

Ah, Rasha's

foot on the stair.

*She moved slowly, as if she carried
the snake around her body
always.*

—RITA DOVE, "Agosta the Winged Man
and Rasha the Black Dove"

The subway tunnel is dark as night. A train rushes through it, and the interior lights of the car blaze like July. Rasha steadies herself on the hard plastic seat as the train rocks back and forth. In a flash the swaying movement comes back to her, and its familiarity is comforting.

It's May 2002, and Rasha's on her way to university. It's also afternoon, but she's deep underground, and it's hard to know what time it is. The subway is almost empty. One older businessman sits quietly across from her. A group of teenagers down the car are screaming at each other, their shrieking laughter filling the car with adolescent self-importance, but even their noise doesn't bother her. Off to her side is a homeless man, covered in all the dirt and odors that street living brings. Rasha finds herself unexpectedly staring at him, and he peers back at her through his tent of hair. For a second their eyes lock, but Rasha's not frightened. Instead she finds the connection rapturous.

Later that night she would write about the moment in a reversible midnight blue notebook labeled "Day Dreams" on one cover and "Night Dreams" on the other. This is where she composes her own poetry and col-

lects her favorite aphorisms. On one page, for example, she has quoted from Kahlil Gibran: "The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain." On another she has written out a line from Booker T. Washington: "I will permit no man to narrow and degrade my soul by making me hate him." And in the middle of "Night Dreams" is her prose poem, dated May 8, 2002, called "This man." It ends this way:

I saw a man today, and his captivity reminded me that I was free. My mind no longer worrying, my hands no longer tied. I could see my mother, my father, and the world again. I can breathe and taste freedom. But most importantly, I can live & know that I am free. I saw a man today and that man . . . saw me.

Rasha was nineteen years old when she penned this. She had just spent almost three months in prison with her family. Suddenly free, she was now visible to the world again. She was no longer one of the disappeared.

RASHA IS A PETITE five feet four. She walks with a feather step and looks at you with penetrating, obsidian eyes. Her lips are often lightly glossed in pink, and her serious brown hair is commonly tied in a librarian's bun. She has an aura of modesty around her delicate frame. If she leans over to tie her shoes, she makes sure to cover herself chastely with one of her hands. She's fine-boned, with porcelain features that give her what you think is sparrow innocence, but soon you'll realize that it's more akin to a hard fragility. If you drop her, she'll break, but she'll cut you, too. She's tough and tender, enraged and exhausted, withdrawn and outgoing, a pessimist brimming with humanist hope.

She has also lived in the United States for more than eighteen years, almost all of them in Brooklyn, and to understand her story we need to turn back the pages of her history. Rasha was born in 1983, in Damascus, Syria, but when she was five years old, her family was granted a tourist visa to the United States, and they moved from the Fertile Crescent to Avenue U in

Gravesend. At the time Hafez al-Assad's Syria was anything but fertile. Embroiled in violence, the nation saw Assad's iron fist battering his growing and increasingly daring opposition. Bombings against the regime were frequent, as were mass arrests and torture. It all culminated in the 1982 massacre in the city of Hama, where tens of thousands were viciously killed. Rasha's father wanted better things for his family, so as soon as they arrived in the United States, he applied for their political asylum. He also began working at a discount clothing store on Fourteenth Street in Manhattan, eventually moving up to manager and then partner. Five-year-old Rasha assumed an American life.

Some of her earliest memories involve asking her mother little-girl questions about the world. One December when she was about ten years old, she was jealous of her friends with their gifts and sparkling Christmas trees. *This house sucks!* she thought. *Why don't we get a Christmas tree? Why are we so primitive?* So she resolved to ask her mother. "Mama," she broached the question one day, "are we going to get presents this year?" Her mother sat her down and explained to her in Arabic that they were not *mesihayeen*, Christians, and that's why they don't celebrate Christmas. Rasha rolled her eyes in confusion and walked away. She had confused *mesihayeen* with the word *mesrahayeen*, "stage actors," and for a long time afterward tried to figure out what exactly acting had to do with Christmas.

She eventually learned the differences between religions and nations and about where she came from. Her mother was her guide, and she taught little Rasha how to be a proper Arab Muslim girl in the United States. Rasha's parents were not particularly religious, so the lessons revolved less around points of faith and theology and more around the simple values of honesty, compassion, and protection of her honor. She had three siblings: Reem, an older sister; Munir, an older brother; and Wassim, a younger brother. None of them was much of a model for Rasha. Reem was five years older than Rasha, and half a decade is a large span of time at that age. The two girls fought often.

The family stayed in the New York area until 1996, still without having adjusted their immigration status. The asylum claim had been unsuccessful.

ful, but Rasha's father had hired a lawyer and was appealing the decision and looking for other legal ways to remain in the country. Meanwhile, her mother had given birth to two more little brothers. Since they were born in Brooklyn, the two infant boys were, unlike the rest of the family, citizens of the United States. But the pace of progress in the immigration proceedings was like washing your hair from a leaking faucet. Nothing was moving except for Congress, which in 1996 legislated even more draconian anti-immigrant legislation in the wake of Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Rasha's father gave up and moved them all back to Syria that year.

By the time they returned to Syria, Rasha was in sixth grade, going on seventh, and she found her new environs hard going. She was crashing into puberty, which is hard enough without having to adapt to a brand-new country. She spoke Arabic but could not read and write the language, so school was difficult. At first her father put her in a public girls' school, and Rasha loathed it. Hitting students who acted up was formally forbidden but still routinely practiced, and Rasha, who has a proud streak at her core, talked back to her teacher one day. The slap came, and she was stunned silent at first and then came home crying. Her father gangbusted his way to her school, screaming at the female teacher never to lay a finger on his daughter again, then promptly moved his daughter to a private girls' school.

After a couple of months, Rasha's father received word from his American lawyer that they finally had an interview scheduled for their green-card application, one of the final phases before gaining residency. But, the lawyer explained, it was nothing to get excited about. Since the family had already returned to Syria, the victory was abstract. If you leave the country, you give up your claim to naturalization. It was too late.

Private school wasn't much easier for Rasha. The biggest difference here was that there were more Christian and Jewish students. (In thinking back to that time, Rasha told me, she is struck by how Jewish Syrians were not nearly as ostracized as we are led to believe.) But Syria was still a stifling place for the family. For Rasha it was airless because of her age and her

school. Her family was constantly watching where she was going, and she felt suffocated. For her father, Syria was a failure due to its flailing economy and miserable political environment. No one was happy.

It was time to make a change, so they applied again for a visa to visit the United States, and they were approved. It felt like a miracle. Reem, Rasha, and Munir were literally jumping for joy in their living room when they found out. They had been in Syria for only seven months, and already they were saying their good-byes to family. They boarded a plane and, half a day later, landed at JFK. They stayed at the Golden Gate Hotel in Sheepshead Bay for three days until they found an apartment. Now that they were back in Brooklyn, Rasha was again happy. This is what she knew. This was home. Once again her father applied for adjusted status. And once again he began working, this time opening his own restaurant. Over time Rasha started high school.

JAMES MADISON HIGH SCHOOL was good for Rasha. Rising up in red brick, the crowded school is set in a prosperous area of Midwood, with its large houses and green lawns. It has an elegant exterior but caged windows and metal detectors. It also has a quote from President Madison carved on its edifice. "Education," it reads, "is the true foundation of civil liberty."

At Madison, Rasha met her best friends, Gaby and Nicky. Gaby is from Ecuador, and Nicky is from Azerbaijan. Befriending Nicky was easy and obvious. They both came from Muslim backgrounds and shared a lot of similar stories and values. And Rasha got close to Gaby because both of their families were traditional. They were talking about boys one day, and Rasha told Gaby that she wasn't allowed to date. "Yeah." Gaby nodded out of Catholic correspondence. "Neither am I." Rasha looked at her with disbelief. "You're not even Arab!" she said. "Or Muslim!" The three of them became an international posse and an inseparable trio.

When they weren't in school, they were everywhere else—on the subway to the city, at one another's houses, at the movies, shopping, or eating.

They were especially fond of Times Square, miles away from Brooklyn and full of tourist glitz and cheap madness. Gaby was a year younger than Rasha, so Rasha, who felt herself growing into her own skin with her friends, became a big sister to Gaby. All three spent so much time together that they became like their own family. When, in the spring of 2000, Rasha and Nicky graduated from Madison, Rasha moved, but not far away. Her father had now saved enough money that they could afford to buy a place in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, with its limestone row houses and numerous Arabs. This was the first property the family had owned, and her parents were very proud of the accomplishment. The girls came over to see the new house. Rasha shared a room with her sister, Wassim and the two little brothers had another bedroom, and Munir slept downstairs. Two Egyptian tenants, whose rent helped with the mortgage, lived in a separate apartment carved into the basement. The friends stayed close after high school, and Rasha started college in September 2001.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Rasha was sleeping late. Her mother opened her bedroom door and peeked in. "Rasha," she said. "You can't go to school. The subway's not working." Half asleep, Rasha raised her head. "Why?" she asked. "Accident," her mother explained, shrugging her shoulders. "With a plane." Rasha put her head back down and went back to sleep.

ONE FEBRUARY NIGHT in 2002, just a week after her nineteenth birthday, Rasha *couldn't* sleep. She didn't know why. The spring semester was under way at school, and she had classes to attend in the morning, but for some reason sleep was a gold coin in the water just beyond her grasp. She went downstairs and turned on the TV, mindlessly changing channels until 4:00 A.M. She turned off the set and trudged back to her bedroom. On her way up the stairs, she noticed a bizarre reflection of lights shimmering in the mirror that sat right on top of the fireplace. *I'm just seeing things*, she thought, and continued up to bed. After a few minutes, she had mercifully dozed off.

But half an hour later, Rasha suddenly opened her eyes. A female officer was shaking her, telling her in gray, official tones to get dressed. *Oh, my God*, Rasha thought, *somebody's died*, and she felt her heart drop and crack. She immediately glanced over to her sister. "What the hell's going on?" she asked, but Reem just looked frightened. Shock and fear paralyzed Rasha, and her knees locked. "Ma'am, just get up," repeated the female officer. "Get up and get dressed." Disoriented, Rasha forced herself to slowly rise. She walked downstairs in her pajamas, a few steps behind her sister. She couldn't feel her legs.

In the living room, she saw her entire family sitting awkwardly on the couch, and she sighed with relief. *Thank God*, she thought, *they're all okay!* She sat beside her sister, and then noticed that her brother Munir's legs were shackled. Shock turned to confusion, as she realized that about fifteen law enforcement officers—INS officials, U.S. Marshals, and FBI agents—had taken over their residence. The strangers, some with guns, walked through her house as if they owned it. Out the window she saw that it was the lights from their vehicles that had been shining into the living room. Fear began to bubble through her again.

An FBI agent, the apparent leader of the group, stood in front of the family. He identified himself and asked each of them their names. He told them they were being investigated for possible terrorism connections and that they were going to be taken to Federal Plaza. He told them that due to their immigration status they could be deported. If that were the case, they might be detained beforehand. And he told them that the detention would last only two or three days. At this point Rasha's mother became frantic, crying and screaming out questions. But the man's flat monotone reiterated that everything would be explained to them at Federal Plaza.

This was no accidental arrest. The man seemed to know everything about the family, including the fact that Rasha's two youngest brothers, both minors, were U.S. citizens. He turned to Rasha's father and told him to arrange custody for the boys. Rasha's father suggested that his brother, who lives in New York City, could take care of them. He asked to call him, suggesting that the authorities wait before transporting them to Federal

Plaza until his brother could arrive. But the agent torpedoed the idea. That would take too long, he said, and instructed him instead to wake the tenants below and leave the boys there. Rasha's father had no choice but to comply, and when they were ready to go, the agent turned to the entire family and said, "We're going to handcuff you now."

(Later Rasha learned why her eldest brother had already been not only handcuffed but shackled. Munir is a deep and stubborn sleeper, and when an agent went to his downstairs bedroom to wake him, Munir was uncooperative. "Why?" he kept asking. "Come on, get up," the agent said. "Why?" "Just get up," the man repeated, and Munir asked why again. "Get up!" the agent yelled. "Get up and put your hands together, like the way you pray!" Munir swore at him and told him to get the hell away. "So they shackled him," Rasha told me, "you know, to tame him.")

Outside, the official vehicles had closed off the entire street. The agents shepherded the family into a van, and they sat on benches in the back, riding in silence except for Rasha's sobbing mother, until they arrived at Federal Plaza in Manhattan. The ride was bumpy and disorienting, affording them no view of the road. When the van stopped and the back doors eventually swung open, they were all pulled from the vehicle into the building, where they were led to a room and then searched and fingerprinted before being dumped in a holding cell. They sat in the cell for what felt like half their lives.

Eventually the cell door opened and two FBI agents walked in. One was the man who had been in charge at their home. The two agents passed out flyers of alleged terrorists and wanted men, instructing them all to look at the pictures. The papers moved down the line of the family. Do you know any of them? the head agent asked. No, everyone responded in turn. And Rasha realized that they themselves were being investigated as terrorists.

Each family member was then escorted individually into a separate room. When Rasha's turn came, she was taken in handcuffs to a bare room furnished with a simple desk and a few chairs. They began questioning her. Where was she on X day? When did she go to Y place? She looked at her interrogators. How did they know where she had been? She answered their

questions, realizing that they already knew what she was going to say. Her interrogators were neither rude nor abrasive. They were polite, and why shouldn't they have been? There was nothing she could tell them that would help their investigation. After a few minutes, they even seemed to be feeding her the answers to their questions. None of this lessened her fear—Rasha was scared to death about what was happening and what was going to happen—but the whole drama seemed stupid, scripted, and pro forma, a badly choreographed dance of bureaucracy and dread.

YEARS BEFORE, when she was in Syria and studying in the seventh grade, Rasha learned how to shoot a rifle. It was part of the curriculum in the public girls' school she attended. They had mandatory classes in military history that were taught by a female officer who made them sing patriotic songs and memorize the details of Syria's various military escapades. The regime demanded devotion—All hail Hafez, the lion of Syria—and Rasha had to comply. There she was, a thirteen-year-old girl—awkward, dislocated, going through puberty, and half a world from what she knew—loading and unloading a rifle with a bunch of other girls in a class at school.

Outside class she would repeat to her school friends what she heard about their dear president at home, and they would stare at her with their mouths dropping, and then they would shush her up. "What are you doing?" they would whisper. "No. You never, ever, ever say anything about the president!" She would become even more pro-American then, seeing with a teenage girl's perspective what things like freedom of speech, arbitrary detention, and human rights mean. She realized that she took so much for granted. At times like these, she missed her American life.

THAT NIGHT THEY PRAYED as a family in the holding cell at Federal Plaza. Her father led the prayer, and the women covered their hair as best they could. When the authorities came back in the morning, her father pleaded with them. Enough of this, he said. Just deport us. It would be a lot

more dignified than having to go to jail, he said. Take us to the airport right now and just put us on a plane. But the FBI man wouldn't hear it. No, he said. We are turning you over to the INS. You have to be investigated, and you will be held in detention meanwhile. Another agent told them in more private tones that they should have expected to be arrested, in times like these, and that they would be deported within three days, but that they would have a better life over there. Rasha glared at him. He was so cavalier, so offhand, she felt. And he sounded like he was lecturing them, telling them with a kind of official nonchalance that we're cleaning out the country and you're the dirt. Right there Rasha's anger toward how immigrants are treated in the United States was sparked. The feelings would deepen.

When the cell door swung open again, the agents told them that they were now being taken to separate facilities. Rasha's father and Munir were being sent to a male prison in Brooklyn. The women would be taken to a women's prison in New Jersey, and Wassim, who was under eighteen years of age, to a juvenile detention center in Pennsylvania. The agents told them to stand up, because they were now going to be shackled and led to different vehicles to transport them to their various locations. This was the most unbearable news, and horror set in that the family really was being split up. Through her own waterlogged eyes, Rasha watched every person in her family collapse in tears.

UNDER ARMED ESCORT, the three women were driven to Bergen County Jail. The van parked in the prison's sally port, and Rasha, her mother, and sister were met by the prison's correctional officers and led in handcuffs from the vehicle where they were strip-searched and photographed before being taken to one of the prison's holding areas. Rasha had barely recovered from the violation of the strip search when she found herself staring at the scene in front of her. The holding cell was filthy, disgusting, and overcrowded. People milled about waiting to hear their cell assignments, and everybody seemed nasty or catatonic. *This is just like prison on television*, Rasha thought, and she was frightened for herself and

for her mother. A correctional officer opened the door and told them to get inside. The door locked behind them.

For six hours they were stuck waiting in the holding cell, as if "holding" meant a place where you hold on to (a) family or (b) your sanity. It scared her to the white of her bones, and when they finally heard their names called, the women sighed in relief. But their respite was short-lived. They were merely herded into another holding cell, teeming with even more people, the most crowded place Rasha could imagine, and they would stay there for two days. Rasha broke down and sobbed.

During this time Rasha's mother raged and yelled until she was able to place a call to her brother-in-law about her youngest sons. She looked so relieved to hear that her children were managing, and she related in detail to her brother-in-law how she and the family were being held. Rasha, Reem, and their mother were eventually moved again to a larger space, a wing of the facility, where they were again strip-searched, then given beige jumpsuits and black-and-white Converse shoes, and assigned to cells. Rasha kept thinking about what the INS official had told them at Federal Plaza: that they would be detained for three days tops, then deported. But when they joined the general population, another realization hit her. They were going to be staying for a while.

When Rasha looked at her new address, she saw a huge room with cells lining the wall. Correctional officers stood in a separate area that was elevated, behind glass, and in front of the cells. From their perch they could watch the inmates constantly. Rasha looked at the arrangement and thought, *They keep us like lab rats*. She and Reem were assigned to the same cell: two unhappy beds and a stainless-steel toilet.

They were given blankets, thick, itchy blankets made of some kind of Stone Age material that didn't even seem to bend. It was like sleeping under hairy cardboard.

And they began to live, or at least survive, there. It was so much to deal with, and it had all happened so fast, and Rasha became extremely depressed. Prison was mostly a terrible tedium that promoted an inconsolable apathy. You stopped caring. She would lie on her bed for days on end,

thinking about her feelings. She felt demeaned and humbled. She'd had setbacks in the past, but she had never been this sad, this powerless, this misunderstood. She contemplated hurting herself. She considered suicide. She had never felt more human, and she discovered that being human means being vulnerable.

For a while she stopped eating. She would lie on her bed sometimes for two or three days continuously, finally lugging herself out of bed one day when the cell door opened so she could join the others and eat. *Like lab rats*, she thought.

She slowly snapped out of her depression, but she couldn't stop feeling angry. She tried to transform her anger into a life lesson, to believe that God was trying to show her the nature of her humanity. But she felt wronged. Never in her life had she thought that she would end up in jail unless she had committed a crime. So why was she here? For what? Because she had overstayed her visa and was now undocumented? She didn't commit a crime, and she was being punished for someone else's acts. For someone else's crime. She hadn't been convicted. She had been abducted.

This wasn't justice. It was revenge.

She watched her mother become a praying machine.

She began to observe the little things the inmates would do for survival, to keep a sense of autonomy, in whatever small fashion, over their own destiny. One woman would swipe the pint-size milk cartons from her meals and store them in the toilet because they stayed colder that way. When Rasha's mother saw this, she freaked out. "Oh, my God," she told her daughters at a meal one day. "They put milk in the toilet! Why? Why do they put milk in the toilet!"

And Rasha saw her mother slowly begin to mingle with the other inmates, which relieved her as she never expected it would. Her mother shared a cell with another woman, and Rasha, in her cell, was becoming closer to her sister. They had often fought while growing up, but now they were close. The two girls held each other's sanity like a locket, and Rasha felt the life breathing back into her. She and Reem began cracking all kinds of jokes about prison life (jokes that Rasha has since blocked out). They played

games with each other. They looked down at their prison-issue jumpsuits and Converse shoes and resolved never to wear Converse shoes again.

Over time they met the rest of the inmates: Pakistani women, Arab women, and other Muslims detained under similar circumstances; Russians and Israelis were also there, usually for immigration reasons; a smaller group of Asians and a much larger population of Latinas and African-American women held mostly on drug-related charges. They found out that the other immigration detainees had been incarcerated for days, weeks, and sometimes months. This discovery was not comforting.

But if the holding area reminded her of TV prison, the prison wing was different. On TV, inmates are constantly in your face, goading you into fights, organizing into gangs, and carving out turf. But at Bergen, Rasha eventually found out that the women were there because of crimes they'd committed just to get on with their lives, to make money, to survive. Petty theft, smuggling, and dealing were their offenses. It didn't matter if the women were serving criminal sentences or were detained for immigration violations. Everyone was incarcerated together. And slowly Rasha and her sister and mother learned that the women in jail, both immigrant and criminal prisoners, were kind with each other. The system had turned all of them into caged specimens, and as a way of defeating it, the inmates shared in a surplus of goodwill for one another. Being treated as beasts grew their humanity to one another. It was how everyone survived.

The situation was different with the correctional officers. They spoke to the inmates as if they were gods and the inmates a subhuman species. Rasha found them ignorant and abusive. They carried their authority like a truncheon. They walked around like Mack trucks shaking the highway, and they steamrolled over you like you were a fly stuck in hot tar. They yelled at you. They ignored you. They terrified you. Here the gods were the beasts.

GABY WAS CONFUSED. Rasha had just disappeared. They had made plans a couple of days ago to hang out after school, but Rasha never showed up. Gaby called her cell phone, but Rasha wasn't picking up. She called

Nicky, and Nicky said the same thing had happened to her. They both called her house, and no one answered there either. They began worrying. Where is Rasha? Where is her family?

Gaby was on her computer one night a few days later when someone instant-messaged her out of nowhere. ARE YOU GABY? the message read. YES, THIS IS GABY, she wrote back, confused. A message popped up on her screen: GIVE ME YOUR PHONE NUMBER. I HAVE TO TALK TO YOU. It was Nada, a friend of Rasha's family. Gaby had met her before, although they weren't close. But Nada knew that Gaby and Rasha were best friends. Through Rasha's uncle, Nada and her family had learned what had happened, and Nada explained the situation to Gaby. "Oh, my God," Gaby said. "But you can't tell anybody," Nada warned. "Don't contact anybody." Gaby agreed, and she hung up the phone. She was so scared for Rasha.

THEY WERE MORE FORTUNATE than many of the post-September 11 detainees. They had an attorney. One of Reem's friends learned about their ordeal and called various legal and community organizations on their behalf. After being incarcerated for two weeks Rasha and her family received their first visit from an attorney affiliated with a local Arab-American association. (Later, a well-known civil-rights attorney took up their case, and one of his associates would visit them regularly and update them on progress.) Meanwhile, they watched attorneys affiliated with the Council on American-Islamic Relations float by the prison, trying to locate others who had been swept up in the mass arrests.

But prison still terrifies. It didn't take Reem long to develop a horrible rash all over her body from those blankets. One night, when everyone was asleep, Reem couldn't take the itch and pain any longer, and she began knocking on the glass. Two officers were talking on the other side, and Reem began pleading with them to come out. "I need to tell you something," she said. "Come out." The glass moved sound only in one direction. The officers could hear her, but she couldn't hear them. One officer looked up, stared at Reem, and motioned for her to go back into the interior of her cell. But Reem

wouldn't give up. She kept knocking, louder and louder. "Come here!" she yelled. She opened her jumpsuit to show her rash to the female officers. "Come here!" she yelled again. "I need to show you something right now!"

The officer leaned over and pressed a button. "I'm in the middle of a conversation," she lectured. "You wait till I'm done." But Reem just wouldn't stop banging. "You come out right now!" she yelled frantically. "You come out right now!" She was sobbing. Seeing her older sister desperate for some kind of medical attention, Rasha began crying, too, and later she would thank God that her mother wasn't around to see this, because she was sure it would have given her a heart attack.

The officer finally came out to see Reem and began yelling at her. "What the hell is your problem?" she shouted. Reem was screaming hysterically. "I have a rash! My whole body is red! I need attention!" Rasha watched the officer. She wasn't the least bit sympathetic, she thought. Eventually she made a medical call.

But the incident stayed with Rasha. She couldn't get it out of her head. She kept seeing the officer's reaction replay when she closed her eyes. The only reason she'd made the call was because it was her duty, Rasha thought, because her job told her she had to do something. It was not out of any feeling for Reem's suffering. Not because she, too, was a human being. Beasts acting like gods.

THEY STAYED IN COUNTY JAIL for three weeks, after which they were transferred to a female wing in the Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC) in Brooklyn. This is a federal prison on the outskirts of Sunset Park, a working-class neighborhood of barren warehouses, low-rent town houses, desperately few trees, and crowded immigrant families. The prison is recessed under the Gowanus Expressway and in a bombed-out industrial area hosting strip clubs and a Costco nearby. But it was also the same facility that was holding Rasha's brother and father.

Getting there was the same routine. They collected their belongings, then were shackled and driven under armed guard to Brooklyn. There,

they were again led out of the Bureau of Prisons van, given jumpsuits, photographed, and searched. But, compared to Bergen, MDC was a step upward. The female wing was much cleaner than the New Jersey jail and arranged more like dormitory living than lab-rat cages. The women were assigned to a huge room with bunk beds and lockers. The wing had a simple common kitchen, and its architecture facilitated much more opportunity to commune with others. Maybe life was getting better.

The women held at MDC were just as resourceful, especially again with food. They would collect all the leftover food and find ways to preserve it: jerk the meat, collect the vegetables and store them. When they were given plain pasta for dinner one night, some of the Asian inmates took over, reaching for the old vegetables, chopping them up, and mixing them with the pasta for dinner. Rasha was impressed.

But, just as at Bergen, time at MDC dragged on, and Rasha began to feel that they were never going to get out, that she wasn't going to see her friends again, that she was not going to graduate college, get married, and move on to the next phases of her life. She slowly resigned herself to these facts. At least if she had committed a crime, she would have stood in front of a judge and answered the charge against her. If convicted, she would have been properly sentenced, and then she would know exactly how long she was to be here. But as a detainee she had no idea when she would be let out. It was enough to drive her crazy.

What saved both her and her sister from madness was a feeling of responsibility for their mother. The living arrangements allowed the daughters to look out for her. This usually meant standing up for her with the correctional officers, who often treated Rasha's mother, since she couldn't communicate in English as easily as her daughters, with impatient contempt. The conflict reached a head one day when Rasha's mother went to a room assigned to their wing's correctional counselor. A correctional counselor's job is to assist in the smooth running of the facility, in part by hearing and assisting inmates' concerns and requests. She asked him to call her son, who was being held in Pennsylvania.

Rasha didn't like this counselor. He had all the capricious behavior and

arbitrary mood swings of a dictator. On some days he would look at you with these large, gentle cat eyes. He would listen to your problems and help you out as he could. Then you'd feel so grateful, as if you owed him more than you would ever be capable of repaying. But most of the time, he was just lecturing and insolent. He would look at Rasha and her family, in their prison jumpsuits, and treat them like the dust hiding under dust. He didn't know the reasons for people's incarceration, and he didn't care anyway. He was always shaking his head at the inmates, telling them they shouldn't expect anything at MDC and that they deserved everything they got. Since they all had done something terrible, they all deserved to be here. That's how he treated Rasha, but she had committed no crime, and she knew she didn't deserve to be there. She hated him.

Rasha's mother had the right to call Wassim in juvenile detention on regular occasions, and she always counted down the days when she would next be able to hear his voice. One day, when it was time, she walked into the counselor's office and asked him to call. For reasons that were unclear to Rasha, he denied her mother's request and summarily dismissed her like a kindergarten child. Rasha's mother walked out of his office believing she would never be able to call her son. She was in tears, and the two girls ran up to their mother to ask her why she was crying. They got the story, and turned their mother around, walking her back into the counselor's room. They started yelling at the counselor, and eventually he relented. Rasha's mother felt so much better, because she got to make the call and talk to her son. But Rasha looked at the counselor and could feel the acid bubbling in her stomach for this man who made her mother cry for no reason.

FOR A WHILE they were the only immigration detainees in their wing of MDC. Everyone else was being held on a criminal charge. Some of them were so young. One baby-faced Latina girl seemed so childlike to Rasha that she felt her heart crack every time she looked at her.

One day a woman was newly deposited in their wing. Rasha later discovered that she had been delivered directly from the airport, even though she

and her husband had valid entry visas. The prison authorities had taken her belongings and outfitted her in a standard-issue jumpsuit, and the lady walked in looking like she was already dead, holding a towel wrapped around her head as an impromptu *hijab*, her hand clasping it tightly under her chin. Rasha's mother spotted her. "I think she's Muslim," she whispered to Rasha before going over to the woman. She started to speak to her in English but received only a blank stare. So she tried Arabic, and the woman, who turned out to be Egyptian, exhaled an enormous sigh of relief. Speaking in a flurry of their mother tongue, they both broke down crying.

Rasha's mother also befriended another woman, Dora, a middle-aged Nigerian woman. She was tall and round and spoke a lilting West African English. When she talked, it was as if the words were bouncing like a stone skipping over water. She had half a dozen kids in Nigeria and was now stuck in MDC on drug charges. She was also a born-again Christian, and she had a mission to heal the whole jail and save everyone's soul. She would move from person to person and channel God's good graces to them all. She did it with such sweetness and conviction, though, that you couldn't help but be bowled over by her. She had a lot of faith.

Rasha's mother liked that about her, and Dora was eventually very helpful. Before they had been arrested, Rasha's mother had had surgery scheduled. She was having gallbladder problems, but the incarceration had forced her to miss her appointment. At MDC her gallstones flared up again, painfully. The prison doctor prescribed some painkillers, but they had little effect. To leave the facility for a medical procedure was a bureaucratic nightmare and would take months of wrangling and paperwork. Rasha's mother intensified her own prayers in an effort to help ease her own suffering.

For three nights Dora would visit her. She would come with a cup of water. "I've prayed over this water. Drink it," she would say. Rasha wondered what her mother would do, but in prison, or in any desperate moment in your life, you are going to hang on to anything, she realized. Her mother drank the water, and Dora then gave some to her and her sister. They all drank the water, and for whatever unknown reason the pain subsided. Everyone loved Dora.

Another day a group of women, including the three of them, were sitting around the bottom bunk of one of the beds talking. Suddenly Rasha heard sounds coming from the lockers behind the beds, weird noises, an amorous racket being exchanged between two of the inmates. She turned to her sister, and they realized in a silent look between them what was going on. Their mother was talking to another woman, and they tried to get her attention, to distract her so she wouldn't hear the same thing they did. It would have been altogether too awkward, Rasha thought. "Come on, *Ummi*. It's time to go," Rasha said to her mother. They moved away to another part of the room, saving their mother, they thought, from the shock of prison sexuality. Later, when they were without their mother, they laughed about the whole matter.

And then after about a month at MDC, Rasha received her first piece of mail from Gaby, who had found out from Nada that Rasha had been transferred to MDC and that she could now receive mail. Rasha couldn't believe it. She said it was like Christmas when the mail came! She read Gaby's letter over a hundred times, even though she knew it by heart after seventeen readings. Gaby sent more letters, along with pictures of them when they were in high school. Rasha would cry looking at the pictures. *Damn, what is she trying to do to me? What is she doing to me?* she would think. But it was nice, and she made sure to save each letter like the treasure it was. Rasha, who still has the letters, told me that they gave her "a feeling that I'm being remembered." She added, "You can imagine—well, no, you probably can't imagine—but it was a feeling that somebody knows I'm here."

AS QUICKLY AS THEY WERE TAKEN, they were released. It happened in the first days of May. One morning Rasha heard her name called by one of the correctional officers, then her mother's, and then her sister's. They were told to collect their belongings, because they were free to go. Skeptical but hopeful, Rasha gathered her letters. Once she walked through the metal gate of the women's section with her mother and sister and saw her father and brother waiting for them, she thought, *Oh my God, it really*

is true. *We're finally out!* The entire family was set free at the same time, including Wassim, who was discharged from the juvenile facility in Pennsylvania on the same day. An immigration official was present at their release. He handed Rasha's father some details about an upcoming trial date and the name of their immigration judge. He also looked over their file and remarked, "You know, you have grounds for a residency petition here." No one knew how to balance gratitude with resentment.

An officer was dispatched to accompany Rasha's father as he drove to Pennsylvania to retrieve Wassim. Meanwhile, Rasha's uncle arrived at the facility to take them home. They walked out of prison, and as soon as they were beyond MDC, Rasha fell to the ground and kissed the pavement. She looked up. She hadn't seen sky for almost three months. It was the same sky, and it looked glorious and familiar.

They entered their own house like strangers, which was creepy. Everything was just as they had left it, except that the food in the fridge had turned moldy and dust had snowed over the furniture. Her uncle had also brought her two youngest brothers with him, along with some groceries, and when her father arrived a few hours later with Wassim, the family was quietly reunited. Rasha felt numb and dislocated. It was hard to believe that the nightmare was over. She watched Munir disappear downstairs and heard him calling his friends, and then she too began plotting about how she would surprise Gaby and Nicky and the rest of her friends with the news that she was free. She was free! Surprising them became the only thing to look forward to at that moment. She didn't want to think about the past. She found that she could think only in one direction, to the future.

The family had a quiet night. Rasha's mother went to the kitchen and cooked a simple meal. They ate dinner together, and over the meal Rasha and her siblings exchanged a few stories about their experiences. Her parents were mostly quiet, and then everyone went to bed early.

THE NEXT MORNING Gaby ran into some of Munir's friends on her way to college, and they told her that Rasha's family was finally home.

"You're lying," she told them, "you're lying!" No, it's true, they said. Munir called us yesterday, they explained, and Gaby turned hopeful and then totally excited by the news. She pulled out her phone and called Nicky. "Nicky, Rasha's back!" she screamed into her cell, and Nicky, who was going up the escalator at her Manhattan college when she heard Gaby's news, couldn't believe it either. She froze at the top of the stairs, and the people behind her bumped into her like groceries on a faulty checkout belt. They began yelling at her to move out of the way while she stood absolutely still, absorbing what she'd just heard.

Gaby hung up the phone but was so overwhelmed with the anticipation of seeing Rasha that she couldn't wait for Nicky. So she blew off her first class and beelined for the house. But then it struck her: "I can't go empty handed!" She made a pit stop at a corner store and quickly scanned around for a gift. Outside the front door of the store was a potted plant for sale. She grabbed it and, trucking the plant in her arms, hustled her way to Rasha's house.

The sound of the doorbell was bizarre to Rasha. *Who the hell is that at 10:00 A.M.?* she thought. In her pajamas Rasha opened the door, and standing there behind a pot full of leaves and flowers was Gaby. She was already crying hysterically. And as soon as she saw Gaby, Rasha burst into tears.

"Oh, man!" Rasha stomped her foot. "The surprise is ruined! I wanted to surprise you!"

They hugged forever.

"I'm sorry," Gaby said, sniffing between her tears. "I didn't call first! I'm so sorry!"

"Get in here," Rasha reprimanded, but the two girls stayed where they were. They just couldn't stop hugging each other and crying.

RASHA'S PARENTS SOLD THE HOUSE. They were behind in the payments, and Rasha's mother was convinced that the place was cursed anyway. Rasha also had to deal with the row of F's on her transcript. Having disappeared from the world for three months, she naturally failed all her classes. She went to speak to her dean and calmly explained her situation.

He listened sympathetically, said he was very sorry for what had happened to her, but then asked if she could provide some documentation to prove what she'd just told him. "What kind of sick person would tell you that she'd spent three months in jail to get excused from her grades?" she asked. "You'd be surprised," he said.

Rasha learned that her sister's classmates had organized around the family's case. Over two hundred people from the school had signed a petition on her behalf, and the president of the university wrote a letter to the INS supporting the family.

Right after her release, Rasha felt freer than she ever had in her life. Normal things like hanging out in Times Square or riding the subway had never been so exciting to her. But everywhere around her was the constant spit of all the 9/11 talk. She bit her tongue repeatedly, and the anger inside her would boil. She now had her own analysis about the way the country is run, and she had proof about the way people are treated. She wanted to scream at people, "You don't know what you're talking about unless you've been in a situation like the one I've been in!" But she didn't say anything. She knew that it was a contradiction, but she felt both stronger and totally drained simultaneously. She thought she had aged ten years in three months.

Her family never really addressed the trauma they had undergone. No one spoke openly about it, and Munir in particular seemed deeply injured. Neither he nor their father told the women very much about MDC's male wing, where later the government's own internal auditor would expose violent abuses that some of the post-September 11 detainees endured. Right after their release, Munir was joyous and full of life. He began praying regularly, five times a day, and was talkative and communicative. That lasted for about a month, and then he began retreating into silence. He became a distant island, hard to reach.

Her mother continued to pray, and her father quit smoking, only to start up again after a bit. Rasha felt so close to and so distant from her family all the time. The closeness came from having emerged on the other side of such an experience. The distance was the inability of anybody to con-

front it. Only her sister sought outside help by going to a therapist for a while. Rasha put her energies into her future.

She started thinking about all the lawyers and activists who had helped them, and she realized that she had to do something to help others in similar situations. Her interest in international relations and human rights grew, and eventually Rasha interned with a United Nations-affiliated organization on Middle East peace. She was also nominated by her university to be a delegate scholar at an international conference on diplomacy. It was a huge honor, but one she had to turn down. Rasha was still undocumented, so, until her immigration status was resolved, she could not leave the country.

And so she told me, "If there's anything that I've discovered out of this whole thing, it's that people take for granted being a citizen of this country. They don't see the importance of having a privilege like that. I've been in this country for eighteen years, and I'm working hard, and I'm qualified, but I've missed all these opportunities. I feel like it should be a lot easier than this. It's not fun. It's not fun at all."

RASHA WAS ONE of the lucky ones. She had family, both inside and outside prison, supporting her. She may have disappeared from her friends for a while, but she hadn't dropped off the face of the earth. The family had an attorney, friends and relatives, and a growing chorus of advocates demanding their release. That wasn't the case with most of the post-September 11 detainees. Hundreds were arbitrarily arrested in the first months after the terrorist attacks. One man, a Palestinian legal permanent resident, was stopped for driving four miles over the speed limit in North Carolina. He then spent four months in jail. Many of the men—and they were overwhelmingly men—were denied access to counsel, secretly shuffled between facilities, and deported in midnight planes back to their home countries, sometimes without having their families in the United States notified and, in at least one reported case, without even his own clothes.

Human-rights organizations watched with horror as the situation unfolded and then took action. Around the same time that Rasha was freed,

in May 2002, Amnesty International released a report that charged the U.S. government with violating "certain basic rights guaranteed under international law. These include the right to humane treatment, as well as rights which are essential to protection from arbitrary detention, such as the right of anyone deprived of their liberty to be informed of the reasons for the detention; to be able to challenge the lawfulness of the detention; to have prompt access to and assistance from a lawyer; and to the presumption of innocence."

By 2003 the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) of the Justice Department completed its own investigation and, in a report of more than two hundred pages, reiterated many of the concerns held by Amnesty International. The OIG recommended, among other things, that the FBI should adopt "more objective criteria . . . in future cases involving mass arrests." Religion and ethnicity, in other words, should not be sufficient grounds for incarceration. The OIG also recommended that future arrests "might require some level of evidence linking the alien to the crime or issues in question." A bold proposal indeed.

The OIG's reports (a supplementary one came later) also corroborated recurring allegations of abuse, particularly of male detainees at MDC. September 11 detainees, the OIG found, were "slammed," "bounced," and "pressed" against the walls of the prison, even though they were compliant. This often happened in the sally port that had taped to its wall a bloody T-shirt embossed with a U.S. flag and the words THESE COLORS DON'T RUN. Twisting a detainee's arms behind his back was routine, as was pulling back his thumbs and bending his wrists forward toward his arms, a practice common enough to be known as "goosenecking." Guards yanked men by their restraints and purposefully tripped them by stepping on their chains as they walked. Detainees' meetings with their attorneys were videotaped, and the men were routinely and randomly strip-searched in efforts to humiliate and punish them. If this sounds like a milder form of the infamous actions performed by American military forces in Iraq, perhaps the resemblance is not merely coincidental. Sergeant Gary Pittman, a marine

convicted of brutalizing Iraqi prisoners, had been a guard at MDC, and he reportedly advised a fellow marine that when dealing with Iraqi detainees "you have to establish who is in charge," also telling him that Iraqi prisoners need to be treated the same way as prisoners in New York.

Rasha wouldn't tell me if any physical abuse befell her eldest brother or father, just that they were mostly silent about their experiences after the family was reunited. But by the time they were detained, most of the first wave of people who were arrested had already been deported. We may never know how many were arrested. (On November 5, 2001, the Justice Department announced 1,182 arrested, then stopped providing a tally.) The inspector general's report acknowledges 762 people detained on immigration charges between September 11, 2001, and August 6, 2002, as a direct result of the terrorist investigation (including 24 already in prison before September 11). It also says that of these 762 only 6 percent had received a final deportation order prior to their arrests.

In other words, people were picked up randomly, through traffic stops, or tips by nervous neighbors and "snitches," usually petty criminals offered leniency for any information that would push the September 11 investigation forward. (Such information is often wildly unreliable, and Rasha suspects a snitch in her case.) Prior to September 11, immigration authorities could hold people for only twenty-four hours before charging or releasing them, but by September 20, 2001, Attorney General John Ashcroft had changed the rule to forty-eight hours, with an emergency exception for an unspecified "reasonable" amount of time. Most people detained didn't fight their deportations (which is not surprising, considering the stories coming out of MDC). They should have been deported before the legal limit of thirty days, but they continued to be held long after, because the government would not free them before completing an FBI clearance. The FBI cleared only 2.6 percent of detainees within three weeks. Some languished for hundreds of days in prison. The average length of detention for a post-September 11 detainee was eighty days, about the amount of time Rasha spent in Bergen and MDC.

IN 1941, immediately following the attack on Pearl Harbor, a similar hysteria burned through this country. The FBI swept through the Japanese-American community on the West Coast, as a lead-up to Japanese internment, arresting more than two thousand noncitizens. Those detained included community leaders, language teachers, and Buddhist priests. Edward Ennis, the general counsel of the INS, complained at the time that "the FBI was turning many aliens over to the INS without a written statement showing good cause for detention." Herbert Nicholson, pastor of the West Los Angeles Methodist Church, objected that the arrests were arbitrary. Law enforcement "picked up anybody that was the head of anything," he said. And Assistant Attorney General James Rowe Jr. later admitted that "we picked up too many. . . . Some of this stuff they were charged on was as silly as hell." After these arrests the government proceeded to detain over 110,000 people, 70,000 of them American citizens, on the basis of ancestry alone, in internment camps that, in the case of the one at Tule Lake, didn't close until eight months after Japanese surrender. In 1988, President George H. W. Bush formally apologized for Japanese internment.

Fortunately, post-September 11 detentions nowhere approximated the scale and suffering of Japanese internment, but the comparison of politically motivated mass arrests should be drawn. Historians of Japanese internment frequently point out that the Roosevelt administration's choice to intern the West Coast Japanese and Japanese Americans was not driven by military necessity. The administration's own intelligence often confirmed that the community as a whole was not at all a threat to national security. But rather than following the course of justice, the administration exploited the jingoism and racism of the moment. Something similar had happened now. Colleen Rowley, the whistle-blower FBI agent who criticized the Bureau for its pre-September 11 lapses, acknowledged the political and ethnic nature of the post-September 11 sweep in a public letter to the FBI director in March 2003. "After 9/11," she wrote,

headquarters encouraged more and more detentions for what seem to be essentially PR purposes. Field offices were required to report daily the number of detentions in order to supply grist for statements on our progress in fighting terrorism. The balance between individuals' civil liberties and the need for effective investigation is hard to maintain even during so-called normal times, let alone times of increased terrorist threat or war. It is, admittedly, a difficult balancing act. But from what I have observed, particular vigilance may be required to head off undue pressure (including subtle encouragement) to detain or "round up" suspects—particularly those of Arabic origin.

I traveled to New Jersey one afternoon to talk to Sohail Mohammed, an attorney who represented thirty-eight September 11 detainees. He told me about the difficulties he had reaching clients, talking to judges, and dealing with the new category of "special interest" detainees created in the wake of the terrorist attacks. "This is not law enforcement. It's random enforcement. It's capricious and copious," he said. He described how a detention policy based not on credible leads but on ethnicity or religion provides, at best, a false sense of security. "I want my children to believe in America," he told me. "What do I tell them? That everyone should be treated equally under the law, but Muslims aren't?" And he offered his own prediction. "In fifty years," he said, "Congress will apologize."

AFTER THE INITIAL WAVE of arrests, the Bush administration announced a new program, the "absconder apprehension initiative." The administration claimed that it was going after the 314,000 people in the United States who had "absconded" after having been served deportation notices, and it began by prioritizing Arab and Muslim absconders. Besides questions about the selective enforcement of such a program and the fact that it broke up many families, another problem quickly became apparent. Many arrested under this initiative either didn't know they had been served

final deportation orders (which can be decided in absentia) or were not “absconders” at all, living out in the open and in full knowledge of the authorities but with appeals pending in their cases (such was the case with Rasha’s family). Immigration appeals, with the current backlog of cases, often drag on for five years or more, yet under this program people were often taken into custody regardless.

But immigration law, in the words of law professor David Cole, “affords a convenient pretext for targeting millions of people.” Just because the government has “charged a foreign national as deportable,” Cole explains, “does not generally authorize his detention, unless the individual poses a danger to the community or risk of flight.” But, as with most of the post-September 11 detainees, the administration exploited an already flawed system of immigration detention, one that exists largely out of public view, with the absconder initiative. This way the government could claim success by appearing zealous and “tough on terror,” but by using immigration detention as a political tool it was also effectively “blurring the distinction between alien, criminal, and terrorist,” as Mark Dow has shown in *American Gulag: Inside U.S. Immigration Prisons*. Dow reveals how immigration detention has exploded in recent years. Since 1996, the year Congress mandated the detention of immigrants who had committed aggravated felonies even after they have served their sentences, the number of people in immigration detention has risen dramatically. In 1995 approximately 5,500 people were held on any given day for immigration reasons. By 2006 the number was over 27,000. The federal government, moreover, doesn’t have the resources to house all these people, so they often contract out beds to county jails, such as the Bergen County Jail, which holds about a hundred immigrant detainees at a day rate of \$85, raking in a total of more than \$3 million annually. Besides being politically expedient, immigration detention is also a growing and lucrative industry.

But what this system means is that you can languish in prison for a long time without ever having committed a crime. And this is what angers Rasha more than anything else. Her liberty was taken away from her for no good reason. She hadn’t hurt anyone but was treated like a criminal, and she

experienced firsthand the manner in which people in prison are treated. She felt powerless to change her situation and utterly unable to challenge her accusers. And when the presumption of guilt was summarily dumped on her, she felt stripped of her dignity.

Now she realizes the importance of speaking out, of correcting the ills that befell her and continue to befall others, and of being able to talk back to a system orchestrated to pacify you. She wants to grow from her experience and is preparing to pursue graduate work in international relations with a program affiliated with the United Nations. She is ready to dedicate her life to human-rights advocacy, because she believes that the only chance for improving our world lies in greater international cooperation and universal respect for human rights. She wants to move forward in her life. And after living through her ordeal, she believes that it is crucial not to obsess about the past but to look constructively to the future. Nevertheless, Rasha will never allow herself to forget what happened to her and her family.

IT WAS THE FIRST weekend after getting out. Rasha went with her girlfriends to Times Square to celebrate her release. That Saturday they went for dinner at Chili’s. Gaby was there, and Nicky, too, and a couple of Rasha’s other close friends. They sat at a big table, and Rasha savored the freedom of ordering food from a menu.

Halfway through dinner she got up to go to the bathroom. When she was coming back to her table, she froze in shock. *It was him. All the restaurants in New York City, and he’s at this one.* There, at another big table, was the counselor from MDC, the very same man who constantly talked down to her and her sister, who treated them like criminals and criminals like animals. The man who’d made her mother cry.

She stood there for a while just watching him. He was with his family, at what appeared to be someone’s birthday party. A woman—she looked to be his wife—was beside him, and his children around him, along with several other people. Everyone was standing up at his table, pleasantly socializing.

Rasha stood there and waited. She knew what she had to do, but she didn't want his children around. A couple of minutes later, they were off playing with some kids at the other end of the table, and Rasha strode quickly over.

She tapped his back with her finger. "Hi," she said. Her voice was ball-bearing steady.

He turned around. "Hi," he replied. But there wasn't a hint in his voice that he knew who Rasha was.

"You don't recognize me?" All the scenes when he'd yelled at her, when he'd made her cry, when he'd made her mother cry, flashed in her mind. And yet he didn't say anything. His expression remained changeless. "Remember?" she said, her voice turning up. "MDC? You don't remember me?"

And suddenly she realized, *Of course he doesn't remember me. I'm not in a beige jumpsuit.*

But then he responded. "Ah, wow," he said. "See? You cleaned up your act."

Rasha stared into his eyes. "You know," she said, inhaling deeply, "I wasn't supposed to be there in the first place." She then lectured him about how he should have known that and that he "needed to learn a thing or two about respecting others." She could feel her chest rising the whole time. She ended by telling him, "You are a fucking asshole, and you will always be a fucking asshole." And before he could respond, she twirled deliberately and walked back to her table with a stiff spine and an anxious but triumphal smile growing on her face.

She ran the last steps and was out of breath when she got to her friends. She told them what had happened. "You won't believe who I just saw!" she yelled. She explained who he was and what she'd said. "It was such a satisfying moment," she told them, her voice sounding all brassy, like a trumpet blowing victory. "I would have punched him," she joked, "but he's like seven feet tall!" They all laughed, and Rasha was ecstatic. She couldn't wait to tell her parents. She knew it didn't really change anything, but it didn't matter. It just didn't matter. It was such a satisfying moment. Confronting your jailer. On this side of freedom. Such a satisfying moment.

SAMI

