

Almost Home

Leyla Savsar

Hawally, Kuwait. 6 September 1997, 10:00 pm

The lights in the hall flicker before going out. Everything is swallowed whole by the soundless dark. I pull the covers, a net of safety, all the way over my head and squeeze my eyes shut in defence against the smothering pitch black that weighs down on my small silhouette. My breath catches in my throat as I cry, 'Mo-oomy!' I don't dare move a muscle until I hear whispers and see feet shuffling under the narrow crack beneath the door. The knob turns. Peering through half-open eyes, I breathe a sigh of relief as Bilal's frame towers over my bed. 'Hey,' he whispers. The bed creaks under his weight as he sits next to my pillow.

'There's nothing to worry about. Just a power shortage. We'll have it fixed in no time.'

The fierce desert wind howls outside.

'I'm scared,' I whine.

'Here, let me show you something cool.'

He extends his arm, pulling me close into a bear hug as he waves his digital Casio watch in front of my face, now illuminated in a reassuring green-blue glow that reflects off his glasses. And just like that, the shadows dancing across his face chase the ones shrouding me, alleviating the darkness. The big, bold numbers read 10:00 pm on a Saturday night.

'Wow!' I exclaim, my fears forgotten.

'Neat, huh? See, there's nothing to be afraid of. I promise you'll get adjusted to your new room and bed in no time. We all will. And it'll probably be easier to do if you can't see anything anyway.' He chuckles at his own joke. 'You know our room is right across the hall, so you can just holler whenever you need me or Selim.'

'Now go to sleep or you'll miss the first day of school tomorrow.' He ruffles my hair, tucking me in.

Talking into the darkness, two people being honest. The power returns and light streams in from the hall just as he shuts the door behind him. I listen to the sound of his footsteps fading, muffled by the carpet.

Izmit, Turkey. 17 August 1999, 4:00 am

Darkness weighs heavily, no matter where you are. It creeps up on you without warning. This time it's not a power outage, and Bill does not respond to my distressed call as he promised he would. I don't need his Casio watch to tell me the time or date. I know because I'm starting the second grade in about a month and Bill is supposed to be going back for his second semester at Penn State University. I don't, however, know that the reason there's no blanket to pull over my head this time is because there's no ceiling above me. The once rock-solid constructs of our home have all been demolished and Izmit, a city 56 miles east of Istanbul, has been reduced to rubble and dust. Buried beneath the remains of what used to be a home, a sanctuary of warmth and safety, a six-year-old comes to realise that there is no such thing as stability, and even rigid landscapes are not so rigid after all. Things move and people depart. All four of us, except Bill, can attest to that. Buried alive, we are phoenixes born out of the ashes, mounds of memories

'Almost Home.' Leyla Savsar.

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excavated from the remains of what used to be home. Even a six-year-old knows that a house, without its pillars, is doomed to implode; that a family is bound to collapse if it loses a member. But this reality is hard to accept. The child desperately wants to believe that there are other walls and pillars, other homes sturdier than this, where other six-year-olds, tucked safe and sound in bed, can simply open their eyes...

American Creativity Academy (ACA), Kuwait. 11 September 2000, 1:30 pm

I blink in confusion as I hear my name being called. 'Leyla, sweetheart, would you like to share with us what happened last summer?'

The teacher gestures to me to come up front. The whispers halt and a growing silence settles on the tables and chairs, into the cubbies like dust, as it invades the fidgeting bodies in Ms Bobby's second grade classroom. I make my way towards the teacher's table where I take a seat on her office chair. It wobbles under my frail frame and I slide to the edge, planting my feet on the ground. I struggle with the question. Too shy to speak up, too timid to remain silent with everybody's eyes on me, I dig deeper into the shafts of my mind, where I choose to uncover the image of darkness as it is chased away by the glow of a Casio watch. I stay in here for a few more seconds. I like it here, where places are clearly charted and home means stability, where there is no room for the flaws of man-made structures, the shortcomings of nature, or the ruthlessness of those second-grade kids who'll cast me out of their stupid games just because I'm different. I finally respond to Ms Bobby's question after what seems like hours but what are only a few minutes.

'My eldest brother, Bilal, died in an earthquake in Istanbul last summer.' I try to ignore the twenty pairs of eyes staring at me.

'We're sorry for your loss, sweetheart.' Ms Bobby touches my shoulder as I make my way back to my seat in silence.

Kuwait International Airport. 1 September 1997, 9:00 am

'Oww, quit pinching me!' I cry out as Dad's friend backs his Chevrolet Corvette from the Arrivals lane.

'Quit squirming and sit still, loser,' taunts my eleven-year-old brother Selim, who is looking for amusement on this short ride from the airport. Some things never change, no matter how far you move or wherever you go.

'Moommy, tell Selim to stop!'

My mother turns around with a scowl on her face. 'Bilal, why don't you sit in the middle, honey, and keep those two in check?' My eldest brother, seventeen years old, switches sides and takes my place without a word.

A short drive later, a hard wave of heat hits us as we spill out of the car. 'Woah, Mommy, look!' I tug at her sleeve, my curiosity and excitement clouded by an iota of disappointment. Instead of pastel-coloured falling leaves, I'm greeted by palm trees, their fronds at once friendly and foreign, like nodes of a life branching out before me; modern buildings propped up on vast, flat, dusty landscapes; wide roads with expensive cars zipping by; locals in black and white robes and foreigners in run-of-the mill western clothes.

'So freakin' hot,' Selim complains, shielding his eyes against the sun.

'What's new?' Bill asks.

'Come on, I'll race you!' I don't let the heat put a dent in my spirit as I race to greet our new apartment, which is situated in a relatively peaceful complex. I come to a halt by the door and

Selim nudges me as we tumble inside the apartment, the place that is to become home for the next sixteen years.

My brothers linger behind as I skip in and out of the rooms, down the long hall, and into the spacious living room with its great tinted windows that both refract and absorb the fierce sun. 'Hello!' I yell, testing the acoustics in the empty space. Selim joins me by the window where we stand in silence, taking it all in. He elbows my side, pointing out at a pastry shop that's still under construction like pretty much everything else in the surrounding vicinity. The purple and white sign that reads 'New York Deli' with the Statue of Liberty is jarringly out of place, but I'm to find out that binaries find home here. Everything feels foreign, yet also oddly familiar. It's like someone was expecting us but forgot to make the beds, or left their clothes in a heap on the floor. I can't wait to explore the rest of Hawally, this sun-bathed, dust-ridden neighbourhood with its funny name.

Sunlight streams into my room as the curtains are pulled apart, illuminating the clutter around my bed. 'Rise and shine! Hadi, hadi,' my mother says in Turkish. I don't need much coaxing because I'm already up, my face twisted in a nervous smile as I both anticipate and dread my first day of kindergarten. 'Hurry up and eat your breakfast. We'll walk together.'

I stuff my face with some menemen, Turkish sauté of eggs and minced vegetables, and wash it all down with OJ, but the food refuses to calm the butterflies in my belly. I'm suddenly overcome with the desire to rush back to bed.

The hot wind blows dust particles in my face as I try to keep my eyes open. 'Mom, Bill told me that camels have three eyelids for extra protection. I think I need three eyelids too.' She chuckles. 'Mommy, so many cars!' We weave around and through whatever empty space we can find amidst the honking bodies of steel: BMWs, Lexus, Mercedes, Landrovers, and other luxurious cars, some with Indian drivers and some with fathers or mothers at the wheels. We reach the blue gates just in time as siblings, mothers and Asian helpers accompany the young students into the building. I cling to my mother's hand as we make our way through the muddle of sounds, in both English and Arabic. My mother is a little flustered but clearly unfazed.

'You be a good girl and have fun now, tamam? Ok? Bilal will pick you up after school.' She kisses the top of my head and exchanges a few words with my teacher, Ms Patricia Toofan.

'Hello, Leyla.' Ms Patricia greets me with a honey-sweet smile and in a velvety, high-pitched voice. I already love her.

'Hi, Ms Patricia.' I smile back shyly. She leads me by the hand as I catch sight of a boy screeching at the top of his lungs as he claws at the door like a terrified cat, refusing to go inside. Maybe it's his first time in a new country, too. I try to picture the butterflies flying out of my belly as I register the cacophony of languages around me. Ms Patricia's hand feels reassuring in mine as we step inside the air-conditioned classroom.

'There you are!' 2:30 pm and he's right on time. I spot his boots first, then his tall, lean frame in jeans and his Lee USA tee-shirt as white and radiant as the smile he's wearing. I jump up, more than ready to leave the chaos behind. Pretending to scout the scene, he swiftly pulls out a chocolate egg, my favourite, from behind him like a magic trick. I reach over, but the egg disappears.

'Mom said to save it for after dinner.' He winks. 'How was your first day?'

The words pour out. 'And then the stupid boys kept messing up our puzzles and annoying us so me and my new best friend played in the corner ...'

'I told you there was nothing to worry about. You've already made friends.' I wonder if he ever worries about living up to the standards of different places and people.

'Where are we going?' I ask, tugging at his hand.

'Sam's place, of course.'

It is the sunset-orange apartment facing our earth-toned one. We climb the steps in unison, his boots kicking up the dust. Sam is Bill's best friend from high school and he often spends the weekends at our place because he loves my mother's cooking. Today is the day I get to spend time with Bill's classmates for the first time. He knocks on the door, which sends the butterflies flying back into my tummy.

Being a four-year-old with an animated giggle, I'm the centre of attention for a while ('Leyla, over here! ... 'Your little sister is adorable!') but Bill doesn't seem to mind at all. I sit back on the couch and resume my habitual silence to watch them interact over Risk, a strategy board game I'm not yet old enough to understand. They sit cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by local and American snacks.

'Imad, you sure you're not playing?' Bill sets up the game.

'Yeah, I'm good with being the referee in case this ... escalates.'

'It's no battle, it's just a game, bro,' Bill laughs as Imad, his classmate from Pakistan, shrugs.

'C'mon, let's get it on. I'm attacking you in, uh, in Red Square,' someone exclaims.

'Dude, I don't have any armies in Russia. You're in Russia!'

'Oh, then I'm attacking myself in Russia.'

I watch the players navigate the board, receiving armies and forming units as they attempt to dominate the world, competing against one another. By the time Bill and I decide to walk back home, it's dark outside.

'Who got to conquer the world, Bill?'

'Nobody.'

'Your friends are nice.'

'I think so too. I sure am going to miss them.' His smile disappears like the setting sun.

The horizon is a thread of crimson, dust intermingled with dusk. I try not to think about Bill returning to his birthplace, Pennsylvania, for college as we walk back home in silence.

Kuwait. 25 December 1998, 2:50 pm

Bilal and Selim are wrestling over tapes and cassettes. The brotherly banter halts as I walk into the room, tripping over Doc Martins. The smell of freshly baked Turkish börek, puffed pastry, wafts from the kitchen. Brushing aside his tousled brown-blond hair, parted down the middle, just as I remember it, Bill pushes his glasses up his nose and beams at me. 'There you are. Look at how tall you've grown! Come see what I brought you.' He beckons me over. I'm surprised to find that I'm overcome with shyness at having to greet a family member after being months apart. I sit on his lap as his hands, dried and cracked by the harsh Pennsylvanian winter, reveal a stuffed animal. 'The Nittany lion!' I exclaim. My very own replica of Penn State University's mascot. Back from his first semester, Bill is here to spend the first Christmas break with us. 'Thanks, Bill. I'll call him ... Penny.' I hug my brother tightly; it's like he never left.

West Housing Area, Pennsylvania State University, USA. 30 May 2000

Bilal, always anticipating the year 2000, won't be here to greet it. Jet-lagged and exhausted, we pack his belongings in this cramped, dishevelled dorm room. My eyes search for his Casio watch, but it's nowhere to be found. His roommates are at a loss for words as we gather the stuff

and leave. The Nittany lion glistens in the sun, beaming with pride. I look down at the grass beneath my feet 6,000 miles away from home. The grass is always greener on the other side; I've heard this phrase from my teachers so many times, but I don't find the grass comparable. It just is. We're due back in Kuwait tomorrow night. And so we continue to leave behind the people and places laced with bittersweet memories.

Hawally, Kuwait. 9 June 2000. 2:52 pm

A few weeks later Dad receives an email titled 'thoughts on Bilal.' He prints it and reads it out loud to us:

Dear Mr. Savsar and family,

It's Todd from Penn State...I must say I was shocked, but glad that you and your family came to visit ... I just wanted to write today to tell you what an absolute joy it was to know and to share a room with Bilal ... He was always there when I needed a friend. He truly was and always will be a credit to you and your family ... Everything was easy-going with Bilal. Everyone on the surrounding floors gravitated to Bilal given the chance to meet him. Kurt still talks about the adventures they had playing around with his flight stimulator game ... He came here well acquainted with, but not knowing much about, American satire and comedy as expressed in shows like 'Seinfeld,' or 'The Simpsons,' but by the time second semester rolled around, Bilal was the funniest guy around. He was not a hermit ... I remember Nick and I waiting on move-in day for him to come off the elevator, turn the corner with his jeans on in 85 degree weather (shorts for us) shouting something sarcastic with a big smile behind it. That's an image of Bilal I'll always remember. I will close by only repeating what I said earlier: Bilal was one of our dearest friends up at school and he will be in our hearts and thoughts forever.

In loving memory,

Sincerely,

Todd

My father puts the letter down. I'm not sure what a hermit is, but I hope I won't turn into one.

Kuwait International Airport. 25 March 2003, 12:00 pm. Destination: Turkey

School isn't out yet, but everybody is en route to safety. Nobody's willing to stick around and witness the second Gulf War break out. Mrs Nancy is sending us home with our assignment packets. War or no war, we have to pass the fourth grade. Dad thinks we're lucky we have a place in which to seek refuge. I trip over suitcases and makeshift beds before finding a spot for all of us. It feels cosy here with everybody in this port of passage with passports in hand. Almost like home.

American Academy, Kuwait. Senior Year. 10 March 2010, 1:00 pm

High school remains unchanged, oblivious to my comings and going, my dislocation. The shrill sound of the whistle resonates through the gym, followed by the squeak of sneakers on the linoleum floor. 'Over here, pass here!' yells a member of the other team. She runs over to the hoop where I block her. I catch the ball mid-air and pass it over to a teammate. I expect to receive the pass from her but she ignores me. 'Dribble before step there!' Mrs Megan steps in

with her ear-piercing whistle. Gym sucks when your teammates aren't exactly cooperating. The rest of the game goes on in a similar manner, with most of my teammates blatantly ignoring my attempts to receive. I continue to go through the motions, slipping on a mask of indifference.

Now the ball is being dribbled by a promising senior with glasses, whose brown-blond hair is parted down the middle. It's received by a Pakistani boy who likes to play referee, and is thrown into the hoop by an American who savours Turkish dishes. I imagine the players dispersed across a board game playing against one another. I imagine winning the game and signing an imaginary peace treaty. But my hands are tired and they sting from all the dribbling. So I imagine I'm the ball bouncing back in any direction I choose.

The bell rings for the final time at 2:30. Ms Meredith stops me on my way out to return my writing workshop portfolio with the final assignment, a six-word autobiography: Packing and unpacking, suitcases worn out. 'Great work here and throughout the semester, Leyla. You should pursue writing one way or another.'

It occurs to me that this might really be all I need to fit in.

Hawally, Kuwait. 30 July 2014, 10:00 am

Immigration forms and student documents: check. Books: check. Heavy winter coat: check. The remaining weeks of this summer are spent packing as I prepare to leave for graduate studies at Boston University. I zip my bag closed and look around the half-empty room. Philip Larkin was right, I think to myself, as I recall the lines:

Home is so sad. It stays as it was left,
Shaped to the comfort of the last to go
As if to win them back.

The final unopened box that Mom recovered from the storage sits on my unmade bed, which almost appears to be telling me that I won't be gone long. Unboxing the contents, I find my Nittany lion, Bill's senior yearbook, and his Casio watch, which I thought was long lost. Unbelieving, I open the yearbook to the introductory page:

Kuwait is a country which has survived against apparently overwhelming odds. Despite these setbacks, the people have proved again and again that they are both adaptable and tenacious. Kuwait has never failed to provide the population with a diverse community. From the United States to Australia, people of all ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds come together ... Senior Bilal Savsar from Turkey commented: 'I like the fact that there is such a diverse population in such a small country.'

Dazed, I flip through until I come across a personal piece with his name and the date 1996 typed in the top corner:

'I have finally made up my mind, we are moving next year,' said my father one dark, rainy afternoon. Just as it seemed that I was adjusting to my surroundings, change came once again. This time, we would be moving to Kuwait. What really affected me was the fact that I would be leaving Saudi Arabia: my residence of the past 13 years ...

The word residence leaps out of the page. I can't help but notice that he has chosen it over home. But then again, what difference does it make?

During my last night in Saudi Arabia, I spoke to my close friend Mustafa. His words really stirred something within: 'You take everything too seriously. It's not good for you. Take everything easy ... and if people don't accept you for who you are, let it be their loss.' It was as

if my whole outlook on life changed. Things that had always pressured me before didn't do so as much. Perhaps these words really affected me because no one ever directly addressed them to me. Perhaps it was because they came from a good friend on a last night together.

A car revs outside and feet shuffle in the hall, jolting me back to the present. This is the moment that finds me almost home, and the best thing about it is that I haven't moved an inch. I didn't need to. I place everything back inside the box and reseal it, all the while holding on to the Casio watch.