**A Silent Scream**

'A monster lives in my house,' Reem thought that night as she lay on the bed. It was 1a.m., and shouts and screams of anger came from the bed four feet from hers. Reem was angry, too. The next day she had to wake up early to catch the 6 a.m. bus to school, but this *Majnoona* was not asleep yet, so how could *she* sleep? Look at her waving her arms in the air, screaming and shouting at nobody. Could she see *Jinns* that we could not? Hiba was lying on her bed, sleepless as usual, making a noisy party out of the silent night in the bed room she shared with five of her sisters. She lay in the rumpled bed, her oily black hair uncombed, her tiny body that had carried her mysterious soul for thirty years now. Reem felt drums beating in her ears, and with every beat her anger grew. I just want to sleep, she screamed within. And, as happened every night, her anger reached the point of hopelessness, and hot tears filled her eyes and ran down her cheeks, and she cried herself to sleep.

The next morning, Reem washed her face and stared at her puffy eyes for a long time; only the thought of missing the bus moved her away from the mirror. On the way to school, she inhaled the fresh morning air and rejoiced at the thought of a whole eight hours away from the house. When she reached the school, she caught a glimpse of Sara, the girl who always laughed like a happy child, always laughing and laughing. Didn’t she have anything to worry about?

- Hi Reema. Sara waved as she approached giggling.

Reem waved back very politely as she was with everyone. - Have you just woke up? You have puffy eyes.

- Ah... Well it’s the morning. Didn't we all just wake?

Sara burst out laughing, and Reem flattered her with a faint smile.

- I’m excited about Wednesday. Daddy is taking us to Dubai for the weekend.

- Oh really. How sweet.

When Sara had gone, Reem thought how she had never had a happy trip. She was the best student at school, but she had never been rewarded with a trip with her family. It was all because of that *Majnoona*….Why do I have a retarded sister? I’d rather die, she thought.

She recalled a day when they had been to the park in Muscat, and how embarrassed she’d been. The *Majnoona* had kept walking a bit and then bending down to touch the ground. She’d kept repeating this for a long time, just as she did at home, when she opened a door or switched on and off the light. Everybody had stared at them that day. How cruel people were! 'Don’t look at us!' she’d wanted to scream. ‘Leave us alone!' Poor mother had had to make another sacrifice and wait outside for everybody with the *Majnoona*, and they had only stayed for a very short time in the park. That red swing had been occupied the whole time by an evil girl, so Reem could not have a turn before they went home. As they left, her father said, “I wanted to take you out, *Binti*, but it just won't work.”

Father was kind, but he was not like mother. She was very tolerant of the *Majnoona*; she was very strong. When the women came to the house, and the *Majnoona* started screaming and shouting at them, mother just smiled. She made a joke out of it, and she never apologized to the women. Of course Reem would never see this: she would hear it from the next room where she always hid.

The bell ringing at the end of the long day was celebrated by every kid, except Reem. She loved school because it felt safe and quiet. When she walked from the bus stop to their house, she could hear her sister’s yells from the neighbourhood. She looked around swiftly and then hurried her steps to the house, thinking *if she is deaf and mute, how is it, for God's sake, that she can scream louder than anybody I know?*

As Reem entered the house, Hiba was talking with her mother making her awkward sounds and waving signs that only her mother understood, for Hiba had never learnt proper sign language; neither had she ever been diagnosed as having any mental disorder.

Reem said, ‘*Assalamu Alaikum’,* and her mother answered her and quickly turned to Hiba, who had immediately shouted to get back her mother’s attention. Hiba was angry, as usual, telling how she hated this and that, blaming mother for visiting Rahma, a relative of the family. Hiba was making an ugly face, which was Rahma, and she pushed mother’s arm a couple times. Reem tried to tell her mother about school, but Hiba screamed and told her to wait. *She* was talking to mother. But she was always talking to mother, Reem thought.

Later that afternoon, when Reem was watching TV, Hiba called to her: ‘Eee, Eee!’ Reem saw her sister was making a sign for a bag, pretending to hold something in her hand, so Reem reluctantly handed Hiba her school bag and Hiba gave her such an innocent smile. Hiba liked to look at the school books, but Reem hated her doing it. One day she’d woken up in the morning to find her books scattered all over the floor.

Reem felt overwhelmed by Hiba and did not feel able to invite her friends home because she never knew how Hiba would react towards them But Reem would never hurt Hiba. Sometimes she even sympathized with her, especially when Hiba was quiet. But as soon as the screaming started, Reem went into an inner conflict of thoughts and feelings of fear, anger, and despair.

That evening, the doorbell rang, and the children screamed, ‘Fatma is at the door!’

“Oh God, don’t we have enough to worry about,” Reem muttered, finding her way to the closest room, intending to hide; but her mother asked her to stay with the guest while she finished working in the kitchen. Entering the room, she found Fatma there, with her round glasses and colorful clothes that made her look like a young girl. *I bet she’s 60*, Reem thought. She greeted the woman and sat next to her. Hiba sat in a corner of the room staring at the guest. Reem could not predict if she would get mad in a few minutes. Then Hiba started pointing at Fatma, trying to get her attention, but the woman would not look at her. Hiba was trying to be nice and to start a conversation. Such a rude woman! Why wouldn’t she look at Hiba? Seeing her sister ignored so, Reem realized things she had never thought of before. She suddenly knew why her sister hated their relative, Rahma. She knew why her sister talked to her mother all the time. And why Hiba was so full of anger. It was because no one listened to her. She was screaming out the thoughts and the feelings she could not express, and the emptiness she did not know how to fill. She screamed out, but it was as if her screams were silent.

That night Hiba went to sleep early, so Reem stole some time to spend with her mother before she went for a rare quiet night’s sleep.

‘Mother, why haven’t you ever sent Hiba to a special needs school?

‘She was my first child and she was born at a time when we did not know what to do,’ Reem’s mother answered with a deep sigh. ‘Nobody gave us a good advice,’

‘But was she always like that?’

‘Like what?’

‘Mentally challenged.’

‘She grew up as a quiet child, but then when she was about 12, she started to do these things.’

‘Why don’t you ignore her? She only screams to you. Only you.’ As Reem said that, her eyes were filling with tears. She felt sorry for her mother, yet admired her strength.

‘ If I don’t listen to her, who would? Everybody mistreated her. Even her grandmother used to give her toys away to other children.’

‘But why?’

‘As a punishment. She punished her for being mischievous, but the poor child was just different. It is not her fault she was born this way.’

Reem hugged her mother very tightly, as if she had not seen her for ages, but her mother laughed loudly and told her she was stopping her from breathing. Again mother was making a joke in a serious moment, Reem thought.

That night Reem cried again. She cried for being so ignorant. She cried because she hadn’t understood. She cried because she felt ashamed. She had never tried to put herself in her sister’s shoes, or tried to imagine what she thought, or how she felt. She recalled incidents when everybody in the house had talked and laughed, and Hiba had only stared at them. She must have felt as an outsider in her own family. What if Hiba was not mentally challenged? What if everything she did was just a reaction to a childhood she had lived without being able to communicate normally with her surroundings? She imagined herself unable to hear or talk for a half a day and she knew that she would explode. At that moment, Reem wiped her tears and decided that she would not feel ashamed anymore of her sister. She did not owe anyone apologies for her sister being what she was. She resolved to be more tolerant.

The next day Reem’s father tied a swing to a tree outside the house. She was very excited to play on it, but she decided to call Hiba first and show her the swing. As usual, Hiba was shouting at her mother, but Reem approached her with slow steps and tried to catch her attention. After being shouted at a couple times, she finally managed to get Hiba to listen to her. She invited her to come outside and there she invited her to try the swing. Hiba smiled, but shook her head, refusing to try it. Then she made signs to Reem that you-ride-and-I-swing-you. So Reem sat on the swing and Hiba pushed her and the laughs of both of them could be heard from inside the house. Going up and down, Reem felt her soul touching the blue pure sky, and she felt the breeze kissing her cheeks, and at that moment she thought, an angel lives in my house.

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