



One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

By Karen Hannoush



Inspired by her interview with Fatima Kifah in Salt, 15-year-old Karen Hannoush pieces together a story about a mother's triumph over adversity.

Growing up, I never had someone tell me that I could succeed and thrive in a man's world. I was made to feel like a vulnerable creature amongst powerful vultures.

Ironically, my husband wasn't so powerful. After all, he never provided for his family. When my eldest was 10, he left us. Unemployed and drowning in debt, I was forced to raise my five children alone. My family blamed me while my neighbours pitted me. Between securing school fees and paying electricity bills, I had no time for sorrow or anger. I accepted my fate. Instead of wallow in self-pity, I picked myself back up.

I figured that financial aid organisations as were my only hope. This was ten years ago; I don't forget dates – it was 29 March 2010 when I was denied the opportunity to earn a living. I lived in perpetual fear, not of failure but of admitting defeat. Yet not long after my failed attempts to seek help from organisations, an angel appeared to me in the form of my neighbour. She began a business, cooking and serving traditional food at gatherings. She offered me the position of chief cook. If there's one thing I'm known for in Salt, other than the woman whose husband abandoned her with five children to raise alone, it's my ma'loobeh and mansaf.

I would cook up to three large platters of mansaf and many more of ma'loobeh and msakhan for a single gathering that royalty and government officials would often attend. I earned an average of JD3. Alhamdulillah is what I would tell myself at the end of the day. I then

“If there's one thing I'm known for in Salt, other than the woman whose husband abandoned her with five children to raise alone, it's my ma'loobeh and mansaf”



started to earn up to JD4 per gathering, and for that I would say, Alhamdulillah.

I was unable to cover all of my household's expenses but I could provide a meal on the table and a roof over our heads. Best of all, I had my five children by my side. For the first time in a while, I was content with my life. I was no longer on the brink of falling apart. I waited patiently for what would come next.

It wasn't long before another person came bearing news on my doorstep, but this time there were two of them. On 4 December 2011, the organisation that I turned to a year before had not failed me, after all. They suggested I open my house up to international tourists. Without hesitation, I said yes! Within the week, my house was crowded with tourists from Japan. I poured for them traditional coffee, then hosted them for a feast that I poured my heart and soul into. Joy, fulfilment and gratitude consumed me. Just when I thought that my day could not get any better, I received my payment: I earned JD120 in just one day and





all on my own! It was beyond my wildest dreams. I never earned this much money in my entire life. Alhamdulillah, I whispered to myself, Alhamdulillah.

The next few years, guests would come day and night from all around the world, leaving me with positive, encouraging words. Yet my sons felt otherwise. My youngest once sat me down and asked, “How are you doing this without a man to support you and stand by your side?” He told me that I was in this all alone and that he was worried about me. But he was wrong. I was not alone; I never was. I had someone by my side ever since the start and I still do. I’d choose to have Him over anyone else in this world. I wouldn’t have grown into the woman I am today if it weren’t for my faith.

Word was finally out on the street. That I, Fatima Kifah, am back and better than ever. I would get invited for television appearances. Newspapers wrote about me. I attended conferences with royalty and I did it all without the help of a man.

Word on the street spread further than I could imagine. On 6 November 2013, my husband came back. With JD37,000 in debt, he was jailed and had no one else to return to but me. I did what others warned me against; I chose to bail him out. I did it because I am not one to hold people accountable for their actions. That is a decision that lies in the hands of God and only God. I worked double shifts to raise enough money to get the man, who abandoned my family and me, out of prison. And when he

got out, he was diagnosed with diabetes and I helped me get the treatment he needed. I continued to host tourists and attend functions. My eldest got married and all my children found work. Alhamdulillah.

The 28th of November 2015, is the day God picked a beautiful flower from my field and decided to keep it to himself. As I was carrying on with my midnight prayers, a vision came to me and my heart sunk. I felt shivers run down my spine as I sat upright grasping on to the tip of my abaya. There it was, I thought, my seasonal downfall and it would wound me the most. Yet I was sure it would be God’s will.

“The rice was never bad. I was the one who needed seasoning”

It was around 9:15 at night that I got a call from my neighbour. Her voice cracked as she withheld tears. “Your son got into a car accident,” she cried. My heart shattered into pieces with my reply, “My son did not get into a car accident; my son died.” My heart continues to ache to this day. They say time heals all wounds. No, it doesn’t.

Weeks and months after that tragic day, people would tell me that my food does not taste the same anymore, that it is not as good as it used to be. I blamed the rice. The season was terrible for rice and it made my food taste bad. Excuse after excuse. I had no choice in the end but to confront my feelings and give myself permission to grieve.

With every step I moved forward, I fell back two steps. It is the way of life. The rice was never bad. I was the one who needed seasoning. And amid that season of tragedy, I needed to regain my flavouring. 🍴

*Alhamdulillah, I whispered to myself,
I have. Alhamdulillah.*



About Karen Hannoush

Karen has many interests and passions, including politics, debate, creative writing and theatre. She plans to study social sciences, public relations and business in university. Her dream is to work for the United Nations as an ambassador or representative. “Until then, I’d like to pass my chemistry exams and keep on writing short stories,” she says.