

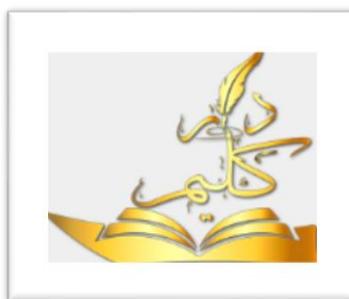
My name is Lulu

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حقوق الطبع والنشر لهذا المصنف محفوظة للمؤلف، ولا يجوز بأي صورة إعادة النشر
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Sawsen Khalfi

My name is Lulu

2023



1

"Should I start?"

"Sure, please feel free and don't hold back."

"My name is Lulu. I'm eighteen years old on papers, yet more than thirty in feelings and appearance. I'm sad. I'm not a free soul, sometimes I feel like an empty shell, a soulless collection of bones, flesh and organs.

If you ask me about what I like, I will simply tell you that I like to be myself. I have hobbies that have been raped and talents that have never seen light. I'm fond of dancing yet I've never had the chance to do it even in my private room because my mom thinks it's forbidden and inappropriate. I love drawing yet I'm not allowed to practice because my mother thinks it will affect my school marks and my father believes it's forbidden and inappropriate. I wish I could join a university abroad, yet I would never do it. My father believes that a female is not allowed to travel alone and depend on herself without a companion; who must be a male. I dream to be a doctor, yet I'm

obliged to forget about it because my family assume that females are not authorized to work with males in the same place. Being a doctor means that I'll be more exposed to males' world and check patients' bodies daily; that is a sin according to my father.

I'm not allowed to choose and buy my own clothes because my mother doesn't want me to imitate 'open-minded' girls and follow disproportionate trends. Appearance is more important than a person's core, feelings and desires according to my family. I'm not free to have a catch up with my friends whenever and wherever. I'm allowed to order from restaurants and coffee shops, yet I have never tried to sit with my friends and have our own table in a restaurant or café even for a short time. My father doesn't like anyone he knows to point at me and say his daughter is eating or drinking coffee in a public place. That goes against traditions and ethics. I'm not allowed to go on a school trip with my mates since my parents are convinced that school trips are only for girls who are not well-raised. That's weird, isn't it?

In my place everything is strongly connected to traditions, customs and appearances. We have a very long list of 'donts' and a very short one of 'dos',

especially for females. We are not born free, and we have no right to disobey great-great ancestors' codes of values. We don't have the right to question their correctness or change them according to our present life and generation updates.

In my place, people are more attached to the past than the present or the future. Silence and obedience are our habits, disagreement and refusal are our disfavors; raising voices and speaking up are unusual and immoral."

She paused for a deep sigh, then said:

"Can you imagine, ma'am that I don't know a lot about my family members?! It's weird, isn't it? I have no idea about my father's interests, dreams, hobbies, worries, strengths and weaknesses. His personality is so ambiguous for me and I only know what he wants us to know. At home, he is like the dark shadow, a mysterious man who gives orders and wants the rest of us to obey and look after his relaxation above all.

We eat when he wants to eat and what he likes to eat. We sleep whenever he asks us to sleep. We meet only those he approves to meet. We never discuss our dreams in front of him because he believes we need nothing to dream about. He affords all our material comforts and that's enough, then what do we want

more? Why do we dream about something different?
Dreams in our house are not tolerated!

My father is the commander in chief and we are there to execute and do only what we are instructed to do. He knows more than we do, he is the wisest ever. We must follow him blindly until we get married and start following another Dark man. When my father is not home, my brothers will replace him and they often quarrel on who will have the highest position and give orders to the females of the house. Actually, they enjoy ruling us.

Do you know ma'am that they had never called us sisters, sweeties, honey bees, guys or any nickname for sisters?!They usually call our names or say 'you girls, females, women..' They always like to remind us that we are different in gender, and they are superior and better. Even my younger brother has the same attitude; he respects me sometimes, but he always points at my gender like it's an error or a source of worries and shame.

In my place everything is male-centered. We; females are treated with inferiority and sometimes disrespect as if we are responsible for our gender or as if being a woman is a sin or a curse. Oh my God! What a pity! I always wonder what makes them think

likewise and where they get this conviction from! Males in my family are convinced that they are chosen to be superior and to control us. They reckon Nature urges us to be always under their commandments and mercy. They believe we are weak creatures who can't stand alone, who are unable to think wisely and appropriately, who depend on their courage and wisdom, who must forever obey even the youngest brother by reason of being a male. We are not free ma'am, and we are empowered by their beliefs, their complexities, their thoughts, their desires, their failures and inadequacy. No matter how old I am, I must follow even the youngest, immature, less responsible male. Do you believe that there still are such persuasions and beliefs in our century?"

She looked straight at my eyes for the first time since we met today.

"Isn't true that women's situation is no longer the same and people all over the world fought, and are still fighting for our freedom, equality and human rights? Why am I still young yet I suffer like an old woman in old times? I'm deprived from the simplest rights while I'm still living with my own family, so what if I grow up more and face a whole community? Then what will happen to me? How can I live my own

life peacefully? How can I differentiate between my rights and others'? How will I be able to respect others' freedom and rights when I've never gotten mine or breathed the pure air of liberty and privilege? One cannot give what one dispossessed. I'm a weak, underprivileged, depressed, wounded creature that needs rehabilitation and a long process of spiritual and moral cure to stand up strong and determined and dare to live outside the big cold walls of a prison others call 'home'.

Actually, home is not the place you were born and raised in. Home is not where you only eat, play, sleep and reside. Home is not only where family members gather and live a life together. Home is more than that for me. I still feel homeless despite the luxurious place my parents afford and the number of persons who surround me there. As a matter of fact, I'm still searching for my home because I strongly believe that home relates to one's freedom and inner peace more than walls, furniture or even family members. Home is where affections, tolerance, mutual respect, desires, ambitions, dreams, talents, hobbies, rights, freedom, honor, and justice are centered and cherished. Home is bigger than walls and smaller than walls, indeed. It's that ball of light that accompanies you and enlightens

your way wherever you go and whoever you meet. It's that deep feeling of safety and belonging to the land you stand up in and not the opposite. Home is rather a feeling than a piece of property and ownership; more than names written on papers that belong to you. Home can be a person, an idea and sometimes a pen and a sheet of paper. Home can be a teacher like you ma'am; the only person I trust and feel safe with! There were times when my dreams were my home, when my hobbies were my family, when my strong emotions and lost ambitions were my brothers and sisters. There were times when I felt so strange on the table I share with my parents and siblings, when I felt bizarre and I couldn't know me through the eyes of my own mom and dad, when I asked myself bitterly; 'who am I, what am I doing in this place? what's common between me and these people who call themselves my family?! Family is not about blood, it's about who heartily supports you and never give up on you.

My name is Lulu, yet I've never chosen it or tried to know its meaning. My parents are decent, yet I've never chosen them or asked whether I want them to be mine or wanted to replace them with ones of my choice. There is always that mysterious Lulu who asks

sophisticated questions. There is, always, that suspicious mind that lures to concealed worlds and unknown people and places. There are always weird concepts and obscure invitations for nonconformity and rebellion. The Lulu I truly know and love asks if I can press a button and delete my surrounding to replace everyone and everything with others of my own selection. The Lulu I definitely admire calls me to dance like a ballerina, tweet like a gorgeous free bird, draw like Vincent Van Gogh and share my art with others, dress up the way I like and choose the colors that suit me, bounce my beautiful long hair and allow the breeze to run freely over my head and face, move my bare feet and mysterious body to music under cold heavy rain, sit with my friends in an open air restaurant and order the food and drinks I like, enjoy a ride with my sister alone without a male watching and guiding our steps. I want to travel the world by myself and enjoy looking at my shadow and trying to catch it like an innocent child. I dream to go shopping with my mother without a brother following us to make sure we are safe or we don't talk to strangers. The Lulu inside me wishes to join her mates for a school trip and discover the world of my fellows out of the school fences. The same blind Lulu wants to

participate in a workshop or a forum where I sit side by side to a male and take part in intellectual discussions without complexities, separation, and prejudice. I believe there is no harm if males and females share the same workplace, study in the same classroom, work on the same projects and discuss issues and values while they are sitting on the same table and having eye contact. Why did old people instruct us to get away from males' world and forbid any contact with them? Why did they suppress our human nature and want us; women; to be imprisoned and keep our emotions and viewpoints bottled up? Why are we obliged to live a whole life carrying that ugly feeling that we are a source of degradation and scandal rather than pride and honor? Why is there a stone wall between us, kids, and our parents? Why don't they communicate with us so frequently and listen to our opinions and thoughts even the trivial and annoying ones? Why do some parents hide their feelings and act like they were emotionally inaccessible? Why do they scare us, fragile kids, instead of assuring us? Why and why and why?!

Million questions are asked inside my boiling mind ma'am. I mostly feel depressed and life has no meaning for me. I don't know whom to blame, but I'm

pretty sure that my birth was an error. I shouldn't have come to life because life doesn't care of me or even wants me. I shouldn't be my parents' daughter because I have no great value in their lives. For sure they love me as Mother Nature says all parents love their kids, but I don't easily feel that love. They literally scare me. I'm not close to them because they think daughters shouldn't be pampered or exposed to love and care so that they know well their limits and they won't be so demanding. I cannot remember the last time my father hugged me and directly expressed his love. I doubt if he played with me like natural fathers play with their kids. I don't remember him bouncing me on his knee, running after me in the courtyard, playing hide and seek with me, carrying me on his back and moving from one room to another like he is my train and I'm the smartest driver of the whole world. I have no memory of my mother and father holding ends of a rope and encouraging me to jump over it. I love the skipping rope game and I wish I would fly higher and higher while mom and dad are watching me and are ready to catch me if a danger was in the air. I don't recall a moment when my father enveloped me in a hug, listened to my stories carefully

and comforted me in a way that I can talk to him effortlessly and fearlessly.

When I look back to my childhood, I recognize how miserable and oppressed I was. Every natural person should have piles of memories and unforgettable moments of childhood. Unfortunately, I have rare if not nothing. Could you imagine how unhappy and desperate I have to be to want to run away from my own family and get rid of all attachments and bounds?! The place I belong to is very tough and merciless especially for females. It's very strange that giving birth to a daughter; in their belief, means living a life of fear, worry and restlessness. They harshly pass this conviction to us till the point that we; ourselves, follow them and think we are less in rank creatures and our importance is, absolutely, less than our brothers, cousins, uncles, sons; males in general. Our ears are acquainted with words like: 'He is a man', 'a man is always a source of pride and strength' 'obey your little brother because he is a man' 'Men are not to be blamed or judged the same way as women' 'Are you crazy comparing yourself to a man?' 'You must obey your husband even if he is faulty, less educated than you, tyrant and complicated, by the end being in power is his right' 'women are weak creatures who

must follow men's instructions; the latter must always wear the crown because, simply; they are males.'

Give me a break! Stop repeating and repeating and praising males at the expense of our importance and existence! What a lagging, stupid delayed mentality and what a feeble-minded, complicated, psycho community! I confess that people I live with are not reconciled with themselves. They lack self-esteem, self-confidence, and indulgence. They do not know how to love themselves or value what they have. They don't accept themselves as they are and even more, they ignore the reason behind our creation and existence. My folks are very strange creatures. Physically speaking; they have the best brains and minds ever created, but in reality they don't use them or even know about how privileged human beings are. They don't ask questions or use their minds to suspect others' instructions, disbelieve what seems unreasonable and stupid, challenge traditions and frozen habits, wonder about prejudice and narrow-mindedness. They don't have the courage to call injustice, rules, assumptions and discrimination into question. They are shallow creatures who focus only and importantly on appearances and things that only come into their sight. They have severe deficiency in

analytical and critical thinking and their minds are not enlightened by the spark and power of reasoning. They are locked up in the past and powered by traditions and auditory habits. They listen more than they think, and this is a disaster itself. They blindly believe on what their ancestors said and follow instructions that are most of the time not suitable for our age and present. They never accept that every time and generation have their own needs, characteristics, opinions, and lifestyle. They think that what applied for their ancestors long time ago must suit our lives and days, otherwise we would be cursed and classified as strange, rebellious, infidel and sometimes disbelievers.

I know well, ma'am, that I talked a lot and I may annoy you and waste your time. But believe me, it is my only breathing space and being alone with you encourages me to tell you everything like I am talking to my reflection in the mirror."

"Don't mention it my dear, I am all your ears, please feel comfortable to tell me everything. You have no idea how much I care about you and to what extent I love you Lulu."

She smiled warmly and her eyes told how comfortable she was to spill the beans.

"My name is Lulu, I'm eighteen years old, yet the scars and complexities I carry are older, deeper and heavier than you could imagine. I'm not a free soul and never will I be. I'm not a useful effective woman and never will I be. I'm not a dreamer and never will I dare to do it. I'm a prisoner and never will I find someone to release me. I'm not myself and I have no idea about self-confidence and appreciation. I have no future plans and I don't really care about tomorrow because even tomorrow won't be mine. I don't actually choose or decide how to live, with whom or why to live. My mom always reminds me that immediately after high school graduation they will celebrate my wedding ceremony. They have already planned for it without consulting me or asking for my opinion. They totally ignore my desires, dreams and emotions. They believe that I'm their own property and they have the right to do what they think it's better for me. They treat me like I'm their house, piece of furniture, land or pet. They own me more than they respect and feel my existence and inner desires.

I cannot forget a cold shocking conversation between myself and mom a day not far from today.

"Mom, I want to graduate and travel abroad to finish my studies at my dream university."

Mom: "After graduation you will have a break from studying; a gap year maybe, you will get married then if your husband accepts you will travel together wherever he wants."

"But mom I don't want to marry now, I'm still young."

Mom: "What! And who is asking for your opinion?"

"Mom this is my life and it's me who is getting married. I need to think a lot before choosing a partner."

Mom: "Choosing? And who told you that you will choose him? He already chose you and we have approved. After all, from when we discuss and decide?! From when we know more than our parents and we dare to look at their eyes and talk the way you are doing right now?!"

"You are my mother and it's natural that I discuss issues with you and tell you all about my wants and my plans."

Mom: "You are my own daughter and I know well what the best is for you. Besides, I; myself don't have any right to choose for you. Your father is the commander in chief and he is reasonable and wise

enough to lead us and decide what is better for everyone.”

“Mom you are scaring me!”

Mom: “you scare me more and I have never expected such a reaction from you. You were always an obedient girl and never had you discussed or rejected something. You always follow us and you know well about our habits, ethics and lifestyle. You scare me more because today I felt audacity and change even in your voice tone. If you want to live a blessed peaceful life you must obey and follow your parents’ instructions. We never fail in guiding you because we know well how to choose the best for every one of you. If you think you could go out of the flock, forget about it. One day when you become a parent yourself you will discover how right we are, and you will definitely do the same things with your kids.”

“I have never been convinced with so many of your deeds and convictions. It’s true that I’m an obedient and calm girl but that doesn’t mean I accept everything or totally agree with you adults. I only followed because I’m weak, I’m still searching for the right time to say no, defend my opinions and freed my beliefs. Following you all the time, mom, doesn’t

mean I'm happy and satisfied! I'm rather more scared than convinced and assured. It's so weird that a person doesn't feel confident and safe even with the closest people, father and mother.

Did you ask yourself once about the feelings of your daughter? Did you wonder about my future and destiny? Did you notice that I'm unhappy and disturbed? Were you aware of the traumatic experiences I went through and the anxiety I endured? Mom you rarely care about my emotions, my spiritual and psychological state. You and my father mainly think that nurturing kids; especially daughters, is restricted in affording material and physical things. You believe that the closer you are to your daughters the worse the results will be. You care less about our souls, concerns, thoughts, passion, beliefs, reactions, freedom, sentiments, fragility, doubts and worries.

Excuse me mom; but your ways in raising us are totally wrong. You and my father scare me more than you convince or relieve my doubts. You think that everything is okay, yet everything is not okay. You do your best to feed us, buy clothes, change our rooms' furniture, pay for our education, pay for the maids to clean after us and take care of us, buy toys you think

are suitable for us, change the house decoration from time to time to beautify our life, consult the best doctors if we are sick and take good care of our health. That is perfect and we are so grateful, but did you notice that you care less about our emotions and mental health? Why can't you get closer and identify our mental and emotional needs? Why don't you communicate and discuss with us and tell us more about life and how beautiful it is? You always give instructions and draw the ugly scary side of life, yet you barely exert efforts to tell us how to live positively, how to dream and widen our horizons, how to boost self-confidence and love ourselves, how to be proud of being a woman and show the entire world how powerful and useful women could be. You have never shown us how to express our emotions, how to dare and talk about things and people we love or we don't love, how to be open minded and accept ourselves as we are, how to criticize, think and use our minds, how to question and show curiosity instead of admitting and taking everything for granted. Mom; you have never talked about freedom and options we have to choose for ourselves. You have never taught us about justice and equality. You forgot to guide and educate us about security and democracy. You have

never ever sat with us and advised us on how to choose a partner, how to love and which rights we do have when we are married. You do not even value education and you let us go to school only for social status and to show others you are great open-minded parents. You have never taught me about my body or told me that I'm a natural set of organs who needs to know how they function all together and what role they have in a person's life."

She battled the tears that were welling in her eyes then paused for a while.

"Unexpectedly, my mother pulled my left hand harshly, looked straight at my eyes and said coldly: Mom: "If your father was here and heard what you have said, it would be a catastrophe and I couldn't guarantee his reaction. It seems that I failed in raising you correctly Lulu. I would pretend that nothing had happened and what you said must be buried here and now, do you understand that? We didn't send you to school to learn how to be disrespectful and daring. Listen to my words attentively Lulu, this is the life we inherited from our ancestors, and we are thankful and satisfied. We will never change our behavior, customs or lifestyle and neither you nor anyone else would dare and ride roughshod over our convictions and

visions. For that you are obliged to follow the current and show obedience and silence; you have no other choice.”

My blood froze in my vessels and I felt like everything around me was twisting crazily. I wished the ground would swallow me up at the feeling of the harshness and indifference of my mother, my father, my family, my life all at once. I hardly made my legs obey my brain, grabbed a pillow from my bed and hugged it tight. I cried like I had never cried before to the point that I had no feelings, no memories, no light....

I had woken up weak and unable for a pretty long time to recall where I was, what time of a day it was or even what my name was. I had lain on my bed unable to move, unable to breathe, unable to feel, unable to remember something encouraging or nice.

After that conversation with my mother, things turned to be worse, and my life became darker and darker. I had a feeling that my bones interblended to become a mass of useless lifeless white piece of ceramic. My heart was like a squeezed blood lemon melt with ice cubes. At that particular time, I couldn’t make my legs obey my brain or stop shaking for a while. I wondered if my own mother treated me so

harshly and caused the worst feelings ever, what could strangers do to me?!

You know what ma'am; I no longer want to study and graduate. I no longer have the same passion to study at university and dream bigger. I want to shut down my boiling mind and stop dreaming about the day I wear the graduation robe and make all my worries and scares fly with my graduation hat. This is for one reason; I don't want to marry the guy she told me about. My family as well as his are waiting for me to finish exams and graduate, then start the wedding ceremonies. They didn't even ask about my opinion. I don't even know his name ma'am. My parents said that if I want to carry on my university studies, I must marry him at first because it was of no question that I could join any university while I'm still single. They think that university is a threat for their honor and a place where I can meet more people and new characters different than ours. They believe that chances of changing my personality to the worst are higher and opportunities of being harassed, teased and 'modified' are grander there.

I don't want to graduate because I have no control over my life and choices. They plan everything for me regardless to my needs and wishes. For them,

being a female is an enough reason not to be trusted. Thus, it's their right and duty to decide for me and highlight even the most intimate and personal stuff. They strongly believe that I lack the ability to think reasonably and decide wisely and rightly. By the end I'm just a woman and women in my place are underestimated and they have miniscule minds, accordingly; we are not as equal and wise as men.

My whole life has no meaning, and all age stages are alike. They said life gives choices to every person; yet in my case even the choices are traced for me. I'm desperately pushed to follow them without figuring out how to make bad situations work in my favor. How unfair life is! How burdensome and meaningless my life is! How gloomy and dreary my future is!

How do you want me to stand up positively and grow up healthily if I'm already loaded and exhausted? Why do you repeatedly advise me to struggle and follow my dreams if I'm already unfree and compelled? It's so easy for you ma'am to talk about hope and positivity because you are a free soul and you have already tasted the sweetness of optimism and freedom. You know nothing, or little, about the hardship I'm passing through or the complexity of my life. I'm literally imprisoned, I'm not

allowed to speak, to dream, to decide or to choose. How cruel to stop a person from being the person one wants to be!

Every night when I return to my bedside, I feel that terrifying silence and weakness few people know about. I sit frozen and unable to think how to change my life, how to dare and ask for my right to decide for myself, how to speak out and tell them that they are wrong and I'm old and wise enough to choose the university I want to join, the partner I want to spend the rest of life with, the clothes I want to wear, the places I want to visit, the hobbies I want to practice and the person I want to be. It's me who will live, study and marry not them, so why don't they simply leave me alone and stop interfering in every single detail? They always make me feel that I'm not a human soul who has rights and duties. I'm rather torn between a body I definitely hate and a soul I impatiently want to free and release from all kinds of chains and bonds. I'm desperate and heavy-hearted more than you realize, I doubt that your peaceful and positive attitude will heal my scars ma'am."

When she kept silent for a quite long time, I touched her hand tenderly and said:

"And who told you that my life is that easy and perfect? Positivity doesn't mean one is always happy and satisfied. Conversely, it indicates the potential one possesses to overcome hardships and see the thin light of hope through the scary black picture. I also suffered a lot and my life was never pink and effortless. I struggled eagerly to be the person I want to be and enjoy my life the way I want. I suffered while swimming against the current for the sake of my desires, hobbies, and ambitions.

Our stories might be different Lulu; yet be sure that at your age, or even earlier, I was a totally different kind of a person. I was very calm and obedient, but I've never been totally convinced with a bunch of things around me. I also had dreams that were kidnapped and voices that had never been heard. I was unsatisfied with the way my parents treated us in so many situations, the environment I was living in, the instructions that filled my life as a girl and the long list of prohibited things myself and the females of the extended family must accept silently and submissively. I was such a calm girl not because I liked and accepted everything around, but because I was still weak and neither my age and personality nor my educational level permit any

refusal or rebellion. I Kept quiet and I decided to wait for the right time to act and speak out. In my place there are people similar to those in yours Lulu. They are guided by stoned convictions they blindly inherited from their ancestors and they practice their violence and unfair, unconvincing customs on the females of the family.

I actually want to share with you a strange story Lulu. I have family members who had never joined school for the reason of their gender. The 'Big Boss', like the one you have at your home, blindly believes that women's place is at home and that they are not allowed to leave it even for school. According to him, a woman is created to be at home serving her family. At a certain age, she must move to her husband's house and start serving another family. Her crucial role is to work indoor and satisfy her surrounding's needs; especially the needs of males who are thought to be more responsible outdoor and to be served and pampered by the females of the family. He and his fellows consider that a woman's life goes around men's satisfaction and welfare. Can you imagine that he disregards family members who respect and value education! He didn't miss a chance to remind us that

what we do is totally wrong and sooner or later it would have a bunch of bad consequences!

My relative is blessed with boys and girls yet he was never fair and just in treating and nurturing them. His sons, no matter how decent, good and respectful they are, are privileged over his daughters for the simple fact that they are males. Guess what Lulu! He has never sat on the same table with his daughters and enjoyed meals together particularly when they grew up! According to his beliefs, this would be an action of disrespect; sharing meals with them would open doors for freedom and dare from their side. He rarely talked to them or listened to their stories, worries and personal stuff. For him this is exclusively the role of the mother. He stopped hugging and kissing them at a very early age. He knew a little about their lives and needs. He filled them with orders and instructions and he scared them more than giving them the feelings of safety and assurance a natural father should give his daughters. He doesn't believe in the special delicate relationship between a father and a daughter. Conversely, he varies the ways of pushing them away from him and teaching them that a father is the master in chief and they must follow his commands and work hard to

satisfy him. Their relationship is not based on emotions, tenderness and tolerance. It's rather based on toughness, restrictions and fear. Unfortunately, even his wife was treated as an inferior creature because she is also a woman who has more duties than rights. Her life must turn around his comfort and peace of mind.

There are some memories which are hard to be forgotten Lulu. I still remember that day when we passed them a visit. I was still young; sixteen may be, and I loved going to their house because they had a big courtyard where we could play freely. They also had a barn where I could feed the chicken and watch the girls milking the cows surprised on how they could be so close and do it fearlessly. I would always wonder when they learned all the hard tasks they repeat every day. They looked happy to show us how talented and hard-working they are and honestly, I highly appreciate what they do because I could never do it as easily and meticulously as them. After finishing with the cows, they moved to another and even harder task. They worked in the farm in a very surprising and artful way. One of them was even younger than I was, yet she was very skilled and persistent. She showed

great potential and her ability to take pains was surprising and worth watching.

"Wow, you are a great girl!" I said while getting closer to her.

She giggled, took a swig of her tea and said: "Why do you say that?"

"Look at you girl, you are very strong and you know everything about the cows and the land. You are even allowed to drink tea at this early age! I wish I could do it! You are my idol and I want you to teach me how to milk the cow, how to feed the animals in your barn, how to prepare land for planting, how to care for the crops, how to water fields and free them of weeds, how to manage so many difficult duties in one day! Every time we visit you, I watch you and your sisters perform actively and diligently and I wish I were in your shoes."

"Never wish to be in my shoes, you ignore the truth."

"You look happy and proud of what you are doing."

"You know nothing about my feelings and state. Watching is very different from acting. You are a pampered girl and your chances for happiness are

greater than mine. Do you know that I'm younger than you?"

"Of course I know it and that's why I highly appreciate what you do. Actually, I'm older yet unable to perform like you or reach your commitment and strength."

"Do you think that I'm enjoying it? How trivial you are!"

"But you always smile and you never show tiredness or complaint."

"Not showing them doesn't mean I enjoy my life. If you just look profoundly and compassionately at my eyes you will realize the truth. Let me trust you and tell you more about me. You said that I'm your idol while I disregard myself and sometimes, I envy you and wish to be in your shoes. Look at you; you are neat and elegant, you are not obliged to wake up very early regardless to weather conditions or your needs to sleep longer and dream of a better life in a better place. You are not asked to conceal your fear and follow the orders regardless to your physical abilities or mental state. You are not asked to get close to a giant cow, sit beside its big scary heel and watch its dirty tail swaying right and left and telling you that it can be more than a tail, it's a kind of cows'

weapon you should consider seriously. The nice picture you enjoyed watching from distance is more different than reality. What I always do is very hard and disgusting. You have no idea about the ugliness and dirtiness of a cow's nostril and muzzle through the eyes of a very innocent, desperate young girl. You have better chances for a better future while I never think about it because what's coming will never be different or more valuable. You look natural and you enjoy the different stages of your childhood while I feel like I was already born adult and I must follow grown-up behavior. Most importantly, you go to school, you wear a uniform, you know how to hold and sharpen a pencil, you learn how to read and write, you have a lunch box, you make friends and you discover another world behind the fence of home and animals. Conversely, I'm stuck here, illiterate, unable to recognize even my name, unskilled and afraid of everything and everyone. I am a broken-hearted girl and you know nothing about my hopelessness and blues. Please stop acting hollowly and emotionally. You would rather broaden your knowledge and compassion because you know a little about others' circumstances, moods and personalities. You judge only by looking at the surface, yet you lack

the wisdom and the ability to recognize that not all that glitters is gold. My life is much more complex than it shows, or you may realize. Don't you feel that I'm an oppressed, depressed and sad kind of a person? If you don't; then you really lack tender feeling, empathy and depth.

My dear, you do not understand what I endure or how I spend my nights when I am totally alone with my pillow, when my feelings are so nakedly on display. You are a lucky girl and I notice that every time I visit you and watch you from a closer corner. So please stop thinking so highly of me, enjoy your lucky life and leave me alone facing my unlucky fate."

She pouted her lip, took the bottle in front of her and splashed cold water on her face.

I had nothing to say then. Butterflies fluttered around my stomach at the thought of hurting her through my superficial behavior. I looked at her reddened cheeks, bushed a hair away from her face, hugged her tenderly and said bitterly: "I'm so sorry."

I felt so bad Lulu after what had happened. I disrespected my shallow mind and selfish reaction. I have never imagined I could hurt someone by telling them how great and determined they are! It was like someone had slapped me roughly on my face. Feeling

her warm tears on my cold face was one of the worst memories ever. I spent the whole night thinking of her and I wish I could literally take some of her sorrows and replace them with peace and happiness. I also thought of her father. Although I love him, I felt so angry about him that night and many questions run through my head. I wondered about the origin of his ways in treating his daughters, the reasons behind his toughness and strong harsh personality, the deep complexities and the hidden experiences he went through to end up so inflexible and cold. Do you know Lulu that his own daughters never call him 'Dad'? They literally call him 'Master'. No kidding, they were told to call him so because it's more respectful and highly regarded than 'dad, father, papa, papi' or other slangs. They treat him exactly as a master and he considers them his possessions; so he is the only one to be in the driver's seat and take control over their own lives.

I may neither feel my relative's exact feelings nor your deep hidden emotions Lulu, yet I am a sympathetic person and I definitely care about others' concerns and state of mind. Trust me my dear I have a great potential not only to listen to others, but also to understand their sentiments, share their sufferings

and tolerate their moods and attitudes. I would love to share my opinions and philosophy with you my dear one. I strongly believe that someone's happiness does not only come from the personal achievement, possessions and material stuff. It is rather and strongly connected to compassion, kindness, tolerance, share and care. I feel happy if people around me are happy. Conversely, if one family member, friend, student, colleague or even someone I just met is not feeling well, I will not feel good. I spent so many nights crying and thinking of people I know who are on trouble, sick, sad or unhappy. Undoubtedly my inner joy counts, and it is very important for me, however, I attain an indescribable happiness when I see others content and in good conditions. Contrariwise, feeling others' sufferings and misfortune drives me uncomfortable, ill at ease and guilty. You may be surprised why I feel guilty! Let me explain it to you openly and sincerely.

Right now Lulu, you are not only my dear student but also a mature trustworthy close friend. I feel so comfortable in talking to you and never will I regret zooming at my very private personal corners. Actually I need you the same way you need me. I also have so

many burdens and I need a fresh, honest, pure person like you to talk to effortlessly as if I am breathing.

Feeling guilty normally means that the person is unhappy either because he/she thinks that they have done something wrong or have failed to do something which should be done. I do frequently feel guilty when I know about others' pains because I find myself unable to change their sorrows into pleasures and joy. I compare myself to them and I wonder why I have what they don't have. It sounds complicated, crazy and unbelievable, doesn't it?! Let me simplify it; whenever I listen to someone's sad story, whenever I notice one of my family members, friends, students or acquaintances is down in the dumps or know about someone's pains, I have a lump in my throat, and I feel like I must do something to help or change their situations. Although I have no ability or superpower to change, I start the painful journey of overthinking, imagining myself in the circumstances of others, empathizing with them and comparing my situation to theirs.

You know what Lulu! Comparing yourself to others is something you won't really enjoy. It is neither correct nor controllable. I confess that I do look at what others own while I don't or what they do

while I can't. My behavior is quite normal and natural, but what deeply surprises me is that I never feel jealous or inferior. Conversely, I pray for others' blessing, and I feel happy for their happiness. But deep inside me there is something painful and uncontrollable; it is comparing myself to those who are less than me, those who don't have what I have, those who are less fortunate or disadvantaged. I hiddenly ask myself: 'Why am I happy while this person is not? Why do I enjoy so many things while that person is deprived? Why am I healthy and sound when someone else is disabled and ailing and at the same time can't afford good medication? Why is my life a mixture of ups and downs, comforts and difficulties, while someone else's life looks very challenging and desperate? I believe that no one's life is perfect and ever pleasant, yet I always notice that some people's lives are more terrible and burdensome than my life to the point that I wish I could share what I have with them or take some of their burdens. Believe me Lulu, I sometimes sympathize with others to the extent that I can't enjoy my own comforts and pleasures while they suffer.

I'm not an angel, undoubtedly, I care for my inner joy and I enjoy my blessings and comforts. I am an

ordinary person who loves life and quests after happiness, luxury and delights. I feel over the moon when I buy something I like, when I afford my necessities, when I am able to possess stuff that make me feel satisfied and valued. On the other hand, the same sources of my delight turn to be sources of guilt and pain because I see others who lack the necessities of life, who go through hardships and whose lives are ways more complicated than mine. I don't really know if my behavior is natural or not. But one thing I know for sure is that I love for others what I love for myself. I wish to see everyone happy. I have a great potential to help others and understand what they go through. On some dark, hidden level, I feel I really could change someone's life and heal their wounds with a great pleasure and endless love.

Lulu: "I believe all what you have mentioned ma'am. Without telling it, I'm pretty sure you are as kind as a pure cute child. For that I heartily trust you and I enjoy your company which fills me with a sweet sense of safety and helps me feel human again. Talking to you ma'am is so similar to a breath of fresh air. I want to tell you everything about me without being scared, embarrassed or cautious as I always feel with everyone else. I always enjoy your classes and

wait impatiently for the discussion sessions you provide. You are not like other teachers and I can guarantee that all your students love you. You are special because you give us the freedom to talk and express our opinions not only to study and learn about the curriculum so seriously and rigidly. You listen to our stories, even the silliest ones and you are very generous in advising and inspiring us. You don't only teach us the curriculum, you also, and most importantly, teach us how to live, how to dream, how to think and use reasons, how to be positive and patient, how to hope and change into the best. You never miss the opportunity to instill values and principles. You respect us and you don't treat us with superiority. On the contrary, in your class we feel that we are valuable and highly esteemed. Additionally, I love your encouraging attitude and how you share some personal stories to make things look very real and realizable.

I still remember when we asked you about your daughter and you told us some of her funny stories. I focused on your reactions when she acted naughtily and how you encouraged her to be spontaneous and do things that she really loves and enjoys without any complexities or fear. You told us that you want her to

be a unique girl not only through her school marks and education, but also, and mainly, by her understanding of the world, her mindset and level of critical thinking, her social and life skills. I still cannot forget the way you mentioned that you would rather encourage her to practice her hobbies freely and creatively more than instruct her only to succeed at school. I love your style to support her extracurricular activities and inspire her to enjoy music, sports, painting, and other activities without giving interest to complications and people's interference and viewpoints. You always believe in her and trust her abilities and choices. You don't oblige her to follow your style and be your replica, as well you don't stop her from enjoying the simplicity and sweetness of life. You said that you always talk to her and teach her how to express and defend her opinions even if they don't convince others. You want her to practice freedom of speech at an early age so that she acquires the skills of leaders and people who can change and guide not people who follow and subserve.

For all that, I felt jealous ma'am, and I disregarded my own life and family more and more. I have noticed that you rarely give instructions and you rather guide her to build her own balanced healthy personality

based on her own choices not yours. You teach her how to be responsible and how to assume consequences of her behavior and choices. You work hard to raise a simple natural and open-minded girl, while my mother works harder to suppress my desires, hobbies and emotions, and stifle my voice as well as my longing for freedom and simplicity. You don't miss the opportunity to tell her how much you love and respect her, how strong you believe in her and appreciate her actions. You show your daughter that you are proud of her the way she is while my mother never misses the chance to remind me that I'm a source of worries and that she will never rest until I get married and she passes on the prison's keys to my husband. She had never told me that she is proud of me or that she cares of my future position and ambitions. On the contrary, even if I got good marks at school, she would react so coldly and carelessly and she reminds me that education is not as important as getting married and saving the family's honor and social status. My mom resumes a girl's life and satisfaction in her body and she never believes in the importance of the mental health or the soul's satisfaction. She reckons that a good daughter is the one who obeys fer family's instructions, who ignores

her desires and needs, who disregards her femininity and most importantly, the good daughter is that who saves her dignity and virginity until she moves to her husband's nest.

My community is very strange and extremist. They never believe in women's rights and freedom. Education is not as valuable as marriage and protection of honor. Whenever you mention your daughter's future, her education, her hobbies and talents, I notice the spark and pride in your eyes, while my mother's eyes are ages different from yours. Her first and only interest is finding a male to marry me and takes the heavy burden out of her shoulders. How cruel and unfair! How miserable my life is and how useless my days are! I frequently think of you and wish I were your daughter! I always imagine you playing with me, listening to my stories, enjoying looking at me while I dance, taking me to the gym to exercise and practice my hobbies, buying me sketchbooks and pencils and encouraging me to draw and make my ideas dance harmonically on that white sheet of paper.

I always have that bitter scary feeling that if we were living in a different age, my parents would rather choose to bury me alive for the simple reason

that I am a girl and girls are springs of worry, shame and stress. They are blindly convinced that they should treat me and my sisters unjustly. They prefer their male children to us and they constantly remind us of our inferiority and weakness. Can you imagine ma'am that they consider us minion and undesirable creatures! I swear I'm telling you the truth, so don't be shocked that in this century there are people who think this way!

I still can't forget when my mother gave birth to my younger sister. It was a gloomy sad day as if a catastrophe had happened. My grandmother announced the birth of a girl when the whole family were impatiently waiting in the reception room; including my uncles and my grandfathers. My grandmother got close to my father, put one heavy hand on his shoulder and held his fingers strongly with the other. She hesitated for a while, then with a shaking voice and watery eyes she said:

"I am terribly sorry my dear son, may God give you the strength and patience to receive the shock; it's a girl."

My father's reaction is quite unforgettable. His face, as well as the other males' faces, turned black

like a shut-down computer screen. His mouth was slightly open like a furious goldfish, and his feet could scarcely bear his weight. He looked shamefully to his brothers' faces and literally hid his own face from them as if he committed a sin publicly. They left the room silently and disrespectfully as if they were blaming him. He was ashamed of the birth of his own daughter and so was my mother who kept apologizing like it was her own mistake or responsibility to decide the baby's gender. How foolish! They even ignore that it was out of their hands and it is only our Creator create us males and females to live together and accept each other with love and respect. My mother, as all women of my community, ignore that scientifically speaking, only men determine the sex of a baby. I was close to tell them more about that fact, yet I couldn't because I fear their reaction and the endless questions they would ask about how I know these information and how I dare to discuss these taboos. How disgusting their reactions were! What a cruel custom and unjustified behavior!

I was fourteen when my little sister was born, and the scene was engraved in my memory. I cried my heart out that day and I tried to kill myself because I

felt the uselessness of my life and the darkness of my future. Whether a girl or a boy, babies are supposed to be a blessing. Parents should celebrate their arrivals equally and be thankful for their good luck because there are others who crave to have kids yet never experience the feelings of being a parent. As a matter of fact, kids are piece of heaven and parents are not allowed to prefer sons over daughters. Fathers and mothers must hold girls as well as boys in high esteem and treat them fairly and without favor.

Honestly speaking, I sometimes hate my parents and think to do what hurt them only to make them feel the bitterness of being hurt. Many times, I thought to behave so badly and act immorally for the simple reason to embarrass and insult them. I wanted to face the ghost they are always scared of and hurt their pride and honor. Many times, I planned to break all laws, go out without permission, and do all things they forbade me to do."

She was smart enough to feel my uneasiness and fear.

"Don't panic ma'am, I couldn't do any of that because I deeply fear God and I believe one day only my Creator will free me from that prison. There is always a deep hidden voice that calms me down and

prevents me from committing mistakes that may cause God's wrath. It is only my Creator I care about not my parents. I admit that it is weird to behave accordingly since my parents didn't teach me to love God, conversely, they filled me with intimidation, instructions and threatening. Mom and dad mostly frighten us and cram our minds with prohibitions and restrictions. How contradictory situations are! I strongly believe in God although my parents did not teach me how to do it. I am a believer in my own way which is quite different from theirs. I powerfully love my Creator and have my own thoughts and philosophy while according to their perspectives and traditions I could be accused or called a sinner and rebellious.

Actually, even my beliefs and concerns are useless and good-for-nothing because I can neither express nor practice them so freely and peacefully. They were and will always be my ghost friends and never will they see the light. By the end I find myself following my people's customs and lifestyle while my soul is screaming painfully and longing for freedom and rebellion. Unfortunately, I always end up desperate and odd as if I were living someone else's life. You know what! It's killingly bitter when you can't be

yourself or sign a peace treaty with your soul. When you are unable to reconcile with the past and progress for the future, when you don't even wait or hope for tomorrow or enjoy today, when you doubt you are schizophrenic and you hate your unclear thinking and lack of self-confidence and esteem, when you are hungrily trying to search for your soul. Then everything will look meaningless and valueless; even your existence will be so.

Do you have any single idea ma'am, about the sourness of being torn between different personalities, confusing behaviors, unstable beliefs, mixed emotions, ambiguous concepts and dark expectations? I know well that I shouldn't be so desperate and hopeless since I am still young and I claim to be a believer. Yet, it is out of my shaking fragile hands to stop being such a pessimistic, somber kind of creatures. Everything around me is so gloomy and discouraging to a point that I see no light or possibility for a betterment or an advance. I don't feel happiness of any sort, on the contrary I feel like an empty shell, I feel estranged from everyone. Reality frustrates me, I don't have deep bonds with my family members, I am not so connected to my mates, and I don't really feel I belong somewhere. Depletion and

depression drain my spirit indeed, and I, unfortunately, have no clear hopeful vision for the future. Every single detail in my life is controlled by others and I rather feel that I am owned by people around me. I empty myself to satisfy them and execute their commands. My past was manipulated, my present is robbed, and my future will never ever be of my choice or decision. I will graduate in a couple of months, yet I don't really feel the excitement and enthusiasm any senior should feel. In my society, we don't choose or create our happiness, we never have options. Even our comfort zones are not so comfortable and satisfying. We are submissive and we have no right to discuss, choose or argue. So many times I wanted to speak, to yell, to scream, to rebel, to say no, to open my mouth, but my voice would emerge muffled, my efforts would be disregarded and my trials would either be rejected or neglected.

2

"Hello, can you hear me?"

"Yeah, I can hear you well. Who's there?"

"It's me, Lulu."

"Oh! Hello Lulu, how are you dear?"

"I'm doing well ma'am, how are you?"

"All the better for hearing from you Lulu. It has been a quite long time we did not talk. I still remember the last day we met, you were amazing with your graduation gown. I felt so proud that day when you were giving your farewell speech and you surprisingly mentioned my name."

Lulu: "You are my source of pride Ms. L. You have no idea how much I love and respect you. Not only are you my teacher, but also my refuge, my friend and a person I fully trust and never hesitate to spill the beans to."

"Oh thank you! I am flattered. Is everything fine with you dear?"

Lulu: "I like the way you discover others' uneasiness and sympathize with their sufferings."

"When you heartily care about others, you spontaneously pay attention to certain details that help in feeling their malaise and listening to their quiet mute voices."

Lulu: "Ma'am, I urgently need to meet you."

"Pleasure would be mine Lulu; choose the place and time and I will be there for you."

Lulu: "I wish I could pick up a place where we can have lunch together, enjoy a coffee and spend long time with you Ms. L. Unfortunately, I am unable to do it and I guess you are aware of the reasons. Can I visit you at school?"

"Of course you can, school was, and still is, your second home and I would be very happy to meet you there. At least we can recall some souvenirs and your parents won't refuse your visit."

Lulu: "I hope they won't! Don't worry, this time I will face everyone and look for an excuse to stop by. There are a bunch of things I need to tell you, and no one can hold me back. Can I visit you tomorrow?"

"Unquestionably dear, I will be waiting for you."

Lulu: "thank you, actually I can't wait to see you. Until tomorrow ma'am."

"Take care of you Lulu."

I hung up the phone with mixed emotions. On one hand I was happy to hear from her. On the other hand, I felt sad that this poor girl's situation is almost the same despite her success and her academic achievement. I was amazed at how successful and whole she was despite all what she passed through. Her voice was clear yet trembling, her feelings and unrest were so nakedly on display. I care about this girl and I truly wish I could help her and fill her life with relief of any sort. I planned to buy a bouquet of flower and order food she likes so that she would feel more comfortable and welcomed.

It was the end of term exam, so I didn't have classes for the whole day. I asked her to come over after ten o'clock when all students would have finished their exam and gone back home.

I was impatiently waiting for her because I miss her and most importantly, I was worried and wanted to make sure everything is all right. The weather was nice and I opted to welcome her in the tent that our principal put in the school backyard instead of the department's inside room. I organized everything in a way that she could feel cozy and encouraged to speak freely.

"Good morning ma'am, how nice to meet you again."

She ran and hugged me so tightly that I realized how heartbroken and distressed she was. Her face was like a wet weekend. But when I took her to the tent, her cheek reddened, she sighed, and a very innocent beautiful smile was drawn on that tired face. She hugged me again and said:

"Is this all for me? It is like we are in a picturesque restaurant! Thank you a bunch for this surprise ma'am, you are my angel. You make me feel that I am someone important, someone whose relaxation and happiness are taken into consideration"

"You are undoubtedly precious and you mean a lot to me little princess."

"Oh God, you even call me 'princess'! How lucky I am to have you in my life Miss L!"

"Come on, have a seat and feel like home. Lights are on you today and all I want is to treat you and make you recognize how special you are. I have ordered chocolate crepe because I know well how much you love it with banana and nuts at the top. Here is your favorite coffee too; caramel Frappuccino."

"Oh how sweet of you! You still remember my favorite drink! Someone is pampering me today!"

"Don't mention it Lulu! You are my lovely sister, and you deserve comfort and happiness."

"You are the only one who values me and cares for my happiness even through simple details and pleasures."

"No way! Don't exaggerate my dear, I am not the only one, for sure. You are a type of unique lovely girl, and I am pretty sure that wherever you are there are people who love and care for you even more than I do."

"Oh, don't be that certain Miss L. People you are talking about are indeed doing the opposite and they never care about me. They always criticize me and neglect what can make me happy, from the tiniest things to the most important ones. People whom you think value me and cherish my joy, step on me, instead, and ignore all my calls for freedom, security and respect. Do you need a stronger proof than my wedding? I came here today to invite you to the ceremony and announce that my voice has been oppressively muted, and my cries have been carelessly muffled.

I know well about your reaction, and I even anticipated your words. But before you say anything let me tell you that I tried million times, yet no one listened to me or respected my opinion. They have already taken the decision and they were not waiting for my approval. No, none of these natural things parents do when someone proposes to their daughter had happened. They abused me when I tried to face them and express my desire. They always minimize my value and belittle my existence. They simply took control over everything and left no room for dialogue or negotiation. Here is a confession ma'am; I surrender and I will follow their instructions silently. No more rebellion, no more strength, no more hope. Dreams and happiness are not for girls like me. I don't own myself and never will I be able to do! So no room is left to challenge people, time and circumstances and I will accept being owned by others until the end of my life on earth. Nothing is left for me ma'am except a tiny hole of light somewhere deep within me that my Creator will reward me in the afterlife."

She pulled a card out of her bag and handed it to me with a smile that wasn't a smile at all.

"Your presence means a lot to me Miss L. Please try your best to come, I will be impatiently waiting for you."

"Lulu, I must tell you this, I cannot just hold my tongue and keep calm. You should have struggled more and pushed yourself to your extreme. You should have defended your rights more vigorously and stubbornly! You shouldn't have surrendered that easily. By the end, if you insisted and said no, what would they do for you? Would they imprison you, chain your hands or kidnap you to take you to that guy's house? Would they torture you to death?

I really thought you are stronger than that and I had great expectations that you would stand up for your right till the very end. Why didn't you call for help? For sure there are some family members, friends or even the police to stop this violent play and rescue you. What about all our talks, hopes and decisions? Were they gone with the wind?! I always try to raise a generation of brave students who will have enough courage to change their own situations and others'. Lulu you were a source of inspiration for me, and I heartily believed that betterment will come from within you and spread outside to reach other fragile repressed hearts like you. Because you are dear to me

and I know to what extent you have suffered, I give myself the right even to yell at you today and tell you all what makes me mad about your silence and acceptance. I am not against marriage itself or the guy who will be your husband because I don't even know him. He might be a good kind of a man after all. On the other hand, I cannot tolerate the way you chose to live and the path you ended up following. Previously, I put the blame on your family members and your community who are oppressing, tyrant and disrespectful for girls' rights. Yet today, I accuse you too and tell you that you are also part of the game. Responsibility is also yours because you were unable to defend your own rights and protest unfairness. Freedom will never be served in a gold tray while you are sitting like a rock in your own path and waiting for the tyrants to handle it for you. Freedom must be asked for if not kidnapped and taken by force. Tyrants never tolerate with people they oppress because they enjoy what they do and they are fully convinced that they are right. They think that their actions are fair enough and they are the wisest in protecting their followers and controlling their lives. They even believe that they should be rewarded and praised!

Without saying no and sticking to your refusal and resistance, you will never enjoy freedom or experience fairness. On the contrary, you will be more and more submissive, and you will feed the tyrants egos and increase their unfairness and suppression. This is not the life I wish for you my dear Lulu, and it will never be peaceful unless you put your own needs ahead of anyone else's and decide, by yourself, what is good for you and what is useless and not acceptable. Lulu you are not a puppet or a marionette! You are a human being who has rights and duties. You are a soul who deserves freedom and happiness. You are a woman full of life, talents and dreams and if you don't speak out and show the world how creative, ambitious and lovely you are, no one will recognize it or offer any respect, help and gratitude. We cannot choose our own families; this is obvious Lulu. Yet we have a golden opportunity to choose our partners and decide for our future. I never want you to show disrespect to your parents or misbehave and ill-treat them. Conversely, I encourage you, and everyone else, to respect parents, show them gratitude and obedience and never hurt or mistreat them. All I want to tell you is that even your parents do not own you and to a great extent you must control your life and choose

what suits you. Your future is yours and no one else, even your parents, will be there forever to protect or decide for you. You are the only one who knows what you really want and the only way to ensure a good quality of life is to struggle and stand up for your own journey. If you don't stop others from deciding everything for you without knowing what you really want, you will end up a loser and your life will have neither a quality nor a meaning. Defending your rights doesn't mean disobedience, misbehavior, or disrespect to your parents. You can keep trying with them and convince them in a very respectful and convenient way. By the end parents always want the best for their kids. And if kids always accept and never express their opinions frankly, parents will forever think that they are on the safest way and that their children are satisfied, then their missions as the wisest guides are fulfilled.

My dear Lulu, you don't have to carry all this load by yourself. You need to be listened to; you should tell your mother about all that bothers you. She will never let you down or ignore your continuous calls for freedom and happiness."

She kept her lips sealed while I was very excited and nervous. The whole situation seemed

weird indeed. Her eyes were full of tears, my eyes were also full of tears yet our reasons to cry were completely different. I held my tongue when I realized that I was like talking to a brick wall. Her silence made me feel extremely sorry for her and at the same time guilty because I attacked her as if things were so easy on this fragile girl. She had bitten away nearly all of her nails. Then, I felt like I didn't sympathize with what she is going through. By the end, my speech is not going to change anything right now and there is no magic stick that can reform the whole situation. I got closer to Lulu, held her hand in mine, smiled warmly and said:

"Excuse my perturbation and mixed emotions sweetie. You are like a sister of mine and my intentions are to help and enlighten your way, no more. Anyway, all my words are useless now and nothing is left but to wish you a better luck Lulu. Sometimes we heartily refuse something and tend not to cope with it or bear it, yet destiny may surprise us and days may change our feelings and perspectives. It can take us to places we never expect they could be beautiful and safe. By the end our faith will always save us because we are under the mercy of The Wisest and Th Most Merciful Lord. So my dear one, let's hope

the future would be better and the unexpected would be beyond our fear and doubts. Who knows what the future is hiding for us! The guy you are marrying may be as kind and lovely as you are. He could be even better than you, he might be the bright light in your path and the source of redemption we always wait for.

Come here, let me hug you beautiful bride. You are a good girl, and our Creator is Fair and Just enough to recompensate all your patience and sufferings. So cheer up and start the new life episode with good intentions, positive vibes and a lot of love and hope.”

Let me confess that I was a little liar when I tried to calm her down and fill her with hope for a better future. I do believe that the unknown might be better, yet I didn’t want her to end up filled with more sadness and shocks. I felt that I was very talkative and pushy; maybe I over-reacted and I shouldn’t have expressed my opinion so openly and hurtfully. For those painful feelings of guilt and compassion, I redirected my speech and tried to grab her attention to the bright side of the situation. ‘Do not judge without experiencing, do not exaggerate, have good intentions.’ Those were my mind’s

messages that helped in ending the meeting peacefully.

She left home and I stayed like a cold motionless stone under the warm tent. Her announcement and attitude affected my mood badly and I was taken back in time and remembered a similar sad look I have noticed one day in the eyes of some women I have met.

Once upon a time, I visited the gynecologist for a checkup. I was pregnant and my situation was a bit critical. My husband booked an appointment in advance and I had to be there early in the morning. I left home before him because he had some paperwork to finish before joining me. To my surprise, the waiting area was full and the doctor didn't come yet, hence patients were angry and the whole situation seemed to be chaotic. I headed to the only vacant spot in the room after taking a number from the secretary who tried to calm people down and reschedule everyone's appointment.

I was uncomfortable because my whole body was in pain, and I haven't almost slept the whole night. I was scanning the place looking for some relief in someone's eyes, someone's smile. I soon realized that the last thing you can find in this place is a smile.

Women there looked exhausted indeed and their faces unmasked everything. Sometimes when you look at others' faces you immediately feel that everyone hides a sad long story. I saw a different pain in the eyes of some women, I heard shrieks in their silence. The only one who barely smiled was the secretary. I can feel everyone's deep sadness to the point that I wish I had a superpower to console and help them. What was common between them was lack of care and attention. Many were alone without their husbands. Physical pain plus loneliness can kidnap life from someone's facial features. There was a cold iceberg and something very sad was on the air. I was secretly looking at a husband's behavior which was nerve-racking. He acted disrespectfully and he did not treat his desperate wife with compassion and tenderness. A question immediately crossed my mind: why did they marry? I didn't seize love, respect and care I previously thought they are the backbone of any engagement. I strongly hate that type of relationships when love, compassion and respect are missing. The woman sitting on the opposite seat was in severe pain. She had bitten away some of her nails and her eyes showed clearly that she didn't sleep for a quite long time. She was calm and patient while her

husband was restless and unwilling to wait. He was angry because the doctor was late and he dared to nag loudly that his time was wasted. He was not even sitting close to his wife to solace and reduce her pain and distress. I then asked myself the same question: why are they married? Why do people get married?

When I was younger, I believed that the only reason behind marriage is love. I thought that only passion and sincere emotions lead to engagement which in turn will end up happily ever after. As I grew up my thoughts started to change and I was forced to quit my utopian world. Day after day I open my eyes to more facts, more realities, and more shocks. I recently came to understand that many of my ideas, judgments and concepts are just pie in the sky. I discovered that people get married for so many reasons including love which is not always at the top of the list. Many of my relatives got married because of religious beliefs and social status. I have friends who move in with a partner for security and companionship. Some people seek financial support and stability while others simply want to have children someday. Many people get married to escape from family instructions and rules, to control their own business and get rid of obligations and generational

customs. Reasons vary; that's why experiences also vary and couples' stories are different and unique.

I personally respect people's choices, traditions and countless motives for marriage. On the other hand, I strongly detest the noticeable disrespect and coldness among couples. I believe that husband and wife must be emotionally connected and there for one another; for good and bad. I strongly reckon that our marital life can turn into a Hell or a Heaven, all depending on our choices and mindset. I can't forget the poor woman who was trying to hide her pain wishing her husband was more lovely, more supportive and more comprehensive. Maybe she knows respect and romance only through her TV screen. She can't imagine that she may be a heroine in her husband's eyes even if she is poor, uneducated, or not beautiful as others may think. After all, she is a lady and he should be her man. I felt disgusted when he was looking at another woman while his wife was sitting next to him. I felt so bad when he stood in front of her asking powerfully and emotionlessly about the time they could leave the place he considered uncomfortable. He didn't solace her, he wasn't as compassionate and shielding as a partner should be. On the contrary, he was helpless, his

behavior revealed that he was even blaming her as if she got herself pregnant, as if she was vicious and faulty. He was blinded and he didn't even realize how blessed he is to wait for a baby. There are thousands of people all over the world who wish to be in his position, accompany their wives to the genecologist and enjoy the sweetness of hearing a baby's heartbeats.

That day, I tried my best to think deeply of the causes of the remarkable unhappiness on the faces around me. I tried to forget my physical pain and focus on her emotional and mental bitterness. Regardless of the reasons behind their engagement, I craved to know more about their daily routines and what leads them to this situation. Who is more responsible: the wife or the husband?

As a matter of fact, I blame both. It was noticeable that she is not caring about herself and maybe she forgets her femininity because of life responsibilities. For that, maybe he stops treating her as a soft female and only thinks of earning money, sex and having children. He doesn't treat her as a sensitive creature who needs love, care, tenderness and respect. His rudeness revealed that she is part of the problem. I believe that we are treated the way we want others

to treat us. We decide if others respect or disrespect us. We guide others to the way they should behave towards us. For that I insist that she assumes a great responsibility. Why doesn't she love herself before asking to be loved? Why does she murder her self-confidence and pave the way to humiliation and rudeness toward her? Why doesn't she take more care of herself and look at her mirror frequently? My mind was crowded with annoying questions indeed.

Every one of us; ladies, is her own doctor. Everyone must love herself, appreciate her body and soul and highly respect her existence. We are supposed to attract our husbands' attention and try our best to impress them and be more special than anyone else. I know it's so hard to do so many things at the same time. I'm sure that everyone's life is full of chores and duties, but we are born to be special and our Creator gave us patience and blow to carry on our path and be more patient and creative.

Every one of us, ladies, should take a moment to look deeply at herself and discover her great abilities and skills. It's a serious mistake to forget femininity and delicacy. We must take good care of ourselves without forgetting that we can always give more. As an ordinary woman, I think that we are gifted with a

renewable energy. Sometimes we reach a point of despair and we feel like we are unable to stand up and carry on. This is so natural because endurance can vary from one creature to another and our emotions may disguise us and absorb our potentiality. On the other hand, somewhere deep inside there is a generated power and a beneficial strength waiting to be discovered and dug out. As a matter of fact, no one can reach this level and detect that treasure except you.

I don't know why some women are careless and when they get married, they think that their missions are accomplished; their husbands are already there and no one can take them out of their nests. This is another serious mistake. By nature, men like change and seek perfection although they are not as patient as women; at least as I personally think. They know well it's very hard to be a mother, a wife, a housekeeper and a worker at the same time. Yet they don't excuse you if you don't behave as a female just because you are tired, you don't have enough time and money or you lay down your life for your house and kids.

A man wants to go back home finding everything tidy, organized and ready. He; mainly, wants his wife

to be a queen inside his castle. He likes to see her beautiful, elegant and smiling even if she is exhausted to the full. It's selfish to a great extent but it is real. He doesn't really seize the difficulties of her chores and sometimes he is not as compassionate as he should be. Of course I don't mean that men are free of charges, on the contrary they are also responsible to the full and they have endless exhausting duties and burdens. But honestly speaking; and it's never because I'm a woman, I believe that women have more duties and burdens; especially working women.

Outdoors, work as hard as men. Then they go back home to start other housework. They have a rest, then they wake up to finish other devoirs. They are like bees; always having things to do with the aim to satisfy their surroundings. These are repeated almost daily that's why some women don't have time to look at their mirrors and remember they are alive. So, many women end up losing themselves while trying to satisfy others.

As a matter of fact, every one of us has her own priorities. There are ladies who care more for cleaning their house, cooking and raising their kids but they neglect themselves thinking that they are perfect and that their husbands and children will appreciate and

not complain. Actually, this is another serious mistake. For sure husbands will appreciate and like to relax in a tidy place, eat tasty food and be away from kids' burdens. But they mainly think that these are obvious and natural things women must do and they focus more on their wives' femininity. It's a fact that husbands compare their wives to other women they meet outside or watch on social media. So again; femininity is the core of marital success.

Unfortunately, in our society such problems increase day after day and they end up either in divorce, cheating or what I always call 'emotional divorce'; which is the worst of all. You can see a husband and a wife living together but you don't really feel love and life. It's like eating just because you are so hungry and not because you really enjoy food. When a couple reaches this stage, both will be careless, and everyone will accuse the other for that great failure. I'm sure that there is no perfect marriage. There would be troubles and hard moments along the journey, but I think that the key to success and happiness is contentment and acknowledgment. Everyone must accept the other as she/he is because no one is perfect.

Everyone should treat the other as she/he wants to be treated. We should love our partner as a whole, as an entity. It is totally wrong to take what's good and complain about traits, reactions or behavior we don't like.

P.S. we are born imperfect.

If you; yourself is full of complexities and imperfection, why do you ask your partner to be faultless and beyond comparison? Why do you stop and focus on every detail, then accuse your partner for something natural and human?! Perfection is not human and anyone who pretends to be or asks others to be so, is a hypocrite and irrational.

Let's try to be as natural as we are created. Let's be proud of what we have because; for sure, everyone has things that others don't have. I think that every human being has blessings and good things in life, but one doesn't realize them unless they are taken away. Let me grab your attention here that your blessings are someone else's fairy tale. Your daily routine; which is actually annoying you, is somebody else's dream. If every one of us simply looks inside his/her box; sparkling things will be discovered. It's a matter of self-confidence, faith and belief, strong personality, and deep content. It's a matter of deep thinking, good

intentions and self-respect. When you deeply respect yourself, when you are guided by the beauty of complacency, you will, definitely, respect others and accept them as they are.

I always believe that every creature is born good, so why don't we excuse each other? Why don't we try to let it go and stop chasing mistakes and imperfections?! No one is perfect, but everyone pretends to be the best and to judge others' defects and failings. If we crave to taste happiness, why don't we accept each other the way we are? Where is he harm if we try to change for the sake of our partner or if we simply forgive then forget?! The whole world is changing and we become more open to each other's life details and daily routine. That's why; I guess, we find the majority comparing their lives to others' and everyone wants to be better and acts that he/she is the happiest and wisest. Some people even follow others' lives more than focusing on their own problems and trying to solve them. I have friends from different ages, cultures, nationalities, and social classes, yet I always notice that some problems are the same everywhere. The way people judge marital life is so similar. I once asked myself why some couples fail to build a simple happy family while others succeed to

do? According to my simple experience and own point of view; some factors lead to failure and problems. I noticed that many people get married without giving themselves a chance to know each other more and discover their similarities and differences. Marriage should be the start of a love story not its end. Everyone; men or women, should be patient and ready to know more about the partner then accept him/her as he/she is.

It's a life decision and we mustn't be in a hurry then regret or discover facts we can't cope with later on. One has always to think twice before deciding and promising a partner to be together for a lifetime. Engagement has never been a funny game you want to play, then when you feel bored, uninterested, or defeated, you uninstall it and quit. Marriage is a sacred vocation regardless to place, time or religion. Devotion is not a child's play and people must be mature enough, serious enough, understanding and responsible enough to decide such a crucial decision. From the position of a simple wife for a quite long time, I'd like to send a message to everyone who is about to get married. I'd like to talk directly to you as if you were a dear sister or an intimate friend. Even if you don't know me in person, I think listening to me

or reading my words will neither harm you nor waste your time. Maybe you need my advice, maybe you lack the knowledge and awareness of the importance of the institution of marriage. When you get married your whole life, as well as your partner's, will change. Thus, it's better to make sure that your choice is correct and then the change won't destroy your life or push you to sadness, regret, depression or cheating later on. I believe that purposes behind this institution are noble and humanitarian regardless of our diverse origins, societies, background and beliefs, cultures or religions.

In such a way, you; being the husband or the wife, must think in advance of the consequences of a wrong choice and its impact on you first then your partner, your kids, your surroundings and the community as a whole. Your marriage is not only about your personal life. At a certain point, your engagement tremendously affects the community. You will give birth to tomorrow's citizens. You are building a family, a society, and an important piece of a puzzle called 'human life'. So, if you fail in choosing your spouse, you will fail in nurturing your kids who will therefore fail in building a sound, healthy partnership

as well as serving the community effectively and adequately.

If you are still single, please be aware of the seriousness and gravity of your choice ad reason behind your engagement. Let me give you a practical way to check if what you are about to do is right or wrong. Choose a spot at home where you are totally alone. Make sure the place is calm and the light is soft. Kindly wear something light and comfortable. Lay down on a soft bed and make sure you feel totally cozy. Now it's time to talk to yourself, to feel every single part of your body, to free your soul, to get rid of every connection to the outer world, to look for negative painful feelings, repressed emotions and buried desires. Once you are ready catch them and release them fearlessly. Kindly go through your body from the top of the head to the soles of your feet. At this point, inhale, exhale, let your mind and heart touch every part and then accept all reactions and emotions. Listen to your breath; in and out, in and out. Feel the warmth of your skin. Let yourself exist in that moment and listen carefully to the messages your body parts dispatch; whether itching, warmth, coldness, sweat, tears, numbness, softness, accept them all and enjoy the very deep pleasure of being

with yourself and knowing more about a deep level of you. At this very special point, you are allowed to think of the person you are about to unite with. Imagine him/her there next to you, so close to you. Dare and imagine your head sinking into his/her hand and his/her breath is very near. At this unique moment of detachment, listen very carefully and attentively to your body's message and believe it. Now, ask yourself only one question: 'how would I like my life with this person to be in ten years into the future?'

Here and now, you can open your eyes, freeze your emotions and pave the way to the rational part of you. It's still between you and you. The decision you will take after this short disconnection from the outer world may not be the best, yet believe me, it will somehow guide you. It will be less risky and more convenient because you first listened to your body's calls, then you merged emotions and logic that work harmonically to enlighten your way and help you see things from a different perspective.

P.S. if you don't apply what mentioned above seriously, correctly and deeply, you will undoubtedly feel nothing and decide nothing.

3

I want to remind you here that I'm a teacher, a proud teacher indeed. My job is not only going round teaching school curriculum and educational skills. I strongly believe that my job requires instilling values, developing personalities, raising awareness on humanitarian causes, and helping a whole generation to live healthily, happily and safely. Whenever my eyes met some students' eyes during my classes, I felt heartbroken on how sad, weak, lost and indecisive some girls could be . I exceptionally felt something sink inside me and my mood darkened when Lulu first trusted me and told me her story. After our last meeting, my malaise multiplied, and my mood darkened even further. She reduced me to tears with her decision and frailty. When she was still my class student, I used to fuel her energy and boost her self-confidence, her hope and her potential to be stronger, more decisive and more powerful.

Lulu didn't own her past and present and I worked hard to help her master her future, take

control over her own life. I believe this fragile girl is trustworthy, well-mannered, kin-hearted and smart enough to choose her own ways and select the best options for her own future. Lulu deserves happiness and I wish she could push herself further and accept no less than what she deserves. I was hopeful that she would live a better life after graduating. I was eager for good news about her, for meeting her when she is mature and powerful enough to stop others from taking her for granted. I prayed hard for her relief and I daydreamt that she would be more difficult to trap. I endeavored to teach her how to understand herself, how to love and accept herself, how to cope with certain situations, then on the right time urge them to serve her happiness not to increase her delicacy, weakness and submission.

My intention was to develop her ability to get ahead in life, to look at herself with more confidence, admiration, esteem and positivity. I carried out a message for her, for you too my dear reader. I wanted her to understand the truth behind our creation and the fact that we all deserve freedom and happiness. It seems I have failed! Lulu has passed her exams with flying colors, yet I'm worried if she could do the same

with her personal life and the new experience she is about to start.

As an eldest sister and a teacher who worked a quite long time in all-girls' schools, I have special sympathy towards girls. I have a deep understanding of their stories, hidden emotions and worries. I know well about their weaknesses, patience and needs. I strongly believe in girls' potential and I never get tired of listening to them and boosting their confidence and hope. I believe that everyone deserves the best and the best can be achieved through education, perseverance and dream. Along my journey as a teacher, I have met different categories of students, different personalities, cultures, religions, social status, health conditions, abilities and educational levels. I have listened to so many stories and I have met poor girls, very rich girls, oppressed and abused girls, shy and introvert ones, skilled and gifted girls, dreamers, rebellious, autistic girls, troublemakers, caregivers and peacemakers, bullies, high achievers and low achievers. I am the type of teachers who welcomes everyone and believes that every student has a strength, every girl has the right to shine bright and show the world how great, helpful and effective she could be. Every boy has the right to be respected and

understood too. Students are fragile humans no matter how naughty and misbehaved they are. Everyone of them has a special key and a way to be understood and dealt with. In truth, I am proud to be a teacher and I strongly believe that teachers have a great role in building students' characters. When I enter my class, I know well that it is not only about imparting knowledge. I am there also to inspire my students, to advise them, to guide them and help in shaping their future, to learn from them in a way or another.

I didn't go to school that day because my son was sick. We spent a horrible night checking his temperature and giving him pain killers and fever drugs. Late at night, I noticed his rapid breathing and an increase in temperature. We immediately took him to the hospital where doctors urged some tests. Nurses gave him the proper dosage of ibuprofen and used cold compresses to make him comfortable. We received the tests' results after almost two hours, then he was admitted to hospital because of serious bacterial infection. The doctor prescribed antibiotics and asked the nurses to put him under observation until his fever is broken. I stayed with him at hospital while my husband went back home to care for our

daughter. I was exhausted yet I couldn't sleep. He fell asleep when the nurse was checking his temperature again. The doctor was there examining him, and he assured me that it is not very dangerous, yet they should observe him for safety measures. He advised me to have some rest because the medicine he took will give him relief and help him sleep deeply. I opted to head to the cafeteria instead and bring myself an espresso. I paid for a bottle of water and a double shot espresso, then quickly went back to the observation room. I was about to open the door when I saw someone I know well, someone I must be happy to meet even at a hospital. I took a look at my son who was still sleeping, then I called her.

"Hey you, my pearl!" This is how I used to call her when she was in my class.

She immediately turned towards me and said surprisingly:

"Oh my God! It is you ma'am! How happy I am to see you! I swear I was thinking of you wishing we could meet right now! It must be my lucky day!" She ran to hug me, and I kissed and hugged her back.

"How are you ma'am? What are you doing here?"

"My son is in the observation room because of a bacterial infection."

"Oh! I'm sorry for that. What did the doctor say?"

"It's not very dangerous yet he needs to be observed to break his fever and make sure everything is fine. He is sleeping now and his fever is decreasing, thank God"

"Thank God, don't worry Miss L, he will recover soon."

"Yes hopefully. What about you, how is everything? Why are you here?"

She held my hand in hers, turned her eyes away and said in a low voice: "Life goes on."

The nurse's call interrupted our conversation. Then I run to the room crazily thinking of my son.

"Calm down, he is alright now. He woke up calling your name." said the nurse in an assuring tone.

"Oh sweetheart! I'm terribly sorry to leave you alone."

"I want water mom." He said weakly and softly.

I moved his head up, placed my arm around his shoulders and gave him water. He drunk a little bit of it, then looked straight to my eyes saying: "I feel better, thank you."

"My little angel, my nerves were on edge waiting for you to feel better. You are the pupil of my eye and

it is killing to see you sick. I wish I could spare you all that."

"No mom! I wish I got sick and you wouldn't. Your arms are my shelter and when you are fine, I'm fine. I swear I feel better now mom don't worry. I just want to sleep."

I caressed him while looking at his tender lovely eyes. This boy is a piece of heaven and I'm sure if I did anything right, it's him. He is so connected to me, so gentle, so affectionate and soft. He caressed me back and gave me a look of tenderness that melts my heart. I covered him carefully, kissed his pink warm cheek and murmured: "Sleep tight my baby, I will be here watching you."

Few minutes later, the door knocked and Lulu appeared holding an elegant bouquet of flowers.

"I hope he is feeling better now."

"Oh! thank you for the fresh beautiful flowers! He would love them. He feels much better now, I think he will be discharged soon."

"I'm glad to hear that. You looked very anxious and distracted."

"Oh Lulu! It's really hard on a mother to watch her kids' pain and sickness. It's out of hand to stop worrying even if nothing is serious. The worst thing

for a parent is not being able to fix something for their kids. I'm always praying that they can live pain free. I want nothing more, right now, but my precious son regains his energy, his enthusiasm and his laughter which always makes my world better and safer."

She was listening very attentively and compassionately as if my words and prayers were for her.

"Why are you at hospital my pearl? Is everything fine with you?"

"Yeah sure. I just passed to get some tests results. My doctor advised me to have a full body checkup, so I followed her advice."

"What for? Are you feeling sick?"

"Not exactly! She is my husband's cousin, and she has noticed my pale skin and fatigue, so she asked for the tests. She suspects that I have a mild anemia. I feel good indeed, but you know when doctors are relatives, they are more meticulous and they go to extremes."

"But she's right my dear. Your skin looks yellowish, and fatigue is so clear."

I grabbed a chair and asked her to have a seat and talk if she was not in a hurry.

"It would be a pleasure to talk to you, that was my wish indeed. Yet I don't want to bother you more in such a time."

"Oh no, never mention it! I told you I'm assured and calm now. My angel is sleeping and it's a great chance to chat. We have met today and here for a reason Lulu, so let's just follow the fate and take advantage of this unexpected meeting."

She was very happy with my suggestion; she didn't think twice to put her bag aside and sit comfortably.

"Do you want me to bring you something to drink? They have coffee, tea, fresh juice in the cafeteria."

"No thanks ma'am. Your company is the best thing happening to me today."

I looked straight at her eyes because I know well that they will never lie or hide things. Eyes are like windows to a person's soul and souls are pure, spontaneous and truthful.

I was about to ask her when she sighed and slowly moved her lips:

"Days are alike, every night I have dreams that make me happy even for moments, sweet dreams that take me away from life burdens and unfairness of certain people. Many times I refuse to open my eyes

and leave my dreams behind because I know well what is waiting for me the moment I open them. I always try to fuel my mind and heart with hope, but sometimes something inside whispers that there is no hope on field. It's a mere illusion or may be a selfish desire. I feel very weak and I ask God in every invocation to enlighten my way and show me how to behave and what the best decision is. I'm not only talking about my heart and emotions, it's more than that. I have a lot of concerns that bother me and urge me to ask if tomorrow could be a sunny day. I will tell you a very sincere feeling ma'am; from the bottom of my broken heart, I'm fed up."

This time my pearl was different than any other time. She was talking without giving me a chance to speak. She seemed a bit more confident and certain about her words.

" I forget to take care of myself and what is more pitiful is that no one takes care of me; no one is here to help me. Even if I was somehow responsible for this situation; believe me ma'am, I don't merit all this. I'm not that bad or sinful to bear this punishment. I know this goes counter my faith and principles as a believer in Great God, but I really have no more patience. These conditions suffocate me, they turn over my neck

as a cold, poisonous snake. I find no one to solace me or fill me with a little ray of hope to carry on my path. It's the first time that I seriously think of escaping from my world. I took a questionable decision that shocked me. Never in my life did I think about going abroad and throwing away all my sweet and bitter souvenirs.

These days I even think about taking revenge on myself and killing what remains in the empty shell of me. My thoughts boil in my mind and one is bitter than the other. I raise my eyes for the million time and ask God to help me. I wonder if all this is resulted from my bad luck, from something bad, immoral I've committed before, from my weakness and inability to take right decisions on right times. All doors are closed in front of my eyes. I feel coldness, bitterness and nonsense. Every night before putting my head on my pillow I build castles in the air and I fancy tomorrow will be better. The following day, I get up smiling and hoping that my wishes come true, but in vain. I go back to my place with empty hands and lots of tears. They are my sole source of strength and solace. Never did I consider them signs of weakness, you know! On the contrary they are the air I breathe and the water that turns my sterile heart into a fruitful one. I love them very much, I trust them, and day after day I need

them more and more. I treasure my eyes more because they are not mean; they handle support whenever I need to feel I am alive. I tried more than one time to open doors to outer support, but every time I return with failure and shock. I can resist no more and I can no longer bear what suffocated me for long years. I urgently need help and tenderness. I'm disgusted with the heart-wrenching loneliness which pushes me to feel unwanted and empty. I need a brave heart that holds my hand and flies to the upper sky, far from anything else; far from anyone else, very far from sorrows. Then, I'll sing like no one is listening, jump like a kid again, laugh from the bottom of my broken hopeful heart. I'll chant loudly: I'm survivor; I'm survivor, I'm alive, I'm important, I'm valuable, I'm a better me."

She fell silent all of the sudden; her tears revealed how hurt she was. Her lips could no longer describe it, yet her heart could speak loudly when she cried her eyes out. I looked straight at her eyes and I, myself burst into tears. At that moment I was unable to control my emotions which were so nakedly on display. My heart sank when I heard her words. I secretly wondered if this fragile creature could carry on and bear all the burden. My nerves were about to

break when I pushed myself to be stronger and more supportive. She needs me, she has more than enough to collapse, and my reaction would make things worse. For that reason, I got closer and hugged her tight believing that it will be more powerful and comforting than any word. I allowed her hot bitter tears to run over my shoulders, I tried hard to stop my tears and control my shaking voice when I said:

“Lulu, I know well how hard that is. It seems so unfair that you went through this!”

At that moment, she wailed with pain, and it was the first time ever to see her as broken, agonized, depressed and lost as such.

‘What can I do to help her?’ I bitterly asked myself. I am the teacher, the mother, the eldest sister who is supposed to act heroically, to be resourceful, to solve youngsters’ problems. On the other hand, I felt helpless and of no use. I wish I could cure her wounds and replace her sorrows with relief, but right now my hands are tied.

She sighed a long-tired sigh and said:

“Don’t overthink or blame yourself my dearest teacher. I know well about your good intentions and your wish to help me. You are, indeed, the only person who aids me in times of thunderstorms. Your

hug, your compassion and your noble feelings gave me some relief and make me feel alive again. I still remember our last meeting when I came to invite you to my wedding. I still cannot forget every word you have said. I looked blank and lifeless that day, yet I was very attentive and touched by everything you have said. You were right in everything, on the other hand, I was defenseless, indecisive and helpless. I should have listened to you, I should have followed you when you said: "Freedom will never be served in a golden tray while you are sitting like a rock in your own path and waiting for the tyrants to handle it for you."

Right now, I confess that I was very stupid and hollow when I suddenly thought that guy could be my savior, my hero. I secretly had great expectations and all I wanted that time is to escape from the house where my family take control of every tiny detail of my life. How could my family do that to me? How couldn't they be compassionate and feel my uneasiness and pain? If that was their way to care and protect me, they must have known that they are totally wrong! I have recently discovered that they seriously misunderstood parenthood and children-rearing. Even if their deeds were out of good

intentions and depth of knowledge, they shouldn't have behaved as if they were messengers of darkness. I blindly followed their rules out of panic and scare, not out of confidence, obedience and conviction. My parents ruined my life twice; once when they failed in raising me properly, twice when they forced me to marry that monster.

Guess what ma'am! You are the only one, and I'm sure about it, who encourages me, who believes in me, who tries to help and open my eyes on the beauty of hope, freedom and change. You tried endlessly to convince me that whatever I hope for will definitely be realized if I work hardly, patiently and determinately. Unfortunately, I was dull and lifeless. I acted like I was looking for a reason to be unhappy. I didn't recognize that I had a life chance that day to stand up for my dreams, for my freedom, for myself. I was unable to understand the truth although you didn't give up on me and you struggled to enlighten my way. You always fill the gap my parents left and only because of you I love myself the same way I hate myself. I hate my weakness, my submission, my despair, my banality, my silence, my indecision, my fear, my loneliness and my muffled voice. I hate my appearance, the way I dress up, the colors I choose,

the makeup I don't wear, the gold I buy, which is in my community a sign of relief and marital happiness. I love my drawings, I love sports and music, I love shopping, I love dancing, I love hanging out with friends and tasting different cuisines, I love playing disorderly like a kid, I love wearing colorful dresses, jumpsuits and high waisted jeans, I love riding a motorbike in the rain, I love early morning runs, I love living spontaneously and freely, I love socializing and connections. I love the praying time when only my Creator is the center of my attention, reverence and devotion. My 'I love' list is quite long yet I'm so away from enjoying what I deeply prefer and fancy. People say that every cloud has a silver lining, it seems my cloud doesn't have. I was desperately escaping from my family's rules and tyranny, from estrangement and inner traumatic experiences, to find myself in a worse place with a worse person. The monster they forced me to marry rubs salt into my wounds.

"Why do you call him 'monster' Lulu?"

"Because he is one."

She lowered her voice and avoided looking at me in the eye, then continued woefully:

"No one else knows about what had happened to me, you are always the exception, ma'am. Now and

here I want to reveal the rest of my secrets as I always do when you are with me. I trust you the same way I crave for relief and support. During the wedding ceremony, you were the only one I cared for, the only one who filled me with safety and alleviation. When you left that night, I felt like darkness surrounded me, like coldness controlled my veins, like my soul was taken from me.

He opened the flat's door, and I suddenly remembered your comforting words, when you said he might be better than my expectation, he might be a hero! On the contrary, I ignored that door of hell was about to open and what I called 'pain' before was nothing compared to what happened to me that night. He was calm like a bomb, disguisable as a chameleon. He was so determined when he headed me to the room where the rest of my hope would be smashed soon, where the remaining of my dignity would be humiliated, where the leftovers of myself would be vulgarly butchered. I've never thought before that a human being could be the ugliest, the most destructive monster ever. Briefly, he discourteously, barbarously and inhumanely raped me."

I was taken aback by her words; I was too dumbfounded to speak.

"It was almost the first time to meet him alone that night, I expected the minimum of respect, romance, compassion and humanity. Were my expectations that great? Was I so pushy and demanding that he didn't even look at my eyes and give me a chance to tell him about me? He suddenly and unexpectedly got close enough and pounced on me like I was an easy prey. I was paralyzed and suffocated trying to resist and push him away. I screamed wildly and begged him to get away from me, yet he acted like a deaf-and-dumb while violating my pride and dignity.

It was the worst, the most traumatic experience I had ever gone through. I was attacked so contemptuously, disrespectfully and pitilessly. I kept shaking and quivering long time after his attack. I wanted to cry yet my tears betrayed me. I felt as cold as ice, as solid and lifeless as a stone. I was rather a dead, stinky body than an alive proud human. He left me alone ignoring the ugliness and danger of his action.

I thought of calling mom the moment he slammed the door strongly and urgently. Yet I couldn't because

I literally felt I hate her, I hate them all, I hate myself, I hate everyone and everything. The feelings of dread and irritation had power over my soul. I was sad as death, sad as the sunless sea. I went numb and everything around looked like it was the end, it was doomsday; my sun went down forever. I was so lonely like a shadow, like a crippled baby cat in the middle of nowhere. I felt empty, frustrated, horror-struck, sick, guilty and dirty. I felt like all rocks of the planet were on my back, like hell was inside my mind, like streams of fiery lava flowed and entombed every tiny part of me. At that point, disbelief and failure asphyxiated me. I was screaming without producing any sound, crying without producing tears. Nothing can paint the pain, the offense, the outrage and the disgust I had experienced that night.

I couldn't even look at my reflection in the mirror. I was screaming silently; why me? Why me? Why me?

I still remember the wave of dizziness that swept over me. I still can't forget how my sense of time had vanished and how my body felt dipped in cement. Why me? Why now? Why that way? Again and again and again, I screamed silently and disgustingly."

She stopped talking, she seemed to fight for words and even for a breath. I was heartbroken when

I followed her movements. She covered her eyes with her hands and it was as clear as day that she is in pain, endless pain. I wiped at her tears while she was chewing her lips. I sobbed at the way she was describing the scene. In her mind, the incident was still fresh. In my mind, thoughts were blocked and obstructed. I had nothing to do in order to calm her down or stop her body from shaking while she was telling me the ugliest story I've ever heard. I squeezed harder on her delicate hand, my voice dropped to a whisper when I lowered my eyes and said: "I'm terribly sorry for you my precious pearl".

She was smart and empathetic enough to detect my inability and ineffectiveness. Strength and solace came from her this time when she leaned towards me, squeezed her eyes lightly shut and said: "So do I my precious teacher and friend. Don't worry about me, there would be sunlight even after the darkest night. My Creator will save me. I'm pretty sure of that."

She suddenly sounded wise and hopeful: "You always tell me that there is a reason behind everything, even pain and suffer. I blindly trust your wisdom and perspective and I will simply wait until reasons come clearly into sight. It will be alright, I don't know how or when, but I have nothing in hands

except to wait for God's words. No one can solve it now, only my Creator is able to guide me to the right way. Meanwhile, I will wait for God's hints and guiding light."

She stood up so fast and moved like a butterfly moves her wings to make an erratic fluttering pattern, then said:

"I feel so sleepy and tired ma'am. I'm really sorry for disturbing you. I wish quick recovery for your son. One last thing, I promise to give you some good news one day; who knows, may be so soon."

She hugged me tight; my senses suddenly told me that she was hiding something! She was calmer and more influential. Her eyes were more sparkly and promising when she winked at me and said: "I will be better, just wish me soon recovery."

"Mon, mom, please give me water." His trembling voice urged me to stop following Lulu for more clarification. I immediately run to his bed to check up on my babe.

4

It was an important day for me as for my students. We were participating in the 'Taqaddam' Project and it was our 'Make It Happen' showcase event. I was very nervous and busy working with my creative students on collecting our materials for the Big Show. The school security called my name when I was about to ride the bus heading for the exhibition location.

"Ma'am, you've got a letter."

"A letter! How strange! From whom?"

"Someone dropped it early in the morning without mentioning her name."

"Oh really?! Thank you anyway. Wish us good luck Mr. A"

"You will make it happen ma'am." He replied with an assuring smile.

I made sure everyone and everything was ready, then asked the bus driver to move to the school where the show would take place. I sat restlessly and excitedly on my seat next to the window, the I opened the envelop to distract myself. I was very happy when I

read the sender's name at the top of the envelop. There was another one inside with a highlighted note: 'If you really love me, read it tomorrow.' My excitement faded away and curiosity took control. I was about to open it, yet I held myself because I truly love that fragile miserable girl. So I opted to respect her request and not to read the letter until the following day. I soon forgot about the letter when one of my students called me to put the last touches on a video we will display on the show.

Although it was an exhausting day, we enjoyed it and my students were very inspired and delighted. We didn't win the first position that day. Yet we left with great memories, a valuable experience, positive and promising feedback from the British Council and the Manager of the HSBC. I was proud of my talented, creative and highly committed students.

I slept early that night and in my mind I was impatiently waiting for the sun to rise and the new day to spread its lights.

I woke up earlier than I usually do on weekends. One of the reasons was to read Lulu's letter. I was holding it cautiously and eagerly; a strange panic was welling inside me. I have received enough shocks and I wonder if this time she will talk about a more heart-

wrenching, a more hideous experience. My hands were trembling like leaves in the wind when I opened her letter.

"Dear confidant,

Please allow me to call you so because you are the one to whom all my secrets are confided. So far, you are the only person I trust, I love, and I desire to discuss all my private matters with. Now that you are reading my letter, I will be at the airport, exactly I will be boarding the plane and fastening my seatbelt. I won't be going for a holiday or a honeymoon, I won't be taking a selfie and posting a story singing the lively famous song: " A-a-ay, I' on vacation, every single day 'cause I love my occupation."

No, no, this is not for me. My trip is different than anyone else's. May be the second verse of the song suits me more. It says; "If you don't like your life, then you should go and change it." Actually, this is what I'm going to do; I'm going to change my life! I will fly very far to change it. Maybe it's too late to follow your advice ma'am; but at least, I dare to try, and for the first time ever, to ride a plane and escape alone leaving everyone and everything behind. When my letter reaches you, I will be asking the flight attendant

to give me a glass of cold water which may help me cool down and digest my thoughts. Finally, I hit the Stop button and persuaded myself to dust off my wings. I know well about the seriousness and danger of my action. I'm aware of others' reactions and judgement. I'm certain that I'll be rejected forever and my family will disregard and misunderstand my decision. Believe me dear, for the first time in my life I do not really care. Something deep inside invites me to ignore everyone and everything and only escape silently. Something unknown tempts me to leave thinking about tomorrow for tomorrow. You are the only one who knows about it right now and I'm sure support and understanding will come from you. If you really love me don't tell anyone. I'm quite sure that they won't focus on the reasons behind my bold unexpected decision. On the contrary they will pay more attention to people's opinions. They will never ask what makes a waterfall a waterfall; instead they will ignore my feelings, my desperate calls for being healed and taken care of. I know well about my value and that's why I decided to retreat silently and inaudibly. I'm nothing, no-one. I'm a ghost ma'am. I'm an empty shell of a creature. I'm a set of useless unworthy soulless organs. There were moments

people like you, fuel my hope for a better future. Yet now and here I confess that I had no worthy past, I have no valuable present, and never will I have a rosy future. I'm of no use and no one will notice my departure, and even if they did it's because they will be embarrassed and shocked not because they heartily miss or care for me. By the end they won't search for me because they won't be ready to carry shame and face the abundant accuses on people's eyes and whispers. They even may announce that I died and they will plan for a funeral. Believe me it's the least I care for right now. I totally ignore where I brought this coldness and this strength from, yet I'm pretty sure that something had changed entirely. My volcano finally erupted to wash away everything related to the Lulu you already know. I'm in pain, in severe pain indeed, yet I decided to redirect my pain for useful causes.

Let me confess that there is a major cause of my decision. Do you remember the day we met at hospital when your little angel was sick? That day changed my life 180 degrees. I'm terribly sorry because I lied to you that day. It was true that I was taking some blood tests results, but not for an anemia stuff like I told you but for my pregnancy!

My reaction was exactly same as yours while you are reading my words right now. When I first discovered I was pregnant, I was blank, I didn't know if I must feel happy or sad. I hate my husband and I've never imagined I could be ready to carry his baby. I was so confused that I didn't know what to do, where to go or whom to call. I'm not a natural, well-balanced woman who should welcome the news as natural, well-balanced people do. Without thinking twice, I decided to get rid of any bound with the monster. But I didn't know how to do it. I was totally alone, totally depressed and frail to take any decision and put it into action, not just words. I felt dizzy and sick and I can't even remember how I prayed and how long I had slept on the prayer rug! The first thing that I could remember when I woke up was my decision not to tell anyone on earth about the creature who will grow inside me. The idea of getting rid of that creature faded away and I still ignore how or when. I felt like I had received a mysterious positive message, from whom? I don't know! For what? I don't know, what about? I don't know.

All I felt when I woke up is a very strange peace and a very reassuring feeling that something different is about to happen. To be honest with you, I didn't

resist, and I just followed the unspoken voice and the mysterious messenger. I surprised myself on how calm and relaxed I was when I turned the TV on and zapped the different channels. Something immediately grabbed my attention, so I increased the volume to listen well to the details. It was a documentary about enrolling on the top Graphic Design Universities and Colleges in Canada. I found myself focusing on more details and noting down criteria, websites and email addresses for application. Later on, I hid my notes on a place the monster can't reach and I started to exploit the long time he spent outside to write an application letter, attach my CV and send to various destinations. To my surprise, things were easier than I expected and replies were sooner than I awaited. By then, the idea of escaping and having my own adventure grew fast inside my mind. I felt that there was a great reason behind every single thing which happened the day I slept deeply on the prayer rug. I discovered that I could do things on my own, I could bottle up secrets and act convincingly like nothing had happened. Honestly speaking, I liked what I was doing which kept me both busy and powerful.

When I received an email from a reputed university in Toronto, I couldn't believe my eyes. I read it so many times that I thought I was either dreaming or hallucinating! Actually, I don't want to bother you with every single detail, yet while writing my letter, I was very excited to a point that I was about to call you for a meeting and tell you everything. Unfortunately, I couldn't, not because I don't confide in you, but because I wasn't sure I could really do it and liberate myself from the dark and frightful prison. Shortly, I worked secretly and so hard to plan and organize each and every thing for my Independence Day. For the first time in my life, I felt lucky to have a decent amount of money my family had offered me as a wedding gift. It's the only good thing they have ever done to me so far. I also possess jewelry that can be of great use when I fly away and seek change in a strange land. I also felt fortunate because I won't really bother on paperwork and visa due to my nationality. One more thing, my passport was ready because my mother suggested to visit the Holy lands in the coming holiday. So, I felt encouraged and lucky, it was like everything worked for my sake and unusually effortless for a reason I ignore.

You know what, Ms. L, I even surprised myself on the choice of Graphic Design! You know well that my oppressed dream was to be a doctor, I've never imagined myself a graphic designer. Yet out of the blue, I found myself doing things I've never dreamt I could do, liking things I've never visualized I could like, and following my own voice like it was a habit not an aberrant and bizarre behavior!

I suddenly felt an urgent call from a stranger to save a soul. The creature was within me and I'm the only person who knows about the little heart that may beat safely inside and change my world entirely.

I'm not escaping for the betterment of my own future. Or maybe, I will try to dream again through the beats of the creature's heart. I have already buried my all on an icy dusty tomb and I'm still confused about my own future. It's mostly for the sake of the baby I gathered my strength and courage and decided to finally wake up. Never had I imagined I could do it ma'am. I find myself so ready to heal my own wounds. There is no doubt that I can't easily forget all what happened to me, yet I decided to strongly fight till the end and give me my due right. The soul I carry in my womb was my hope, my strength, my savior. I wanted, then, to be my own person, to rebuild my own values,

to fight my own battle and show myself at first, and everyone else later on, that I can be in charge of my plans. I can stop people from stepping on me, I can reflect on myself, I can discover myself, trust myself and depend on myself. The charming creature urged me to adjust my priorities, to purify my soul and never fall into the monstrous cycle of depression and darkness. Instead, I discovered how strong, faithful and responsible I could be in order to reach the peace and enlightenment I always crave and die over. You were totally right ma'am when you once told me that clarity, freedom and satisfaction come from within not offered by others on a golden tray. From now on, I will listen carefully to the voice inside me, to your calls and valuable pieces of advice. I will stop doing anything for anyone, instead, I will put my own comforts and choices ahead of anyone else's. From now on, I will stop wondering if it is late or early, instead, I will focus on the rest of my days and work harder to live them peacefully, sincerely and freely. I may fail indeed, yet I promise that I will never surrender again, never be submissive and dreadfully frail again. I may be lost, ignoring what to do in a totally strange land, with a totally new lifestyle and a fragile person I must nurture and care for totally

alone, yet I will never let anger, pessimism, frustration and past scars block my mind to think correctly and my heart to beat safely and hopefully. The more I hate my past and my husband, the more I wait for the angelic human being to enlighten my life. I promise to care for him/her the way I craved my family to care for me. I'm ready to sacrifice anything to raise him/her healthily, fairly and safely. If it is a baby girl, I don't want her to be like me. If the baby is a boy, I don't want him to be like his father. I will never forget the monster's unethical behavior and his ugly actions, yet they will never pull me back or push me to take revenge on my baby. On the contrary I will instill forgiveness, love, tolerance, ethics and so many values and morals in my child. Together, we deserve the next stage of our life to be different. My mission won't be easy, but it won't be impossible too. I intend to be a strong woman, to learn from the storms I walked through. I won't let my child be a replica of someone else's failure and complexities. I will make sure to help my kid learn from my experience and never be scared of creating new experiences regardless to generational curses and boundaries.

I can't thank you enough ma'am for all what you did for me. You are of great value in my life and I

promise to keep you updated and make you proud of me. I want a favor from you; please keep me in your prayers and be more generous in advising me because from now on not only will I listen carefully, but I will also apply and follow your instructions. My real journey started already and I'm pretty sure it won't be an easy rosy one. On the contrary, I will struggle to heal my bleeding heart. I confess that I'm scared, terrified ignoring what to do now that I'm freed, yet my faith, my belief and my prayers will always lead me to better destinations.

P.S. Two weeks from now, I want you to meet my mother and tell her that I'm terribly sorry for the pain I caused her. However, I'm not regretful and never will I change my mind and decisions. Tell her that I will be safe and never will I let anyone exploit, humiliate or belittle me. Please tell her that I forgive her, my father and everyone except the monster. One day, I'm quite sure, she will be proud of me, she will call to meet her grandson or granddaughter with honor and joy.

With Regards

Lulu"

5

I still remember her parents' house location. I know well that her father and brothers won't be there on a Friday night. They would always have lunch at home, then spend the rest of the day at their friends'. I thought of calling her mom for an appointment, yet I didn't for I knew well she would refuse to meet me. So, I drove directly to the place Lulu would consider a gloomy prison.

"Good evening, ma'am."

"Oh, that's you! Please tell me that she is fine, she is healthy, she is alive."

Honestly speaking, I didn't expect her reaction. She held my hand tenderly while her eyes welled up. The look in her eyes was so old, so sick, so powerless. She lowered her head with shame as if she was in front of a judge, then said:

"I'm not a beast ma'am. I'm a mother and she is a piece of me. I've never hated her or wanted to see her sad. I know well about her grief, her sorrows, her pain. On the other hand, I'm a weak, oppressed woman, I

cannot change her fate or heal her wounds. I'm already a broken crippled creature and I failed to keep my daughters safe and give them the life they truly deserve."

"You ought to have tried, to have shown her your affection, to have sympathized, not to rub salt to her wounds and oblige her to marry someone she didn't love."

"I was hoping that he would be better than her father, my father and all men of our family, wasn't he?"

"If he were a good kind of a man, we wouldn't have this conversation tonight."

"What did he do to her? Did he kidnap and hide her? Did he kill her?"

"He killed the rest of her hope, he executed her dignity, her honor."

She hid her face with her hands, her tears were falling like rain, heavy rain indeed. I didn't go into details, yet she knew it, she understood the pain her daughter went through. All of a sudden, I was touched by her sadness and misery. I recognized that she would always understand her daughters' sufferings, yet it may be the first time to show her affection, reveal and express her compassion and pity.

Something deep told me that she was a victim herself, she needed tender feelings and alleviation as much as her daughters needed them.

She wiped her tears away with the tail of her shirt, she sighed a long heavy sigh, and then; I could hear pain, loneliness, regret and victimization in her voice.

"Do you think she would forgive me one day? I'm responsible for what happened to her, that's out of question, yet I didn't intend to cause heartache and blues. I wanted to save her from the misfortune and the prison we all live in. I wanted a better life for her. I wish to see her happy and free, as a consequence, to feel my own freedom and relief through her eyes and smiling face. I'm a mother and all I wanted is my daughter's salvation and safety. I won't forgive myself; my ugly, weak personality leads to my destruction as well as my own daughter's. I've never valued her emotions, her needs, her dreams, her achievements. I was stuck in my past and pulled back with my own complexities and defects. I was selfish, I was of no use to her, on the contrary, she was always smarter, braver and kinder than me. Would you please tell me where she is? How is she mastering her life?!"

"Lulu is no longer in this land, she immigrated to Canada. I believe in your daughter's smartness and ambition, ma'am. I'm sure she would be safer there."

She was frozen to her place, she seemed unable to control her tears and her shaking body. She appeared dumbfounded while her eyes opened wide in fright. She heavily moved her lips and said:

"My calm, decent, so frail daughter took such a prudent, big decision! How brave and fearless she is! How hesitant, helpless and trivial I am! What did I do to my own daughter?! Please God forgive me! How can I live with such a weighty burden? All I wanted for her is a better life. I didn't want her to be a deformed copy of me. I roped her into that marriage! I'm guilty, I'm a timid unworthy creature."

I was examining her pale face with sympathy which really surprised me. She looked like a ghost from the past when her voice tone changed a bit and she sounded like begging me:

"Would you please tell her that I'm proud of what she had done? This fragile hurt girl always has true faith and renewable patience! I failed in understanding the hints she would always try to send me. I failed in supporting her and providing the emotional containment she called for. I would always

be deaf when she called for help. I was defensive and disrespectful when she yelled for change and freedom. Lulu was born with unique characters; she was always different from all women of our community. She was always hungry to live a sort of life she dreamt of. On the opposite hand, no one of us understood her, no one listened to her, no one trusted or respected her rights. Then what happened?! We lost her forever. I contribute nothing meaningful to her, shame on mothers like me!"

I tried to say something to solace her and assure that Lulu would be fine, yet she seemed in need to talk. She raised her hand as if to ask me to listen more carefully.

"I know that she will shine brightly through her faith, goodness and patience. I know that she won't use her desire in the wrong way. Lulu has a good nature, and I will not stop praying for her safety, happiness and success. I'm certain God will never leave her unable to reach her contentment and freedom. All I ask you to do ma'am is to assure me that everything will be all right. Please inform me about her address, her news, her health and safety. I promise not to tell her father and brothers since I know well about their intentions and mindset. Please ask her to forgive me!

Beg her to forgive me! When my days in this world are over, will she remember me in a good way? Will she forgive me? Will she visit my tomb and pray for me?"

When she said so, I hugged her with tears in my eyes and said:

"May God grant you a long life, then you meet Lulu in a better place, better conditions. She has a good nature as you said, and she begs for your forgiveness when she asked me to inform you about her. What has happened has happened ma'am, the past can't be altered, yet the future carries hope and light. I promise to keep in touch, give you her phone number and address as soon as I receive them. Keep praying for her until you meet her yourself and talk as you never did before."

I wanted to tell her that day about Lulu's pregnancy. Yet I didn't; thinking that it was hard to receive lots of news at a time. Sooner or later, she will know about the little creature; in all cases, she has nothing to add to help her daughter or act as a protector and caretaker anymore.

To my surprise, after meeting the mother, I felt relieved and more hopeful for Lulu's future. At least, now she has someone so valuable to support her even by not totally refusing the changes she needs to

better her emotional and mental health. Actually, I sympathized with the mother's situation, she looked very sick herself, even more injured and traumatized than her daughter.

That meeting urged me to think seriously and deeply of the responsibilities of parents in giving birth to and raising children. A strange question crossed my mind; are parents the first to blame for their kids' mental and emotional disorders? I'm not an expert in psychological and sociological education, yet I have that critical mind which pushes me to question, criticize, analyze, worry and decipher puzzles; especially those related to human relationships. I have my own thoughts and beliefs, my own worries and doubts. Regardless of our diverse origins, countries, cultures, religions and traditions, we are all born under very similar circumstances. At first, a mother carries a baby for nine months, then she is helped to take it out of her womb. Anywhere in the planet, the umbilical cord is clamped and cut to separate the baby from the mother for the first and last time. After that, the baby will be taken to be cleaned, bathed, fed and dressed up. At this very early stage of life, all babies are still equal, as I consider. Then, differences start to show off according to settings, supplies, parents'

status, surroundings and social environment, financial situations, education levels, emotional connections. These factors, along with others, participate in sculpting personalities and different types of characters with different behaviors and manners, different reactions and motives, so many different stories, assorted mindsets, perspectives, beliefs, various levels of compassion, tolerance and understanding, heterogenous dreams, visions and ambitions. Although we are different, we can live together peacefully and helpfully. I believe that these differences have to be respected and celebrated. On the other hand, we should work harder to help each other, to correct each other's mistakes and to call a spade a spade whenever needed. Lulu's story is repeated in so many families and communities. It may be different from my own story or yours, yet we shouldn't only read it and sympathize with this poor girl. On the opposite, we must dig for causes and reasons behind her tragedy. We must help her as well as all girls who share the same sufferings or even more. We ought to speak plainly without avoiding unpleasant or embarrassing issues. We can heal each other's traumas if we are good and compassionate listeners, if we stop being judgmental. If we sow

goodness and kindness, if we spread hope and love, if we guide each other to roads of fairness, honesty, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. Lulu's mother didn't find anyone to guide her, consequently she misguided her daughters. Unfortunately, she was convinced that she is taking them to the safest destinations. Likewise, Lulu's father didn't find anyone to stop him, to speak plainly and count his hazardous mistakes. Consequently, he was perfectly convinced that what he inherited from his ancestors was totally right. Maybe he didn't even know he was blamable and guilty. Like thousands of families, Lulu's parents have beliefs without basis, logical information and tolerance. They simply copy inherited traditions and convictions without questioning or reviewing.

P.S. This is not a call to break with all traditions for I strongly believe that many inherited habits are worth copying and saving. My focus here is on certain behaviors and customs that may destroy a person and a community. Habits that may not serve humanitarian causes and which are not suitable for certain ages and times.

In Lulu's community, as well as mine indeed, there are so many strapped for time and retrograde habits. Unfortunately, up until now for instance, there is that

strange conviction that the more kids you have, the more powerful you are; preferably if the majority are boys! It's by number people count blessings and fortune not by quality or health of kids; considerably the mental and emotional health which I believe to be the most important reason for everyone's proper rising and satisfactory future. Our ancestors committed so many mistakes that are sadly followed by a very long list of parents up to now, even some of the well-educated and civilized ones.

Relating to Lulu's experience and my own attitude, one of the most hazardous mistakes committed by parents is injustice and gender inequity. Grievously, great number of families still believe that boys should be privileged or prioritized over girls. They disrespect the latter's fundamental human right to be treated equally and fairly! When equality is attacked, be sure that females will suffer the most. Men in Lulu's family, as in many families around the world, are thought to be the best, the strongest, the most powerful. On the other hand, females are regarded as the less fortunate, the weakest, the most dependent and inferior. It is an awfully strange, unfair social phenomenon I would prefer to call attention to profoundly at other time, in other papers. We

shouldn't be pressed while mentioning such a crucial issue because discrimination against women must be tackled more seriously, thoughtfully and efficiently.

Lulu is my dear student, she can be your sister, your daughter, your friend, your neighbor. She can be someone you meet everyday yet you ignore what's going on her life and how hard she battles to win the fight which is not only hers. The fight for freedom and soul-searching is ours too. Lulu lacks serious attachment to others; mainly her own family. The question here is; are we all so well-balanced that our bounds are strong and our relationships are successful?! Lulu was broken when I first met her. She looked like part of her was missing. But what about me and you? Don't we also have missing parts? Don't we also suffer from hidden things that hurt like hell? We can all sympathize with Lulu, yet she will always remind me and you of parts that had died within us. Lulu is a natural person, yet she is different from many of us. She bravely stitched her own wounds and decided to push past her sorrows and follow a thin light for a mysterious future. She suffered a lot yet she woke up by the end to pursue her simple dream to live, to love and be loved, to sleep safely, to breathe the fresh air of freedom. When she decided to put a

goal to her life and work hard to fulfill it, things looked simpler and less complicated. Paulo Coelho once said: "When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it."

6

Dear Lulu;

I hope that you are doing well, that the baby is safe and healthy. It took me a while to digest what happened and understand your brave decision. I congratulate you on your new powerful inspiring version. As well, I'm sure your faith and patience will never let you down.

First of all, I want you to keep always in touch and assure me about your health, your settlement and every tiny detail of your day. Please update me soon on your new address, your news. Actually, I'm confused and taken aback, yet somehow, somewhere I feel comfortable and confident. You will be safe as long as God is guiding you. My precious pearl, I need to tell you that I'm proud of you, I will always love you unconditionally and uncritically.

Now that I'm writing my email, I feel like I'm looking straight at your eyes. Those eyes that grabbed my attention the very first moment you entered my class. Never will I forget our first meeting Lulu. Your

skin was pale that day. It was dry like a sterile land in the middle of a desert craving for heavy rain. I stared at you to notice that sadness took over your facial features. I saw no life in your eyes, and then I knew that you will not pass invisible in my life, that your eyes called for rescue and help.

Eyes are not created only to see, they are also created to talk. Their language is not understood by everyone, but when you listen to them like an expert you discover how eloquent and expressive they are. Eyes have mouths and tongues. Did you ever try to look long at your reflection in the mirror and use all your senses to understand what your eyes tell you? Did you ever experience listening to your eyes? Do it even once, then you will discover the mystery of your eyes' language. From that trial, you will make it a great habit to listen and understand them. Did you ever try to listen to someone else's eyes? When you are with others, even strangers, do it and look at someone's eyes so directly, emotionally and sympathetically. Let all your senses work well and never stop them if they merge and work as an entity. Never forget that when you truly care about humanity, when you love good for others, when you have compassion and never hesitate to help, only then

your eyes can also talk, your ears can also feel, your mouth can also see, your nose can also taste and your whole body can surprise you and serve your humanitarian causes.

My dear Lulu, the chemistry we had from the very beginning wasn't out of nothing. It was caused by your eyes' need to talk and my heart's skill to listen. We literally met at school, in a classroom full of students, yet our souls met in a different place not everyone is able to reach or recognize. If I had a superpower, I would not only be a good listener, but also a generous, brave helper. Not only would I listen to your eyes and soul, but also I would struggle to spread peace all over, to fight for your rights as well as those like you. I would strive vigorously against rules, traditions, certain generational curses that are opposed to humanity and that murder a young girl's right, not only to dream indeed, but also to live. Unfortunately, I have no superpower, yet I have a super heart that spares no efforts to serve others and share their pain. I have a super pen which can speak up, raise awareness and drag others' attention that around every one of us, there are people who survive yet they are not alive. I have super strong emotions that can feel exactly what

you feel, share your sorrows and hardships. I have a super job that allows me to interfere when possible and instill values that will consequently guarantee peaceful coexistence. I can easily understand and decipher your codes; when you are dead inside, but you want to brighten up other people's lives. I am not pretending to be Mrs. Fix-it! I am not really sure that I would succeed in what I intend to do, I am not certain that relief would be on your side. Conversely, I guarantee you will enlighten others' ways. Your story will inspire others and many lives will be saved while listening to my pen and imagining your eyes. Always remember that faith helps you see the invisible. Compassion helps you hear the hidden. Love helps you heal the wounds and save humanity. As long as I am alive, I will never lose hope for a better chance, for a better future, for a better generation. You inspired me my dear Lulu and so will you do to others. You are such a powerful, strong, determined woman and I highly respect your persistence and faith. Some people think that maturity comes with age, but you taught me that it is measured by pain, it is built by the brave decision one can take during the midst of one's frustrations and darkness. You taught me that calamities are blessings

in disguise. Your woe was beyond description, and I am not sure I would survive and fight for the good if I were in your shoes. Contrariwise, you uprooted power, hope and steadiness from the womb of sufferings and torture. You didn't want to fight others' war, you wanted to fight your own war. You needed to breathe freedom, you refused to die and that's why I definitely believe that you deserve to be happy. I confess that you are one of my best teachers! Yes you are! Because your story, your behavior, your experiences and mostly your attitude on holding out hope taught me a lot. You are larger than life!

Your commitment to be your own person and to fight your own battle, your journey for soul-searching are unusually impressive. It's me who has to thank you abundantly for the so many lessons I've learnt. Your story instilled knowledge to an extent you may not be aware of. For me, you are an idol, a leader to be followed and honored.

Wherever you are my precious pearl, be sure that I will always be here for you. My prayers will be your umbrella during rainy uncomfortable nights. I inexhaustibly encourage you to chase principles and values instead of people, to pursue inner peace instead of problems and negative attitude. You are

still rich to fulfill your dreams. You own Time, which is your capital, your fortune. Work harder for your child's welfare, for kids symbolize the future, the hope, the light. Your mission to build a strong, healthy, effective and successful kid won't be painless, yet it won't be futile. I believe that you can make it happen.

P.S. Please show your kid the beauty you possess inside. Always remember that who toils succeeds, who plants love, tenderness and beauty, reaps peace and contentment. Both of you are ready now for a better journey, a better future, keep going!

One last information that will undoubtedly warm you up during the same sad stormy freezing nights, your mom is proud of you. She promised abundant prayers, countless and sincere invocations. Please call her whenever you are ready, whenever you feel like hope has gone, whenever you need tenderness and assurance, whenever you crave for warm and trustworthy hands to guide you to safe destinations.

With love and pride

Lily."

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