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Freedom
is an inside job

OWNING OUR DARKNESS AND OUR LIGHT
TO HEAL OURSELVES AND THE WORLD

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The Girl Who Sings

Once upon a time, a girl in a green dress lay forgotten at the bottom of a ship. Her hands and feet were tied, and she lay among hundreds of slaves, one next to the other. They had been in captivity for a long, long time, and in the shadowy bottom of the boat, it was not clear if they were dead or alive. Dust covered their bodies.

One day, a mouse started gnawing on the girl's ropes, and she woke up. As she stretched and looked around, the ropes that had bound her for so long frayed and broke. With that she was able to stand up.

Liberated, she looked at the others around her and saw that they had all died in their sleep. Afraid and alone, she stood in the darkness of the bottom of the ship, thick with the smell of death. She began to sing softly. The melody had no words, but it made a unique sound—the sound of her life. As the tune took shape and her voice strengthened, she felt less scared and alone. Her body magically rose up and up and up until she entered another reality.

In this new world, the girl found herself on a bustling city street where people were rushing from one place to the other. Cars were speeding by and honking. She didn't recognize anyone or anything. All she knew how to do was to keep on singing the song of her life.

Her voice was so beautiful that passersby stopped to listen. As more people noticed her singing, they talked about her, and she became popular. People were whistling her melodies and seeking her out wherever she'd wandered in the city. Since no one knew who she was, they called her the Girl Who Sings. She became more and more known. More and more people wanted to hear her.

One day, people got together and built a clay statue to put her inside so they could hear her whenever they wanted. At first she went along with their plan, but soon she realized that being in the statue was like being tied with ropes at the bottom of the ship. Both were forms of enslavement. She was not trying to please anybody; she was simply singing the sound of her heart. That is what made her sound so moving. To stay inside the dark statue was to suffocate.

So she decided to break free. Singing and singing the song of her life, she was lifted again into another reality, one very different from the bustling city.

In this third level of reality, she found a woman wearing a black robe, a black headdress, and a black mask. The woman was stirring a bubbling stew in a large cauldron over a fire. The girl walked toward the black pot. As she got closer, the woman spoke.

“You must accept evil,” she said mysteriously.

Scared, the Girl Who Sings retreated. She could not accept evil. It was too much to ask. When she retreated, the woman stopped stirring the stew. But the girl was still curious, so she walked forward again.

The woman in the black mask repeated, “You must accept evil.”

The girl stepped back again, afraid. She could not accept evil. But every time she took a step back, the woman in the black mask stopped stirring the stew. Everything paused.

The girl realized that whatever the woman was trying to make could not continue unless she accepted evil. Eventually, her curiosity took over. She wanted to know what would happen if the cooking continued. She approached the cauldron again, and when asked for the third time to accept evil, she agreed. Immediately, a ceremony began. The stew began to bubble and boil, and the woman began stirring more intensely. The woman spoke. “Now you must choose one of these white masks hanging on the wall behind you.”

The girl looked at the wall of masks. She did not like any of them. She turned to the woman and pointed at her face and said, “I want your mask.”

“No one has ever asked me for my mask before,” said the woman, perplexed. “But here, wear it.”

As soon as the Girl Who Sings donned the black mask, Evil arrived. It was neither a man nor a woman. It was a faceless being in a charcoal robe. Evil held out its charcoal-gloved hand for the girl to take. She did so hesitantly, and they walked away, leaving the woman behind.

Evil and the girl walked and walked until they arrived at Evil's land. It was a vast, dark field crowded with people. Some were lying down, and others were standing. All were covered in spider webs. The girl's eyes opened wide; it was a horrifying scene. These people had surrendered to living this way, stuck forever in the land of Evil.

"You see all these people—they are in this field because of something they did that they are ashamed of," Evil said. "Some stole, some lied, and some did something sexual. Their shame is what brings them here.

"What they don't know is that they have a choice," Evil continued. "I am not keeping them here by force. Not at all. They each can walk away from here. All they need to do is to acknowledge what they did and talk about it. Then, they can leave. Anyone can do it. But when their shame and fear are stronger than their strength to do their work, they don't make this choice. They don't free themselves."

The girl realized that the reason she had to accept evil was to see this field. She needed to understand why people stayed stuck in Evil's land. *It is shame and fear that keep us wrapped in these sticky spider webs, she thought. It is not Evil itself.*

Evil wanted to show her something else, so they continued walking. They went into a building, through one giant door after another, from one room to another. At last they entered a small room with a chest in the middle. Evil opened the chest and unlocked a box inside it. In that box was another, smaller box. Evil opened that one and kept going until it reached the smallest box. Evil carefully opened it. It contained a heart. It was Evil's heart that had been hidden for a very long time. Evil was showing it to her alone.

"Only someone who sings the true song of her life can hold this heart," Evil said. Evil offered its heart to her. "Please take it with you. You are free to leave this land."

The girl looked at the heart and saw that it was just a normal beating heart, neither good nor bad. She took the heart and swallowed it. Now, she had courage.

To leave the land of Evil, the Girl Who Sings had to cross a rope bridge and walk through a murky forest alone. The bridge was made of half-broken wooden planks and loose ropes that barely held together. The dark forest that loomed on the other side seemed mysterious and ominous. The Girl Who Sings was paralyzed with fear. She did not know what to do.

Suddenly, she remembered what had helped her leave the bottom of the ship—the song of her life. She began to sing with all her heart, and as she became absorbed in the sound again, she grew happy. Her melodies and her voice brought her joy, and that joy gave her the strength to cross the bridge. It helped her go through the dark forest without fear. She just kept on singing. She remembered that it was her choice to see her fear and her shame. It was her choice to be free. Her happiness relieved her worries and gave her more courage.

The girl sang until she was lifted up to a final layer of reality. There she found herself in a field of light blue. All the people there were moving freely, dancing with happiness. They laughed, sang, played, talked, and expressed themselves openly without worry or fear. The girl smiled. As she took a step forward to enter the land of freedom, she realized that this would be the first time that Evil's heart—the heart she had swallowed—would experience beauty, joy, and freedom after being locked up in a box for what might have been eternity.

With that realization, she stepped into her own freedom.

Introduction

We are living in a time of shadows. What is ugly in our world is rising out of the basement where we have locked it up for a long time. Countries, communities, and individuals are divided into extremes: left and right, rich and poor, citizen and foreigner, Muslim and Christian, ruler and rebel, employer and employee, man and woman, all of us with vastly different points of view that seem never to agree. This is creating panic and confusion.

As an Iraqi-born Muslim American who has worked most of her life in service to victims of war, especially women, I have lived through instability and unrest, have known dictators and world leaders, have dodged snipers' bullets and fought for justice. I have tried to address some of the world's rights and wrongs through my humanitarian work in war zones and later in my media projects that shared some of the struggles and triumphs of people around the world, from the third-gender movement in India to the wives of ISIS in Iraq to young Muslim Americans deciding to wear the head scarf. I know conflict, struggle, and division intimately. And I have learned that when we lead with fear and anger, we eventually become the very aggressors we are fighting against. We become what we despise.

This is especially important to understand right now. All over the world, we are pointing our fingers in fear and anger at perceived enemies and aggressors around us. Afraid and bewildered, we are searching for the "other" to confront. As someone who travels between the two worlds of the West and the East, the United States and the Middle East, I see the different fingers pointing. Whenever I am in the Middle East, I hear that everything is America's fault.

All the destruction, revolutions, oppressions—even ISIS—stem from America’s arrogance and abuse of power. Ironically, I hear the same from the other direction: to Americans, all this terrorism, instability, fear, and mass displacement of people is because of the depravity and corruption of those “other” people *over there*, in those Godforsaken places far away.

Indeed, there are plenty of people we could point fingers at. We can point at the people who voted for Trump or Brexit or in the referendums in Catalonia or Kurdistan. We can point at the mass migration from Syria or the destabilizing force of Russia. Or we can point our fingers closer to home, at people who practice different religious customs than we do, at bosses who block our progress, or at family members who abuse us.

We could—but this is not a book of how we got here or who is to blame. This book is about “Now what?” Now that we see ourselves pointing our fingers in accusation at one another, what do we do about this turmoil?

Each life, each place, each culture, each individual has the good, the bad, and the ugly within it. We all have a story, and it’s usually complex. When we demonize or idealize *anyone*, we remove ourselves from the picture and oversimplify the situation. We do it when we think all Afghan men are oppressive and all Canadians are peacemakers or when we say all conservatives are closed-minded and cruel whereas all liberals are open-minded and compassionate. We do it when we think all male bosses are bullies and all female bosses are role models. These generalizations may be convenient, and some may contain a grain of truth, but they cannot be fully true. When we demonize or idealize, we lose any sense that we *also* carry the good, the bad, and the ugly in us as well. We lose sight of the fact that we all have a story. And from our stories we all make choices.

We need to find another way to deal with our panic and confusion. Now is the time. We need not only to talk about what is wrong with our world but also to find a *way* to talk to one another and cross the divides. In the West, many of us want to be the hero of our own movie. We want to see ourselves on the side of the good, speaking truth to power like Wonder Woman or Spider-Man. It’s a noble inclination, but we don’t always see the whole picture. We don’t understand what’s

at stake for the other side. And we certainly don't understand our role in it. What have we done ourselves, as good people, as innocent, caring people, to encourage this troubling division and turmoil?

We need a new way to think about this broken time. We need a new language in order to connect with those we consider "other," different from us, and whose actions we find hard to comprehend. We need to harness our desire to do good and put it to its best use. Because unless we know what it means to be a hero in all the small ways of our lives—in our marriages and families, in our work and social lives, and in how we account for our past actions and current values—we will not become that hero we fantasize about. If we talk only about the big stories and big traumas out there, we can easily hide from our own stories and our own shadows inside ourselves. Our reactivity and self-righteousness will create more division, turmoil, anger, and hatred. Then, *we* become the polarizing force. As we stab our fingers at "the enemy," we ourselves create enemies.

True change starts with owning our own experiences. That means owning the good and the bad and the ugly in ourselves—as well as what makes us beautiful. It means owning the complexity of our emotions and dreams, as well as the discomfort of our missteps and misfortunes. It means being deliberate and aware of our actions. Then we are not intellectualizing our lives. We are not operating from the narrow simplicity of merely *thinking* about things or *reacting* to them. Then, we are talking from the depths of our known selves. We stand on the wisdom of our lived experiences. We are no longer available to being manipulated by others who want to tap into the shadows that we carry but cannot bear to face.

It is scary, at times, to share what I and others have grappled with, but it is the only way I know to be authentic to myself, to you, and to the world we are living in. It's a journey inward, a journey of the brave, a journey of transformation. I won't lie: it is indeed a bumpy road. But it's very much worth traveling for the ultimate freedom we gain personally and for what we contribute to the well-being of the collective.

It is with this spirit that I share my own stories and experiences in this book, as well as the stories and experiences of many others who are also coming face-to-face with their core truths. By sharing these stories

openly, I hope to illuminate this path for those who also feel called to connect with their own. We cannot talk about any value outwardly if we do not understand it inwardly first.

I began to wake up to what is good, bad, and ugly within myself when I decided to write my memoir, *Between Two Worlds: Escape from Tyranny: Growing Up in the Shadow of Saddam*, which was published in 2006, and reveal truths that had been too painful to admit for most of my adult life. As I awakened and began to sing the song of my life, I also had to reckon with what was broken in myself. I hadn't wanted to face the dreams, the ideals, the behaviors, and the attitudes that had not worked, nor the situations that had been beyond my control. Writing that memoir was not easy, as I talk about in chapter 1, but it was essential. The taste of freedom that came from it was so delicious that it inspired me to examine my whole life this way.

This awakening led me to unravel all the other layers of untruth in my life. It didn't happen overnight, and it was also painful at times, as you'll read: it was hard to leave my gentle and loving husband when our marriage faltered; it was hard to step down from Women for Women International, the organization I had founded and that, for twenty years, had helped hundreds of thousands of women around the world; and it was hard to face the shame of understanding that I, too, could be arrogant. At first, seeing my inner "other" horrified and depressed me. It took time to realize that it was an important wake-up call.

In the process of exposing my secrets and fear by writing my memoir, I discovered that I could trust in the process of unwinding the layers of my truth. That trust led me down paths I hadn't realized were open to me. I discovered what it meant to be truly happy. I realized my own beauty—and that it had been there all along. I confronted my terror and found that I could have compassion even for the one who terrified me. I, who had always identified as a fighter, learned the beauty and power of surrender.

If we do not take the time to get quiet, go inward, acknowledge what has happened, and see who we are in all of our goodness and ugliness, we act out. When we do not sing the songs of our lives, we become angry, self-righteous, cruel, or even violent. That's when we lose ourselves in twisted half-truths or outright lies.

On my inward journey, I saw that we all need to dig deeper to speak and live according to our real values, not the ones we think we are supposed to have. We need to see our shadows and know our darknesses. We need to understand a deeper dimension of our truths, one beyond finger-pointing. Only then can we really speak and act in alignment. Then, we can look at what is dark in our world right now and ask, honestly, without an agenda, “Why is this happening?” Once our own dark and light are more integrated, our voices of protest change from harsh barks that speak to some but alienate others to a resonant call that many, many more people can hear.

Awakening creates a bridge to our authenticity. With that comes a more honest conversation inside ourselves and with others. We can see our shadows and our light, our demons and our beauty. We can speak about the larger issues with credibility and integrity. When we wake up, we can have a more honest way of relating to those closest to us and also to those whose lives we’ve never given any thought to. That’s when we can begin to better understand the world around us. Only when I began to see that “other” within myself could I truly see the “other” in them, in the “red-necks” of America, the “Arabs” of France, the “fundamentalists” of Islam—and in all of us. From there, we start to bridge the divide between us and them, between the many “others” out there and our inner “other” whom we live with every day.

A true hero is an ordinary person who can hold the sword of truth and tell the full truth of herself, in her good, her bad, and her ugly qualities. She makes her choices from this understanding. As heroes, we move forward, not in fear and anger, but in integrity, love, and vision. We work from the strength of our spines rather than the breathlessness of our chests.

If we have the courage to look inward and embrace truth in our lives—the entire truth—then we may gain the courage and the credibility to look outward and become a force of great change in this world. We will see our own role in the world we have created. Then we will charge forward *for* something, not simply *against* something. And from our collective integrity and values, the change we are seeking will necessarily happen.