**Highly Commended: Scintilla of Hope**

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The aroma of incense filled the air in the bedroom. Golden hued rays of sun kissed my cheeks to make the start refreshing. Glancing through the window that had the glimpse of morning life. I felt lucky to be in this house as it gives the agglomeration of modernity with th earching outlook of nature as the seashore is just a couple of yards from the highways connecting the gateway to Muscat. Resting on my favorite coquelicot couch, I tasted *Khajoor* and *Kahwa* - an Arabic blend of sweet and strong drink. The glimpse of the radiant sun with the coffee mug are my healthy addictions during my dawn routines.

Today is an important day in my career which has been plagued with struggles, losses, hard work and finally a bit of success. The elite business awards’ 2016, the most reputed one in the country, bring the leading business people to limelight and provide international outreach. The event culminates with trophies to be awarded to the winners who are selected by readers of newspapers and distinguished jury members. The event is about to have a kick start in a couple of hours from now.

This tossed me to have a look at the photo album to evoke nostalgia. I was pictured with awards, memorabilia, proficiency stripes and even old geeky spectacles. In one of the dust laden photos probably at fifth standard, I had an adorably chubby face. I kept that photograph besides the woman’s face in the newspaper which reads Marwa, the nominee for young entrepreneurs of the year.

In this span of 30 years, things have changed completely. From a playful and carefree childhood, to baffling adolescence, to matured married life with loads of responsibilities, pursuing ambitions and carrying forward with arduous tasks. Oops. What a struggle! Life is beautiful but the journey is not easy. Felt enjoyably tiring.

This voyage looks ecstatic now but was filled with lots of issues and agony. Failures were my friends to begin with. I started a business owning a boutique shop with just little inputs that I could gather then. It was an utter failure due to the competition with many well established players in the town who had done business for generations. Ultimately, I had to settle with zero income from business and managed with paltry earnings from my previous job in a private firm. I applied for a position in a ministry after a few months and by God’s grace, got the job that provided a soothing time to recoup myself.

Optimism was the lifeline for my intention of doing business. Two years time was well utilized to hone my expertise. Increase in bank balance and strategic working were the essentials for this enterprise. I bought a new business from someone who wanted to leave the country for betterment. It was all about catering marriage needs. At present, I am one of the leading entrepreneurs in Oman with business wings spread across many countries which can easily be spotted on the golden globe.

After reaching the hotel for the mega event, I saw someone looking at me with a blushing grin who was none other than my ex-college Ziva.

“Ziva… What a surprise?” Ziva had been a smart and intelligent girl in my class. She looked charming with an enviable radiance and a gleeful stance just like someone who had spent considerable time in penance on the Himalayas. We exchanged pleasantries and had finished our mutual enquiries which always take a significant amount of time in our culture.

Over a cup of coffee, she jumped to interview mode and was curious to know what had transpired me to this level from a commoner.

“Look Ziva, in life at times we get motivation from little things. Mostly we did not care to zoom our lens into things happening at pint scale. My example is none other than that of my old aunty. She was selling frankincense in Sohar souk and was the sole bread winner of the family after the tragic demise of her husband. She was tireless and always focused on her tasks with a positive attitude. As a result, now her children and grandchildren are well placed. My voyage to the brighter side of life also started recently after the birth of my second child.”

“Dealing with a multitude of things is never easy. I worked and continued with my business simultaneously till that evening, when my manager yelled at me asking me to set my priorities right and only concentrate on my job not the business. I was badly embarrassed in front of all my colleagues. Many consoled me; others felt I deserved that harsh treatment.”

“My intention was just to take care of my personal needs through my job and step forward in business. I realized tha I was unable to continue in such a way. I quit my job the week after. My husband was neutral to my drastic step of stepping back from a well-established job. I could have applied for leave for some time, but decided to stay focused and avoid multitasking for a while.”

“Marwa, it was a brave move but many of us would not have taken this decision if we had been in your shoes.”

“Decisions take us to our destinies. I was very confused at the time, but took a bold decision to concentrate on my business. My business, in spite of my presence, did not do well as one would have expected. One habit which I developed during these years was to listen to people. It is not about hearing things, but listening to people. I mean to take their suggestions wholeheartedly. This time, I did not close my options as I was eyeing an excellent venture to slip in. Indeed it worked out well.”

I was talking to my neighbor who is an octogenarian living few meters away from my house. He worried about how the modernity slashed the tradition and culture. He had a gift shop of handicrafts in which he used to sell traditional dhow, Khanjar, stand, Omani sticks, Kumaha and other traditional stuff. The influx of goods from Chinese markets at lower prices and the lack of interest for traditional goods among the young generations forced him to close his business. He was worried about the cultural identity of our country since local handicrafts are disappearing due to this aspect of globalization and trade liberalization; a phenomena not only peculiar to Oman.

The announcement at the gala event had brought me to present tense. That moment came when the convener stated the importance of sharing the vital role played by entrepreneurs and its positive impact on the oil driven economy of the Sultanate of Oman. He also elaborated the encouragement given by the government to transit people from job seekers to providers. Then he announced to the delight of the audiences amidst loud cheers that the next award is for a young entrepreneur of the year.

I was waiting anxiously whether my name would be announced for the award with my heart beating lub-tub clearly audible with prayers on my lips.

Then came the announcement that “The best young promising entrepreneur award goes to ……………….. Marwa”

After that for almost a minute I was on cloud nine.

He continued with the citation and read out my profile.

“Marwa was sailing from a family with no background on business. She was an unassumingly sober person who led a typical womenfolk lifestyle with her early marriage and two children before joining for a job at a private firm. She then moved to a government job with one foot in her business, inspired by her aunt. Not able to cope with work and business in addition to shouldering family responsibilities, she moved out of the job to focus on her business. She ventured into a novel business of running a traditional boutique shop which makes custom gifts reflecting the most respected of Oman’s traditions and rich heritage. She started the operation in Salalah, and has now shops in every major town of the country apart from having her business centers across the USA, UK, GCC countries, India, and China. She is the role model of every Omani’s citizen with her pursuance, perception, commitment, and determination to grow big. The organizer of todays function is pleased to give this trophy to her and this is her sixth major recognition as organizations from overseas have recognized her on five other different occasions.”

Now Marwa will receive the award from the chief guest of the today’s event …..

At the backdrop, thunderous applause and standing ovation were heard. I reached the stage and exchanged pleasantries with the chief guest of the evening at this mega event. Then I took hold of the trophy with pride that is absolutely not for me but for my role-models, well-wishers, my fellow womenfolk of my country, and all those who believed in my abilities more than myself.

With tons of gratitude manifested through moist eyes, there lies the scintilla of hope, way forward and fresh air.