

Not Simply Broken

A Memoir by Betty Khalili
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Not Simply Broken

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Author's Note

Dear Reader,

It is with great excitement and deep gratitude that I present to you my book, *Not Simply Broken*.

This book is the story of hope and resilience in which a woman encounters a journey full of unexpected twists and turns and yet continues to find her way home all over again.

Not Simply Broken is one of intuition and insight, of deep introspection, and of choosing to create new meanings in your life.

It is a tale of immense gratitude for recognizing the miracle of existence and celebrating life despite the circumstances.

To my dear readers, my one hope in writing this book is to ignite a flame within your soul, be it big or small. Whether it should take a single sentence or the book in its entirety, I hope that my story can inspire others to recreate theirs. Because life is worth it.

Betty Khalili, June 2022

A Note from Publisher Pantea Kalhor

Working with Betty was one of the most enjoyable experiences I have had in my publishing history. The moment I heard about her story; I knew I would publish this book. Because Betty was born and raised in the same country as me, I was familiar with her tale even before it was completely told. From the Iran revolution, war, immigration, to marriage and being a mother; every piece of her story resonated with me.

Betty is brilliant, a fast learner, and a high achiever. Since we started working together, her life has totally changed. She was the creator of her brand-new life. She has firmly fought and stood up for her goals and dreams despite her father's resistance and the bitter taste of infidelity in her broken marriage.

She has proven that nobody but us is responsible for our happiness. Sometimes, obeying the family rules to fit in with society may have a conflict with our goals and our plans. Sometimes, we need to cross our boundaries and fight for what we believe. It is easier to be a follower and not an initiator since you give the authority to others to manage your life. Yes, it's easier to ignore our dreams to satisfy others. But we need to see ourselves as an individual looking at our life from outside. Do you pity your life for what you could have done but didn't because you prioritized your obligations as an excuse?

Sometimes, we need to take a break and look at ourselves in the mirror. How happy and satisfied are we with what we see in the mirror? I believe when we have passionate goals and dreams, but we suppress our desires or postpone them to eternity, we cannot feel happy.

Not Simply Broken is a great example of how fighting for dreams and staying resilient and positive can have rewarding results. Betty highlights the role of her good friend Zari as an inspiration in pursuing her education, her mother's support in the sensitive stages of her life and love of her son as a stimulus for improving her life and fighting for the better future.

Her story reflects one part of Iran's history which pinpoints behind the scenes of Iranians' lives before and after the revolution. She is also a successful paradigm of a Canadian immigrant who rebuilt her life a few times and remained loyal to her goals.

As human beings, our lives will be a mixture of happiness and sorrows. We all experience spring, summer, fall, and winter. But staying hopeful is what we need, to see the beauty in all stages of our lives. We may see a beam of light in a dark tunnel and be Not Simply Broken by any deluge or thunderstorm.

Foreword by Antonio G Scisci, Program Designer and Event Planner

Not Simply Broken, by Betty Khalili, is a wonderful book about one woman's soulful attempt to make sense of the changes in her life. Her message is to try not to shatter apart if you're in a bad situation when life is hard hitting and dismal. The memoir follows her journey from Iran to Canada, focusing on the important lessons she acquired along the way that she could not have planned or imagined.

Her candour about her life as a young child growing up to be a woman gives her story strength. She is fearless, enthralling, and supple as she confronts her own humanity, as well as ours, with all the turmoil and elegance that entails family, friends, and relationships. In this memoir, you'll meet her as an open and funny person. Her lovely words will make you laugh, weep, and smile again.

I thought this book is a realistic tale that evoked memories and feelings in me as the son of an immigrant family. The memoir is an inspirational story that demonstrates that the sacrifices we make or risks we take for those we truly love are stronger than any material object we may possess, and that we can achieve everything we wish or want through belief in ourselves.

Foreword by Majed Gharavi, PhD in Comparative Study of Religion, Teacher

This book is made up of different faces. While most biographies often revolve around life events, this book focuses on the people in the author's life. Each person has a dedicated chapter, and I believe this is the most important takeaway from the book. Our lives are ultimately shaped by the people in it, as opposed to events. The author's description of the people in her book is incredibly detailed. Sometimes I quarreled with them, sometimes I shed tears with them, and sometimes I held their hands tightly in my own... In this book, I realized how alone we truly are as humans — whether we are the oppressor or the oppressed. I also realized that the same loneliness ultimately leads to the discovery of meaning and depth in life.

Of all the characters in this book, the one that touched me the most was “Zari,” a character the author only knew on a first-name basis. She tries to find her but fails. The character represents an element of mystery and renowned glory. For this reason, I would like to talk a little about Zari amongst the other characters. Perhaps because I am a teacher myself, I observed a sense of leadership and wisdom in her character, further deepening my perspective of the character. Zari is a person we all need in our lives. They are one who discovers the inanimate aspects of our lives, and whose presence is in the strength of one's heart to set foot on unknown paths. In particular, there were five traits she possessed that stood out to me.

The very first trait was that of her action-oriented approach to life. Instead of offering “positive” reassurances, she instead suggests a simple action to the author, Betty: to create a library.

Another feature I deeply resonate with is her ability to solve some of life's most difficult problems with wholehearted acceptance. In this book's instance, instead of arguing and coaxing Betty's father to let Betty go to school, she accepts this fact and finds a way to overcome the challenge. In the case of this book, she finds a time when Betty's father wasn't home to support Betty's educational journey. In a time when people want to solve their problems through negotiation, talk, and persuasion, Zari's refreshing approach consolidates the principle of working through life, akin to a river bending and accommodating around rocks and ridges, as opposed to trying to move them.

Thirdly, Zari's presence was quiet and unassuming. Despite her influence and inspiring nature, her presence did not weigh heavily on Betty's life. This point is illustrated in the duration of Betty's recent search for Zari when she had slipped away quietly in a place unbeknownst to Betty.

Another trait that stood out to me were her eyes and how they shone. While we may meet many good people in our lives, there are far fewer who, when they help us, do so with eyes that shine with enthusiasm. It is for this reason I find that oftentimes a simple look or smile can soothe a soul through life's hardship, more than a thousand tips, and well-meaning advice.

Lastly, her presence with Betty through moments of fear and hope consolidated Betty's resilience. Zari inspired her to go on despite her circumstances, making her journey one of the most empowering moments of Betty's life. Zari's unbridled activism and philosophy etched a permanent mark of courage and strength into Betty's life.

Whilst reading this book, many of you may question who or what played the role of Zari in their own lives. However, to that, I pose the more important question: "How can I be more

like Zari?" The life shown in Betty's book illustrates that she sought the answer to this second question from the heart of all failures; perhaps, for this reason, life coaching is her answer to that concern.

Foreword by Sara Rahimian, B. A, M. A Realtor®

What a pleasure to be part of Betty's journey and to read her memoir, *Not Simply Broken*.

Some people cross paths in mere serendipity. Some people's souls connect with no real explanation why. I felt this way with Betty Khalili and her story hit my soul. She hit my soul. At a party in the summer, Betty walked up to me, along with her son, Abteen, heartbroken.

She told me about her spouse's infidelity. When we stood in a protected circle, I mentioned that this felt like complete déjà vu: a feeling of having already experienced the present situation. Abteen said the same thing. As if this experience was meant to happen. From that day, we developed a friendship, and I got to know Betty more. I've known Betty briefly in my life, but my soul feels like I've known Betty for a lifetime.

One beautiful afternoon at a French-inspired café, Betty and I spoke about the struggles of immigration, and the taboos within the Iranian community, from mental health to cheating. We spoke about the importance of being independent women. We spoke about energy and faith.

We spoke about our sons; Betty's son who recently got married and mine being a toddler exploring life. We were two women, sharing our hopes, dreams, struggles, and heartaches. Although we talked about struggles, what I appreciated about Betty was every conversation ended in hope and growth. The conversation was about heavy topics but light in energy if that makes sense.

Betty understands that you must go through your struggles and pains, feel them, experience them, but overcome them.

She demonstrates this so well in her memoir. She touches on so many important topics in her book and I am honoured to be a small part of her journey.

As a mom, as a wife, as an entrepreneur and “boss mom” (Realtor), as an Iranian Canadian, and a person who understands and feels energy, I connected with her story. Her whimsical stories about her childhood and youth capture the readers as she takes you on a journey of immigration, marriage, and personal crisis. Betty will triumph on her journey. It has only just begun; she is not broken!

This Book is Dedicated to

This book is dedicated to **my mother, Marzieh**, who has lived a life of hardship and difficulty. Who, through loss and grief, carried the burden of raising nine children on her own. Throughout my life, she taught me about the sheer strength of a mother, and how to use life lessons as a means to learn through morals and principles. Her presence was my shelter on my darkest days, ceaselessly uplifting me with her everlasting faith. With every word of encouragement, she helped me pick up the fallen pieces and build my life up again, piece by piece. She was a woman who had every reason to protest and give up, having lived through heartbreak, grief, and hardship, yet somehow, she never did. It was at that point I learned how to stand as she did, to sometimes bend, but to never break.

To my son, **Abteen**, who has and always will be my forever love. Whose wise and gentle presence has touched many souls, including mine, with his generous and kind-hearted soul.

Introduction



Suspended in a dream world, I'm running with broken high heels. Running feels difficult and painful. There were times my feet felt as though they would fail me, and times my lungs were about to give up as I panted, gasping for air. I stood to catch my breath. I am here. But I don't know where I am.

Perhaps it is in a parallel world in which life is different. I am wearing my broken red high heels, walking with a newfound confidence; the earth and sky lie beneath my feet, and I'm lost in a cloudy tunnel of time.

I take off my shoes and start to walk along a sandy beach barefoot. Whether I have heels on or not, or whether I have any shoes on at all, it doesn't matter anymore. The sand is hot, just bearable to walk on. In the solitary blue, everything is calm. I have only brought my memories with me, and my shoes in my hands. I trudge closer to the water and ponder to myself: *"You can still play like a child in this cool water; you can still create new adventures."*

I later found a quiet place, sat on a rock, and let my soul fly away where it needed to go, to my father's library; my mother's trembling shoulders, shaken and bent under her losses and pains of raising nine children, losing both her husband and daughter, and yet having never forgotten to smile... to the happy sounds of a family reunion, after years of longing and distance. Different voices talk all together at once,

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giddy laughs and shrieks ensue after seeing each other together one more time.... We talk of the old days, remembering the happy and sad moments.

Oh, how much I love this life! With its never-ending shades of grays and whites, its losses, griefs, and ups and downs. How much I love the feelings of being loved and gifting love. The sense of unity — of being a mother! The depth of love while embracing my son, and simply hearing him breathe. I long to hear his sweet childish voice one more time, when he was only a toddler and just called me “Mama” for the first time. I love the feeling of beginning: migrating, moving, rebirthing, and recreating. The time has arrived for me to rebirth. I have been born one more time with every one of these pages.

Life is like ending a line, inserting a period, and starting a new line...

I polished my soul amongst the pains. I went through separation, my sister’s death, and my father’s death.

When immigrating, I left the half-paved road to start anew all over again... a new line.

Periods, pauses, and commas were scrawled on written lines, and I find myself creating new ones, each starting with a capital letter.

In this short time after my divorce, it feels as though I was born one more time. My intrepid soul has longed to create. I have fought endlessly; I faced difficulties of limitations, disagreements, and gender discrimination. But I could finally free myself and run over the boundaries.

Regardless of the restrictions and obstacles I faced, I was a warrior for my dreams. I celebrated with myself when no one else did.

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Walking without my red high heels gives a sense of immense joy and freedom. I will walk again. I will continue to walk barefoot on the hot sand that may burn my feet, and if it does, I wade in the water yet again to cool them down.

I hope you can be a creator of your life too. I hope you experience rebirth. You might need to insert a period or a comma, pause and restart writing a new line or a new chapter... But life is worth it.

Period. New line. New chapter.

Why I Wrote This Book?

Over the years, my closest friends, my only child, and some of my colleagues encouraged me to write about my life. Recent events in my life took me to very dark days and made me struggle to find a way to survive. Writing became my way to overcome the pain, and that was how the book was formed.

Chapter 1: My Life Journey from Childhood to University



The family doctor checked my throat and asked me to say “AAH”. I looked at my older sister who was watching us, and thought to myself, *“You are the next. Maybe you get to be poked by a big ampule in your butt.”* Dad sat on a chair in the doctor’s office looking worried. I said, “AAH,” and swallowed my saliva with pain. I looked at the doctor’s eyes with my innocent childish look and, in my mind, begged him not to prescribe any injections. It was so common that for each simple flu or small headaches, Dad would take us to this neighborhood doctor who knew all our family members. I guess he liked my dad a lot since we were a big family and Dad was always worried about us. We were a good income source for him. After the appointment, my dad took us to the drugstore across the street from the doctor’s office and filled out the prescriptions for me and my sister. There were no injections this time. I was relieved, but as always, the plastic bag in my dad’s hands containing one of those bitter cough syrups looked scary. We came home and Dad complained to Mom that my sister wasn’t answering the doctor’s questions and kept quiet all the time. I was proud that I could answer each question the doctor asked me very politely. There were plenty of visits with this doctor, as far back as I remembered, for small and tiny problems. Dad and the doctor had a strong bond and trusted each other completely.

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When my younger siblings were born, I remember seeing Dad anxious all the time. If one of them cried a lot overnight, he would take the kid to the doctor first thing in the morning, questioning a lot and demanding a thorough examination. People told him this was just how kids were, but he couldn't help it.

My mom had never married anyone else before my dad. She was much younger than him. He was married before, though. Despite the fact he desperately wanted kids, he hadn't had a chance with his two previous wives. I wonder if maybe that was the reason. He was so worried all the time about our well-being that even a common flu would scare him to the point where he spent a lot of money taking us to see his trusted physician.

Our family culture taught us that boys were more valuable than girls. Boys would help take care of the family and business. They would provide. But girls were different. Many families preferred to have boys because they thought girls would just get married and leave home and couldn't contribute to the family's income. We had seven girls and two boys, and my dad loved each of us so much. Regardless of his concerns for all of us, he always gave more credit to his sons' educations and desires. On the other hand, he created overprotective restrictions for his daughters in a way that he thought was caring.

When, after six girls, my mom gave birth to a baby boy, the news was spread so rapidly in our neighborhood. Everyone was so excited. People in the neighborhood's mosque were over the moon and said the special "Thanksgiving prayers" nonstop. The excitement affected us as kids, too. I was 10 years old and the fourth kid in my family. My dad was ecstatic, and I did not remember ever before seeing him as happy as he was when my brother was born. The smile did not leave my mom's face. We all cherished this new baby boy in our

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household and embraced him in our arms. If he cried overnight, my dad would pick him up and would walk him in our alley, pacing up and down in the middle of the night to calm the baby. In the meantime, Mom had a chance to rest. For days and nights after his birth, our house was full of people coming with sweets to congratulate my parents. The happiness sat in each corner of the house. My sisters and I would fight each other, whose turn it was to hug or change him. Not long after, my second brother was born. My parents' wishes were fulfilled again, and they were beyond happy. Their last kid was a girl, and, before her birth, my mom asked my dad's permission to go for C-section and end her ability to have more children by tying her tubes. Surprisingly, Dad agreed, and that was the end of Mom's pregnancies, although she was only 40 when my youngest sister was born.

The differences between girls and boys in our family were so obvious; boys could get everything, and girls were forced to stay at home after grade five. I could see the sexism, which really bothered me. When my second brother was born, my mom was over the moon since she felt complete as a woman. Back then, if you couldn't have a boy, the blame was on the woman. She would put the blame on herself that she couldn't carry a boy, and society agreed.

In Iran, elementary school was up to grade five. In my family's culture, girls were allowed to attend school up to that point. Because my father didn't believe in sending girls to school any longer, regardless of how interested or how smart they were, he decided that my sisters had to stop attending school after fifth grade. My sisters were so smart that people tried to convince my dad to let them continue schooling, but that did not happen. Instead, they had to take sewing classes and learn how to be a good housewife and a mother. Our jobs would be to care for the kids, clean them, nurse them, feed them, and change diapers, and nothing more. I loved

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elementary school, though, and I wanted to stay in school forever.

In my last year of elementary school, there was a revolution in our country. Everything was changing, and I had to stay home like my sisters. While I was doing housework, my mind wandered elsewhere. I was thinking about school.

The Islamic revolution shifted everything, even, attitudes about girls going to school. I had hoped that things might get better. Revolution and protesting happened on the streets, and when my 15-year-old sister and her fiancé went to the demonstrations, 11-year-old me tagged along. My sister had a bit more freedom in public. If she was with her fiancé, our dad relaxed some of his rules.

I found myself curious about the protests and demonstrations. I started to learn more things on my own. I borrowed books from famous Iranian authors: Shariat, Hedayat, Jalal Al Ahmad, Simin Daneshvar...

My parents encouraged us to attend the mosque in our neighborhood. They wanted us to learn about religion and pray. We were going to mosque regularly, but we didn't pray; we met with a bunch of other girls there and mosque was a safe place to chit-chat. We talked about every subject, especially boys and how babies were born. I remember one of my older sisters couldn't stop crying when she found out how babies were made.

"No, no, my dad with my mom, it's impossible?!!! It's a lie. They wouldn't do such a thing," she sobbed.

"So, how do you think you got to the world?" one of the naughtier girls asked her.

"Oh! By the way, I think your parents were doing it more than our parents. Look how many of you were born." Another girl interrupted.

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“My dad would not ever do such a thing with my mom! God gave us to them,” my sister insisted.

I was smaller, only 12 or 13 years old, and the news shocked me too. But I accepted it as it was and counted nine kids. So, they did it nine times. It was not that horrible!

The nights at the mosque were fun for us. Even though we cared less about prayers, we were eager to go there and continue our discoveries.

A gorgeous friend of ours read my palm in the mosque. “You will travel a lot; I see you on airplanes. You are going far away from here and will live in a very distant place. Your husband’s name starts with M and you’re going to have two kids.” In my mind, I thought about all the boy’s names that started with M. We girls sat in a circle, whispering and giggling. Our fortune-telling friends would take turns reading everyone’s palms. Some older ladies looked at us with blame and regret, as we weren’t serious about praying. They noticed that every night, we had secret meetings in the mosque.

The palm reading for me somehow came out right, although we didn’t believe in her at the time and were just doing it for fun. In my mind, the farthest place I could ever live was east of Iran and less than 1000 km from Tehran, where my eldest sister lived. This palm reader was a free girl with big black eyes and Persian-looking eyebrows. Her hair was so black and silky that I always wanted to touch it. She was always happy and laughed so hard all the time. She was our fun and naughty friend and somehow the head of all meetings. I wish I could see her again and tell her that her palm reading came true. She, her sister, and their family stayed in our neighborhood for only one year and moved out too soon.

My second sister, Zahra, was the one who suffered the most as a girl. The first sister got lucky and got engaged to a

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man to whom my aunt - from my father's side - introduced her when she was in her teens. She loved her husband, and he loved her back. They moved to the east of the country and built their life together. This made my parents think that all of us girls would marry in our teens before we turned 16. It was hard for the second girl since she wasn't as obedient as the first one. She had big dreams and was stubborn. I remember we both went to our neighborhood mosque to practice meditations and theatre. After the revolutions, mosques became cultural and activity locations. Young people gathered to sing Islamic songs together and play theatres. I was 12 or 13 and four years younger than my second sister. I wasn't fully involved in activities in the mosque, but she was. Since she had finished her elementary school and wasn't allowed to continue school, she got more involved in these activities. I remember one day we were practicing hypnotism, and we laid down in a circle on the floor. Our instructor was so good and used our imaginations to take us to the north of Iran to a rice field (SHALYZAR) and gave us breathing exercises. After he counted backward, we couldn't wake up my sister. I was so scared: what if she stayed in the rice field forever and didn't wake up at all? Years later, I was watching the 2010 movie "Inception," and it caught my attention when Leonardo DiCaprio's wife didn't want to come back to their real world anymore. I was reminded of this childhood memory of my sister.

There was another day at practice when my other sister showed up with a letter in her hand and gave it to my instructor. I was a kid, and they wouldn't let me get involved in more grown-up things. I learnt later that the letter was from my dad to my older sister, Zahra, asking if she was going to marry one of the boys in our neighborhood who used to be our neighbor. His mom kept calling my sister her daughter-in-law for years, and then one day she was at our home with her son, asking for my dad's permission for the two to marry.

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My sister didn't like that family at all and didn't want to marry him. She told me later that she was so scared to write back, "No," she didn't know what to do. They had to stop theater practice for her... The director came to her questioning what was holding her back from returning to class?

She showed the letter from my dad.

He asked, "What's your answer to this question?"

"No is my final answer," she mumbled shyly.

The director banged the pen on the desk loudly, and exclaimed, "I count to ten and by 10 you have to write your answer. One... two... three..." He banged the pen on the desk with each number.

My sister thought, "By saying no, I will be in big trouble and will get punished. By saying yes, I would marry this man who I don't like at all..."

The countdown continued: four... five... six... seven...

Someone reminded her it was getting late, and everyone was waiting for her.

The director was looking at his watch, still counting. "Eight... nine..."

And my sister wrote a big NO on the paper with my dad's handwriting on it.

This was insane, mad, and dangerous.

We went back home. Everything looked so normal. The boy and his mother were still upstairs in our guest room. My sister was shocked and found out the letter reached only my mom, who never dared to give it to my dad.

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She told my sister, “We all need to be obedient and follow our father’s advice. It’s right for us.”

We should only listen to our parents since they know what is best for us. The boy’s mom came downstairs and gave my sister a watch as a symbol of their engagement. The watch was too big, and she said she would return it to fix the size. My sister was certain she would not marry this guy, and she never did, despite of all troubles she faced. Years later, they managed to get my third sister to marry the same son, who was still single.

One Friend Can Change Your Whole Life Forever

When we desperately look for a change, we send signals to the universe. Right people and right opportunities appear on our way. There are always signs around you that you should not ignore. Angels are real. They come to help you in different forms; so, embrace them.

The universe heard my prayer, my fervent desire to go to school and continue my education.

My sister, Zahra, had a friend who was an activist. They were both 4 years older than me. Zari was optimistic, open-minded, and an avid reader. She and I formed a friendship and the more I got to know her, the more I loved her and wanted to be like her. Through our conversations, she encouraged me to build a small neighborhood library.

Her family was so different from mine. Her mom was divorced and lived with someone else, which was unusual for me. There were three girls in her family, Zari being the oldest. She had dreams of attending medical school and I wondered if that would be possible for me, too. It was a far-reaching dream, but we started small with this neighborhood library. We added to it and shared books. Zari wanted me to go back

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to school next year, but I told her it was impossible. I stayed home one full year after grade five; I was 11 or 12 years old and missed the school so much, I couldn't bear not going back to school for the rest of my life.

She was surprised. "Look how many different books you have read in the past year. You are a genius."

When the next school year started, kids were excited to go back to school, but I just sat in our small room with the radio. There was a song that played each year: "Hello classmates, hello classmates, we are coming back to see you. Are you coming back to classes?"

A lump formed in my throat, and I burst into tears. I didn't understand why I couldn't go back to school. I read a lot of books. I wanted to be a doctor, a dentist, maybe even a lawyer. All I knew was that I desperately wanted to go to school, but my dad wouldn't let me.

Zari tried to encourage me to return to school and said she would help me, but that would go against everything my father stood for. He wouldn't allow it. The once exciting welcome back song on the radio now sounded sad to me since I was not going to join my classmates.

One grey fall afternoon, Zari knocked on the door, her arms overloaded with books. My mom opened the door as Zari said, "Let me in, I am about to drop these books."

She smiled so brightly, and her eyes shone as she rushed inside the house. "I am sending you back to school."

My mom and I stared at her in shock. She was insane! I was excited about this, but scared, too. Zari said she tried to come over the other day, but she heard my dad from outside and returned without ringing the bell.

She was here again, and she would like to study with me. She would teach me. It wasn't happening the way I thought it would or wanted, but Zari was going to homeschool me. I'd never heard of that before, but she said she would register me for exams, and this way I could learn as much as I wanted. Years later, she finished medical school, married her sweetheart, and moved to Canada and later to the US. I tried so hard to find her. She had mentioned earlier that she didn't like her last name, so I believe that was the reason she was not searchable. I couldn't even find her family since they had moved to different countries!

I studied at home without my dad knowing. When it came time for exams, Zari would come and pick me up with some excuse, like going to hang out or heading to the mosque. But we would go so I could write my exam. Those days, those challenges, crying and swinging between hope and despair, were some of the strongest in my memory.

Finally, when schools became separated by gender, I was able to attend high school in person. There were three years of middle school and four of high school. It used to be those schools with mixed gender, but after the Iranian revolution, the schools were separated. My dad agreed to let me go to an all-girls high school.

Academic Competition among high schools

I did excellent in high school. I was not only at the top in my class and school but also in the whole region among boys and girls both.

In my second year of high school, I was nominated to compete in an academic knowledge competition against other students from the city where I lived. Nobody accompanied me or supported me; I went alone. I took the bus, changing buses

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a few different times to get to where I needed to be. The competition was in a large arena, and when I arrived, I saw kids everywhere with their parents. I thought I was the only one there without someone to cheer me on.

As I look at the surrounding people, I saw they were dressed well and carried books and lots of supplies with them. I was dressed plainly and had only a pencil, eraser, and pencil sharpener. I felt out of place with these kids. They all had years of schooling and they knew how academic competition worked. I learned at home for so many years, I barely even called myself a high schooler. These kids didn't know their privilege to have spent so much time with their friends at school. I worried that I didn't stand a chance here. I couldn't win this competition. I couldn't beat them. They were all so much better prepared.

Then, I reminded myself that I might be different, but I had spent years working to this point. I believed in myself, I dreamed, I worked hard. And my school chose me for this competition. What did I have to lose by trying? Nothing. I might not win. I might not even do very well, but if I did my best, that was enough. I sat for the test and the questions confused me. I was not sure if I understood them correctly because they seemed too easy. I answered the best I could and when I finished, I turned in my paper. I was the first one done and was not sure if that was a good sign or bad. Then I had to wait.

I went back home and waited for the results. The morning of the announcement, every student at school was gathered in the yard. We stood, exercised, prayed, sang, and listened to the announcements. I was surprised when the principal called my name. I won. I was in shock and couldn't believe it! I had won and was number one in academics out of all those girls and boys in the whole region.

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The principal handed me the prize and exclaimed, “We’re first in the region. We are so proud of you!”

At home that day, I announced my win to my mother. She was so proud and happy and hugged me very tightly.

One year after the Iranian revolution, open warfare between Iran and Iraq began in September 1980. People had to learn how to defend themselves and their country. There were different workshops on how to practice working with guns, how to neutralize a bomb, or how to defend ourselves.

Me, Zari, and my sister started going to shooting class together. They taught us different tactics of how to defend ourselves in case of getting arrested by the enemy. We had to open and close a Kalashnikov rifle or Machine Pistole (MP) in one minute. We were anxious and stressed to follow the instructions properly. The instructor served in the military and was really serious about what he taught. There was no place for laughs or jokes. I was young and scared of war, death, or becoming a hostage. We heard a lot of horrible stories about the cities close to the border where women were raped and had to flee their homes while their men were at the center of the war, being killed, injured, or captured.

Those days were dark and horrific. Sometimes I could see horror in Zari’s eyes; however, at the same time, she tried to buoy everyone up with her cheerful and energetic spirit. On the contrary, I was furious, uncertain of the future of my country, and afraid of losing my life and my loved ones. One day, her eyes looked different. I could find a trace of happy glitter in her eyes, a hidden sign of good news or an announcement.

“What is the matter with you? It looks like you’re flying on top of clouds.” I told her, while tilting my head and looking at her.

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She laughed hard and looked at me with a bright face: “I just got married one hour before I came to the workshop!!!”

I was speechless! How is that even possible?

She was a young, beautiful girl who was ambitious and clever enough to have the most exciting wedding ever! And spend the night with her husband, not with us in shooting class. I didn't understand her.

“The ceremony was very simple. I didn't even have a wedding gown or anything special. There was only the immediate family, and this is my honeymoon!” she said with a warm laugh.

I admire her now even more. She was a hero to me, and I wanted to be just like her one day.

A few years later, I was at university, and she asked me to help her niece with her school while she was going to Mecca with her husband. It was the time for me to make it up to her and show her my appreciation. I traveled all the way to her apartment in the rich part of Tehran and did my best preparing her niece for her exams. Everything worked out in the best way. Her niece passed her exams with good marks, and I was proud I did something for my role model and hero.

My proud Radio Contest

Because of my success in the academic competition, my school nominated me for another contest. The radio show had a large audience. It was a national favorite radio show called “Friday Morning with You” and broadcasted every Friday morning at 9:00 a.m. My father used to listen to this comedic and happy show. For this competition, two girls competed against two boys for the prize.

The radio station was on *Jameh-Jam* Street in the north of Tehran—the residences of the wealthy people. I didn't have proper clothing or shoes for this. How was I going to be present in this rich area? My school hired a car for me, my teammate, and a few teachers. It looked so strange to me, the girls against boys!

The show's host was famous and well-loved. He had a lot of influence in our community. Excitement filled me as we got through the show, and I could hear my heart beating the whole time. When he asked questions, we would have to be alert and ready to ring the bell. My partner and I were amazing. One question after another, we rang the bell. The boys stared at us in surprise as we answered the questions, and the audience clapped, cheered, whistled, and shouted for us.

With each question we got right, I felt more excited. The crowd cheering for us gave me strength and courage. I was so proud of myself and my partner. Eventually, we answered the final question. We got it right. We won! I was over the moon with happiness and couldn't wait to get back home and share this excitement with my family. I did it again!

In 1982, when this competition took place, there was no Internet. My family didn't have television either, because my dad believed there were often scenes which were inappropriate and destructive for kids. Even the radio was carefully regulated and because of our religion, we were not allowed to listen to the music.

The radio show was recorded instead of broadcasting live, so I had to wait a few weeks to sit and listen to the show with my family. I had held my secret about the outcome until then. Finally, I could prove to my dad that I was capable and smart, and I could win. I anxiously turned up the radio, calling to my family, "Listen, it has just started!"

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Everyone gathered in the room to listen to the radio. The host announced the competitors: the two girls from my school, and the two boys. My dad winced.

“I did not know you were in this competition with boys.” His voice was angry.

I didn't expect this to be a problem. I wanted to make him proud, so what was it that I had done wrong? It seemed for many years that no matter what I did, my dad never cared. My ears and cheeks flushed with shame. Then I wondered what it was I had to be ashamed of? The audience clapped and cheered. We won. He should be proud, but he was not.

I felt my own excitement fade. Winning didn't matter anymore. It wasn't enough for my dad. I gave the prize to my mother, who had always supported me. She was honored to have me.

I Finally Made It to University

My father was completely against the idea of me attending university after high school, but my mother tried to convince him otherwise. Even high school was too much for him and we never knew from one day to the next if he was going to let me go to school. Every so often, he'd decide I couldn't go to school anymore. I'd cry for days until he'd change his mind. Everyone at school knew about my situation. They knew that I might not be there. Every day was a struggle. I never knew if I could go to school or not.

Two of my teachers – religion and literature – came to our house to convince my dad to let me go to school. They begged, but he was manipulative and humiliating. He didn't like that his daughter was going to school, doing well, and striving for success. But I continued to go to the library to read books he wouldn't approve of. I read books outside of our

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religion, which my father wouldn't even begin to understand. Reading books outside of Islam was strictly forbidden. My father was not just religious, he was a clergyman. He lectured the people on how to be a good Muslim and about Islam. Religion was everything to him.

My teachers told him how brilliant and smart I was, that it would be a shame if I didn't finish school. They finally convinced him that I was a good girl and didn't get into things I shouldn't at school. I studied and worked hard. I had a strong personality and was not influenced by others' behaviors. He finally agreed that I could finish high school, but I still had to do everything at home as if I wasn't at school all day. I had to cook, clean, do the dishes, and care for the smaller kids. When I finished high school, I wanted to attend medical school, but my literature diploma was not enough to get me there. I needed a diploma in natural science. I felt hopeless and devastated.

Life was so different for boys. Boys could go to school, the swimming pool, and soccer or any other activities they liked. My dad was determined to provide everything for them. He hired a private driver to take them to different classes, but we girls had to stay at home and sacrifice our life just to learn how to be a good housewife. I was totally against sexism; that was an obvious discrimination, prioritizing boys' needs over girls'. That's why I could not agree with what was happening around me. As a matter of fact, I hated spending endless hours doing house chores; I hated doing dishes, ironing, and sewing. We were a big family, and the housework occupied my whole day. I would love to study, to become a doctor, a lawyer, or maybe a judge; someone who could make a difference. I was thirsty for learning new things, that was the reason I loved our little library, and I was eager to go to libraries and read books. I would like to be a scientist or a researcher. At that time, I didn't know exactly what I wanted to

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be, but I knew I wanted to be well-educated and earn my university degree. I knew this was not something that my father planned for me, but I wanted to follow my heart. I had a burning desire to go to university, even if this was not something common in our family or for my parents. Girls in our society were not supposed to have these skills and privileges.

Secretly, I started studying to get ready for the university exam against my father's wishes. I would pretend that I was reading the Quran. That was the holiest book for Muslims and that was the only book that my dad approved. But hidden in the middle of the Quran, I had my books from school. I read them through the night, so my dad wouldn't find out that I was studying.

I still had to keep up with the housework, so he had no excuse to be after me and would let me spend some time with myself. I did quite well at school and appreciated every minute of it. When I was happy at school, everyone could tell, including my father. He didn't like that I was happy and enjoying my life and that is when he decided I couldn't go to school.

He said, "Enough! Enough! You're not going."

Then there was a fight between my parents. My mother wanted me to continue my education; she wanted me to be happy, she wanted me to be successful, but she had no voice. She couldn't tell my dad, "No," because it would make him angry.

I struggled to learn by myself. There was no Internet, no computer, often no books to guide me. I wasn't even allowed to go to the library. I remember one day when I came home from the library, he confronted me.

"Where were you?" he demanded.

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“The library.”

He slapped my face, and my ear rang so loudly I thought I lost my hearing.

“You should never have been at the library. You will not leave this house anymore. You will stay home from now on.”

I apologized but was heartbroken. How could I continue my education if I couldn't go to the library? I couldn't go to high school. I wanted to go to university, but that was seemingly impossible.

I had always wanted to go to medical school, but my high school diploma in literature meant that was not possible. My friend, Zari, encouraged me to go back to school for one more year so I could earn a science diploma, too.

As it turns out, the age-old adage is true: always follow your heart and never ignore your dreams.

Times were changing and my father's views softened some. My younger sisters were starting high school without any fight from my father. I knew things weren't going to be easy for them, but it wouldn't be as hard as it had been for me. There was more freedom here for women, and I thought about what I needed to do. I talked to my father and told him that I needed to go back to high school for one more year. He agreed.

I fought hard that year, reading things I'd never heard of before like math, physics, science. I didn't know anything about these subjects and crammed a four-year study into one year. But like the competitions before, I did it. I won.

One more obstacle stood before me: the university entrance exam. The competition was rough. My scores weren't good enough for medical school, but I could get into

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nursing school. My friends and my mother were so proud. My father was not.

“Nursing?” he said. “Nursing! Oh boy, I am so ashamed of myself. I am so ashamed of my daughter. Why would you choose nursing? Why don’t you study philosophy, or something related to religion or our family culture?”

I thought by studying nursing I could be in a medical field. It was close to my dream and far better than I imagined I could achieve. I could accept this future.

But Zari told me to wait. “Don’t tell your dad. Go and pretend you’re going to university, but instead study more. Take the exam again. Get into medical school next year.”

I was so exhausted, though. I was tired of fighting, of studying in secret. I just wanted to get to university. This was freedom. That freedom took me to nursing school. However, I had also learned by now that today’s problems belong to today; they won’t last forever.

Nursing was a four-year program and I realized early on that I was going to need money. My parents wouldn’t give me any money because my dad was still too prejudiced against my education. Mom tried to convince him to help and support me, but with no success.

I took the plunge and got my driver’s license. It was one more thing my dad disapproved of, but I felt courageous and strong. I learned how to drive. I was grateful that my mother and sisters supported me.

While I studied full time at university, I worked part time in the hospital and took the driving lessons. It took me four attempts to earn my driver’s license, but at age 19, I could drive. It finally seemed like there was light at the end of the tunnel.

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My mom told my dad, “She’s so smart. She’s capable. She can do it and you must trust her. Just trust her. She knows what she’s doing.”

My dad finally said Okay. He decided to buy a car so I could drive them places when they needed, partly because he was tired of hiring drivers or using public transportation. He finally realized that I could help the family. With eleven of us, it was hard to get around. He considered buying me a car until a man in our neighborhood asked him, “What happens if she gets a flat tire? What if she gets pulled over?” He pointed out that I was a young girl and not a boy. It was dangerous, and I should not want to drive alone. I fought hard to not get myself stuck in the tunnel while chasing the light.

My dad changed his mind and no longer wanted to buy me a car. It was just another disappointment. It wasn’t all gloom and doom; as it turns out, disappointments give you courage to fight for what you want.