**Highly Commended: Flowers Buried Alive**

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In the early morning, Amal went outside home after she showed her parents a fake smile which she labored much to make. This day, her mood was not enviable, that mood which expelled the sleep from her eyes last night and colored her bright face pale. She closed the house's door and walked holding her school bag with a strong fist, but suddenly she swerved through the school's way. She headed to the trash container, quickly turned left and right, to make sure that no one was in that place. With a feeling of disgust, she pushed aside some of the garbage, and looked again left and right. Her face was covered by a mask of fear and panic, and her heartbeats a rataplan. When she was sure no other creature was in that place, she opened her purse and like a lightning speed, took out a dark bag which was knotted strongly enough hiding what's inside it. She threw it in the trash container bottom, and covered it with piles of garbage. For the third time, she turned left and right before returning to the school road. She continued walking, pulling her lumbering steps, and her mind had been dominated by the ghost of frustration.

She arrived at the school door and sat to contemplate the place and remember the first beautiful days in it with her best friends Ahlam and Baraa. She was saying to herself, "wonderful days and memories! As if they happened yesterday. This time had passed too quickly, and now I will not be able to make more with those memories within the walls of this showplace."

Suddenly a sharp voice came from behind Amal and cut her memories. It was screaming "my sister Amal, why did you walk fast and didn't wait for me? I wanted to walk to school together as we do every day, I'm fed up with you and I'm not going to talk to you for ten hours." She was raising her hands up to ten fingers to indicate the number of hours. This was Amal's young sister, her name was Noor, and she was eight years old.

Amal turned towards Noor, held her young hands, and said "my dear Nour, I'm so sorry. I had some work to do at that time. You should have continued eating your breakfast to stay strong and healthy. I decided to go ahead. I'm sorry, I won't do it again, are you satisfied now?"

Noor replied, "I will accept your apology on one condition and that is that you don't repeat it and buy me sweets after we return from school."

Amal smiled and said, "but, baby Noor, these are two conditions not one. I will accept them, but you have to do a very small task. Go inside, find Ahlam and tell her to come here now and quickly, and tell her that my aunt came."

Noor looked very surprised at Amal and said, "But my aunt did not come!"

"Just go and tell her this, she'll understand what I mean. And don't tell someone else about that, or I'll kill you." Amal said that with a tone of anger and a lack of patience. "Okay!" Noor responded as she was running inside to find Ahlam. At that time, fear, panic and conflicting emotions came back to erase the beautiful smile from Amal's bright pale face.

Noor found Ahlam, and once she uttered "MY AUNT CAME," Ahlam gasped and raised both her hands to cover her face. Then, she said to Noor "well, go now to your class so that you will not to be late for your lessons, and I'm going to see Amal."

Noor replied with a dissatisfied "very well" with question marks all over her face.

Ahlam ran fast to Amal, hugged her and said: "Don't worry. Don't be afraid, everything will be fine."

Amal replied with an intermittent voice, her eyes filling with tears: "How will everything be fine?! My life will be destroyed now, and all my dreams and aspirations will evaporate."

Ahlam asked, "When did IT come?" Amal answered "last night."

Baraa caught them from a far, came speeding, and asked, "What happened? Why are you crying Amal?"

"My aunt came," Amal answered with a broken voice.

Baraa said, "Oh this old authoritarian came to disturb your home again and throw commands, orders and ..." Ahlam interrupted her, "Stupid girl. Amal didn't mean her father's sister in the literal sense, but she meant her PERIOD!"

Baraa gasped sadly and hugged Amal strongly.

Amal, Ahlam and Baraa are three blooming flowers, aged thirteen. They were living in one village located on the border of the country. The laws of customs and traditions were fully controlling people's minds in this village, and bounded them to stay in the dark ages, depriving the youth from their dreams, and the flowers from seeing the light. One of these unjust laws was throwing its poisons on the little innocent girls. When the menstrual cycle comes to a girl, she will have reached puberty, so she must leave school immediately and prepare for marriage with one of her relatives. Through this marriage, she will save her honor and family's. Girls in this position should not object to marriage, and if they did, they would be forced to marry or their father would kill them. Most of the ignorant parents believe that having a girl is a great burden which will only be lifted when she marries one of her relatives. They did not care about genetic diseases which were spreading because of kin marriage. Moreover, they believe that the marriage dowry is a good opportunity for the father to benefit from in his own business.

Ahlam asked Amal: "Have you make sure you hid all the evidence so your mother will not see them." Amal responded: "Yes I did, and I threw them in the garbage of the other street. But sooner or later, they will know about it and force me to marry my cousin whom I DO NOT LIKE. Oh, they won't let me go to school again, and I won't be able to see you guys. Oh, and my dream of becoming a teacher is shattered, I want to die and not live this agony." Amal was crying so hard. Baraa said with tears: "Don't say that again, Amal, we all will face this fate as our mothers and grandmothers did before us."

After deep thinking, Ahlam said "NO, I won't face the same fate. I have a plan to get rid of this torture and be able to achieve our dreams."

Amal and Baraa were so amazed that they screamed together "what's the plan?" Ahlam replied "we will escape from our village, cross the border into the neighboring country, and continue our lives there. As we know, that country is full of justice, and there are no customs and traditions like the ones here"

"But I heard that the road of borders is full of mines and explosives, we will not survive!" Amal said.

Ahlam said, "These rumors are adults' lies in order to cultivate fear in our hearts and prevent us from approaching the border. Our plan will definitely succeed if we have the courage and honor. Trying to escape is better than agreeing to become the scapegoat to the unfair customs and traditions." She grabbed the hands of Amal and Baraa, and said, "Let's do it after two days, on Tuesday night, after everyone goes to sleep, approvals?" "Yes" Amal and Baraa replied.

This was the big secret, only between those three girls, in their own convictions, but apparently some walls had eyes and ears. Ali, an old man working as a guard for the school, was asked by parents to work as a spy and convey them their daughters' news. When he heard the girls' plan to escape, he ran immediately to their parents and told them everything they planned to do. Parents erupted like a volcano, and sparks blew from their eyes. They met together to decide what they would do to thwart the girls' plan. Then they agreed to call their relatives whose children were going to marry these girls. They agreed with them that the girls were mature and ready to marry tomorrow.

The girls returned from school and they imagined what freedom and happiness would await them in the neighboring country. Too soon these rosy dreams were dashed. When they arrived at their homes, their fathers took them with beatings and insults, saying: "Do you really want to be prostitutes in the neighboring country? Do you want to bury my head in the sand? And sally the family honor!"

"My child Amal," said the mother, "that's the way of the world and this path is inevitable. You have to accept this marriage. Your cousin has a good job and has a lot of money. He will buy you whatever you want and make your life happy and wonderful." Amal shook her head in approval, with feelings mixed with desperation and dejection.

Ahlam's mother was dumb since childhood, because of a trauma that happened in her marriage. She was unable to speak but pointed with her finger to tell Ahlam that she must give consent and in order not to be hurt like her. Ahlam said nothing. She was only looking at her mother with compassion.

Baraa screamed at her mother, "Mum please do something. Don't let me live the same torment which you lived before me." These words shook the mother's heart, so she stood in front of her husband and said, "I won't let my daughter marry now, she is not ready yet." The husband's anger flared and he said "so you are the one who planted these dark thoughts in her head, I will kill you now to rest from you forever." He pulled out a gun and directed it to the mother's head, but before he pulled the trigger, Baraa screamed: "No father, please don't! Leave her alone and I'll agree to marry. I swear to you." He grinned with satisfaction.

On the wedding day, the marriage ceremony was planned. The helpless brides left their mothers with a look of despair as they were leaving their unlived childhood and unfulfilled dreams behind.

The desperate Amal entered the house of her husband with no feelings, no emotions, and without the slightest reaction like a dead body without a soul. Baraa tried to resist and not to enter her husband's house, screaming: "Let me go, I DO NOT want you! I'm still A CHILD!" The unjust usurper's reply was: "Today, you're my wife and mine alone." Ahlam, however, still wanted to execute her plans. She first tricked her husband with her calmness and then hit him on his head with a stick when the opportunity came. When he lost consciousness, she ran as fast as she could towards the border thinking about her desired future. Fate, however, was not on her side. She stepped on a mine and her weak body was blown into pieces.

The following day, a border policeman found her body and a paper stuck to her dress where was written: *"Every day, a HOPE killed, an INOCCENT raped and a DREAM shattered by the toxins of unfair customs and traditions which restrict the minds and tear the feelings from hearts. The honor of MY attempt will not be in vain, but will be the beginning of change. May the restrictions be broken and justice be revived. Ahlam will never die; she will remain immortal in everyone's memory."*