

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

A woman's face is the central focus, partially obscured by a semi-transparent diamond-patterned overlay. She is surrounded by various flowers, including pink hibiscus, yellow and orange lilies, and green leaves. The background is a dark purple with a repeating diamond pattern.

MOTHER COUNTRY

ETA F RUM

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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ETA F RUM

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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1.

***B**eing a woman is the greatest curse, you told me once. I must have been six or seven. You said, *One day you will understand what I mean.**

This was back before that day when things went wrong between us, sitting in your kitchen. Back in the beginning, when I was still trying to make sense of our world, of you and your place within it, of me and you. So why do those words come back to me now? Now, when I am so focused on the future, so desperate to leave the past behind.

Is it, perhaps, because thoughts of the future are actually memories? Researchers believe that we rearrange our memories of the past to put together a vision of what the future might look like. Mapping brain regions using fMRI has allowed researchers to see the brain activity of people as they remember the past and imagine the future. Karl Szpunar observed that the activity in the brain during both tasks is almost completely overlapping. This must be why when I envision my future the only image I see is you.

This morning, as I packed my suitcase to see you, I listened to “Helwa Ya Baladi.” You used to sing this to us back then, in our cramped Brooklyn apartment, all nine of us stuffed together like sardines. Do you remember?

My hope was always to come back to you, my mother country, you sang. To stay with you until the end of time.

Alone in my new bedroom, bare with white walls and a tall window, I hummed this melody as I reached for a few items from my closet: blue jeans, a black dress, a sweater big enough to swallow me. The room smelled like jasmine and fresh paint, and for a long time I just stood there, thinking of you. A light rain misted over the window. I wondered if you regretted staying in America. If things would’ve been different between us had you found the courage to return to Palestine. If it would have been possible for us to forgive each other.

This was when I decided to write to you, two years after we last spoke, in case I cannot form the words when we meet.

When I remember that day, my brain reconstructs the setting. We are sitting together at the kitchen table making fatayer, spinach pies. You flatten a ball of dough, fill it with a spoonful of wilted spinach and allspice, and fold the sides into a triangle. You do not like what I am telling you, you do not like what I am about to do, but you remain seated, your fingers quivering on the table. I inhale the scent of olive oil and citrusy sumac, feeling a heaviness in my body I cannot name. I try to meet your eyes, but you won't look at me. You are far away, lost in something outside the window, your face arrayed in light.

Now, when I imagine what it will be like to see you again, I notice myself preliving it, constructing a similar scene using details from this memory: soft dough against my fingertips, a streak of sunlight across your face. But my ability to imagine our future together using my memories has one disadvantage: I expect the future to be too much like the past.

I think now of the Fairuz song, how you used to swirl around the kitchen with a wet rag in your hand, singing openly as you pulled up the sleeves of your nightgown and squatted to your knees, your body assuming the position. Your body warped, scrubbing the linoleum floor, was the default state of things. I wish I had understood what you endured back then, how much you sacrificed. I wish I had learned to reserve judgment.

Dear Mama, I begin. Maybe this way I can reach you at last.

2.

The first time I traveled without you, I took a flight down south to attend my wedding. I was nineteen years old. You and Baba would drive down in a few days, along with my six siblings—five sisters and one brother—all eight of you huddled in our blue Chevy van. But in the meantime, you sent your mother on the flight to chaperone me. She was visiting from Palestine to celebrate me, her eldest grandchild and the first to get married.

I did not understand what I was doing when I agreed to marry him and leave you. It was raining, and I stared out the window the entire flight, imagining the rest of my life playing out. I would start over, have a better life. I would put the past behind me, like closing the final chapter of a sad book and starting a new one.

The airplane smelled musty and sour, like dirty socks. I wanted to cry because I had a nagging suspicion that I had made a mistake. I didn't want to get married, but in our family marriage was a priority. *What about my dreams?* I asked when the suitors began knocking on our door. *You can do what you want in your husband's house, you and Baba said. After marriage.*

Looking back now, I realize it wasn't a dream I was reaching for, more like avoiding a nightmare.

When our flight landed, I saw that the town was quite different from our neighborhood in Brooklyn. Outside I could hear birds chirping in the air. I could smell the sweet scent of freshly cut grass with a hint of pine. Bright red and pink crape myrtles lined the driveway of every home. For a long time I stood there, unblinking, taking in the view. I was thinking about how it would feel to live in a place full of color. Would it relieve the numbness I felt inside? Would it make me happy?

America looks so different from the refugee camps, my grandmother said in Arabic. And in every city, the same scene.

What does it look like? I asked her.

Paved streets lined with trees, she said.

I don't remember much of my wedding day. Arabic music pounded in my ears, and around me men and women danced in a circle, wearing Palestinian scarves around their necks and waving long sticks in the air. Mabrouk, congratulations, they kept saying. But standing on the dance floor between them, all I could think of was how I'd never spent a night away from home. What would it be like to leave you now, to start over new?

Do you think I will be happy? I asked you the night before the wedding. Do you remember? We were sitting together on the balcony of the hotel room, drinking chai, neither of us able to sleep. The sky was a gauzy blue, and you stared at it for a long moment, not responding. Your eyes were wet, but you weren't crying.

It depends, you finally said.

On what?

If you accept your place as a woman, learn not to expect too much.

But I want things to be different, I said, breathing so hard my stomach hurt.

You shook your head. *Well, don't get your hopes up,* you said. *I left Palestine hoping for a better life than my own mother. And look how that turned out.*

I opened my mouth to tell you that I was afraid. That I wanted a better marriage than yours. But in an instant your life flashed before me, and I couldn't bring myself to say the words. I looked away, toward the darkness, ashamed to be wanting anything at all.

I don't remember what happened next, overwhelmed by the night sky, stretching on endlessly. I don't remember telling you goodbye.

3.

In the early days my husband worked in his father's gas station from sunrise to sunset. To avoid being alone, I spent my afternoons in my mother-in-law's house, helping her cook and clean after her children. Her life wasn't much different from yours with one exception, a big one, really: she had five sons. Two of them were still teenagers and lived at home with her, two of them were in college, and my husband, the eldest, lived in a small house a few miles away. Most days I stood beside my mother-in-law the same way I stood beside you, plunging my hands in dirty dishwater or scrubbing bathroom floors or chopping vegetables for stew, desperate for approval.

Even though I wanted to be free of these mundane tasks when I married her son, even though I wanted a more empowered life than yours, the routine felt safe, familiar, and I clung to it.

I did not realize I was seeking comfort in the familiar. I did not yet understand what Sigmund Freud meant, the desire to return to an earlier state of things.

I've always wanted a daughter, my mother-in-law said one afternoon as I fixed her a cup of chai. Slowly I set it before her on the coffee table, my hands shaking, tears welling in my eyes. I'd never heard those words before.

Some afternoons I helped my mother-in-law iron laundry. Uncorked yellow squash before stuffing it with rice and minced meat. Wiped pubic hair off the base of the toilet. Moved the antique china cabinet in the dining room so I could wipe the baseboards behind it. My mother-in-law watched from the doorway as I pressed my body against the wood, out of breath. *You don't realize how much dirt is hidden under things*, she said.

At dusk, my husband would return home from work to find me sitting on the living room sofa, dinner warming on the stove. He was a charming, funny man with eyes so big and black I couldn't bring myself to look into

them. Whenever he spoke, he tilted his head and his pupils widened to large beads. I'd turn away, fumbling with the hem of my sleeves. Something about the look in his eyes unsettled me, but I told myself I was imagining things. Or maybe I just hadn't gotten used to him. It was easy, back then, to discredit myself. This was back in the beginning. Before I'd learned to listen to the voice inside that didn't use words. Back when I was desperate to let my walls down, to finally trust someone. *What did you do today?* he would ask playfully. Then, *Why do your hands smell like Clorox?*

I recounted the day's events to him, the dusting and stuffing and mopping, unable to meet his eyes. When I finally looked up, he offered me a sweet smile. But it seemed as though my words did not register. *She must be glad to finally have a daughter,* he said.

I excused myself to the bathroom, scrubbed my fingertips hard.

That was ten years ago. Back then, I did not realize that the smell of bleach reminded me of you, that the time I spent scrubbing those floors was an attempt to get closer to you, to bridge the states between us. To undo all that had been done.

What do you mean, all that had been done? I can hear you say now, your voice trembling. *You make it sound like you were tortured, like I was some sort of monster. I gave you everything I had, sacrificed my life for you.*

I thought about making a list for you now, to explain it to you. Or perhaps to explain it to myself. How the anger between you and Baba throbbed and pulsed through our house like a heartbeat, consuming us, our bodies forever flinching. How at night your screams seeped through the walls and into bed with me, how I stuffed my pillow into my ears until I stopped shaking. The days we walked block after block, collecting empty aluminum cans because we didn't have enough money. The dingy, paper-thin mattresses we found on the corner of Fifth Avenue and carried home, how we laid them on the bare floor and slept on them, two or three kids per mattress, then stacked them against the wall every morning because we didn't have enough room. The bedbugs. Those long days at the mall, the panic in your eyes. That time, in Ramallah, when you slapped me hard in the middle of the market because I kept saying *Mama*, as if you were disgusted by the word, as if its sound was a reminder of your burden. The summer you pinched my nose with a laundry pin so it would stop growing. The years you called me Pinocchio because my nose was big like Baba's.

How you couldn't stand to look at me because I reminded you of him. *How, how, how . . .* But the sentences are locked in my throat.

I want to continue, want to shed my guilt and let go of old grievances, want to bridge the miles and years between us. But my flight is boarding now and I have to go.

4.

Two months after our wedding, I had my first appointment with a gynecologist. A female doctor wasn't available, so my mother-in-law accompanied me. *I reviewed your pee sample*, the doctor said when he entered the room. *I'm afraid I won't be able to examine you today.*

I nodded, though I wasn't sure what he was implying. *Why not?* I asked him.

You're pregnant, he revealed.

Inshallah walad, my mother-in-law said. A son.

Let's hope she's right, you said when I told you. *For your sake.*

I am the eldest of seven children. Six of us are girls. I remember the shame you endured each time you learned of our gender, the humiliation your own mother-in-law put you through, the disappointment you felt within the community. I remember the days you refused to look at us, as if disgusted, as if our gender were contagious. But you remind me anyway.

You're useless to them unless you bear a son, you said to me one day, though I didn't need telling.

I paused, gripping my belly, gulping back tears. *But what if it's a girl?* I finally asked, though I already knew the answer.

That was the year I lost thirty pounds. For months I gagged and vomited. My throat refused to swallow food. I remember the sour smell of the food court in the mall where they sold the ginger lollipops that relieved my nausea. And in the moments I felt a little better, my mother-in-law handed me a wet rag. *Come on*, she said in Arabic. *A little cleaning will help take your mind off the discomfort.* Taking it from her, I wondered if the smell of Clorox would help settle my stomach. Then I wondered if it would take my mind off you. It did not.

My husband continued to work long hours at his father's gas station. Some nights he would return home from work to find me sitting on the bathroom floor, resting my head against the toilet seat. I was afraid he

would be upset because I had stopped cooking dinner. I was afraid he would do the things Baba did to you. But thankfully his mother always sent me home with a plate of food wrapped for him. One night I was shivering, so he brought me a blanket and pulled it over my shoulders. *Thank you*, I said, hoping he would stay. But he retreated to the next room, his dinner plate steaming on his lap, laughing at something on the television.

Alone in the bathroom, I stared into the toilet, and my mind found its way back to you.

When we were younger, you used to sit us around in a circle for mealtimes. Do you remember? You'd sit cross-legged between us, a steaming bowl of rice and stew in your lap, and put a spoonful into our mouths, one by one, until the bowl was empty. *There are too many of you and not enough food*, you said whenever we asked if we could feed ourselves. I was angry then, but now I understand. You were trying to care for us, to ensure we were all fed. You were trying to care for Baba, to ensure there was enough left over for him when he returned home. To avoid his rage.

Or maybe you were still stuck back there, in Palestine, your body stained with hunger.

Most days I wanted to call you, feeling a need to tell you what was happening. To explain the war inside me. How could I live out here all alone with a man I barely knew? How could I be a mother when I still felt like a child myself? But each time I picked up the phone, I pictured your scrunched and twisted face, the refugee camps of your childhood, the seven children, the loneliness, a far worse war inside you. Slowly I put the phone down, ashamed.

5.

I enrolled in university during my last trimester. The pregnancy was no longer debilitating, and it was time to be productive again. To follow my dreams.

My husband didn't go to college. His father needed him to run the gas station. But fortunately, my husband didn't stand in my way when I told him that getting an education was a priority for me. *As long as your studies are suitable with motherhood*, he said. I sat quietly, eyes focused, lips tight, as he explained that he didn't want our future children to be raised in day cares while their mother worked. But since I did not know what love was back then, having rarely felt it in our home, I convinced myself that this was better than nothing. A compromise. I even believed that I loved him for this.

You should be thankful he's letting you get an education, you said when I told you, envy filling your voice. Lucky you. Your father barely let me breathe.

I'm sorry, I said again and again.

Growing up, the path of my future was already mapped out for me. All I had to do was look around: you and my grandmother and most women in my family lived small, domesticated lives governed by marriage and motherhood. No one I knew dared defy tradition; I had no example of what it would look like for a woman to be free. But secretly I had my own vision of the future, one I'd pieced together from the women whose books I'd read: Maya Angelou, Virginia Woolf, Audre Lorde. I would do important work, create something meaningful. I would make a difference in this dark, lonely world.

How? I wasn't sure.

Why? Because I wanted the pain to mean something.

You can do what you want in your husband's house, your voice whispered in my ear. Now that you're married. I wandered to the very back

of a lecture hall, one hand under my swollen belly, and slid into my seat. Now was my chance.

Where do thoughts come from? my philosophy professor asked on the first day of class. For a long time I sat there, looking down at the blank page. *I don't know*, I eventually wrote. *But how do we make them stop?*

My husband told me not to worry about gender, but I couldn't help it. I thought of you back then, coming home from the hospital with a pink bundle in your arms.

Bent, my father's mother would say each time, her voice filled with shame. Girl.

Inshallah next time, people told you when they came to visit us at home.

Inshallah, you replied.

I liked school because it kept my mind busy. I attended my classes in the mornings and in the afternoons returned home to tidy up and cook dinner. Afterward I leaned back on the sofa, a laptop propped on my lap, and completed my assignments. The days passed quickly this way. As my due date neared, my belly was so swollen I could no longer see the screen.

How was your day? my husband would ask each night when he returned home from work. I cleared my throat, desperate to come up with a meaningful answer. There was so much I wanted to tell him: How I spent hours and hours repeating a series of recurring tasks without pause so I wouldn't have to think of you. How it felt like I was moving but trapped in place. How I was desperate for my story to have a better ending than yours.

But my husband would turn away, seemingly distracted, his gaze fixed on something behind me.

One night he came home more distressed than usual, slamming the front door, his eyes fierce, a defensive edge in his tone. *Are you okay?* I asked him.

He let out a heavy breath. *Just some bullshit with my father*, he said. Then he went on to explain all the terrible things his father had done, the words spilling from him like a river.

I'm sorry, I said, but again he turned away, and at once his eyes went dark.

Afterward, he reached for the remote and turned on the television. I sat beside him in silence, my stomach twisting, feeling something rising in my

throat. He flipped to one of his shows, to an episode we'd seen before, but we watched it again anyway.

Sitting there, I noticed how he stared at the screen with a desperate longing, his eyes focused, eager, as if hoping to distract himself. He ate his dinner without breaking his attention off the television, followed by the usual after-dinner snacks. There was something in the hard line of his face as he chewed and swallowed, in the hungry way he kept consuming, as if eating his anger away, that reminded me of the cold, lonely days of my childhood. Something within me softened for him, and I leaned closer to him on the bed. It was as if I could feel his pain inside my bones, as if our shared grief had bonded us.

I understand how you feel, I told him during a set of commercials. But he said he didn't want to talk about it anymore, his eyes fixed on the screen as he popped another nacho in his mouth. I understood that too.

You did not visit me when I gave birth. *For what?* you said when you realized I was expecting you to come. *My mother was in Palestine when I had you*, you explained. *If I managed as a young mother in America, a foreign country, then you should too.*

I felt a sudden chill and pulled my daughter close. *She's beautiful*, I said, stroking her cheek, the phone cold against my face.

I'm too young to be a grandmother, you told me.

I had ideas about motherhood. Mostly based on my relationship with you. I was afraid I would hurt my little girl, that I wouldn't be good enough for her. I was afraid she would see all the ugliness you saw in me.

But what if I was better? What if I did things differently?

Studies suggest that recalling past events helps us learn what to avoid and how to behave in the future. The problem was, there was so much I couldn't remember. Or didn't want to.

I had seven children before I was forty years old, you reminded me.

My plan was to be the best mother I could be. That meant being the opposite of you. I was going to be present and tender and not sad all the time. I was going to set a good example of what it meant to be a woman. Less powerless, more hope. More fuck off. The problem was, I didn't know how.

My husband wanted to do things better too. I learned he was angry with his own father for some things. He wanted to take our daughter to the park, watch her ball games, ask about her day at school. *We could learn*

from our parents' mistakes, he would say. It seemed possible that we could do this together. Or maybe I just desperately wanted to believe that two broken people could fix each other.

Each night, I'd stand over my daughter's crib and hum a melody until she fell asleep. *You're safe with me, little one*, I whispered to her in the dark. *No she's not*, my mind would say.

Later, as I ate dinner in bed with my husband, the voices from the TV mercifully drowned out the tormentor in my head.

Why am I telling you all this? What is the relevance of it? I can imagine how you might respond to these words: *You think that's painful? It's nothing, nothing compared to what I've endured.*

I know, I know. This is why I am writing to you now. To tell you that I understand. To say I'm sorry, to finally forgive you, to ask if you can forgive me.

6.

When I try to recall that first year after my daughter was born, I can't remember details. Only vague, abstract memories, like I'd lived them in a dream. I spent most days at home with her, swaying her in my arms. I barely slept, barely ate. I paced around the house while she cried, singing softly until she fell asleep. When I slipped her into the crib, I did it quickly or else she would wake up. Afterward I would stare at her eyelids as if they might open again. Then, in a rush, I cleaned the bathrooms and cooked dinner and wrote my research papers, my body on high alert as I listened for her sound in the next room.

I kept losing weight. It wasn't intentional, but I liked how airy my body felt. For the first time in my life I was light.

Growing up you used to call me *bansa*, fatty. Do you remember? You used many other Arabic words for it—*barrel*, *bulldozer*, *giant*. *Bikafi*, *you're about to explode*, you'd say whenever you found me sneaking Little Debbie snacks from the pantry, not understanding that food was the only way I knew to soothe myself.

You're as thin as air, you said when we came to visit, ushering me to the kitchen table. *Sit while I make you something to eat*. I sat there, my daughter sleeping in her car seat on the floor beside me, my hand against my chest. You opened and closed cabinets, set pots and pans on the stove, and reached for spices from the pantry.

How are you, Mama? I asked in a low voice, as though afraid of the answer.

You shrugged and said, *Alhamdulillah*, but your body said otherwise.

I did not know what to respond, could barely look at you, so I pretended to adjust my daughter's blanket, my eyes on the floor. Afterward, you began to talk angrily about Baba, flapping your arms, the blue vein in your forehead pulsing. I sat very still as you complained about one thing, then another, my whole body prickling, my heart hammering in my chest. I

learned that things hadn't changed much since I left. You and Baba still fought a lot. You were still very lonely. Looking into your eyes, I saw that they had the same look from back then: fidgety and on edge, as though expecting an attack.

After an hour or so, you placed a bowl of my favorite childhood meal, maftoul—Palestinian couscous with chicken and chickpeas—on the table before me. The nutty smell of pasta pearls and cumin tomato broth took me back to those cold, lonely days, and the memories I'd been pushing down since I left home confronted me. I put my hands around the warm bowl, not talking, steam suffocating my face. I was thinking about what it would be like for you to finally be happy, to find peace. Would it fix us then? Would you love me?

Or maybe the real question was, Would your heart have room for love? Or had it been cursed, hardened by this cruel world?

You must have noticed the panicked look on my face, because you stepped closer, placed your arm on my shoulder. *Eat, habibti*, you said.

As a thought experiment, Wittgenstein asks that we imagine a group of people who each have a box containing something called a "beetle." No one can see into anyone else's box. Each person is asked to describe his or her beetle but can talk about only their own beetle, as there might be different things in each person's box. Over time, the word "beetle" simply comes to mean "the thing inside a person's box." *The beetle is like our minds*, my philosophy professor said. *We can never truly know what other people are experiencing.*

I can't imagine how it must have been for you, I confessed. *Raising us all alone in that cramped Brooklyn apartment with not enough windows. How did you manage?*

Easy, you answered. *I imagined raising seven children in a refugee camp instead.*

I tried to picture this but couldn't. Instead, the usual images came rushing in, and the world darkened again.

At night, after our daughter fell asleep, my husband and I watched one television show after another. This was how he liked to unwind after a long day of work. Ideally, I would've liked him to be slightly more interested in the physical world than the one happening behind the screen. But he thought I just needed to relax. *Not everything has to be so serious*, he said. *Why are you so sensitive?*

I know, I know, I told him. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry*. The problem was, I didn't know any other way to be. I wanted to confess there was something unusual happening inside me, but I said nothing. I was afraid to reveal myself, to tell him about the ways I was failing our daughter. How would I explain it? *There's something wrong with my brain*, I wanted to say. *My body is here but my mind is far away*, I could've explained. But I didn't. I couldn't push out the words.

Instead, I pulled out one of my books, shared a Kafka quote with him: *I am constantly trying to communicate something incommunicable, to explain something inexplicable, to tell about something I can only feel in my bones and which can only be experienced in those bones.*

But my husband was unmoved. He thought I had quite the imagination. *Relax*, he said. *You're overthinking things.*

7.

The second year wasn't any better. I did not understand what was happening inside my body. I did not know why I felt numb, disconnected from myself and my daughter. Why I often lost track of whole chunks of time. Why I was unable to identify or feel my emotions. Why when my daughter cried and cried it felt like circuits in my body had gone haywire. Why I had trouble looking people in the eye when we spoke. Why it was difficult for me to make friends. Why some days I felt suddenly, unbearably sad, for no clear reason. Afterward I went inside my closet, curled up on the floor in the fetal position, and burst into sobs.

The same thing happened to me as a young mother, you said when I told you about the crying. It will pass.

Are you sure? I asked, the phone wet with tears, but you said you needed to go.

Months went by this way. I learned that the more I did, the less I felt. If I slowed down or stopped, I would feel it again. Each semester, I overloaded my college courses. Twice a week my mother-in-law watched my daughter while I sat through back-to-back classes, not even pausing for a meal. I kept the house in immaculate condition, took my daughter to the library and the park, had dinner on the stove every night.

Mama, Mama, Mama, my daughter would say after I tucked her in bed, not wanting me to leave. *Mama*, the word like a bullet to my chest. I climbed beneath the covers with her, humming a Fairuz melody, trying to soothe her. But somehow your voice in the room was all I could hear. I stood up, breathless. It seemed like there was no escaping you.

Later, when my husband ate his dinner in front of the TV, my daughter fast asleep, I buried my face in my philosophy and literature books, determined not to waste a single moment. To leave room for nothing else. To stop the hammering in my head.

You've lost so much weight, my husband said one night. You look sick. Is everything okay?

Well, no, I thought but I could not say.

The summer my daughter turned two, I graduated from college with a double major. Philosophy and English. *I've never seen a student complete her credits so quickly, my college adviser said. What's your secret?*

A compulsion to fix myself, I did not say.

Later I hung both degrees on the wall, expecting to feel changed in some way, but I did not.

After I graduated, I did not know what to do with myself. I had become so used to rushing through my day that the small pocket of time I now had felt jarring. Aside from no longer having college classes to attend, my routine stayed the same: wet rags, dirty diapers, folding laundry, groceries, doctors' offices, playgrounds, pushing the stroller around the neighborhood, homemade dinners—certainly plenty to keep me busy. But the absence of striving toward something for myself, a goal or hobby that made me stronger and better, made each day feel like time wasted. Time I could be using to improve myself, fix all the flaws you saw in me.

Sometimes at home I still rushed through my tasks, imagining I had a research paper I needed to prepare for. I realized then what my body liked was busyness. I walked up and down the house, picking specks of dirt off the floor, putting toys back in the bin. If I slowed down or stopped, I would start feeling it again. I couldn't pinpoint what feeling I was running from, exactly. All I knew was that the more things I crammed in my day, the less time I had to reflect on the state of things. For once I didn't have to think about you.

And then there were the moments I picked up my phone, scrolled through pictures of cute cats and funny memes on social media. Every now and then I'd read an insightful quote but did not allow myself to reflect on it.

Feeling the need to stay busy is a distraction from what you'd be forced to feel and acknowledge if you slowed down.

I kept on scrolling.

8.

My mother-in-law was over for dinner when I told her the news: I was continuing for my master's in literature. Considering the speed in which I'd completed my undergraduate courses, I could finish in a year. Easy as pie. Not only because I desperately needed a distraction from myself, but also because books had become my closest friends. Tucked inside their pages was the only time I truly felt safe.

My mother-in-law shook her head and pointed out that I did not need another degree. I was tight lipped, trying to remain calm as I fed my daughter spoonfuls of yellow rice. My husband wouldn't look at me, his attention on the football game playing on the television in the next room. *You should be at home focusing on your child*, she continued, dipping her pita in hummus, extra lemony like my grandmother taught me.

What about my dreams? I asked her, my heart beating too fast.

You're a mother, she told me. *What could be more important than that?*

I excused myself to the bathroom, locked the door, sat on the toilet, and pressed my face into both hands.

Lucky you, was all you said when I told you about the master's.

By the time the semester started, my mother-in-law was pleased to find out I was expecting again. *Naseeb*, she said to me. Divine timing.

That's not going to stop me, I replied.

Inshallah it's a boy, people said.

Let's hope they're right, you said again. *For your sake*.

It doesn't matter if it's a girl, I told you, defiant, but deep down I was terrified of what would happen if it was. Would I spend my youth like you had, pushing out one child after the next until I bore a son?

Luckily, the books helped take my mind off it.

The days felt long, but at least I was doing something to better myself. An education was one thing you didn't have, a clear separation between us.

The power of a single thought.

Some days I looked down at my hands as if they belonged to someone else. Other days it felt like I was floating above my body and watching myself on the ground. A speck of dust on the scale of the universe. Insignificant.

I blinked, it seemed, and nine months had passed.

You came to visit me this time. You sat very close to me in the hospital room, the floral smell of your perfume taking me back to that dark house, those years in Palestine. I cried and cried, the tears pouring out of me.

What's wrong? you asked.

Nothing, nothing, I said. But later, before you left, I told you I was afraid.

Of what? you said.

Failing like you was what I didn't say.

Walad, my mother-in-law said, her eyes bright like fireworks. *Alf Mabrouk.*

His eyes were dark, and there was a pleasant, sweet, slightly tangy scent radiating from his skin. The most delightful fragrance.

I remember the first time I left the house alone with them. My daughter sat inside the grocery cart. My son was fast asleep, wrapped in a tight burrito. I propped his car seat on the top of the cart. Carefully I placed the items around my daughter: milk, toothpaste, macaroni, off-brand cereal. In line to check out, she reached for a bag of M&M's.

Only after you eat your dinner, I said.

The clerk watched us, seemingly amused. *You're a good big sister,* he said to me.

Three months later, I hung my master's degree on the wall. Hooray. Except the pounding in my body didn't stop.

Afterward the days were long, and everything felt tedious and useless to me. More often than not it was just the three of us, from sunrise until dusk. We went to the park, attended story time at the library, and took slow walks around the neighborhood. Sometimes I pushed my son in the stroller while my daughter walked beside us, her fingers curled in mine. Other times I carried him on my chest in a baby sling.

Later, when it was time to put the children to bed, my husband came home from work. We tucked them in together, read bedtime stories, all four

of us huddled close. One night a thought whispered in my ear: *Is this moment the closest to happiness I've ever felt?*

Yes was the answer.

I replayed the thought in bed all night, tossing and turning. *But how?* Maybe I'd been looking at this all wrong.

I took a job tutoring elementary students in English at a learning center a few hours a week. It didn't pay much, but I'd finally learned to accept what life had been trying to tell me all along: My husband was the breadwinner of the family and would likely always be. As a woman, especially as a mother, my options were limited. There was only so much I could do.

Fortunately, my neighbor, an older Arab woman, agreed to babysit for me. By then my son was one, my daughter almost four. *This isn't worth the time you're losing with your children*, my mother-in-law said.

I didn't disagree with her, except I still felt like a child. *What about all this time I've lost with myself?*

I never had any time to myself, you told me.

9.

Another year passed. I would like to tell you what happened, share more details, but I don't remember. Or maybe I don't want to.

Some nights in bed I could feel myself slipping away. In the darkness I closed my eyes and imagined what it would feel like to die, for my brain to go silent forever, to be relieved from the pounding in my body.

Maybe it's best to keep moving forward, I told myself. Focused on the light.

Except the memories wouldn't let me be.

I remember the way you used to look at me, a look of dread on your face. Or maybe of dreams deferred. For years it's haunted me. Now I catch myself looking at my daughter exactly the same way. Each time I turn away, ashamed.

I'm sorry, I tell my daughter, rearranging my expression. You know I love you, right? I love you so much.

She nods, but I'm afraid she doesn't believe me.

Afterward I cuddle with her every night, holding her tight and whispering in her ear, *I love you*, afraid she'd forget.

Some days she seemed very sad, a faraway look in her eyes. I was afraid it was because of me, if she could smell you on me. I tried to monitor myself closely, to guard her from me. From you.

I'm trying to be better, little one, I cried to myself in the closet. I'm trying not to pass my pain along to you.

But I can't help it, I can't.

In those moments, my heart softened for you. I wanted to call you and tell you I understood. That I could feel where you'd come from.

My husband got a new job, selling wholesale cigarettes to gas stations. *Do you like it? I asked him. Are you happy?*

The pay is good, he answered.

But are you happy? I asked him again a few weeks later, unaware that I was asking myself. *Are you fulfilled?*

My husband laughed, seeming to find the questions amusing. *You think too much*, he said, and for days I cried myself to sleep, thinking about it.

He had a point, though. Most days I found myself having conversations in my head: Why was life moving so fast? What will my children remember? Am I repeating your mistakes? What if I was doing it all wrong? The questions were overwhelming, the answers unbearable. I went inside my closet, closed the door, and assumed the position.

My daughter banged on the closet door. *Mama, Mama, Mama*, she said in a sweet voice. But my body flinched unto itself. Another way in which I was failing. I could not stand the sound of that word.

What do you do for a living? my neighbor asked one afternoon when she caught a glimpse of my three diplomas hanging in the foyer. Technically, I was a housewife, but I couldn't say that.

I'm a thinker and feeler, I joked instead.

She looked at me oddly. *What do you think and feel?*

That we're doing this all wrong.

10.

My husband got into a fight with his father again. His father cussed him out, making my husband feel small. For weeks he came home and barely looked at me. He took turns staring at the television or into his phone, careful not to meet my eyes.

Are you okay? I asked one night.

I'm fine, I'm fine, he responded. But beside me in bed I could feel him simmering, his mind far away, as though plotting for revenge.

For days afterward, I cried myself to sleep, feeling two pains inside me, mine and his.

I began to suspect that something was wrong, that maybe I should talk to someone about this. About you. But the thought of bringing up old memories frightened me, and I pushed the feeling away.

Then I read a quote from *Hamlet* and my face burned with shame:

This above all: to thine own self be true,

And it must follow, as the night the day,

Thou canst not then be false to any man.

—*William Shakespeare*

Each night before I went to bed, I searched the internet for advice on how to live an authentic, fulfilling life. But every article pointed me to look within myself. I lay there with the covers over my head, unwilling to take a peek.

Have you ever had the feeling that something isn't right but you can't quite put your finger on it?

Of course not, you said when I asked you this question. I know exactly what's wrong.

What? I asked.

This made you upset. *Is this a rhetorical question?*

I read an article about being unaligned. It said that when a person feels off, unsettled, or uneasy, she should check in with herself. The universe is showing her that something isn't for her highest and greatest good.

I put my phone down and wondered what the universe was trying to tell me. Was there something wrong with my motherhood, with my marriage, with me? Was this why I couldn't keep still? Why I couldn't be happy despite how much better my life was compared to yours? But the thoughts went on and on, and I couldn't make sense of them.

All I knew was that I wanted to do right by my children. I wanted to be better, prove them wrong. Prove you wrong. Prove me wrong.

At the library one afternoon, I found a book about vulnerability and shame. I read it quickly, a part of me cracking open.

Brené Brown said: *Numb the dark and you numb the light.*

I developed an obsessive interest in self-awareness and self-discovery. Subjects like connecting to one's inner being and uncovering our true essence resonated with me. What is the meaning of life? Why are we here? What is our purpose?

And then: What do I truly want?

Well, ideally, I'd like to fix my brain.

I read a book that promised to help readers achieve an extraordinary life. Apparently, limiting beliefs were the biggest obstacle to self-improvement. If a person spends a lot of time putting herself down, she's getting in the way of improving her life. *Guilty*, I thought, flipping the pages.

I made a list of all the things my mind liked to focus on. Looking down at the words, I realized it was really three things: the past, the future, and you.

Another recommendation was to change negative words to empowering statements. I began to edit my self-talk. *I suck at life*, the voice in my head whispered. Correction: *I'm trying to suck less.*

For a short while, the self-help books seemed to work. I became more acutely aware of myself and my goals. I understood for the first time how much my past with you affected the woman I was, both as a mother and a

wife. I could see very clearly that I was afraid. Afraid of losing myself to a husband and children the way you lost yourself to us. Afraid of turning into a submissive, resentful woman haunted by unfulfilled dreams. Afraid of raising my children to feel the way I felt watching you, a stain of sadness tainting everything. Afraid of failure, of loneliness, of never knowing what it was like to feel loved. I couldn't bring myself to tell you any of this, of course.

But then things got a little better. When my daughter started kindergarten, I started teaching English full-time at a local community college. It didn't pay much, but in terms of flexibility, the job was perfect. I felt rich internally, as if I'd won the jackpot. I dropped my daughter off at school at 8:00 a.m., then took my son to preschool, then taught my courses back-to-back until 3:00 p.m., when it was time to pick them up. Cha-ching! I could be an independent woman and a good mother too. Afterward, I went home and started our after-school routine: homework, library, extracurriculars, cooking, cleaning, playtime. I felt like I was in college again, racing, progressing, working toward something. I felt like I was one step closer to being the opposite of you.

I did not understand what I was doing when I decided to be a full-time teacher, mother, and homemaker. The seasons passed. It was a practice in multitasking. I spent the mornings rushing to get my children ready for school. In the afternoons I taught the same classes before rushing home, checking off a mental list in my head. My house smelled like Lysol and cooking spices. Most nights I wanted to cry because I was sure I would never escape you, would never be happy. I had achieved everything you could never achieve—the big house, the supportive husband, the promising career—yet still I felt empty.

You're lucky, you said, which was what you always said when I tried to explain the emptiness to you. I was calling you more often then, but I still couldn't find the right words to reach you. One day I listened to you on the other end of the phone, weeping, telling me what my father did to you. I breathed in and out as you recalled the incident, my body shaking. I was thinking about how sad you still were after all this time. How much you were still suffering. Then I thought: Would this happen to me? Would my life turn out this way? Maybe not as violent as yours had been but cursed by the silent chaos of a haunted brain. I started to cry then and told you I had to go, expecting you to say, *Wait, what's wrong?* But you didn't stop me.

What Christopher Ryan said in *Civilized to Death*: “When you’re going in the wrong direction, progress is the last thing you need.”

But of course I didn’t understand this at the time. I thought rushing forward, away from the past, was the only way to succeed. Little did I know that the answers were back there, with you.

11.

Then one day I discovered something disturbing. My brain wouldn't stop thinking; I couldn't shut it off. It worried about the future or ruminated on the past. It seemed to like being in problem-solving mode, fueled by the possibility that if it thought long and hard enough, a solution would arise. For most of the day, no matter what task I was doing, continuous monologues and dialogues went on in my head. I cleaned the house and played catch and graded papers and built with Lego bricks and cooked dinner while the terrible noise continued—commenting, speculating, judging, comparing, complaining.

At night I closed my eyes and listened to the tormentor in my head. *Who is this person?* I wondered.

What Descartes said: *I think, therefore I am.*

After that, I couldn't sleep. Most nights in bed I'd stare into the darkness; I could hear my brain moving along. I closed my eyes, horror-struck. *Help me*, I whispered. But my husband was fast asleep, and no one could hear me. I pulled the covers tight over my body until I stopped shaking.

In the carpool line, I googled symptoms of schizophrenia. Early signs include:

- withdrawal or complete isolation
- mood changes, especially depression-like
- mild hallucinations or odd beliefs that others don't buy into

Check, check, check.

But the more I read, the less certain I was about the nature of the illness or whether I had it. Typically, the person isn't aware that she is hallucinating or that her beliefs are delusional. The illness is so serious and all-encompassing because the person thinks she is fine.

I found myself exhaling at this last bit. Fortunately, I knew better: I was the opposite of fine.

I had an idea in the middle of the night. What if I opened myself up to you? What if you could help me? What if the solution to my pain was letting myself be seen?

Lying in bed, I tried to imagine your response. *I didn't know this would happen, you'd say. I was doing the best I could. I didn't know any better.*

I know, I understand now, I would say.

But when I called you the next day, the words on the tip of my tongue seemed a little distorted, a little foolish. *There should be classes for this, I thought.*

Eventually I said: *Something is wrong. I can feel it.*

Motherhood has that effect on people, you replied. It will pass.

No, no, no, I said. This is different. I feel like I'm losing my mind.

What makes you say that?

There are so many thoughts in there, and I can't make them stop.

Like what? you asked. Give me an example.

I cleared my throat and said: *Humans are the only species who pay to live on the planet. Do you ever wonder about that? Do you ever wonder about our world?*

But you were unimpressed. *Ah, I see, you said. All those books have gotten to your head.*

My husband didn't believe me when I told him something was wrong. *Everyone has problems, he said. At least you got to move away from yours. My father still makes me feel like shit every day. Yesterday he . . .*

I didn't hear what he said after that, my heart hammering in my throat.

Maybe we should see someone, I told my husband one night. It doesn't hurt to ask for help.

But he was unmoved. *I don't have time, he said. I'm busy with work.*

I saw two therapists, but neither of them felt right. The first asked so many questions about my culture and upbringing; it felt like I was a teacher in a classroom. The second asked none at all.

What a waste of money, my mother-in-law said when she found out about the therapy. Some things are meant to stay private. Besides, why confess to a stranger when God listens for free?

What a waste of time, you told me, almost laughing, as if you knew neither of them was listening.

Advice from Buddha: *The single most vital step toward enlightenment is learning to disidentify from your mind.*

But how? The million-dollar question.

I read about trauma on the internet. How it is the root cause of what has been labeled as “mental illness” in our society. We spend 90 percent of our lives unconscious, running on autopilot. Waking up just means becoming conscious. The symptoms of trauma people are experiencing come from living in a world that keeps our nervous system in a near constant state of fight or flight.

I read and read, every word resonating.

I wouldn't call what happened afterward as waking up, more like I'd gone to sleep. Everything that was once important—my picture-perfect marriage, my nice house, my standing in the community—no longer mattered. I didn't care about my job, was no longer interested in proving myself to anyone. All I wanted was to stop the pounding in my body, to silence the voice telling me everything was wrong.

You're trapped, the voice kept saying. *Get out, get out.*

But I can't leave, my mind rebutted. *I'm so scared, I'm so scared.*

But then my daughter looked at me, her eyes as haunted as mine had been, and I knew at once what would happen if I stayed. If I let myself become like you. I knew what I must do.

So I lit a match and set my life on fire. Then I sat back and watched it all burn.

12.

My husband thought I was losing my mind. *Why would you ruin such a good thing?* he said. *I've been busting my ass for this family for years, and this is how you repay me? By ruining my reputation?*

I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

My mother-in-law thought I was possessed by a jinn. *Magnoona?* she said. *Are you crazy? Do you know how many people would kill to have your life? Why destroy it, bury our faces in mud?*

I know, I know, I told them both, shame stewing inside me. I'm sorry. But I can't pretend anymore.

What are you pretending about, exactly? my husband asked, embarrassed about how the divorce would make him look in the community, his reputation in ruins.

You wouldn't understand even if I could explain it to you, was the answer.

This was the closest thing to truth I could offer him. I couldn't explain what was happening inside, why suddenly I needed to go. I couldn't articulate that the voice that didn't use words had gotten so loud, so deafening, and I could no longer ignore it.

But looking back now—after the lies and lawsuits and so many crooked things I do not wish to dwell on—I realize it was my intuition guiding me, though I didn't know it at the time. This inner voice I cannot name, this inner being, was trying to protect me, to steer me to a safe haven.

I finally understood what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin meant when he said: “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.”

If you want to leave, then go, my husband said. *Let's see how long you survive out there on your own.*

What about our children? I said.

Asks the person who's ruining their lives, he said.

That's not my intention, I told him. I'm trying to save them.

Ha!

Please try to understand. We can share custody, raise them together peacefully. We can give them a better life than this one. But this is the only way.

Fine, he finally said. But you'll regret this, you'll see.

I confessed to you what was happening a few days later, the time I saw you last, the last time we spoke, sitting together at the kitchen table, making spinach pies, dough sticking to our fingertips. The room smelled like olive oil, and the sky was bright blue outside the window. Before I had even begun to tell you, you talked about how depressing it was to grow old without having someone to love you. How you and Baba slept in separate beds. *I've wasted my life, you said. I haven't felt a body beside me in years.* I wiped my tears with the back of my hand, feeling sick. And then I told you.

I don't think I can live like this anymore, I said.

Like what? you asked.

Like I will never be free, was all I managed to say. For a long moment you said nothing, folding the dough into a triangle and brushing it with olive oil. *I know how you feel, you eventually said. And I don't blame you. But what you're about to do is big, life shattering. Can you endure?*

I nodded, then shook my head. *I don't know, I said. But I'm going to try.*

What about your children? you asked, a familiar panic in your eyes, as if replaying a nightmare. *Will they take them from you?*

I shook my head, but the memory of your scared and twisted face tugged tears from my eyes. *My husband agreed to share custody, I said.*

Lucky you, you whispered. I tried to meet your eyes, but you wouldn't look up. Your eyes were wet and you were crying.

Eventually you reached your hand across the table and touched mine. Then you said: *Can I tell you something I've never told anyone before?*

What?

I often think about the past, about how my future would've turned out had I stood up for myself and left your father, took a chance.

What would you have done? I asked you. *If you had left.*

I would've gone home, you said. Returned to Palestine, back to my family, my mother country. My hope was always to come back to you, my mother country . . . to stay with you until . . .

You turned toward the window, unwilling to meet my eyes. I wish I'd had the courage to do things differently, you said. But I was afraid of so many things: losing my children, being shunned by the community, disappointing everyone.

Tears fell down my face. I'm afraid too.

Of course you are, you said. But if you believe it's right, listen to yourself. To the small feeling in your heart, not the voice in your head. Don't make my mistakes. Don't second-guess.

Will you be here? I asked, and you promised you would.

But then, when I told Baba later that day, when I said I was getting a divorce, when you saw how he responded, you changed your mind. The shame I was bringing to the family was too deep. What about your children? Baba kept saying. What about our reputation?

You said I was doing too many things wrong, crossing too many lines. Not only did I want to leave my husband, but I also wanted to live on my own, refusing to move back into my father's home. I'm not a child anymore, I told Baba. I can take care of myself.

All my life I had lived in one man's house before transferring to another's. It was time to experience life as a free woman. I wanted to travel freely and alone, unconstrained. I wanted to have the choice to love whomever I wanted. I wanted the freedom to go after my dreams, whatever they might be, no restrictions or limitations.

But most of all, I wanted to unlearn all the shame. I wanted to learn how to love and honor myself so I could know how to love and honor my children.

You're not just getting a divorce, Baba said. You're breaking too many rules at once, ruining our reputation. If you keep going down this path, consider yourself dead to us.

I didn't want to lose you, didn't want to be disowned. But it was not enough for me to cross one line and not the others. I couldn't live within your restraints anymore. I wanted to break out of the chains and fly. To where? I wasn't sure. But I knew in my heart it was best.

Don't you get it? I told you and Baba, desperate for you to understand. *If I keep living like you, I'll have no choice but to become like you, repeat*

the same mistakes. And I can't do that to my children.

Ridiculous, you both said. How could you be so ungrateful after everything we've done for you? Don't you know everything we've been through?

I know, I know. You endured so much, and so have I, but now I want to live.

I fold the letter and place it in an envelope, then slip it in my suitcase.

13.

On the two-hour flight to see you, I replay the sentences in my head, wondering if I've missed something. I'm certain I have. Memories, I realize, are unreliable. Stories we tell ourselves, confining us like prisoners to the past. But they have less of a hold over me now.

I still hope I will see you again when I take a cab over to the funeral. It is late November. A thin light shines in the gray sky. *You came*, Baba says. The cemetery smells like autumn leaves, and for a long time neither of us speak; we just look down at the casket. The air is cold and I am shaking. I wonder what my father is thinking, if he has any regrets. I wonder what he would change if he could do things differently. The imam recites a verse from the Quran before we lower the casket into the ground. Then he says a hadith: *Heaven lies beneath the feet of your mother*. We take turns filling the hole with dirt. There is so much dirt, and I start to cry. I cry because I'm not sure if there is anything I could've done to go back to that day in the kitchen, to fix things between us. *What if I had tried harder to reach you?* the voice in my head says. What if, what if, what if. I take a deep breath and put my hand over my chest. *I'm sorry*, I say. *Please forgive me*.

Then I hear a whisper. It feels like it is coming from the open space in my heart: *I'm sorry too, ya binti. My daughter*.

14.

On my flight home, I read a quote that got me thinking:

Surely all art is the result of one's having been in danger, of having gone through an experience all the way to the end, where no one can go any further.

—*Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet*

This is when I decide to write a story about us, about my journey back to you, about how dreams are born.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

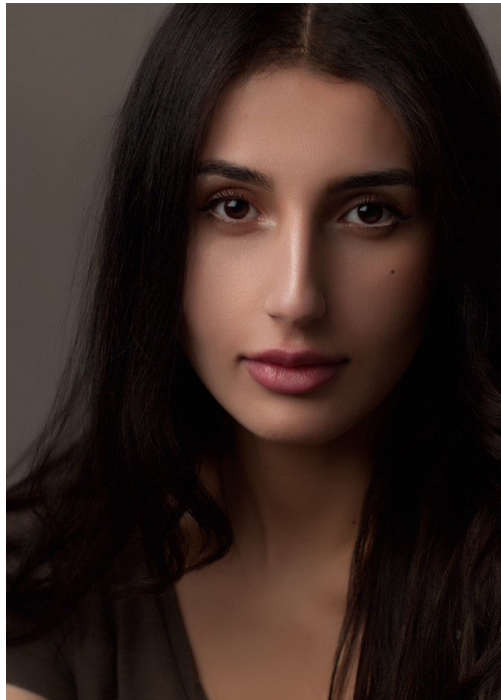


Photo © Angela Blankenship

Etaf Rum is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Woman Is No Man*, which was named a *New York Times Book Review* Editor's Choice, among many other honors. She has a master of arts in American and British literature as well as undergraduate degrees in philosophy and English composition.

“After Yara is placed on probation at work for fighting with a racist coworker, her Palestinian mother claims the provocation and all that’s come after were the result of a family curse. While Yara doesn’t believe in old superstitions, she finds herself unpacking her strict, often volatile childhood growing up in Brooklyn, looking for clues as to why she feels so unfulfilled in a life her mother could only dream of. Etaf Rum’s follow-up to her 2019 debut, *A Woman Is No Man*, is a complicated mother-daughter drama that looks at the lasting effects of intergenerational trauma and what it takes to break the cycle of abuse.”

—*Time*, “The 23 Most Anticipated Books of 2023”

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