of victories over her own mother-in-law in relation to her previous newborn. She becomes a new mother, motherhood is her instinct... and he is the man.

Motherhood is an instinct; manhood is a state of existence.

He is the man you were ordered by God to kneel before, after God Himself. You have rights. Do not worry. You are safeguarded, and your rights are reserved. Maintain yourself in your home with virtue. He is responsible for expenses and everything you need in order to live honorably. You were educated? Great. You want to work? Why not. Everyone works today. You have advanced degrees, and your social and cultural status is better than his? It doesn't matter. All respect to you. But he is the man.

If he is more educated, then you are lucky. If he is rich and prosperous, then you are doubly lucky. And if you diverge from the conventional lifestyle of your mother

and your aunt and your grandmother, don't worry. We are in the age of cultural openness and exposure. He wouldn't accept her if her status were any lower. Competence in marriage nowadays is an obligation of the woman, not the man. All those old laws are no longer valid. Do not worry, you are the daughter of today. You will work to support him, and he will reinforce you. He will be your support as you go to work early each morning, accompanying him, and come home to cook and sweep and help the children with their homework and prepare whatever he wants to eat when he comes back from the coffee shop, tired after a long day of work.

Work, study, learn, train, bring one child after another into the world, clean, cook, wash, iron, train to dance—dancing is one of the stabilizers in a marriage. Always be ready to meet him. Be his prostitute at night. Sizzle when he turns his eyes on you. Don't give him a chance to look around, except to gaze at you. Be energetic. A man doesn't like a dull, lazy, tired woman.

Don't tire yourself. Finish all of your duties and adorn yourself for him. Rest and wait for him. No matter how

advanced we've become, the expectations within
a marriage remain the same.

Follow him. He is your support and your protector.

He is your shadow.

(16) Escaping their shadows

I escaped from their shadows and returned to myself. I found my tattered self in the margins of books and the meaningful expressions they contain. I often hid behind the heroines in novels, and imagined myself in their roles, even in those times, when women did not have leading roles. I engaged with the writer and accompanied him like a lover until the final pages of the novel.

I felt love and adoration and passion at times for great authors and thinkers and philosophers who passed through history and left proof of their existence for eternity within the pages of books. I argued and held discussions with them. I agreed and disagreed. I wrote to them. Some left the earth in previous centuries, even previous millennia, while some still live here in our time.

I have never stopped searching for a man who can provide more than shade in my life. In vain, perhaps. I still don't know if finding that man is what I really want, but I haven't given up the search.

If the man I am searching for to redeem me is not a lover, then he should be a liberator of the homeland. I

might have become confused around the issue of the homeland and its nostalgia. In my imagination, I needed a national leader, a hero. Stones have cried about our miserable situation, as our people live in the absence of good governance, sovereignty, and security under occupation. The oppression of the occupation is very much like the oppression of a tyrant husband—like the man I was married to. Life from the outside looks normal and pleasant. The viewer sees no reason for complaints. But when you look closer, it is an infertile nebula filled with oppression and injustice.

The door is unlocked, but woe to you if you dare to pass. You dress elegantly, you exchange visits, you sit in coffee shops, and you shop and go about your life normally. But beware if you are a minute late to arrive.

You are living a luxury that most women around you don't enjoy. But that luxury is the tyranny of a tall, charming man. If his hand assaults you, you will find yourself on the floor like a corpse. He will stand over you, angry that you provoked him and caused him to lose control. That man is the broad-shouldered soldier at the checkpoint with a wide smile and clean uniform. He can

charm you with that elegant smile, and the female soldier next to him greets you like a friend, until they realize you are not an Israeli who can prove a Jewish lineage. The soldier then behaves like a sadist. He takes pleasure in dehumanizing you and marginalizing you, or torturing you using whatever tools of violation may come to mind—and many are allowed.

And woe to you if you speak, if you complain, if you object. He is the *wally*—the prefect. And the prefect is pious and accountable to his subjects, like occupiers are accountable to the occupied. He is aware of the line that separates violations from crimes, like the torturer in prison. He tries to maintain the appearance of normality. Torture with no signs of bruises. Hunger without starvation. Feeling thirsty without dying from dehydration. Feeding without satiety. A lifeless life, despite the fact that obvious, everyday routines go on. The sun still shines, but you don't feel the warmth.

(17) Divorce

I often wonder if, with divorce, there is salvation from tyranny, like liberation from occupation. Why divorce when the result is need, humiliation, exhaustion, and destruction? How is it liberation when poverty, tyranny, and depression are the result?

Perhaps divorce is equal to marriage in its despotism and injustice. The criteria in our lives have changed. Clear measurements are no longer used. But courage may make the difference. It makes it possible to snatch life from the depths of oppression, tyranny, and suppression. This courage in expressing oneself, the prominent writer Nawal El Saadawi confirms, is the first step towards liberating the mind from the superstitions and myths passed on in the name of science, literature, or virtue. We have inherited much ignorance in the name of knowledge, many fabrications in the name of science, many lies in the name of literature, much vice in the name of virtue, and much low thinking in the name of higher thought.

Divorce is much the same. What it means in application is different from what it means in language. In

Arabic, for instance, it means release, like discharging a bullet from a gun. When a gun is triggered, it is usually done so out of determination. But we can never guarantee where the bullet may go, no matter how we try to determine its destination. There is something that cannot be guaranteed. Someone may cross its path before it reaches its target.

With divorce there is undoubtedly liberation, but divorce in our society closes itself off from the woman, makes her leave her husband's house and live behind locked walls surrounded by fences, far removed from society. The husband is the warden until the woman goes off on her own, only to find herself imprisoned within a whole new system. If she were lucky, her patron would be her father, and if she were less lucky, any passerby could become her patron.

Divorce is like leaving prison with an eternal scar. No matter how you present the word or try to make it beautiful or explain its causes, no matter if you present your story logically, providing all of its context and contours, it still falls harshly on all ears—even my own. How many times have I said the word loudly? How many

times I have been hushed, as if the word divorce carries only shame?

I dared to challenge this belief. Divorce is a right when living together becomes too difficult. Like an addict in rehab, I used to scream at my own face and yell into my own ears: “I am divorced!” The moment this statement came out of my mouth, my stomach dropped. That same empty scream is the depth of fear. Fear. That protective fence I surrounded myself with in order not to confront the world. As much as I felt strong with my children, they were also my weakness. Each time this confrontation arose, I would yell at myself: “In the end, you don’t live in this society alone. You are entrusted with these children. It is not fair to exclude them and remove them from society.” My divorce didn’t necessarily mean the divorce of my children. But there was no middle ground. There is a continuous, unavoidable confrontation. This is what distinguishes divorce. It cannot be stopped. You cannot hide. You have no options but confrontation. Otherwise, why divorce?

It is not a coincidence that I have never encouraged a woman to seek a divorce. But I don’t deny that I may

encourage men to do so. Maybe this is because I believe men don't have the strength to ask for divorce, even though they have the upper hand in society. No matter how affected the man is by a divorce, the woman usually suffers greater damages and consequences. The system protects the man and holds him in comforting arms. If the man is divorced, women rush to him—seekers, matchmakers, and many others join the line waiting to make him a husband again. The man is always perceived as “capable” by society. His divorce allows for many other opportunities. Women stand up for him. No matter if he has children, or if he was obsessed, or a freak. It doesn't matter if he is ugly or disgusting. The man is only disgraced by a flaw in his manhood, and manhood is masculinity, and through masculinity, societies are made.

And woe to you, woman, if the divorce was your choice. Our society wants you defeated and broken so it can have mercy on you. Temporarily. “Oh, poor thing. She was divorced. ... Oh, poor thing. He hit her. ... Oh, poor thing. He betrayed her. ... Oh, poor thing. He brought home another wife. ... But she is patient and honorable.” Within moments, those chains of support become circles

of gossip. Don't worry, she didn't threaten the makeup of society and its rough fabric. She didn't know how to deal with him. Men have many weakness, and women are keen. That woman who allowed her man to slip out with another woman, or that woman who was beaten or assaulted, must have been delinquent in one way or another.

Society wants you oppressed.

Woe to you, if you initiated the divorce. After the social and cultural examination of your behavior, and after warding off suspicions of your betrayal, society stands in front of you like a solid cement structure supported by awall made up of the women closest to you. Then the systematic attack begins, like cannons, showing no mercy or clemency. How dare you? And the moment the aggression ends, the perceived reality changes: "He divorced her." He is always the one who divorces. Even if she dumped him onto the streets. He is always the one who divorces, even if she caught him committing adultery. He is always the one who divorces, even if the court forced them to split due to irreconcilable differences and his obvious flaws and defects.

You are divorced.

Endure the consequences of the crime of making such a decision. You wanted to get rid of the sly fox who conned you. Here you go... come and live amongst the hyenas.

(18) Ravages of divorce

How many times did I feel the ravages of divorce and its painful, flaming burns? How often have I thought that marriage under the shadow of one man is more merciful? And yet, inhaling the air of freedom is different. Feeling that I'd been freed from the prison I used to share with him was, by itself, an achievement. I was breathing again. All I wanted was to take a fresh breath. I needed that sigh of relief. The divorce made me see houses through their windows. Peering into homes from the outside revealed something different about the people inside—how we live inside our homes in double standards and lies.

What I have seen of the man's world makes me feel as though the tragedy of my marriage was nothing but normal. I came to realize that betrayal may be a fundamental part of society. I will not place the blame entirely on the man. Relationships always require two, and behind every cheating married man is a woman partner. This was among the most terrible things I realized—that the other woman was not necessarily unmarried, widowed,

or divorced. The other woman was most likely a married woman.

Such realizations landed around me like shooting stars falling to earth; so strange and wondrous that I cannot find any meaning or significance in them. But I learned and grew with each passing day. Or maybe I became mature enough to understand that human feelings are complex—emotions, desires, and obligations grow muddled. I realized that so many people were leading double lives. Though marriage is a revered institution, many people who participate in it live both within and outside of it, seeking certain things outside their marriages and living a lie. Society had grown comfortable with this schizophrenic state. Marriage gives people certain things—families, a home—but rarely everything they desire. This isn't unique to me.

I don't think it's mere coincidence that things are moving in this direction. Nor do I necessarily mean that there are not men who are devoted and dedicated to their wives. I will not hesitate to say that there are marriages that can serve as role models, but I also learned that there

is no singular rule. Human beings are changeable by their very nature. So are their emotions.

The biggest problem may not be the changes and fluctuations of emotions. People want to believe in and strive for perfection. We do not want to admit mistakes. We do not want to stray from the path we've charted for our future. The aims are mixed up with the means. The means become the aim. We cling to the relationship but forget why we entered it in the first place. Here, the problem lies in the collision between the aims and the means, and the difference between the other and ourselves. We lose respect for ourselves because we fail to achieve our aspired aims, or because we are incapable of preserving our emotions towards that other, believing that the imbalance lies within us. Or maybe because we failed to convince the other to cling to emotions and agreed-upon constraints. And when we lose respect for ourselves, which of course we do not want to admit to, we begin our war against the other. He transforms from angel to demon. The lion becomes a hyena. The generous becomes a spendthrift. The conservative becomes a fundamentalist. The adventurous becomes careful. Care transforms into

obsession, and silence becomes negligence. The distance grows, and irritation increases.

And we lose respect for the other.

In one fell swoop, we lose our respect for the other and for ourselves. Yet we prefer to keep the situation as is, because the means became the aim.

Perhaps divorce is sometimes the answer in a normal society. But I also realize it is not necessarily the *solution*. If we were more tolerant of divorce when a couple doesn't get along well, perhaps our expectations of marriage would be lower, and therefore more rational. The idea of eternity in marriage is complex and too idealistic. What if the wedding ceremony were not crowned with an eternity of happiness, but instead ended this way: "Marriage until you are both in mutual agreement to end it." If the terms of marriage were conditional, the husband and wife would be less likely to take one another for granted. Marriage has become like a trash bin. We throw in everything we don't like, knowing that, at the end of the day, the garbage collector will come and rid us of the trash—only so we can fill it again immediately with more garbage.

What if marriage had a limited time frame, rather than until death? The idea of eternity is intimidating. If married couples knew that the relationship was not to be taken for granted, the husband and wife would make the effort to sustain it and help it succeed. If society accepted divorce, people wouldn't rush into it. On the contrary, they would approach it rationally. Divorce carries many scourges. It causes inner destruction in every single member of the family system. But it also puts an end to the damage.

I still repeat to myself the real reason for my divorce: "He took my presence for granted." I became an obsolete fixture in his life, to the point that he no longer knew the difference between me and the Persian carpet on the floor. The only difference was that, unlike the carpet, the more he treaded on me, the more glorified and valuable I became.

Sadly, this is the value of women in our society when marriage goes sour. Patience and endurance give her a higher value. As my mother and grandmother said so many times, "Man turns and turns and comes back." The most important thing is that the obedient, pleasant, patient woman is ready when he returns.

(19) Breaking the chains

This violation made me break the chains of a marriage that had gradually become a form of slavery. He was entitled to do things not entitled to me. His word was always superior; mine inferior. If I was lucky enough to have a say at all.

Then, all of it came under a religious costume woven by jurists and *sheikhs* and *muftis*, containing *fatwas* of all colors and designs. You are commanded to obey, and he has to provide support. Obeying him is the same as obeying God. Never dare to forget that. Obeying him is obedience to God, and his satisfaction is the satisfaction of God.

Be patient and endure. He will, at some point, collapse and become exhausted. What is it I want from a husband? That he will finally reach exhaustion and destruction? Is it possible that the woman puts up with years of ill treatment and endures unjustified dominance and ongoing violations in order to spend whatever is left of her years nursing, healing, and medicating him? After

spending the first half of her life as a slave, a servant, and, in times of need, a whore?

This is all we are allowed at the end. Any other scenario, no matter how logical or proper, is nothing but madness, or, quite simply, impossible.

“You add splendor to things.”

He once told me this. Or someone told me this. Perhaps. I don't want to reduce all of the people I once loved to “someone.” I hate that we can become mere phantoms in the minds of others. At a certain time, that other person was my universe. I try to preserve them in the place they held at the time, despite their shortcomings. They always hold a place in the chambers of my heart.

Sometimes I revisit my written reflections on love, and I laugh with myself. I almost can't recognize the person who wrote them.

Was I lying about my emotions? How could I fall in love all those times with the same intensity, believing it to be love at first sight leading to eternal love? As if it were unique every time.

Often I enjoy returning to those feelings, asking what was really true and what was not. I poured all of those

emotions into one person and designated him an idol for worship—until the moment I left him and he became human again. I look back at memories of him and revisit those preserved emotions, which remain untouched. The words are sometimes similar. No matter how we enrich our vocabulary, our ability to use them remains limited. The same words and same phrases don't carry the same feelings, no matter how similar they are. The wonder of love remains charming. It remains tender until it is replaced with adoration—*Ishq*. This is when it becomes slavery.

Love without adoration is like a matchstick. It ignites but does not give warmth, and if its spark is not put to a fuse or a candle, it extinguishes and has no use.

The rush of love, the flurry of the heart, the fumbling to be perfect, this is our experience in love. Therefore it is not easy to accept failure after such intense emotion. *But this is life*, I always try to remind myself. That now-distant person once shared moments with me that filled me with love and life. Even my ex-husband. I shared with him many beautiful moments... and the worst moments too.

The hardening of our emotions was brutal. A love that size can still turn dry and stale.

The worst thing that can happen in a relationship is the feeling of failure over what was once a major excitement. At first, our hearts burst with emotions. But the final emotion is often hate.

I don't wish to hate anyone. Or at least I don't wish to continue hating anyone. But there are certain wounds that are difficult to get over. There are injuries that won't heal. However, we can make an attempt to reconcile with ourselves, and if we can accomplish that, perhaps we can then reconcile with the other.

Reconciliation with oneself can occur only by making peace with the physical body. I wonder if a person who has reconciled with himself on the inside can ever be completely at peace without an external truce with the body, which protects the soul. How do we reconcile internally when we treat our bodies improperly? The ancient Greeks used to say that a proper mind dwells in a proper body. What about a proper heart? How can a person commit injustice to his body and continue this cycle of abuse and violation? Smoking, eating fattening

foods that clot the veins and block the breathing. How can a human abuse his body and be fair to himself? How can a human love with a physically weak heart? How can one be true to himself when his body is sacrificed to sicknesses and disease as the result of poor nutrition?

Wishful thinking, undoubtedly.

The truth remains: He who does not have cannot give. Reconciliation with oneself is only possible with a healthy body, and a healthy body is not given miraculously, nor inherited. It requires continuous, diligent work. Exactly like the inner reconciliation we work to achieve all our lives.

Health is not about having a lean body or achieving a certain weight or waist measurement. It is not about obsessing over a certain shape or figure. It is simply maintaining the healthy body we were entrusted with. Our love for ourselves starts with our love for our bodies: caring for them, accepting them—enabling us to turn towards our inner selves.

(20) My journey with my children

My journey with my children shaped this challenge.

Society possesses a certain overwhelming power to pull you in, into a culture that is not necessarily an actual culture. Towards customs that are not worship. Towards traditions that are almost cult-like. You perform a blind imitation of everyone else, without thinking or paying attention or reflecting on your actions. In exactly the same way, the husband takes you for granted—though I don't exclude the wives here, in many cases. It is a strictly human affair. It is not ruled entirely by manhood or womanhood. The fault for this male control and domination does not lie entirely with men. It is part of a patriarchal society to which women and men contribute evenly.

There was that pivotal, difficult moment of separation between me and my children. I wanted to raise them on solid principles and values that were not connected directly to religious teachings. I was fully aware of their need for society. Or maybe it was just a decision: From the beginning, I decided not to escape. I could have chosen to

escape with them to a faraway place and live within a society more open to divorce. Societies where life is not so entwined with religion, or governed by traditions. But I fully believed that what I did was the right thing. It was *halal*, even if it was hated. *Halal* according to the definition that most people hold strongly to; I tried to live my life through religion entirely.

I still don't know whether this was a kind of escape or a defeat. But I am well aware that this is part of my inner identity. Inside me lives a woman who has faith that God exists, that there is a power bigger than man and nature. I may differ from others in how I describe it, value it, and communicate with it, but I sincerely believe it exists. I believe faith is important in order to find balance. It can provide answers to life's dilemmas. Within it one can find shelter, security, comfort. It provides a certain peace that is more substantial than any other.

Perhaps I wanted my children to have a choice as well. I didn't want them to face the same destiny I faced. Not out of obsession or fright; I wanted them to grow up with enough power that they could be the shapers of their own destinies. I didn't want their lives to become like

mine. I wanted them to find their own paths. I tried everything I could to separate them from my decision to divorce, despite the realization that it might have been too late. In every sense, divorce was decisive. What I wanted from it was the freedom that would come after. It would have been impossible to become anything else, due to the limitations forced by marriage. If I had remained a married woman, it would have ensured the continuation of that portrait I had carefully sketched, with defined roles for each one of us. What I tried to do as a divorced mother was to give each child a brush and allow him to paint whatever he wanted into our life's portrait.

(21) Surviving adolescence

The family portrait was then subject to collapse and breakage. Strange colors mingled, shapes were off balance and out of place. There were no lines or columns, nothing in proper proportion. The entire image was on the verge of being unrecognizable.

How often I gave myself over to despair, almost submitting completely.

How difficult motherhood becomes when your children enter adolescence.

And how difficult adolescence is for the child himself. As if the human being goes through a second birth, a stage of life that's not all that different from exiting the womb with a painful jolt. The only difference is that the first birth comes from inside of another, but the second is out in the open for all to see. We see the transformation happening in front of us. The difference is that the newborn becomes even larger than you, the one who gave birth to him. Instead of the scream he makes upon his first appearance in the world, he emerges as an adolescent, screaming out with behaviors that are strange compared to

anything in his childhood, since you raised him with extreme caution and rules you carefully designed. He tries his best to break out of those confines. To be himself. He wants to be a man, no longer a child. He screams out for his own independence, like that scream he let out when a cut of the umbilical cord separated him from you.

The universe is filled with secrets and mysteries. We pass through it without ever realizing this. Our need for freedom as human beings is instinctive. It is the first instinct in humans. Freedom.

This appetite for freedom is in place from our first breath. We measure everything, clarify, and explain all in accordance with our moods, our heritage, or our traditions. We become what is expected of us, and we are told that we are free. We think within the boundaries of this structure from the moment we're able to reason. Even our imaginations are restrained. The brain—*aql*—is locked. In Arabic, the word “brain” and “lock” share the same root. The words “mind”—*fikr*—and “apostasy”—*kufr*—share another root. To use the brain is to rationalize, and this does not interfere with belief. But to use the mind is to reason, and this makes one an infidel.

We say “rationalize,” and we don’t say “reason.”

With the brain, the boundaries are clearly defined. It is not confusing. Rationalization is like confining the brain to a locker. With reason, you sail in, you dismantle the brain, and you allow what is possible. In reason, there may be disbelief in what the brain has rationalized. And this is horrific... terrifying... frightening... threatening to the whole structure that is organized in the mind.

What has been fixed in our minds has been pounded in like a nail struck with a hammer. It becomes part of the construction of our intellect. Therefore, the mind cannot rationalize without a brain.

Rationalization is a wisdom no one escape, except by dismantling the brain, by which he becomes insane... forsaken.

He becomes divorced.

Except, a man *never* becomes divorced. The woman is the one who gets divorced.

You become divorced.

(22) Internalizing oppression

They say that raising a girl is much more difficult than raising a boy. This is what I was brought up to believe. In all cases, a girl is raised in our society to be like a man. She has to be courageous like a man. Strong like a man. To be virtuous like a man. “I raised men,” my mother proudly repeated.

In times of war, the belligerent Palestinian woman who courageously faces the gun and the violations of the occupation, she only receives the honorable title “sister of man.” Even the most heroic act committed by the woman must be traced back to a man. It can never stand on its own, as an act of a woman. Though they stand on the front lines, facing the danger of the occupation, they are not invited to the negotiating table when the two sides attempt to make progress.

It is easy to raise a girl with the idea that she must possess the characteristics of men, to become rougher and stronger and more deserving. It is also easy to raise her with extreme femininity. This is how the girl finds in her

hand a doll bride to take care of and look after while she waits to grow up and become the bride herself.

It is also easy to suppress a girl. You are not alone. There is a whole society in harmonious compliance with this. Society is filled with rules that define the girl's norms. The girl is raised to know what is forbidden, to feel shame, and to beware... to be careful. Take care. Watch out. Protect yourself. Your honor defines you. Your honor is the family. Your honor is the existence that surrounds you. The loss of your honor is your destruction—complete destruction for you, your family, your neighborhood, your city, your country, your homeland.

Your manners are the light of the society. Your honor is your religion. Your religion is your manner. Everything else is complementary, such as education and beauty. These two elements are your assets when the wedding market opens for business.

Our problem in this society is that we do not raise the boy the way we raise the girl. If we did, society would improve. We conspire to constrain the girl and clip her feathers so short that she can no longer fly, even if she begins to grow new feathers. If only we raised the boy like

we raise the girl. If only we taught him that the shame that falls on the girl is like the shame that falls on him. His honor is also his religion. His morals. His manhood.

But we liberate him. We set him out like a gunshot, as we do with others after divorce, only with the boy, it's more like a machine gun, scattering bullets around. He is a boy. He is expansive. No matter how you try as a mother, like I did, to turn this around, there is a whole society on the other side of the doorstep waiting to embrace and elevate him.

The rule is that the male is not like the female. Is it a sacred differentiation made by God or just a distinction made by humans? If it is a differentiation, there should be justice. But how can there be justice and separation?

God Himself is male. This fact I was taught as a child comes back to me now.

Even amid all the confusion and uncertainty thrown at us, that fact remains. There is no need to overthink it. This is a situation that requires rationality. Too much reasoning in this case can lead to *kufr*.

Kufr in a society that misjudges and misunderstands and promotes fragmentation and racism the moment we begin to breathe.

I was confident that victory would be my ally towards the end. I am the mother of a boy I will raise in accordance with my own rules, and not within the context of the tyrannical, patriarchal society. I will raise him the way I am raising his sisters. I will raise him to understand the value of equality, love, appreciation, and giving. I will raise him to be deserving of a woman who was raised similarly by nurturing females, who was breastfed by a female, and who grew up to be loved in the heart of a woman.

As he grew older and began to realize the extent of his male power, I began to see in him the man I had divorced a decade earlier.

I thought mistakenly that my son's father, his hollowness and backwardness, had been left behind. My son was different, I insisted. He was my son. I raised him with great love. I gave and gave to him until I was spread too thin among all my children. Each child takes a part of the mother, a part they need and feels entitled to. I raised

him with immense tenderness. I was so fond of his modesty and good manners and morals, his feminine tastes and sweet love. But the moment he stepped out the door, he was received by the mob of youth, and his father behaved like the patriarch in *Bab al-Hara*. That Ramadan TV series led to his exit from our house.

He became a part of the external, questioning society. *Don't dress like that. Where are you going? Where have you been?* I was able to stand up to this strongly. I worked to draw that clear distinction between me and my children when it came to our roles. I was the mother, no matter how often we laughed and played and I acted softly. I was the one with the final word. And I was the one who set the rules—simple, clear rules we were all accustomed to. But it was never easy to keep the rules in place, to make them an accepted part of life. Life with children is never without such power struggles. Give them something once, and they believe that thing to be theirs for all eternity. I always reminded myself: *You are the mother. You are the one who makes the final decision.* There have not been too many refusals in our daily routine. But the no was always

a no. The boundaries were preserved and everyone knew which lines could not be crossed.

I was always careful to be truthful with them. I would never do what I told them they could not do. I hid nothing. I never lied in response to any question they asked. I never put them or myself in an embarrassing situation, especially with regard to my relationships with men. I was always careful to talk about my relationships only within the limits of what they could understand. In certain moments, there were difficult questions. Sometimes embarrassing questions. But lying was never an option. If I felt that I didn't want to talk about a certain topic or answer a certain question, I would tell them I preferred not to discuss the issue. Maybe because I allowed them their own privacy, they, in response, gave me mine. I reminded them that, even though they had grown more mature and that some of our issues might overlap, I was still the mother and my power was greater, no matter how much theirs had grown.

I invented a wise trick. Every time my youngest—the most spoiled child—would ask, “Who do you love most?” I would answer with a confidence that scared her: “The eldest, of course.”

She would become angry and call to the rest of her siblings, “Did you hear her? She says she loves the eldest the most.”

In an instant, the rest would conspire with her. “Why do you love her the most?”

With a strange wisdom quite outside my nature, I would respond, with amusement, “How old are you?”

The youngest would answer, “Four.”

“And you? Six? And you?”

“Nine.”

“And how old is she, the eldest?”

“Thirteen.”

And I would answer, “I have known her for thirteen years, so I love her according to the number of years I have known her. And I have loved each of you since the moment you were born. I’ve loved you for four, six, and nine years.” This became one of the running jokes in our home.

(23) My son discovered the street

My son discovered the street and the other young men his age. I was plagued with worry because he lacked toughness, which is what I liked most about him. I was haunted with the echoes of threatening words: *Beware. He must be rough. He must be a man. He must not be beaten.* It was as if the man caught inside of him wanted to get out and rebel so he could reach manhood in front of me and society. I loved him so much I set him free.

I lost him completely when I didn't know how to deal with him. Or perhaps I let him take his own path so I wouldn't lose him. Many things inside me shattered like glass when he started to look at me as if I were a whore, when he'd glance at me with doubtful eyes, accusing me without speaking. Thinking thoughts given voice by his father, attuned to the society around him.

At that time, I was in a relationship with a man whose presence in our life greatly improved our very difficult situation. He was like a life preserver for me—and for them, sheltering them from their tyrant father. This man was a foreigner, a wealthy diplomat. He had the status and

money and respect required to keep society from judging him. The same things quieted my ex-husband's acts of tyranny. My relationship with this man was social, and we shared a strong friendship. He loved my children a great deal, and they developed valuable emotional bonds with him. He had been divorced once and didn't have children, which made the situation more complicated. In one sense, he was very close, and in another, very distant. We would go out together for lunch or dinner, and would sometimes go shopping, or visit at his house. But my house was my family's only.

When it came time for his departure, we discussed marriage and we explored the complicated possibilities. Perhaps I used my wisdom at that moment as well. I was still nostalgic for marriage in a way I cannot deny. I cannot deny how much I loved him, how safe I felt with him. I asked myself many times whether my feelings towards him came from my need for safety, or whether I really loved him. I still don't know the answer.

I am confident, however, that love becomes an ingrained habit. I cannot determine, each time I fall in love, if I am in love with the person for who he is or for

his characteristics. There comes a moment, of course, when a certain unity takes place, and one can no longer differentiate between the characteristics and the being. The person becomes one with his character and his being: you. But as is the case with all relationships and their endings, a time comes when rationality wins out.

(24) My relationship with another man

My relationship with the diplomat was not traditional, and wouldn't normally be accepted. But I wanted it, and I felt it was important. So I fought to give it validation within society. Sadly, society is hypocritical. It likes the surface of things, and domination and power.

The man I loved had the admirable characteristics that would make it possible for him to be welcomed, and for the customs and traditions of Islamism to possibly accommodate our relationship. He was generous and tender, with good manners and a prestigious position. Enough to overlook societal restrictions. With my children and I, the rules were different and they were real, even if those rules were not embraced in our society. He and I discussed the seriousness of these restrictions and what was expected. Ultimately, there was a ring that resembled an engagement ring and a visit to my parents and some talk of love and a willingness to be together, but no promises were made.

The idea of marriage used to horrify me. And it scared the children. I was the center of their safe, closed circle.

Allowing anyone to enter was prohibited, as if there were a hidden agreement that said, “Do whatever you wish, as long as we don’t have to share you with anyone.” I was giddy over the idea of marriage to a man who would alleviate my worries and help me fulfill my aspirations. I was torn between this delight and the society that would frown upon us. I was torn between the desire to become a wife and the desires of my children. The idea of marriage was always retreating, dissipating in my mind. However, I insisted back then that we were still getting to know each other. Time might change our desires and our understanding of one another. I didn’t want to marry only to be divorced again.

So time passed and soon after he left the country, the relationship started to break down. After two years, it was completely shattered. I went through rough times that are indescribable. But I was confident that our fracture did not fracture me, or him. There are relationships and emotions that change. Then there are relationships and emotions that simply disappear. My insistence on that relationship posed challenges—to me, to society, to my children. I was walking the line between what was wrong, forbidden, and

unacceptable and what was respectable. I was trying to balance my devotion as a mother with what I needed as a woman. I am a mother and a woman—two living in one body. We meet, but we separate in many ways in order to live in peace and security, to enliven both of us.

That relationship became a disgrace to my son, even though he had known about it in detail for years. My son refused this man and refused me. He began to denigrate his sisters. He rejected the boyfriend of his sister. He became the observer and his sisters' guardian, the one who gave the final orders. He wanted to enter the house when he wished and leave when he wished.

It was almost impossible to stand up to him. He became taller and larger than me. I feared an altercation. I started seeing his father in him.

When he decided to go live with his father, he broke my heart. That was the first time I examined my emotions towards my son, the idea of loving him. What did I want from him? What did I expect? These questions were a strange turn for me, and I asked myself, "What is best for him? What does he want? What are his expectations?"

I left him.

And it was a wise thing to do. I said to him, “Go. And the moment you want to come back, this home is yours. Every moment, wherever you are, I am always with you when you feel that you need me. And when you do not need me, I am still with you.”

I tried to be angry and get away and escape. I was terrified for him. I saw him drifting away, and I remembered what the social worker told the family: “Let him fall. If he doesn’t fall and feel the pain, he will never understand the meaning of mistakes. He will not understand what it means not to fall.” Many years passed as I watched him, waiting. I lost hope sometimes. Sometimes he came back crying, throwing himself to my bosom. Each time, I would send him out to go do what he wanted for himself, allow him to see a new decisive moment. He was mature enough, and he wanted more than just rationalizing; he wanted reason and maturity.

He came back.

He came back a man. The way I raised him to be.

He tried, and still tries, to break the arrogance of the patriarchal beliefs that were instilled in him. I am very aware of the difference in his maturity, his capacity for

forgiveness and tenderness. Love fills him, but he feels anger toward his father, who embodies the spoiled patriarchy, who is arrogant and conceited to the point that he forgets that he's a father.

If I was able to wear the robes of wisdom for my son in the midst of his adolescence, this was not because of virtue or maturity. The feeling of eternal loss was the engine for my wisdom. It is society that pushes the male child to the peak of tribal thinking and arrogance. It pushes the girl inward, like pushing an elephant into a mouse hole. Society wants her pure, untouched, and saint-like. The girl is like crystal; if she is scratched, she loses her value and is reduced to nothing more than glass. As a child, I repeatedly heard the adults talk about the importance of understanding the difference between glass and crystal.

At that time, I could handle what came my way—the ups and downs and extremely difficult situations. But the most difficult moment was seeing my eldest adolescent daughter lying in front of me with her wrists open, covered with blood, surrounded by empty medicine boxes and scraps of paper. This is a moment that will never leave

me. It cannot be wiped from my memory. Each time it comes back, I hear my own screaming and feel the same intense fear.

She wasn't yet sixteen when she attempted suicide after a phone call from her father on her way back from tennis class. He asked her if she was walking alone. She answered that her boyfriend was next to her. Not much happened. Nothing actually happened. But she was so overwhelmed with intense fear that she decided to take her own life. No one could have understood that fear like I did. I used to be terrified of him in that same way, fearful of his suspicion. As if he saw and knew what you couldn't see or know. He made you feel that he knew about you, and that he was more confident about your actions than you could be. He had absolute knowledge. He had the iron fist that was fixed and fatal. I understood what had happened with my daughter, how he had besieged her with fear. That's what my life with him had been.

It is a fear you cannot express to anyone. He threatens you and demolishes your life with two calm words that ensure your collapse, as if you never existed. He guarantees that you will take your life with your own

hands. She couldn't handle the pressure that was bearing down on her—for being beautiful and talented. We created for her a schizophrenic life. She was contained within the confines of tradition at home, and then free from those constraints at school, living in a bubble of modernity. In the foreign school she attended, she lived the life of the French until she passed back through the school gate. She enjoyed a cultural and intellectual openness that fell away when she entered the world again. She was a true rebel, and he was a lying, fascist dictator.

Her rescue didn't necessarily mean my rescue. In that moment, I tasted the meaning of death and its bitterness. I lived a moment of loss that can never be reconciled. There is nothing more difficult than losing a child. I could never survive such a loss. I don't know how a mother can live after the death of a child.

(25) horror of murder

I lived this horror again after the murder and burning of a young man, Moḥ ammad Abu Khdeir, by radical Israeli settlers in a nearby neighborhood. The idea of death creeping closer is horrific and scary. As if Azrael, the angel of death, went out into the streets, randomly selecting whoever might appeal to him. Until that moment, I used to feel a certain sense of security. It was a Ramadan night, and the girls were gathering with their cousins and neighbors for *Suhour*, the predawn meal. I used to like these breaks in their life, perhaps because it reminded me of my own childhood with so many girls in our home and the neighbor girls as well. Life was simple and different, with no interference from the crowded city or the evil of human beings.

The social structure in neighborhoods has also changed, and we seem to be living in isolated boxes, barely knowing our neighbors.

The burning of Mohammad Abu Khdeir, a fifteen-year-old, was traumatic. It stole from us the sense of security we had previously felt in our homes.

We live far from the lines of confrontation and points of friction. Our neighborhoods are safe. We are obedient Jerusalemites in an upper-class neighborhood, walking by the wall, as they say.

I used to enjoy seeing my daughters and my son socializing in the neighborhood, before the boy was kidnapped from the entrance of his home and murdered. I also do not deny that I was distancing myself. People's eyes following me, trying to pick up potential material for gossip, while still believing their lifestyles and morals were in line with what Imam Shafi'i says: "Never mention the nakedness [insecurities] of a person. Because you are full of insecurities, and people have eyes."

I remember an old friend of mine once came to visit me. I hadn't heard from her in a long time; she came back because she was thinking of getting a divorce. Like many other divorcees, I became an appointed consultant for women who wanted a divorce or women who had already divorced and somehow lost their way. I didn't understand why I had become a place of asylum, but I understood the feelings of a person in need. Those feelings kept me company, but also made me feel empty.

My friend told me that she had attended a certain breakfast gathering for women, and they started talking about me. Before my divorce, I had been invited to such events. They no longer asked me. But this did not concern me. I was well aware of what takes place in such settings. All of the women shop the day before, purchasing new shoes and full dress robes. The women then sit together and show off everything they purchased the day before. Sometimes you wonder if they've left the price tag on so that it might be seen. Each woman continues to move around the room until you compliment her: "How nice your dress is, your shoes, your bag..." And she quickly tells you the history of these extravagances—while her husband can barely afford the vegetables and the electricity bill.

I was apparently their topic of conversation that morning. The discussion went something like this: "Have you noticed? Ever since her divorce, she can't leave the men alone. She's slept with half the men in the city." I couldn't help but laugh when I heard this. How could this be? Assuming I did sleep with half of those men, or even

one of them, and assuming these men were the husbands of these women, how would the wives get the news?

So, the husband comes home and tells his wife, “John slept with her yesterday.” Or, “I slept with her today.”

I told this story to my mother. She yelled at me, saying, “Stop being an idiot. We don’t need more scandals.”

I said, “What scandals? Why should I be silent about a scandal that never took place? Why do I have to hide something that shames them and not me? If I had slept with any of those men, I would understand. But how can people fill their mouths with lies and chew my flesh when they don’t even know what I look like? How can they mention me when most of them haven’t seen me in years? When my path never crosses theirs?”

This discussion took place in front of my boss at work. He was the president of the non-governmental organization where I worked. We were on good terms. We had a friendly relationship and enjoyed having intellectual discussions with one another. But our families did not have friendly ties. He was part of my ex-husband’s family. My boss responded with a mixture of encouragement and

pressure. Part of him wanted to take my hand in support, and part of him wanted to oppress me. In the end, I rebelled against those considered elite in the family. In elite families, no one has the right to leave, so perhaps my boss felt guilty that the family was particularly harsh with me. Despite how much I appreciated him, how much I considered him a source of comfort at one point, he threw me into a deep, dark hole during those first few years after my divorce.

(26) Admiring men

I still looked at men with admiration. I idealized the men I liked the most, hoping to find one whose shadow could give me shade. My employer was like a godfather to me. He may have even been present for my engagement. I considered him a role model. I respected him and valued him as an intellectual political figure, someone almost unrivaled in the Palestinian political sphere. After the traumas of the first few years of my divorce, I considered him one of the few miracles I had been blessed with. He not only asked about me and consoled me and apologized for what my ex-husband had done in the name of their glorified family, but he also offered me a job in the organization.

It felt like a dream back then, at a time when I was desperately searching for a job. I would enter an office and find my ex-husband in front of the window, sometimes like a ghost and sometimes like a monster. I would present a resume that documented my life's dilemmas and tragedies, but I knew I could never have a job. No employer wanted to deal with an obsessed, annoying ex-

husband constantly tracking the wife who'd left him. Nobody wanted to get involved in someone else's problems. It was as though I was constantly carrying an ember in my hands. I became accustomed to being burnt. No one would dare come close and take the ember from me. I could feel people distancing themselves from me and my stories and my problems. Everywhere I went, my problems preceded me, and this made me want to avoid almost everyone.

That man, who was a great man in my eyes, gave me a life-saving opportunity: He asked me to organize the gender department, and he offered me a position where I could use my language and communication skills. His offer was like a dream. I was confident he was the only man my ex-husband would not dare confront. He was the most powerful man in that family, and he didn't need their resources or approval. I received my offer letter two days later. A friend told me then, "You are lucky. This organization has never hired anyone so quickly."

That was on a Saturday. On Tuesday, he called while I was busy filing. I was eager to tell him what was going on, but before I could open my mouth, he said, "I think we

need to hold off for a little while.” I didn’t understand. I was still waiting to give him an update on my work. He went on to say that my ex-husband’s mother had called his mother, sister, and brother. “They went to my wife,” he said. “He is calling everyone. I think he loves you.” At that moment, all the warm feelings I had for that man evaporated. I was in shock. This man who claimed to support women was talking about how my ex-husband loved me? He was making excuses and involving his mother. Why?

Tears filled my eyes. My daughter and I had just spent a night in the police station after being sabotaged and confronted publicly by my cousin, my mother, and my sister.

I was giving a lecture to an international group about Muslim women’s rights in Jerusalem. I blamed the occupation for increased restrictions on Muslim women’s rights, and I spoke about freedom while my daughter sat next to me.

My cousin entered the room while talking on the phone. “The whore is with me,” he said as he pushed me. My ex-husband had called my mother, claiming I was out

working as a prostitute. To try and prove him wrong, she gathered my cousin, my neighbor, and my sister to come out and find me, to prove my immorality or innocence. Either way, I was incriminated.

They wanted to take my daughter to my ex-husband. My mother insisted I give him “his” children. They had fallen under his spell. Several days earlier, my father and cousin had come to the house in the middle of the night to take my three children. “He wants his children,” they yelled at me. They forced me to wake the children up. I told myself it was only a few days until the court decision, and things would be over soon. But the court order affirming my competency as a mother came ten months later. That night they came to the house, my eldest refused to go with them. She was thirteen, and old enough to make her own decision. She stood in front of my uncle and said, “If you try to take me, I will go to the police.” They left her.

(27) *Revisiting memories*

It's difficult revisiting those memories.

A friend who worked for the organization told me, "Write down what happened and circulate it." I was active in the Coalition of Women for Peace back then. Sending the message I wrote after that dark, hollow night gave me a sense of liberation. Writing had empowered me.

The image of my mother and cousin rushing into that presentation hall has never left me. It's like a nightmare that stays with me. I imagined myself the way they saw me, as if in a movie scene where they catch a woman committing prostitution or adultery. Whatever. Any woman is seen as a whore when society insists on perfection.

How the female among us is considered both sacred and inviolable. Heavens lay under her feet. As the holy *hadith* says, "Paradise waits beneath the feet of the mother." Yet she herself is the burning coal of hell. The female is depicted in so many conflicting portraits; she can be moved and changed in accordance with the desires of

society, left to the whims of the patriarchy she helps to maintain.

Life took me down twisted but important paths. Among the many paradoxes were my encounters with Israelis. Israeli women, in particular. My involvement with the women's movement opened possibilities that allowed me to think and make new discoveries. At the time, I didn't know what I wanted. I felt a sense of panic any time someone asked me, "What do you want? What are your goals?" These questions still make me feel uneasy, yet I find myself responding the same way each time: "I'm just trying to live. I don't even have the ability to dream. How can I have ambitions?" I started asking myself about ambition, even though I was still afraid to dream. I knew there was a dream of some kind buried inside me, a dream I wished to fulfill, a dream I'm still not sure I understand. I was ready for it to appear at any moment.

The Israeli women I knew were supportive in a way that defied the confines of the occupation. It was as if, to them, I was a miserable product of the occupation, in need of their support and compassion. And I was.

They're minorities, excluded to a great extent within Israeli society. Within that minority are those who swing between a Zionist identity, which must deny the Palestinian equal rights, and humanist leanings, which allow them to see Palestinians as people not unlike themselves. I'm not sure I could blame them for their views. In general, the left in Israel faces this conundrum. They're like miserable married couples. They're fully aware the marriage isn't working, yet it provides enough stability and comfort to prevent them from leaving.

I am a product of an occupation that is upheld by soldiers and surrounded by a wall and its many checkpoints. Inside lives a patriarchal machine that is systematically restricting me, monitoring my every move, counting every breath.

The Israeli women were trying to pull me out of my hiding place, out from behind walls and fences. Their attempts were unsuccessful, but I felt their compassion, which is something I needed so desperately. Their support gave me a new energy and a sense of possibility. They pulled me towards a place of empowerment. They insisted I was far more capable, stronger, and tougher than I

believed. They also realized how much I needed the support of others—the support that comes with a word, a look, even a simple sigh of understanding. At that time, even the smallest things could pull me from the darkness of my slumber. I was searching for a light to lead me out of the darkness that had swallowed me. I was like a young child lost in a dark tunnel, searching for light, sensing it but unable to see it.

I needed to be reminded that I existed, that I had value. After a long period of collapse after collapse, with destruction raining down on top of me, I needed to be reminded of my worth.

When I saw the president of the organization again, perhaps three years had passed since he had revoked my job offer. It could have been more time, or less—I had stopped counting. In that period of my life, I no longer thought about days or weeks or months. I could only live from one breath to another. I knew if I was still breathing, I was at least alive.

By the time I met him again, I had become more mature and had developed greater political and social awareness. In the interim, I had worked on a human rights,

anti-occupation project with a man. I saw in him the hope of peace, and decided to join in the fight for Palestine.

As I continued thinking about men and their shadows and the false shade they provide, I began to assign each man's shadow a shape. This man I worked with, he had a circular shadow, which made me laugh; I chose a circle because he wasn't very tall. Jack was more of a Santa Claus. He had the characteristics of a father, a mentor. He was God-like.

But, like other human gods, he believed he was deserving of a throne. He believed he possessed an authority beyond his influence in the fight for the liberation of Palestine. I followed him like a shadow. I repeated his holy words. He was supportive, caring, and loving. Until one day, when we were discussing the issue with a Palestinian supporter and I dared to speak.

He silenced me.

He said, "You are not supposed to talk." I was puzzled by his attitude and sudden gloominess. That pleasant Santa face.

"Why should I not talk?" I asked.

That was our last discussion. I told him, “I will always be grateful to you for shaping my Palestinian identity, but you seem to not realize that there is a difference between shaping an identity and creating one. You want a Palestinian that you yourself have molded. But I am here with an identity that needs shaping, not creating. We both want to end occupation; our paths are parallel, not crossed. You will not liberate Palestine. And you should not. You need to be liberated by the liberation of Palestine.”

He replied, “If you are such a nationalist, why don’t you invest your energy in Palestinian institutions?” He was right.

So I left.

And I heard the sound of a shattered God.

(28) A shadow of a man

My meeting with the president of the association happened during some cloudy, shifting circumstances. I had just finished an autobiography of an Israeli novelist, which Jack had insisted I read. It was not amusing. I was avoiding reading Zionist ideology. By that time, I had trained myself to separate Israelis into Zionists and non-Zionists, between settlers and non-settlers. My relationship with Israel is much like my assessment of masculinity and patriarchy: I admire some of their characteristics, but others I will stand against with all my power. I won't deny that humanity had won over my feelings in my relationships with Israelis.

During my time of crisis, Israeli women from different feminist groups, and some mothers of my daughter's classmates, supported me, gave me strength, and encouraged me to be resilient. This was at a time when many of my closest friends and family members had withdrawn from my life. The few that remained, I could count on a single hand. They were my protective walls.

Humanity wins in most situations like these, though we swing between feelings of rage, deception, and the miserable consequences of oppression. I don't know why I felt closer to the Israeli women around me. Perhaps because these women were enlightened and highly educated. One thing I admire about Israeli society is its true passion for knowledge. Titles and designations never precede their names. Unlike us. For our people, the title of Doctor precedes the person's name, making everyone aware of his status. But an Israeli, man or woman, can be a full professor, and yet his first name is what comes first. He will listen to you with curiosity, interest, and respect, receiving every word you speak with seriousness. He lifts you up to his level or goes down to yours, depending on what the situation calls for.

I learned from my Israeli acquaintances that modesty can increase with knowledge, that the value of a human is not in what he wears, and that a certain modesty in daily life makes life more valuable. These were principles I had always heard and believed, and our education placed value on them, but they were not put into practice in our society. We have gradually transformed into a society in which

people compete to earn certificates merely in order to possess the titles that come with them. Education in our schools and institutes has been emptied of context. We've become satisfied with titles, and we hide behind the boundaries we create around knowledge. We use big words and impressive concepts, but these rest on empty foundations that can easily be destroyed.

My judgment of the Palestinian intellectual could, of course, be too harsh, and I might be heaping too much praise on the Israelis. I don't deny that there are many Palestinian and Arab intellectuals. But we need more. The status of the Palestinian intellectual today is not an impressive one; his\hers is a lonely voice that mostly goes unheard because there is no stage, no intellectual community in which he can speak and be understood.

My relationship with Israelis was like walking a tightrope between the sky and the earth. I had to be cautious at all times and maintain my balance. Even a small mistake could cause me to fall. But I continued to engage with them. I cannot deny that I felt closer to them on a human level, and, over time, I viewed the relationship with more maturity. However, my point of view shifted

again and again. Any time a new crisis presented itself, I reverted back to my nationalist ways and stayed away.

The autobiography of the Israeli leftist was very exciting. I read it carefully. I began looking for a counterpoint by a Palestinian writer to provide balance. By coincidence, I came across a new publication by a Palestinian figure. I didn't want to read it because of its links to my past—the divorce and its consequences. Still, the nationalist side of me always wins. I don't quite understand why, though I do genuinely love the idea of a homeland. I truly believe our fight for our homeland is a just cause. It is a cause that will always involve questions of justice. It is about rights. Rights cannot be lost as long as there are people who demand them, and the demands will remain as long as there is a living, breathing Palestinian. Justice will prevail one day.

I was overwhelmed reading these books, getting caught up in the journey of their pages. The Palestinian one told the story of Omar ibn al-Khattab and his entourage coming to Jerusalem. The group accompanying Omar, included Nussaybah al-Maziniyah, an ancestor of this Palestinian writer.

The Israeli writer told of his own family's migration from Poland to Jerusalem, their settlement within the remains of another nation that did not realize what was going on then and still does not.

The two writers were holding a seminar a few days after I read the books, and I didn't want to miss it. Part of me wanted to confront the man who had disappointed me when I was already so shattered, especially because I had held him in such high esteem. I imagined him seeing me in the crowd, chipping away at his confidence. I ran into him the day before the event, and we exchanged hellos. My naiveté wins every time. I've gotten used to it. Or was it simple kindness?

I raised my hand during the seminar to make a comment. There was a long line of people waiting to speak to the novelist and the philosopher. He saw me, and the exchange of looks was enough to end our cycle of blame and antagonism; more than that, even—my desire for revenge. I saw the giant in front of me shrink in his chair, while I felt myself growing bigger, standing in line. I was seeing him as a regular man, not as the God I once believed him to be. We then avoided looking at one

another. I could see the thoughts running through his mind: *Release me... Liberate me from this torture and blame... Say what you will.*

Silence is sometimes much stronger than words. It can be sharper than a sword in its ability to penetrate the other. Especially those with a tortured conscience—the tyrant, maybe, or the one who saw an injustice committed and failed to stop it.

I was apparently one of the few people who had read both books. Perhaps I was the only one, besides the two authors themselves. When it came my turn to speak, I began with a nice description of the impression the Israeli writer's words had on me as he drew me into another a world and another reality I had never wanted to see, the city as he saw it, though I had never seen him within it. When I was through with that, the audience believed I had finished talking, but I continued on, saying, "But the other book held me on the wings of the horse that brought Mohammed from Mecca to Jerusalem. It was an original historical epic that resembled my very own. It made me feel connected to the entire history of my people and everything that made my existence possible." I don't

really remember what happened next. There was a great deal of applause. I felt myself grow larger, while he continued to diminish in his faraway chair on the distant stage. Or maybe in that moment I brought him back to earth. The admiration I once had for him was gone and his effect on me had lost its power.

Sometimes words come out of you and you don't know who's speaking them. How did they form themselves and escape from your mouth? A certain glow surrounds you, comes out of you, lightens the space around you, and carries you away on the wings of the sky, like a star, glowing, shining, splendid... and distant.

That was such a moment.

People came up to speak with me, and I felt like a star descending from on high. I felt full of that glow.

In that moment, new possibilities opened to me. My life changed. I changed.

Maybe.

(29) Alice in wonderland

Among the people waiting to talk to me was a tall man who resembled the character with the tall shadow from Jean Webster's classic young adult novel, *Daddy-Long-Legs*. I was polite in the way I am now used to being with Israeli writers and journalists looking for a Palestinian tongue like mine, one that says different things than what they hear and read everywhere else. This difference is part of me, my identity, my Palestinian being. I was seeing in myself a representative for the lost Palestinian in all of us. I tried to help them to see the humanity in us, to see that we resemble the humanity in them, that the only difference is the tyranny of occupation.

He waited patiently to speak with me. When he approached, he handed me his business card. He was an ambassador. At that moment, his presence felt very powerful, almost magical, but looking back on it now, that feeling doesn't seem significant at all.

When he walked me to his house, it was as if I had entered *Alice in Wonderland*. Everything was dreamlike. It was a dream to enter that house, especially as someone

who, for so long, had been afraid to dream. I passed through his home, which spans the top of the road in a West Jerusalem neighborhood. I had once passed through that area with a friend, and I don't know why, but the house caught my attention, and I said, "I wish for a house like this." I live my life too proudly to wish for material possessions. Thus, our house felt like the most beautiful house. Our collections were the most valuable in our eyes. And our clothes were the most splendid. It was unusual for me to long for something belonging to another, but, for some reason, on that day I stopped and admired that expansive home, and I felt wistful about it.

He walked me towards his place, and I didn't realize where we were heading until he pointed at the palace, opened the gate with a remote control, and said, "Welcome to my home." I looked at him in disbelief and said, "You are a liar." Then, like a child, I started jumping up and down. Like Alice. I thought for a moment that he might just be the guard or the driver, or perhaps the cook. I thought maybe the owners had left, and he wanted to show off in front of us—a group of people were walking behind us. They had been invited to dinner to honor that evening,

and later became friends. I was like a child looking around a palace, admiring its beauty. I even took photos of the toilet. That day was my entrance into Alice's world. Though, it was not yet wonderful.

It's as if life bounces us from one place to another. How strange that feeling was.

I still don't understand the strange character of the European man. Often he is highly intelligent; at least those I meet here. My humanity and modesty is what attracts them to me. Later, they become surprised by my intelligence, surprised that an Arab woman can think for herself.

They come to this part of the world knowing very little about Palestinian society. In the books they've read, there are usually pictures of the Arab Muslim woman, covered by the veil, hidden behind the man. In most places outside the Arab world, especially the West, this is the only image of the Arab woman. They—men especially—find it strange if a woman is educated, intelligent, *and* beautiful.

This is always what limits the woman; she has to fit a certain mold. Any versatility shocks a man. He wants her

beautiful, or strong, or intellectual, or educated, or smart. But all of those attributes contained in one woman annoys him.

He wants her to be a goddess, either angelic or satanic. He sees nothing in between. The ordinary woman doesn't attract him; she must be special—but only if she is either wholly an angel or wholly a devil.

I have what annoys all men: beauty filled with femininity, intelligence, and education. My weaknesses are a result of my circumstances, my obedient upbringing, waiting for a God-granted gift given by a man who had a dream for me. My strength and my ability to change my circumstances horrifies men, makes them run far away from me.

They enjoy seeing me, and then flee the moment I look at them honestly.

They want inner nakedness, vulnerability. They want the fragility of a female, but they are too haughty to bare their own humanity.

Men are afraid a woman will see the simple, normal human inside of them. He wants the woman to discover his true, inner self, but once she reaches that place, he is

done with her. He doesn't want to see that part of himself or do anything good with it. He is only interested in the journey that ends there.

The man is constantly yearning to return to the uterus of a woman. He wants her to remain a mother, but his patriarchal circumstances make him become her guardian.

The moment he gets close to that uterus, he steps back and indulges himself with the sexual act. He gets enough excitement from the impure act. Then, he leaves even more confused, having to remind himself that he is the one with the upper hand. He is the one in charge.

He is the man, the male, and from him came the word.

Dominance overcomes him over, and he is filled with arrogance. Why not? Women surround him as if he is Joseph the Prophet, ready to cut their veins in exchange for his glance.

There is a cultural or instinctual misunderstanding about the relationship that a man and a woman have together. Sex for a man is to descend into her, and for her it is to ascend to him. He ends by spreading his seeds of ecstasy, and she begins by attracting the seeds through her ecstasy. His curiosity for her ends when his lust is

fulfilled, and her curiosity starts where he ends. He loves her until he enters her, at which point she begins to love him.

Is this instinct or a misunderstanding?

He elevates her to the highest levels of holiness while she is on the earth, and drops her to the deepest depths of impurity when she gives in to him.

The man wants the woman to live up to a certain idea in his head. He doesn't accept her, except when she conforms to the image of the saint or the devil.

With sainthood comes purity, and with Satan comes harlotry. This is perhaps what tires the man—the femininity of the woman. He wants her motherly instinct, but in reality her instinct is her femininity. Maybe because the man's origin is within the uterus, there is no originality in his instinct, only what he is accustomed to. Hence, the origin in the female is her femininity. This is her instinct. Her first instinct. From it, she becomes a mother. But the man is the result of a woman. His masculinity is modeled for him by generations of men before him, until finally it became his instinct. Patriarchy became his instinct, and motherhood, the woman's instinct.

All of our definitions and laws and policies are based on placing man at the center, at the foundation of society. He believes that his centrality makes him knowledgeable about womanhood. He insists it is impossible to understand her, but that he is the only one who knows what she wants. He tries to understand her, to reach her, and the moment he begins to, he thinks he has discovered everything about her, that there is nothing more to learn. The woman has inner depths that even she herself isn't aware of. Woman is like an onion. Maybe its outer layer, dry and fragile, doesn't impress you. Its powerful smell makes the eyes water uncontrollably. However, as the outer layers are removed, it becomes more bright, soft, and delicious. Its sharp smell and taste enhances a meal, and its nutrients heal the body. Yet, it is just an onion.

The woman contains a special, innermost creature, and innermost creatures cannot be discovered by force or instinct. For the man to know the woman, the woman must know herself. The same applies to the man. They are both busy knowing the other more than they know themselves, and they end up creating expectations for the other based on themselves, and these are met with disappointment and

failure. This shocks the man and makes him judge the other by what he sees, rather than with what he is.

The man loses the woman as soon as he enters into the illusion of knowing her, and the woman loses the man when she exits from the illusion of not knowing him.

(30) Wondrous world of Alice

After I entered that wondrous world of Alice, I can't explain what happened between me and diplomats. I must have fulfilled their curiosity about the exoticism they associate with the East.

Once, an Arab diplomat elevated me to the point of holiness. He was strange and wondrous. I was startled by his attention and his outpouring of emotions, which I could not understand. He was as emotional as Abdel Halim Hafez's songs. He was sensitive, and loved Egyptian movies. And exactly like an Arab man, perhaps, he was able to separate his emotions from his family relations. He behaved as if he were totally free, with no wife or children to disturb him. I was driven, as usual, by curiosity. I didn't understand. I didn't understand why he elevated me to that state of holiness, and I didn't understand why I suddenly became impure in his eyes.

I knew it didn't matter, yet I was somehow startled as well. I was discovering a place that was strange to me. I was not used to close attention from others. It wasn't in my nature. I was surprised and startled by his

attentiveness, like a cat discovering that it enjoys being touched.

It was a phase where I was constantly pursued by men, but these relationships always ended the same—with my escape or theirs. Usually mine.

In relationships with a diplomat, a musician, a politician, an intellectual, an academic, and an activist, I was able to explore myself. I was looking for something in them to revive me. But as I crowned them as gods and lifted their thrones to the skies, I also brought them down. I was aware of their limitations, and they refused to be humble. Perhaps I like men who inhabit the role of God.

I was searching for a man, a liberator for the homeland, a reviver of the world. I imagined them all to be idols of perfection. I don't know if they realized that. I don't know if that was even real. I only know the exhaustion I felt searching for a man to become the liberator and reviver.

There are certain men who enjoy stardom. Among them you will find the reviver, the wise one, the adoring lover, the brave leader, the amused lover, the one who

supports women, and the master who attracts students and followers.

No matter how the man's role changes, he is totally convinced he is the only one, that he was born to be unique and special. He is the copy that will never be pasted. What unites all men, despite their differences, is their absolute belief that they know you better than you know yourself. They are convinced that they possess the solution to the equation, and through them secrets are revealed and masks fall.

I don't blame men for this, but I cannot understand why women submit to it. Did men give themselves this level of authority or did women assign them the role? Even with the most specific details of their lives and emotions. You see the *sheikhs* of men ruling in women's issues. Books of *Shari'ah* are filled with rules that govern the inner lives of women, which, they claim, only men can specialize in.

"There is no shyness in science or religion," they say. A man can teach me about menstrual pain, and how to clean myself, and how to shower and when. The knowledgeable man also knows what makes me aroused,

what my body needs, and how to touch me. The honorable scientist can go into detail that, as a woman, I am too shy to describe. And for me to mention that, would make me impudent and immodest. He is the jurist, the lawmaker, the wise man, the pure, truthful *sheikh*.

You find the woman rushing to ask the man how to cleanse herself of impurity. You find her asking him which sexual position her husband should use with her and when, sharing details she doesn't reveal even to her mother. "There is no shyness in science or religion," the saying goes.

Strangely, you find women believing and trusting men with the intimate details of their lives. The man gives sexual advice as if he is the knowledgeable specialist, yet the Arab man cannot understand the difference between his ecstasy and hers. He is the core. His coming is hers. His ecstasy is hers. He tells her that his ecstasy is hers as well. There is nothing else she should or could want. Thus, when she is not sharing in his ecstasy and expressing pleasure over his pleasure, she is considered cold.

Each man I hold in high regard is, in time, reduced to something much less. He is no longer exalted in my eyes.

This happened again and again until it became routine. I stopped even noticing it.

I used to walk away, justifying my path. The path of a life I knew could exist, a life I understood completely in my imagination, with that man who would appear at some point and revive me and liberate the homeland. Whoever that man is, I am always connected to him in one way or another through my nation's cause, so he has become my personal national project.

It's a habit I can't get rid of.

Jack's words were hard for me to hear. But he was right. "Look for a national association to work with," he said. After that seminar with the writers, the president of the association was welcoming to me when I suggested a project I was working on with Jack. It focused on community work between the association and local parties. He liked the idea and offered me a new position. He apologized for what had happened years before, and said, "you are not destructive."

I had a different kind of power, twice the power I had before. I wasn't even close to enjoying the idea of the upcoming job when the whole issue of the family came

back. They tried to pressure him. That time, a lioness came out of me, her claws sharp, and I spoke words I wouldn't have dared speak when I worked under his supervision.

“I want to know one thing,” I said. “Whether this association is the property of the family, or if this association is a national, public organization. I believe I have the expertise for the job, and I will work despite the family.”

I don't think he would have been able to slap me again. The ambassador was interested in the work of the association, and somehow interests always win.

I believe they were enraged, and they objected. However, I was busy sharpening my claws, waiting to attack when needed. After a short while, I was hired.

On that day, I was talking to him in front of one of his assistants, who disliked me as much as she disliked herself. Her eyes had lost their light a long time ago. She was sad and pathetic. She understood everything, and her jealousy flared over his attention toward me. She didn't know why it was happening. The family tie was startling. The other employees didn't realize the real reasons for his

fondness for me—my strength and unprecedented capability in my professional work. People usually prefer to misinterpret things, and so of course my “splendor” and beauty must have been the reason. That woman, the assistant, had started an ugly rumor about me and a male colleague in the office some time earlier. I despise such people. Those who lie in order to violate a person’s honor. Not because I care about such concepts, but because of how important such concepts are to them.

That woman was a lot like my ex-husband. As if there is one designated road everyone decides to take. He would always tell me how he filled the minds of our children with imagined stories about me and other men. “I don’t know why they like you,” he said. “Your coldness?” That coldness that I believed was truly part of me. I got divorced to be free of the sexual acts I was forced to submit to. Getting rid of him was my greatest achievement.

After our marriage, I would answer with mockery, “I didn’t know anything of sex except what you gave me, and I didn’t know if what you gave me was right. Today, I

know the difference... I understand that coldness comes from a man like you.”

The words “slept with” and “whore” and other such phrases began to work their way into my vocabulary. One day, a friend stopped me and asked, “Is there a history of prostitution in your family?”

“Of course not,” I said.

“So why do you use such phrases so often?”

I replied, “I’ve heard these words so much in the past few years, I’ve started to feel that they belong to me.”

I stopped using those words afterwards, but they remained inside me for a long time.

(31) A divorced woman is a whore

How easy it is for a woman, especially if she is divorced, to become a whore on the tongues of the people in this society. I internalized the word so deeply; I felt as though it were tattooed across my chest. However, soon enough, in the face of their immoral judgment, I began to embrace my “whoredom” as an honor. Society prides itself on integrity, but then exults in the despair of others. Their hypocrisy made me proud of what I had become.

There is a regrettable dilemma in this. With the exception of my ex-husband, who was despicable in disgracing my honor, the most insulting words were spoken by women, often women I barely knew or had never met.

I became famous for leading roles I didn’t know I was cast to play.

The divorced woman is viewed as dangerous territory by the woman who fears her husband will go astray. Suddenly, she thinks her pig of a husband looks handsome and desirable, irresistible to other women. In this way, the divorced woman can sometimes improve a marriage.

Then, there is the woman who is jealous of her own shadow, the woman I provoked. There is the woman who believes my bold ideas exceed the limits of what is acceptable, and the woman who sees divorce as a disgrace. There is the woman who thinks divorce is a threat, like a potentially fatal and contagious disease.

People had many presumptions about me, most of which I was unaware of. I told myself that enduring their insults was another good deed according to the heavens.

I could err as much as I wished. The scale of my deeds was balanced by the punishments and attacks I endured. The more they violated my honor, feasted on my flesh, and gossiped at my expense, the more elevated I became in the eyes of God.

My balance must be overflowing, I thought. It is pay day. It's time to collect what I'm owed.

Tough situations can make us stronger. In unjust circumstances, the flesh of the body hardens and its ability to survive becomes stronger.

During one lengthy stretch, I spent a good deal of time in police stations responding to claims made by my ex-husband. It was horrific. When a man becomes

obsessive, he becomes a psychotic criminal without noticing. I admit I used to be scared of him. In fact, this fear never left me completely—until this very moment, as I write this. I would shake with fear when he began to grind his teeth and clench his jaw. His appearance was enough to guarantee my horror. His calm, quiet gestures transformed into something else. You could barely believe it was the same man still standing there.

My first visit to the police station was not the result of my bravery. My ex-husband had stolen the car, and I didn't know who had taken it, so I went to the police. Such things were beyond my imagination. I never thought I could go to a police station.

The police also intervened during the first months of my divorce. Thieves broke into my parent's house and, strangely, all the gold pounds I had saved were stolen from the room I was staying in.

When my ex-husband stole the car and brought it back, he dismantled the steering wheel. He was trying to kill me. Each time I went to the police, I would refrain from telling them anything that might get him arrested. I didn't want the children to blame me for throwing their

father in jail. Many years passed this way, with the children not understanding exactly what was taking place. On one occasion, I was with the kids, waiting for them to get on the bus for a summer trip, and my purse disappeared. My youngest said, "I saw a tall man who looked like Dad, but it couldn't have been him." He used to stalk me and enter my building to cut the electricity. He would knock on the door and run. The children used to say, "There's a thief who looks like Dad." He kidnapped one of the girls as she was going to school. My daughter said, "A man who looked like my dad kidnapped me from the hand of my mother."

Every time the children asked me to respond to his accusations against me, I would say, "It doesn't matter. God never throws stones." Years later, my son said the same thing: "God doesn't throw stones at all."

However, I became part of this aggression. The disasters accumulated, until one day the court called me for a response. I said, "I cannot handle it anymore. I don't have money, and I cannot handle all of this. I am in a battle for my children, and the children are becoming the spears in this war."

Every time I involved the law, he was surprised. He couldn't imagine being anything but dominant in such situations. His word *had* to be taken over mine. When he broke my ribs, he told the staff at the hospital that I fell on the stairs. I went to the Palestinian hospital so the accident wouldn't be investigated, as it would have been in the Israeli hospital.

Two months later, before I left the house forever, he asked me to prepare his *hookah*. He lost patience with me because I ignored him. He had been keeping a close eye on me and I was doing everything I could not to provoke him. He couldn't be suspicious of me, nor could he complain that I was disobedient. Living with him for a decade had trained me to make sure his needs were met and his demands were completely fulfilled according to his requirements. But in giving him everything he wanted of me, I could no longer stand him. I no longer slept in the same bedroom with him, and moved into one of the other rooms in the house. That night, his anger reached its peak, and I will never forget the way he looked. I will never forget the words he said: "If you open your mouth, I will hit you and throw you down the stairs and make your

father come and take you to the Maqaş id hospital.” I couldn’t look at him. Any move I made would have sent me tumbling, and I was still in immense pain. The pain is still with me. But what was so terrifying at that moment was his arrogance—that he would hit me again. Not only that, he would call my father to take me to the hospital. Not only that, he was so confident I would go to the Palestinian hospital. How violated I had been. By him.

(32) Injustice of justice

Every time I went to court or to the police, my feelings for him turned into a harder stone. It made me despise him. There were times when I became too close to him to hate him, but I would remind myself that hatred is a feeling we can only have for someone we used to love. I decided that I never loved him. He didn't deserve even my hate. I had loved him only because I was raised to; I had been taught to love my husband.

I had loved him. When I left him, I realized that love was never my real feeling towards him—not true love or adoration or understanding. I loved him because he was my husband, and I believed it was my duty.

I married him when I was very young. I became the bride I had refused to be at first. Inside me was the woman I wanted to become for my mother, the woman my mother could not have become in her own time—the woman who demanded, and took more from life. There was still a human being inside me who wanted to prove to her parents that she deserved to live fully.

Maybe this is the weakest of what lies inside me. My fragile confidence can be crushed by a look from my mother. How harsh mothers can be in their love, never realizing how unfair this harshness is. My mother always wanted me to be what she couldn't become—until I decided to get a divorce. It was as if I had intruded on a world she had suppressed for ages. I had created a strange earthquake inside her. I had awakened her quiet volcano and she couldn't make herself stop.

My mother's love is equal to her harshness. It's a love like the love I feel for my children, except that my consciousness is different from hers in many ways. My mother is the victim of a society that maintains patriarchy and demands weakness in women, ideas that infiltrate the soul that otherwise might dream of a future without a man. She taught me to be what she secretly wished she could become. And when I became what she aspired to be, she tried to break it the way Abraham tried to smash the idols in his temple. Her looks followed me constantly. I felt besieged by her, yet I tried to prove to her that I deserve to be her daughter. Because I had dashed her dreams of a male child by arriving as a girl and bringing more girls

after me, I wanted to compensate her by proving that a girl can be like a boy. A feeling that never ages, no matter how old I become.

I was an obedient wife, as my mother wanted me to be, and I was strong, as she wanted me to become. I saw her joy at my stability and I saw the panic in her eyes when she remembered her own disappointments.

My confidence haunts me. So do my sisters, my children, and my ex-husband, as if they represent society. Sometimes they all collude against me, believing they're right to think I'm crazy, that my blind confidence is unrealistic, that I'm not beautiful. My eyes are hollow and lined with black circles, it's true... but they are more than the tired circles below. Just as I am much more than the features one can immediately detect. I always mocked anyone who would say my eyes and my mouth are my best features. I would imagine my ex-husband mocking me in front of the children, both during happy times and when we were fighting: "They must have seen you while you were wearing sunglasses at dinner." I would laugh and the kids would laugh, and all would agree. If I mentioned that someone complimented my body, the children and my

sisters would giggle. “They haven’t seen the cellulite and stretch marks,” they would say. I would swallow my pride and answer, “Of course, the stretch marks.” This would always be a good opportunity to show my tummy to my children and tell them the history of the lines and curves and stretch marks and surgery. One is for my eldest; the stretch marks are for my son. Those on the side came from my third and fourth. Showing my children my belly was a way of teasing them, of playing with them. When they were younger, they teased me in return. As they grew older, they viewed these scars with more respect and appreciation, as traces of the pain I endured to bring them into the world.

(33) To live under occupation

During one of my travels, a soldier stopped me for a detailed check, as usual, using a new ultraviolet X-ray machine. I had become accustomed to that checkpoint, which had become much harsher than before. The individual inspections conducted by female soldiers are apologetic, filled with timidity and embarrassment for violating your body. I let her search me, looking for suspicious items. I was amused by her personal dilemma while she searched me, trying to forget the humiliation I feel in such moments.

The machine should decrease the humiliation of a direct body search, but nothing can actually satisfy the soldiers' obsession. The Palestinian is guilty until proven innocent. I became accustomed to wearing minimal pieces of clothing to the airport, so the guards' hands wouldn't touch me. But this is also ineffective. Once, the machine buzzed, insisting there was something suspicious upon me, traces of something unnatural on my body. This machine sees every detail of the body, even the stretch marks of my

pregnancies. I said mockingly, “There used to be Palestinian children in there.”

Our need to build happiness is often simple. A look fills our lives with happiness—and a look destroys them completely.

I hated turning harsh. I tried to remain keen and mindful, to remain on the inner path of ease and tolerance. I wanted peace within myself, so that I could endure everything that happened outside of me. But peace never comes through hate and rage. I learned to reconcile those feelings that were inside me. Even toward the soldier at the checkpoint who would insist on violating my humanity.

I would busy myself in the long lines at the checkpoint with a book. In the past, these long lines would enrage me, and there were times when I almost got killed. The guards take you to the depths of humiliation, and you lose any will to live. You lose your fear, and your universe becomes a surreal emptiness. They cruelly and coldly strip you of your humanity. They strip you completely. I had three such incidents with the soldiers over the years. I understood how they could allow anger and hatred to

control them. I understood the meaning of deprivation, which makes you finally reach out, burst out, to become someone new.

One time, I quarreled with a soldier who was busy eating a cracker while working at the checkpoint. At that time, suicide attacks threatened Israeli cities. I waited for two hours with one single car ahead of me, because a twenty-year-old soldier chose to violate our life. I was taking my daughter to her tennis class, and the class ended while we waited at the mercy of that young man dressed in a uniform and armed with a gun. I looked at him and said, “Do you know why people blow themselves up? It is because of people like you.” An exchange of loud words took place. He took my ID and yelled at me. It was the first time I noticed I could speak Hebrew—when I realized there was another person speaking to *me* in Hebrew. I studied in the Hebrew university for three years, and I never spoke more than a sentence. I quit during my last year so I wouldn’t have to struggle with the language anymore. Because I was not an Israeli citizen, I was considered an international student, and international students did not have to speak Hebrew in the university.

Otherwise, it would have meant learning a new language (the language of the occupier) in a university that was literally a few meters from my birthplace. But inside me, I refused the language as much as I refused the state that accompanied it. In the years I spent at the university, I never saw a single Israeli. I didn't recognize them. They were not there.

I was confident they would disappear exactly the way they appeared: suddenly. My Arabic teacher at school always told us, "They are called Jews, not Israelis. Israel is a temporary word that was imposed on us, and it will recede someday." While I was attending school there, the second Gulf War was underway. At that time, I believed liberation was coming. I wanted to believe that Saddam Hussein's attacks on Israel would bring an end to the occupation, but I could also see that his attacks were having little effect. In order to justify exposing myself to Israelis, I said I was only talking to Jews. They were Brits, or Americans, or French, and so they all had nationalities other than Israeli. Which would disappear someday soon, I believed.

Ten years later, we were living in the Second Intifada, Saddam was under attack, and I had changed. I realized my denial would not bring a solution. So I accepted the occupiers and heard their stories.

But that soldier represented the disorder that exists in occupation. He was the reassurance that they are only there to violate you and steal your life from you and keep you breathing just enough to continue living. The truth is that the occupation pushes you towards an abyss, a hell you walk through on your own two feet. To suicide. To exploding yourself.

In that moment, when he ordered me to obey and shut up and I refused, I was screaming in Hebrew with a gun pointed at my head. The world fell away. I saw only a blank whiteness, an emptiness, and could only hear the sound of my voice. With his gun pointed at me, he told me my existence no longer mattered. I lost entire moments, unaware of my surroundings, like I was in a trance. Suddenly, I was taken aback by the sound of my daughter crying and my young son saying, "Mommy, Mommy... enough." I was surrounded by people. I don't know where they came from. A nice soldier was trying to calm me

down, while another pulled the first soldier away from me. I came out of that trance, which had pulled me powerfully into the unknown. I wasn't feeling myself. I was in a state of fearlessness, and it was wondrous. I broke all the walls of fear in that moment, and I opened my arms to death, screaming and calling for it.

(34) *Fear*

Fear is our worst enemy. It never tires of plaguing us. It even coerces some of us to our deaths.

People's beliefs about death govern the way they live their lives. They believe in false notions about what death will bring, and this can cause them to devalue life.

Living under years of occupation has diminished the value of life among the Palestinian people. Life feels so miserable and worthless that death seems merely to be a change, not a loss. Young men are eager to go and fight, knowing they will likely be killed, because this would not be a loss to them. It would be an escape, and may be viewed as glorious in the eyes of fellow Palestinians.

Israel has successfully convinced us that our lives and our deaths are equivalent. Thus, we rush to our deaths and make it a race, singing for martyrdom and dancing in its name.

They snatched from us the spark of life; it lost its value in our souls. When young men wrapped their abdomens in explosive belts after the Second Intifada, Israelis didn't understand that snatching the meaning of

life from one's soul makes it easier for that person to sacrifice the body. Living in that state of humiliation, oppression, and suppression changes the nature of our souls and robs us of our joy for life.

(35) Pain in fear

I understand and sympathize with the men who throw their own lives away in such a manner. I sense their desperation. I feel their pain. For a long time, I understood their actions, their decision to end their lives. Their desperation and humiliation comes from all directions—not only the occupation, but also the corruption within the Palestinian leadership. There is no hope for a better future. One had only to try to pass through a checkpoint during the Second Intifada and be humiliated by a guard no older than your son to feel this level of frustration. I felt the same sense of hopelessness, though later I would meet a man who changed my mind, who reminded me that there is always some value to life, no matter what has been stripped away.

Diagnosing what happened and is happening is not complicated. It's easy to understand. The Palestinian people today live in a state of devastation and desperation. The tyranny of occupation and corruption, as well as tension within the Palestinian Authority, robbed the Palestinian youth of any promising future. The state of

increasing humiliation from all directions has led young people to take their own lives with kitchen knives, or even with a ruler or scissors.

I do understand those who go to their end aspiring to reach heaven. Or those so desperate from living an existence that loathes them that they let go of it. I cannot blame such a person, living in despair and desperation, without hope for a solution. Life needs a space for hope to thrive, and such spaces have been shut and locked for young Palestinians.

At this time, during the Second Intifada, I said what many others said, that every Palestinian passing through a checkpoint is a potential suicide attack. I repeated this until I met the person I would later call the angel of death. I was in a Jenin refugee camp with a group of activists on an invitation from the late director, Julian, who was also a creative force in the freedom theater. A very well-known man who represented the leadership appeared. He was at the top of the list of people wanted by the occupation. I was horrified when I saw him. His relationship with Julian was very close. What Julian and his mother, Arna, did in the camp to establish the theater

was very impressive and inspiring. They attracted young people to the theater and gave them chances and choices for creativity and expression in ways they were not used to amid the violence and desperation that haunts life in refugee camps.

The man sat in front of us and situated himself in the middle of the room. His face had been disfigured in an accident, when a bomb exploded as he was building it. The way he spoke was cold and monotone and carried a horrific energy. I was scared and surprised. The details he described were very interesting, and I couldn't take my eyes off him. It was as if he had bewitched me. He was talking about how he prepared the suicide bombs, how the young men used to come to him, and how they used to plan their attacks.

I looked around, and for an instant my eyes met with one of the Jewish activists. I saw the horror in her expression as she tried to suppress the tears in her eyes. The man was proudly describing his deeds. And he spoke about his own life, which was a tragedy by all measures. His mother and father were killed. His brothers were killed one after the other. He was wanted, and so nobody would

provide him shelter, fearing retribution, fearing that they'd become a target. His life was one escape after another.

I looked at him at some point and asked, "How can you still carry on with life when you have so many reasons not to? Why do you lead others to their deaths with their own hands, and yet you hold on to your own life? Why do you take them to a cowardly death? Why not train them to fight instead? Why carry out suicide attacks on a busload of people feeling safe, regardless of who they are? Isn't it enough to know that a child was among the crowd? While military bases are popping up on every intersection, why don't you train these men to confront and fight? If death is their destiny, why don't they die in real combat?" Suddenly, I saw him as a devil, a kidnapper of souls. Why was his life valuable while others' lives were worth nothing to him?

At that moment, I came to despise suicide attacks. Because whoever leads them is a kidnapper of souls, working in the place of God to decide who lives and dies.

What is happening these days is different—it's neither directed nor organized. All who decide to leave their homes with a knife do so quietly. Trust is totally

absent. They no longer trust a system, authority, party, or family. They only know a desperate feeling and the devastation that bled them of any value for life.

(36) horror awaiting

I feel horrified every time I leave home, or the girls go to school. I submit totally to God, because I cannot predict anything that may happen. When the tension was at its peak, I made sure to discuss what was going on with my children. I was afraid they could be mistaken for an attacker. The Israeli guards would persecute anyone on the smallest suspicion. Or I feared they actually would sacrifice themselves in this way. Horror knocked at my heart each time my youngest daughter sat in front of the TV and asked, “What would you do if I became a martyr? Why do we live? Look at all this injustice. What did these children do to deserve this? Why do we live such a life in the first place?”

I made myself available to discuss this with her. We even planned an outing together so we could confront the situation peacefully. I took the girls to the Old City and we walked around, challenging our fears and the soldiers. At one point, I found the right solution. I said, “If you become a martyr, it doesn’t matter. I will follow. I will not be capable of life without you, and in this way we all

become martyrs.” I wanted to show her how much I needed her. Somehow, my lack of interest in my own life made her worry. The heroic act she imagined began to fall apart. Young Palestinians want to commit a heroic act they can leave behind one that will be immortal.

Thinking about this is exhausting and worrisome. I don't understand how a mother can live after losing her children in such a way. It is immensely difficult to lose a child. How do they go on when their children are hijacked and given over to death in such a way?

I have always been a fan of the Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire and his school of thought concerning education. I agree that there is no such thing as neutral education. Education is either about oppression or liberation, and education and raising children are connected. Both contribute to the growth of the child. I look at my children and their thirst for freedom, for liberation from unclear constraints, especially when compared to other Palestinians in the West Bank. The infrastructure here in Jerusalem is different from that on the other side of the homeland. Signs of modernity are much more obvious. Palestinian citizens here have slightly

more freedom than those in the West Bank. Their confinement makes our freedom seem greater, though we are not free. Freedom is in the eye of the beholder, and there is always more to wish for.

What is happening in Palestinian society is horrific on a social and educational level. The horizons of the children—male and female—are closed off by settlements and a giant wall. The Palestinian raises his head, and his eyes can only see the surrounding wall. His movement is determined by a soldier, who holds him back at every checkpoint. Palestinians live in a disgusting maze of cities and villages that don't allow for the possibility of a full life.

Now that young people, through social media, are able to access and absorb so much beyond their own narrow reality, their sense of loss becomes even greater. They are constantly aware of the freedoms others are able to enjoy—the freedoms they are repeatedly denied.

In my own life, the patriarchy is another form of occupation—a second form of dominance, an additional means of control. I wonder if I obsess over this comparison because I am Palestinian, because I live under

a double occupation? Or is it an objective fact that life is this way? That a Palestinian woman must suffer two forms of tyrannical governance.

Despite theism, we are required to seek the truth. We will feel a sense of awe if we get close to it and bring it out of its depths.

Truth is sought, but reality is what should be lived.

Like marriage, which is described as peaceful living, but in reality is imprisonment. The married couple are the jailed and the jailer. Despite this, everyone insists that marriage is heaven, and the man and wife are the guards of this pure existence and eternal beauty inside that heaven.

I don't know why I joined a training course in *Shari'ah*. Ten years earlier, I had thrown the textbook away the day before the exam when I discovered the shocking difference between truth and reality. I was getting ready for the exam, enthusiastically memorizing the texts. I wanted to fulfill my dream of practicing law. I wanted to defend women like myself. I wanted to become my own role model in a career that would allow me to defend and empower my gender.

The truth struck loudly when it arrived. The law is supposed to create order—this is the “truth” we are given. But the reality is that whomever holds power takes for himself at the expense of others. I saw this in the rules and definition of voided marriages. A Muslim woman is prohibited from marrying a non-Muslim man. This is an unarguable truth, I believed, and I was sure it was dictated by the Quran. I was the obedient Muslim, as I was expected to be. At that time, there was a *fatwa* on the Sudanese jurist Mufti Hassan Turabi. He was being attacked from all directions. “There is no text in the Quran that says that a Muslim woman is prohibited from marrying a non-Muslim man,” he said. *He is* a kafir, I thought to myself in ignorance.

I’d read the Quran every day and finished it at least once a month for the last twenty years of my life. And I read that verse time and time again. *It is there in* Surat al-Baqara, I said to myself. *The religious rule is there in the book.* Surat al-Ma’ida, al-Nour, *and their many verses.* I rushed to the Quran searching for that verse... and I didn’t find it.

I searched in another version of the Quran. Maybe there was a problem with my copy. I doubted everything, except the verse that I was sure was there. It prohibits intermarriage clearly and strictly. The rule had been there in front of me, I was sure of it.

I found the verse in *Surat al-Baqara*. I rejoiced. Here it is: “And do not marry polytheistic women until they believe. And a believing slave woman is better than a polytheist, even though she might please you. And do not marry polytheistic men [to your women] until they believe. And a believing slave is better than a polytheist, even though he might please you. Those invite [you] to the Fire, but Allah invites you to Paradise and to forgiveness, by His permission. And He makes clear His verses to the people that perhaps they may remember.”

There must be another verse missing here, I told myself. He is also telling the man not to marry the polytheistic woman, and do not marry the polytheistic man, he says to the woman. But a polytheist is not a person belonging to another religion. Yet this is not the most important issue. If this verse speaks to the male and the female equally, why does the religious rule allow the

man to marry outside the religion but forbid the woman to? If the Quran is so obvious and clear in its discourse, why did religious law change the rule in its application to the woman?

I began to research the question, and I found a book by al-Qaradawi, chief jurist of al-Azhar. He was popular at the time, and I related to his *fatwas*. His book was titled *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*. In the chapter on the marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man, his answer was straightforward and eloquent, separating truth from reality: “A Muslim woman is prohibited from marrying a non-Muslim man, whether he is *kitab* (from another monotheist religion) or not. And she cannot in any case. And we mentioned God’s words: (And do not marry polytheistic men [to your women] until they believe.) And God has mentioned in regards to immigrant faithful women: When there come to you believing women refugees, examine (and test) them: Allah knows best as to their Faith: if ye ascertain that they are Believers, then send them not back to the Unbelievers. They are not lawful (wives) for the Unbelievers, nor are the (Unbelievers) lawful (husbands) for them.) And no

other text except that came to this rule. Voiding has been agreed upon among Muslims.”

I tried to find an answer with certainty. I read the verse time and time again. It addresses both males and females. And the polytheistic are not the people of the book. There is this differentiation that is emphasized in our religious education: a polytheistic person believes in more than one God, or does not believe in God at all, whilst the people of the book are those who, like Muslims, believe in one God. Why can a man marry a Jewish woman or a Christian, but she cannot marry a man of those faiths if the Quranic rule is there, and clear? Al-Qaradawi’s answer to that was the same as the answer in our religion textbook in school when I was eight or nine years old: “The woman is not allowed to marry neither a Jew nor a Christian because the man is responsible for the family and he is dominant over her.” These were words I was raised on. I was convinced they were true. They were engraved inside me like a tattoo. I gave in completely to the religious authorities who are entrusted to pass on what God has told us. I was also convinced that the Quran had answers to my perplexity. The Quran is there to help me

understand what I have missed. The Quran was created in a language and crafted into an understandable structure. It wasn't falsified like other books. In the Quran lies certainty. In the Quran is the answer.

But what the jurists decided among their *sheikhs* and *muftis* was different. It is true that we are obligated to follow the Quran. While much is hidden and mystified, far from the understanding of commoners, there are things that are clear and obvious. Why should we understand it differently from how it was written? Why are phrases cut and dropped and not used in accordance with their meaning?

(37) *Guardianship*

There is a certain guardianship forced on us, both men and women, by society. This guardianship takes the form of men of religion and men of politics. This is what takes shape in societies with tribal thinking and with dictatorships. The same authority can be said in an intellectual thinker, whether his ideas are based in religion or something else. He, too, can take power for himself by capitalizing on his intelligence and taking advantage of those who are uneducated or ignorant. The late Egyptian thinker Nasr Abu Zayd confirms that “the guardianship of the intellectual ends to one result, the ultimate dictatorship of politics from one side, and the priesthood of thought from the other side. Hence, the guardianship on the audience—based on its lack of awareness—results in fixing the missing consciousness and supporting it.”

I was filled with the most basic questions about the rules and laws that governed everyday behavior: Why must we wear the *hijab*? What is the point? Why are we forbidden to drink alcohol? Why am I forbidden to marry a non-Muslim man? But to ask these questions was to place oneself in dangerous territory.

I decided I didn't want the guardianship of men—political, religious, intellectual, or otherwise. Their rules for governance were hollow.

Stop...

Forbidden...

Don't disbelieve...

Ask for forgiveness...

God forbids...

The girl has gone mad...

I said to myself, "Girl, keep your madness to yourself and stay away." How can I repeat and memorize rules that I am not convinced of? How do I defend a cause for something that cannot even be discussed? How can I stand up for my rights when I don't have a right to address the clear, apparent truth?

Because reality almost never aligns with truth.

Or perhaps reality, with the divinity of masculinity and the existing societal texture, should not be affected by a threat from truth. Truth here is destructive, and the society, the preservation of its very structure, are more important.

That rule regarding pregnancy, for instance. How can any rational person accept that pregnancy can last for four years? The teacher's answer was, "They have modified the time, and it has become two years."

No argumentation in religion.

This dialogue stuck in my mind for ten full years. To start over again with the same question and receive the same answer that lacks logic or reason. Anyone using logic has fallen to *zandaqa* (disbelief), as the most honorable Imam Ibn Taymiyyah said. (This statement is also attributed to Imam al-Ghazali and al-Suyuti.) The rule is there to preserve the home. "The child is for the bed!" I cannot deny how much I like the rule that encourages the protection of families. But the question remains: Is there any protection left for the family? Or is it just for the preservation of the institution of marriage? It should not collapse. Or is it the preservation of the prestige of man and his nearness to divinity? He is the god, the god of the family. He can produce in the uterus of his wife a son in four years.

Sorry, two years.

(38) Rule is: Protection of Society

The fundamental rule is the protection of the society. I have to adhere to this and repeat it.

“You ask questions you don’t need to ask, my dear.”

The teacher stares at me with a friendly look, and continues. “Stop it. Calm down and let us finish this lesson.” My questions incite sedition.

I cut my questions short. I shut down, and locked my head.

How exhausted my head has made me. Too much thinking.

I was not allowed to question and scrutinize; my job was to accept and obey. The rules are there to keep the man at the highest level of the social structure. No matter what. Rules are aligned for his benefit, to ensure that his word carries the most authority. The woman, of course, has the right to return to the duties the jurisdiction- *sharia*-asks her to perform.

The jurist man, of course, knows more than me—that my pregnancy might last years. And that I can endure

all but dependency. The jurisdiction gave me—as a woman—alimony rights, as long as I am “imprisoned” and not disobedient. A woman can endure everything except hunger, according to jurists. Hunger can make her commit bad deeds... God forbid... We don’t want her to become an adulteress...

Unless the man chooses that for her. She can hide her pregnancy for four years and remain virtuous, but she cannot endure the absence of food. So, jurisdiction gave her the right to alimony—under certain conditions, of course.

Legislative arrangements insist on her subordination. No matter how hard she tries, how independent she becomes, how old she grows. No matter how much she understands. She remains, no matter what she does, “Incompetent in her mind and her religion,” according to *hadith*.

She remains a hostage to jurisdictions sold as the word of God. Obedience to God. Fear from punishment. Threat of torture. All are under the rule of man. Through a man she enters heaven, and because of a

man we are burned at the bottom of hell. In our life and after death.

And we women continue to contrive stories in which we hand over the starring role to men.

He grants permission. He thinks for us. He tells us what we like to hear. And what our hearts soften to. We know ourselves through him and for him. We live our lives through attraction to him and distraction from him.

This is our destiny. His heaven and his hell. We are destined to live in his shadow if we want to live at all. Our life is sheltered by the man who begins as a father and ends as a husband, with shadows of other men in between—a brother, an uncle, a son, a lover, a friend, a *sheikh*, a *mufti*, and a *mawla* (guru). If they suddenly all disappear, and the burning rays of the sun invade our hearts, we must remember that God is “masculine.” Above us, there is always a male.

(39) Justice under occupation

Arabs living in Israeli territory can choose to take legal matters to the Israeli courts, which are more liberal, or to the Islamic courts. But an Arab woman using the more “impartial” and progressive Israeli courts is likely to feel just as oppressed and neglected as she would in her own Arabic sphere of law.

When going to the *Shari’ah* courts, she knows what to expect. We don’t like the *Shari’ah* family court that is, in our view, unjust to women, but we know exactly where we are and what the consequences will be. Our expectations of that system are limited, but familiar.

In Israeli family law, there is a separation that is not official, and the discrimination is not necessarily intended, but there is the assumption that we are inferior, and there is an absence of knowledge about Palestinian society. For them, the Palestinian family is conventional. The woman is veiled and hides behind a dominating man who can violate and abuse her. The Israeli woman, however, in the view of the judicial system, is a natural consequence of a modern democratic state. The Muslim

woman is, at best, lucky that she can use the Israeli judicial system.

The judge in my case was a woman. She was moderate in her views and her words. It was difficult to read her. She listened to me and understood my words as a woman, maybe, or as a human. Until the Israeli lawyer spoke and argued that, as a woman, in both words and actions, I was not in line with Palestinian society. How can a Palestinian woman send her children to tennis and swimming lessons, and other such activities? How can an Arab woman raise a cat and take care to return home to feed it? Arabs barely feed their children. They barely send their children to schools, so why the international schools, in this case?

During one court hearing, he screamed in my face, “How can you read Schopenhauer and have time to raise children? Reading requires a lot of time. How do you balance between reading and time with your children?” This kind of dialogue affected the judge, who agreed with his views about Palestinian society, that Arab women are uneducated and obedient. I was the exception to her generalization about Palestinian life.

She did not even take into account the tears of my children. My children and their tears didn't affect her. Perhaps she also saw them as eccentric, odd children who were dangerous to Israeli society.

They claim a liberty they do not grant us, like in marriage. We live in a patriarchal structure within a patriarchal structure. A woman is always there, maintaining the dominance of man. She insists on it.

And I, the woman, the mother in this case, am nothing but an incubator. I hosted in my uterus a child and breastfed him for some months or years. I watched over him night after night and raised him. In the end, the system and the society and the universe come and take him. He carries his father's name, and he cannot put his mother's name next to his.

I carry a name I don't know how to retrieve or keep. When I tried to recover my family name, the employee told me I needed to get written proof that my family would allow me to have that name back. A woman in my situation loses her family name when she gets married and cannot get it back except through a written approval. And the name of the husband remains with her.

She cannot get rid of it. How can I get rid of it? And my children carry it as if I did not give birth to them, as if I did not raise them. As if I were merely a nanny, a babysitter.

I was lost in the labyrinth of names for many years, and I felt so foolish when I finally decided to keep the marital name on all official documents. Perhaps I gave in and gave up. I said to myself, “It is the name of my children. They cannot change their names, so I will keep mine with theirs.”

(40) The end

Her talk suddenly came to a halt. She was exhausted, and I was tired of listening. She said, “This talk should stop, and this story should come to an end.”

She looked around. The place had emptied of people. It was as if she had just descended from another world and begun to observe the universe for the first time. She looked at me and asked for a cigarette.

“I didn’t know that you smoked,” I said, surprised.

“I don’t smoke,” she said, inhaling deeply and laughing, as if she had just taken the first breath of her life.

I tried to re-enter myself after her journey. I felt a deep sense of amazement. I couldn’t differentiate between reality and imagination, between her story and mine.

She asked me to write her story... I thought...

I don’t know if I can ever succeed in writing a novel. I don’t know if I can set my own life aside to imagine a totally fictional world. Even after writing all of this, I am still processing everything that has happened to me: the world I was born into, the abstractions and arbitrary rules that shaped what my life has become. I am

still obsessed with making sense of it. It is hard to imagine turning away in order to write a novel about people who are not real.

Something inside me doesn't know how to inhabit or imitate the life of another. But one must inhabit many lives in order to write a novel. Perhaps my life is the only novel I know how to write. Perhaps it is already written inside me. Perhaps it is the story that busies me.

Perhaps there is a novel that is being written about my life.

Perhaps our own lives are the origin of the novels we write. Some read between the lines. Some cannot express themselves. Some pour forth novel after novel, in which the writer becomes the narrator of his own life. Perhaps narrating one's own story is easier.

Embodying her and myself, our novels ascended and mingled and I could no longer differentiate between the narrator and the writer.

(0) And we go again ...

The lines of this story started with words from her, Nawal El Saadawi, a writer I am proud of. And words from him, Youssef Ziedan, a writer I am proud of: “Be you. Destroy all the protective walls of fear.”

It also began with a discussion that took place among the three of us about our lives. The two writers explained that we (all of us, so many of us) are caught up in external realities—what we are told to be, what *happens* to us, how others influence and dictate our roles as men and women. We turn these into unnecessary conflicts. We put ourselves in the boxing ring and swing at the air for no reason. This results in a double loss—a victory for one side or the other, and the continuation of the battle. We waste our lives on incoherencies that become the core of who we are. We are lost in the hoax of humanity, and leave it to religion, customs, norms, and people of authority, all of which are united in order to distract us. We chase after ridiculous matters, and we find ourselves lost until we can no longer recognize our own souls, or our

reasons for living. We hold strongly to stupid affairs until they become our pillars.

In our conversation, these writers said something so enlightening. Our only job is to understand ourselves and what we want, and to live in an authentic way, regardless of the reality that is designed to confine us.

I am still trying to break apart all the gods I worshipped throughout my days and years—the people and the cultural norms—but they still roam around within me. I still don't know what truth I am searching for.

I am certain, however, that the answers to my lost questions reside within me, and me alone.

I may need a whole new lifetime to reach myself. To flirt with it. To love it genuinely, to reconcile with it, to remove it from the old depths where I both lived and didn't live.

There is something in our heritage, that undoubtedly shapes our identity. I cannot say I don't want it, or that I try to rid myself of it. But everything that taints and distorts this heritage should be thrown out if the human inside us wants to find his or her humanity. The

humanity he or she was created to know in order to be creative and build.

This story might be the story of all women. Perhaps the trials I endured are extreme when compared to those of other women, or perhaps my life is no more complicated than anyone else's. Its simplicity could be ridiculous, and its boldness could be tragic. And it could be and it could be...

But, in the end, this is a human story that, through its revelations, forms me and liberates me from the complexities that liberation alone can dismantle.

I seek the freedom I am certain I was born for...

The creativity that built the world...

The humanity in us is God's miracle on this earth.

And me...

This uncertain, dreamy person within this universe...

I will not search for a man to be my support...

My words will be my own support and my legacy.

Men will always remain shadows over my obsessions and apprehensions.

In writing these lines, I feel my life passing through me, as if I'm giving birth to something, but I don't know what it is. I don't feel the same pain of childbirth, only the belief that something new is coming, and that everything before and after will be different. It's the same feeling I had when I decided a decade ago to get a divorce.

They say that beginnings are always easier in love and adoration, but not in life. I feel as if I have been hurled from one place to another, toward horizons I didn't realize existed until now.

It's as if an invisible power is dredging me, holding me, and delivering me to a future containing a whole new reality.

I am still afraid to dream.

I am still afraid to give up the hope that the universe is just, even though the spread of tyranny, oppression, and brutality prove the opposite. It seems as if there is a system where tyranny wins over justice, but there remains that space for hope, which moves us. We live our lives, if we notice, for the sake of a moment, of countless moments that may shape our happiness and our

miseries, our successes and our failures, our beginnings and our ends.

And there remain moments that may come every decade or so and transform you, with life holding you in its arms, moving you somewhere else. Over there... towards new horizons... choosing you, specifically... carrying you, saying: *dream!*... live within the heart of hope... with hope, space can be created... and within that space is life.

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