

Born Into The Wind

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I was a thief.

Um Hasan, our kindhearted cook, didn't give me the tuna. I'm sure because she'd have also given me something to open it with. It was 1982 or 1983 at Dar-el-Tifl el Arabi, an orphanage for girls in East Jerusalem that took in girls like me who weren't orphans, but who had nowhere else to go. It was getting late. The sky was gray-blue and we were already locked in for the night. We weren't allowed out of the dormitories after hours and there was hell to pay if caught. But there I was with my stolen can of tuna that evening, hiding out in one of the empty classrooms.

I might have convinced myself that Um Hasan would have given the tuna to me had I asked because she often slipped me contraband cheese sandwiches. The first time she did that was after she saw me staring at two of the day-students – girls who went back home after school. They had families waiting for them at the end of classes. I imagined a loving mother, anxious for her daughter's return, who would embrace her child and proceed to do mother-daughter things that were suffused with laughter, cuddles, books, cooking, and unimaginable joy. I imagined their meals, delicious, warm, hearty, and with real meat. The father I imagined, equally magnificent, would look at his daughter with complete adoration and pride. I stared on at those day-students, holding back my disgust that their fathers could be proud of them with the low grades they brought home.

I always got the highest marks in class. A father like that would be so proud of me.

As envy seeped from my pores while I waited for the day-students to finish their sandwiches and leave so I could pick up their discarded crusts, I was startled by Um Hasan's stern voice "Come with me, girl!" I don't think she knew anyone's first name. We were all "girl" to her. Sometimes she called us by our last names. In Arabic, my last name means "daughter of the wind". It can also mean "daughter of love" since wind and love share the same word.

I was scared and assumed Um Hasan had peeked into my wicked thoughts, but I followed her because I always did as I was told, which was another reason I deserved a good family that loved me. Good Grades and Obedient were two important entries on the list I compiled about myself. (The matter of stealing tuna was unknown and should not count against me.)

I followed Um Hasan's wobbly gait to the main dormitory building, where she made me wait in the hallway while she went into the kitchen. She had one good leg. The other one was much smaller and not quite right, as if her knee folded the wrong way under her long embroidered caftan. To someone just meeting her, Um Hasan's steps seemed precarious. But for those of us who knew her, it was easy to discern a rhythm and natural grace in the way she would swoop low to step with the short leg, then rise again to her height on the good one. Her body moved up-down, side-to-side, front-back, all at once in a consistent and fluid pattern that seemed to me like a song.

Um Hasan emerged from the kitchen a few minutes later, a hand behind her back. She looked around to see if anyone was watching before she handed me half a pita sandwich with cheese spread and cucumber.

“I’ll make you more whenever you want. You don’t need to eat anybody’s scraps, girl.”

There wasn’t enough food for Um Hasan to give every girl clandestine snacks. So she picked the runts, the ones who likely couldn’t fend for themselves, or those of us who were clearly hungry and undernourished. More importantly, she chose girls who wouldn’t tattle and make her lose her job.

I never squealed – a virtue I added to my list in three parts, to make the “good traits” column longer: Never Tattle, Never Squeal, Keeper of Secrets.

As I tried to open the can by beating a fork into it with a rock, smelly tuna water leaked and squirted out all over my hands and clothes. That was my condition when I heard one of the girls running down the hall, calling my name.

The girl stopped when she saw me. “There you are!” she said, “You’d better hurry up back to the dorm. Sitt Maisa sent word for you to go see Sitt Hind.” Dread washed over me. Sitt Maisa was our pudgy, stucco-faced, evil headmaster who didn’t let a day pass without humiliating or hitting one of us. Once, she put my pajamas on display in the cafeteria with a sign declaring “these belong to Susie the eleven-year old *shakhakha*”. A *shakhakha* is a bedwetter.

The girl repeated herself, this time much louder. "Susie, you'd really better come."

Her words calmed me a little. Sitt Maisa apparently didn't know I was not in the dorm, so she probably didn't know about the tuna either. But had I heard correctly that Sitt Hind wanted to see me?

Sitt Hind was the founder of the orphanage and rarely had time for the everyday details of our lives. She was always busy traveling to raise money. She had never asked to see me. I didn't think she asked to see any of us. In fact, I didn't realise she even knew my name.

"Why does Sitt Hind want to see me? Did she say *my* name? Susie?" I asked.

"How would I know, dumbass? I'm here saving your life from Sitt Maisa. If she finds out what you're doing she'll kill you and feed you to the donkeys," the girl snapped and left.

I left the still unopened, badly battered can of tuna and I headed downstairs, toward the black iron door that was always locked at that hour. On the other side of it was the recess yard separating our dorm from Sitt Hind's home, which was on the second story of a stone building that had been in her Jerusalem family for five hundred years.

The door opened as I approached it. Espi, my friend who was several years older than me, held it open. Espi was the unofficial police. She possessed the trust and confidence of the administrators as well as the keys to nearly every door in

the school. And we accepted Espi's authority without question, partly because of her access to all the keys but mostly because on General Strike Day she had stood up to an Israeli soldier. She refused to go to class, and not even his giant gun pointed at her head could make her move. People said she was fearless. I wanted to be just like her. That night, Espi must have seen fear on my face because just as she turned to close the door behind me, she said "don't be so scared, Susie. There's nothing in the world to be scared about."

But as the lock turned behind me, I got scared that I might not be let back in. I kept hurrying. I climbed the stairs to Sitt Hind's home and knocked on her door.

Then it hit me how badly I reeked of tuna.

I hadn't even had the sense or time to wash my hands so I just stood there when Sitt Hind opened the door and asked me to come in. She seemed so old and frail - as most adults with grey hair seem to children - but must have only been in her fifties. She was thin, with slightly sunken cheeks and short hair cut in a tidy bob. Time, war, and military occupation had sharpened her eyes and set them deep in her face. The lines on her skin spoke of dignity, sad secrets, and a tortured heart. She was always well dressed; even on that evening, alone in her own home, she wore a simple below-the-knees skirt and an elegant blouse. She was like a God to me and I was afraid she'd smell the stench when I passed by. I stood in her doorway too long - just looking at her, contemplating my predicament. Eventually I had to make a move, so I rushed in and stood far from her. My fists were clenched to hold in the stench on my hands. I couldn't even

shake Sitt Hind's hand, much less accept her hug when she came towards me with open arms. I was so ashamed of smelling so bad that I just backed away.

I will never know the real reason why Sitt Hind called me to her home that evening. Perhaps it was to get to know me better since I was excelling in all my classes and stood out among my peers. She asked how I was doing. She asked me about Ameena, the girl who had grown into the woman who gave birth to me.

Ameena and two of her younger sisters, my aunts, had lived at Dar-el-Tifl many years before I was born. It wasn't often that a second generation came to Dar-el-Tifl. Maybe Sitt Hind was curious to know what happened to her former pupil.

She had educated, fed and clothed my mother and aunts when my grandfather died and my illiterate grandmother had to go off to Kuwait to work as a maid for a sheikha. As she often did for girls who showed promise, Sitt Hind sought scholarships for them to go abroad. My mother ended up going to Germany to study nursing. That's where she was when Israel took the rest of Palestine, including Jerusalem, in the 1967 war. So my mother was never able to return home and went to Kuwait instead, where Palestinian refugees flocked as cheap labour. I don't know if Ameena was ever in touch with Sitt Hind after that. I doubt it. I don't think Sitt Hind knew anything about her until I, Ameena's firstborn, arrived at the orphanage doorsteps thirteen years later.

But the desert winds of the Arab world always arrive with news and rumours.

Gossip is a staple of our society and my mother provided good fodder for it.

That's one thing I inherited from her. Maybe Sitt Hind knew that my mother was

remarried and living comfortably in Kuwait. She probably even knew that my mother had abandoned me in the United States as an infant and then came back for me when I was five years old. I was living with my uncle at that time in what others often described as a white trash neighborhood of Charlotte, North Carolina. My uncle's wife, Mary, was the first of several women I called Mama. She was an Evangelical Christian and had raised me on the fire and brimstone television sermons of Jim Bakker and Jerry Falwell.

I'm sure Sitt Hind knew that after I met my mother at the age of five, she took me back with her to Kuwait, and left me to live with my grandmother. Ameena visited, but mostly she was in Saudi Arabia, working as a nurse, living in a dormitory with the other imported labour. Eventually, she remarried.

I don't know what tall tale my grandmother told Sitt Hind to justify my living at Dar-el-Tifl when my mother could clearly afford to care for me, especially since her new husband was an important person in Kuwait with a lot of stars on his army uniform. I'm sure my grandmother told a convincing story. And I'm sure no one knew the truth. Not all of it anyway. Because it would be at least another twenty years before I would ever tell another human being that the man my mother married had already molested me when I was seven years old, long before she married him. It would be at least twenty-five years before I would admit to anyone that at the age of eight, when my mother married my molester, I became my stepfather's mistress.

Until I burned down their house.

His reaction to the fire was proof to others that I was the problem. People extolled his self-control and patience for not giving me the good beating I deserved, and they criticized him for the same reason. They said he must be a saint to put up with a troublemaker like me who wasn't even his daughter. They said my mother was lucky to have found such a man. "He didn't even yell at the girl," a woman said. And she was right.

My stepfather never said a word to me on the matter. But in the soot of memory, our eyes locked one day and he held me in a terrifying stare that immobilised me until he looked away, an eternity later. It was a stare swollen with a secret rage that I could only interpret through my adult eyes, many years later. He had wanted to unleash his fury for the financial loss I had caused. He wanted to pound me, maybe rape me and rip me to shreds. But doing so would risk having his reputation burned down if I told. I suppose he didn't understand that I would not have squealed, not because I was a Keeper of Secrets, but because I felt culpable.

The fire was really an accident, but maybe there are no accidents. Maybe the accusations I got from everyone around me were correct – that I was jealous of my mother's marriage and wanted to destroy it. Maybe I just wanted to burn the scenery of my life. Maybe, at the age of nine, I needed my world to smolder on the outside like it was smoldering inside. Things need to match when you're young. They make more sense that way. Maybe. And maybe I knew that the traits that really mattered – Unworthy, Dirty, Bad – far outweighed the other entries on my list.

So, I was sent away to Jordan.

Like the times before, I do not recall the details of this abandonment. My memory moves from the grip of my stepfather's stare after the fire, to being in Amman, Jordan with a relative, too embarrassed to let anyone know that I had only one pair of panties that I wore and washed at the sink every so often under the cover of night when the world was sleeping.

I went from one relative to another. In one home, mosquitoes left my legs looking like I had chicken pox. Someone told me that I must have sweet blood since mosquitoes had not dotted ugly welts on anyone else's legs. I liked the idea that my blood was sweeter than most and I secretly thought it probably gave me special powers. But I didn't add that to my list, since I wasn't yet sure what my powers were.

In another home, I met a beautiful old man that everyone called el Haj Musa. He claimed to be my paternal grandfather's cousin. As proof, he showed me a picture of him and my grandfather, Atiyeh, together in Jerusalem sometime in the 1920s. A much younger version of el Haj Musa is seated while my grandfather stands erect, his chest puffed out as if holding his breath. Their moustaches are thick and long and curled upward at the tips. Each is wearing a Palestinian *galabiya*, but only my grandfather dons a *tarboush* on his head, a sign of importance that the Turks left behind in Palestine. El Haj Musa told me that my grandfather was a *gabadai*, a tough man who never backed down from a fight. "He was fearless," el Haj Musa said, "and that's how he wanted all his sons to

be". Atiyeh would not accept weakness from his sons, and was especially hard on the one who would someday become my father. El Haj Musa said that God was merciful to have taken my grandfather at a young age, so he didn't have to endure the indignity and humiliation of being a refugee. That was the first time I learned that I, too, was a refugee, because someone else had taken my country. "Nine hundred years our family has been on the Mt of Olives in Jerusalem," he said. "And before that a thousand more years..." el Haj Musa would then launch into a familiar rant that made no sense to me about the "damned British" and "their godless Jews." Sometimes he ended his rant crying, his wrinkly face cupped in his wrinkly hands as his wrinkly voice repeated curses at the damned British and godless Jews. El Haj Musa used the words "damned" and "godless" to describe everyone he didn't like. Naturally, I decided to hate the British and the Jews, because I loved el Haj Musa.

I did my best to be good. I wanted to stay in the good graces of these relatives so I could remain near el Haj Musa. I helped clean, minded my manners, didn't impose on anyone, ate small amounts at meals, never talked back, and I didn't tattle on their kids when they picked on me.

All that began to change when school started. I had no passport or papers so I could not attend. El Haj Musa was trying to find a solution. I heard him yelling once that they should take me to the United Nations and say, "Here you go. Here's your fucking 'Question of Palestine'. She needs a damned education and can't get it because according to you, she doesn't exist." It was the first time I heard el Haj Musa say "fucking," so I was sure things would work out since he

was clearly very serious. But day after endless day in Jordan, I watched kids in uniforms go to and from school while I stayed put.

I was nothing. A fucking question. My heart grew dark and thundery. And for the first time in my life, faced with my greatest fear of being denied an education, I became defiant and loud and hostile and moody. Good Grades was the only consistent entry on my list of virtues and I couldn't bear losing that. I pleaded and panicked and cried and screamed and bothered everyone around me until the pity and charity I had been shown dried up.

"What do you expect her to do?" el Haj Musa defended me. "Call that godless mother of hers and tell her to do something. This is sinful to leave her child like this. I don't care what the girl did. She's a child. What is this world coming to? Such godlessness would never be allowed to happen if we were in Palestine." He blamed the damned British and their godless Jews. I stopped listening because I didn't appreciate him calling my mother godless. But I just kept that in my dark thundery heart because el Haj Musa was my only friend.

Finally, my grandmother arrived from Kuwait and el Haj Musa asked her why Ameena hadn't come herself. My grandmother called him an old fool and told him to shut up. He raised his voice instead, telling my grandmother that her "godless daughter hasn't so much as lifted a phone to talk to her child. This girl is not an old shoe she can throw out", he said. The whole world fell silent as el Haj Musa's words curled around an old familiar feeling in my belly – one that I had always mistaken for a bellyache. I had not considered that my mother should

have been in touch with me. And old bellyache suddenly had a new name and shape. It became a sort of sadness – a small old shoe, perhaps – formed from a spooned out piece of the heart. I held the little old shoe in my palm, then tucked it in my pocket.

My grandmother had brought a suitcase of clothes for me, with several sets of underwear. In a day, I was packed and ready for my next journey. Before we left, el Haj Musa gave me the photo of himself and my grandfather, Atiyeh. “Take it,” he said. “They can steal everything we have, but they can’t change history. They’ll never have pictures like these of their grandparents in Jerusalem. Of course not! They’re European.” I didn’t know who he was talking about, but I took the picture and hugged him. I kissed him mightily on the cheek and promised that I would get his land back for him when I became a grownup. I didn’t mention my special powers. I was old enough to know that such a claim was laughable, no matter how strongly I believed it was true.

“Be fearless, Susie, like your grandfather, and you’ll be okay,” he said. Many months later, I tried to put Fearless on my list. But Don’t Lie was also on the list and it had to be one or the other.

On my last day in Jordan, as we drove to the Palestinian border, my grandmother showed me how to sneak into the West Bank through the Allenby Bridge. That’s an impossible feat now, but things were different in 1980. The crossing was mayhem: an open space with suitcases splayed open, soldiers rummaging through them, children running around. I was told to “stay with that family over

there with all the kids”. I did as I was told. Having been promised schooling, I had gone back to being my obedient self and restored that attribute to my list.

There seemed to be hundreds of kids in that family. In reality, there were probably some twenty siblings and cousins with their parents, and I could simply blend in or hide among them. Being short may have saved me, as I could easily be invisible in the shuffle. “I’ll meet you on the other side,” my grandmother said and began reciting verses from the Quran. She instructed me not to look any soldier in the eyes, not to try to find her, and to recite the *Fatiha* and every other verse from the Quran that I had memorized, over and over in my mind until I made it across. I obeyed. I knew a lot of Quran verses by heart. (That, too, was on my list of virtues).

I stayed with the large family. I stripped off my clothes when ordered to do so and stood in my panties in a line with all the other women and girls in their panties against the wall as the Israeli soldier took our shoes in crates and came back a while later, pouring the inspected shoes into a pile on the floor. Still reciting Quran verses in my mind, I waited for the adults to move. They waited for the soldier’s nod. Then we all fell to our knees around the pile to retrieve our shoes. I worried that someone was going to steal mine. That’s all I remember. I must have met up with my grandmother on the other side. She probably paid the women of the large family for playing along. She must have taken me to Dar-el-Tifl. And I must have said goodbye.

“Fine,” I answered when Sitt Hind asked me how my mother was doing, but all I could think about was whether or not she could smell the tuna. I began to worry that I was stinking up her house and that the smell would linger long after I was gone. I didn’t tell Sitt Hind – nor would I have even if I had not been stinky – that Ameena had not tried to contact me at all since I had arrived at Dar-el-Tifl years earlier.

Because I was a Keeper of Secrets. I Never Squealed. I Never Tattled. And on the matter of being discarded and abandoned, I would never have tattled on my mother – not even to myself, in the privacy of my own thoughts. I simply let the spooned-out-piece-of-the-heart-old-shoe in my pocket just be a bellyache.

Sitt Hind might have been disappointed in Ameena. Maybe she was disappointed in me, too, on account of how strangely I was acting. That thought still bothers me. It bothers me that I never got a chance to demonstrate to Sitt Hind that I was worth her investment; that I had internalised her commitment to believe and invest in the humanity and potential of others; that I treasured the education she gave me and would do the best I could with it; that I loved her and wanted desperately to hug her that day; and that I would never be the kind of mother who would sacrifice or abandon her daughter.

I would never get a chance to express any of that to Sitt Hind. The evening I stood reeking of tuna in her home was the last time I ever saw her. Sometime after, I was given the traumatic news that I would be leaving Dar-el-Tifl. My father had sent for me to go live with him in the United States.

So, at thirteen, I came to the United States. At fourteen, after a year of going to school with bruises, black eyes and broken bones, I became a ward of the Mecklenberg County Court, got a green card, and my father was convicted of misdemeanour child abuse. Several foster homes later, Social Services settled me in a Southern Baptist children's care called Mill's Home. I was one of two kids on that campus who was not Christian. The other kid, Alan, was Jewish and he and I formed a friendship based on a common annoyance at their endless efforts to convert us.

Alan was prudent and patient. I was impulsive and foolhardy, and when the possibility of family and belonging was dangled in front of me – my greatest and most incessant want – I would leap for it without thought or care. So, when I reached out to Ameena and she invited me to visit in Kuwait, I wasn't going to let a technicality get in my way. As a ward of the court, I couldn't leave US jurisdiction before the age of eighteen. Alan warned me not to, but I emancipated myself to leave at the age of seventeen for Kuwait, where Ameena had just given birth to my fifth and youngest half sister. For a week's visit with my birthmother, I gave up the financial security of being a ward of the court, which would have provided for me and paid for my education through university. Upon my return to finish my senior year, I lived on my own and I learned that I couldn't sustain myself working at Burger King and Mr. Gatti's Pizza. My homeroom teacher, Anne Parrish, took me in, and I finished high school living with her, got a scholarship for college, and then graduate school. Anne did not believe in God.

That's how I went from immersion in Evangelical Christianity for the first few years of my life to conservative Islam through early adolescence, to Southern Baptist Christianity and then atheism through high school. Before the age of sixteen, I had lived in twenty-one different homes, only two of which were with either of my parents. The rest were with relatives, in foster care or at institutions. I have lived and travelled all over the world, but my heart never left Jerusalem, where all my ancestors are buried, where Sitt Hind showed me that I was worthy, and where Um Hasan told me that I didn't need to wait for anyone's scraps and Espi said I didn't need to be afraid. I abused my own body with food and drugs to find some measure of control. I fell in love and, alone, gave birth to the love of my life. I've had a broken heart. A broken body. And at times, a broken everything.

My life is very far from the destiny that Atiyeh thought he was bequeathing to his descendants. His granddaughter, the fruit of a long line of a huge clan of Palestinian farmers grew up alone, fending for herself so far away from her birthright. El Haj Musa was right when he said that the world is unkind when you're alone, without papers, without a family or a clan or land or country. He was right, too, when he suggested that rarely would I be treated with the dignity of an equal, until I demanded and fought for it. But el Haj Musa neglected to tell me about – or maybe he neglected to see – the particular beauties and strengths that can be found in the trenches of such a life. Like the ability to hold your head high, even when someone has their boot at your neck; the wisdom to do whatever it takes to get an education, even when you're denied schooling; the

freedom of shedding shame; the authenticity of living a truth, no matter how ugly, without apologies; the marvel of a body that heals itself from the intentional harm of others; and the victory of a heart that does not succumb to hatred or bitterness.

The thing about being an adult is that you eventually stop needing things to match up and you manage, somehow, when your birthright or your dreams don't coincide with your destiny. It turned out that I didn't have special powers and I wasn't able to get el Haj Musa's land back. Nor was I ever able to add Fearless to my list, even though it is long since I stopped taking inventory of my traits. I am forty-one years old now and I still fear so much, like intimacy and abandonment. The old shoe is still in my pocket. But there are gems there, too. Like my inheritance of Atiyeh's stubbornness and his attachment to and love of the land; the legacy of Um Hasan's gentle heart; and the imprinted wisdom, feminist ideals, and expansive generosity of Sitt Hind.