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Category: Creative

Prompt: Write about your greatest inspiration.

Region: Europe, Russia & Central Asia

A Fearless Smile

"We hereby declare that, from now on, women with hijabs or men with any religious indications on their bodies, will not be permitted to renew their university records. Any attempt will be considered a protest and will face a penalty", said the announcer, in a nauseatingly cheerful voice. As the speaker uttered these horrendous words, the sound of uneasy steps arrived from the kitchen; Fatma loomed from the living room entrance with detergent stains on her hands. She stared at the radio, confused, for she had just heard the words that would terminate her life as a student. She turned her baffled face to her mother sitting in front of the radio. As their eyes met in the pale light, just as stunned, her mother wondered why a simple fabric would violently rip the right to education from the sole person in their family ever to achieve to go to a university. Fatma or her mother could not even bring themselves to utter a single word. A stinging stillness merged their anguish as if they were a single individual.

Until dusk, not even a drop of sleep visited Fatma's eyes. Instead, she watched the blank ceiling with a glazed expression. She wondered about her friends' reactions; she was worried about them, too. After a point, these thoughts became excruciating. She slowly got out of bed and wore the hijab her mom gifted her with. The harmony of the lime green and golden engravings always stunned her. It was her favorite. She prayed in the dark to free herself from the weight of what she had heard on the radio. Just as she finished praying and got into bed again with a lighter heart, her mother knocked on the door. She sat on the edge of Fatma's bed. Please don't go to school tomorrow, she said, I don't know what they would do to you. Fatma shook her head; I must face it, she said.

It was a sunny day at the university. The guards coated with shiny silver shields with matching pistols clutched tightly in their hands, eyes looking around as if they were preserving something valuable. Fatma approached the university entrance, the place which she deemed safe.

As her steps brought her closer to the gate, she straightened her shoulders, fixed her hijab with her face held high, and proceeded to pass through the gate. Just like that, the soldiers with

their silver armor broke their noble stance and attacked her, preventing her from entering the university. The familiar breeze struck the tip of the lime green hijab and moved the golden engravings.

They knocked her to the ground; she could not fight back as she endeavored to keep her hijab steady. She tried to stand up, but they knocked her down with sheer hostility as if that soothing lime green menaced them. The chaos stirred inside her head and made the world spin.

"The new rector of the Istanbul University invites students with hijab to sit down for a friendly talk!" said the newspaper with giant fonts that have a happy connotation.

After two months of limiting her contact with the university after they brutally prevented her entrance, Fatma finally built the courage to pick up the newspaper her mom dropped by to her that morning. But the moment she saw this news, she quickly creased the paper. No matter what they call it, she knew there was nothing friendly about those interactions. So many of Fatma's friends told her about what they experienced in, as they call it, "the persuasion rooms." Dimmed light, emotional mobbing, and fierce pressure to remove the hijab. Look at your bright and gorgeous hair; you cannot hide this beautiful aspect of yours under a piece of fabric; it would be a shame, said the woman who maintained the "friendly talks" on behalf of the rector. Many of those women didn't take their hijabs off, but they left the rooms with emotional traumas.

No matter the damage those rooms have caused, those students originated protests and initiated movements to eradicate the post-modern coup's consequences in Turkey with sheer diligence. People from the right, the left, communists and liberals, anyone with a genuine heart attended these rallies to go against this violation.

Once the valedictorian students with hijabs started protesting, the movement gained momentum. They weren't allowed to attend their own graduation ceremony, to give their valedictorian toast, their parents couldn't see their daughters graduate with honors. However, one dear friend of Fatma disregarded this rule. She was the valedictorian, she had earned her degree, and her hijab was going to shine while she was giving her toast. She ran up to the stage during the ceremony, but they closed her mouth; you have no right to speak, they said. They dragged her from the stage.

Fatma knew what her friend would say. She would scream her pain; she would lament how easy it is to steal the future of a generation. But even though she didn't physically articulate those words, Fatma and others comprehended the message she tried to convey by going up to that stage with a hijab on her head. "You have no right to speak." echoed in Turkey for years.

"We regret to inform you that your record to our university is terminated upon three unsuccessful renewals. We wish you success with your future endeavors." Fatma stared at the letter she just got, hoping that the wording would spontaneously change in the blink of an eye, and she wouldn't have to confront this brutal note. Nothing happened. Those months-long intensive protests and rallies didn't work. After the new academic year, the government took profound precautions to prevent the protestors. Under no circumstances was hijab acceptable.

At this point, like every student with a hijab, Fatma ought to decide. She could remove it and carry on with her education, but she refused it. So instead, she tossed the letter to the back of a drawer, and she promised herself never to open that drawer ever again. She knew she had to move on; no matter how heartbreaking it was, this chapter of her life had come to a sorrowful end.

Three years of university have matured her emotionally and intellectually. She was eager to find new jobs and grounds to develop herself without a diploma but with her hijab. She wrote a book about contemporary Muslim leaders. It was her first work, yet not the last. With the distinction she gained from the academic world, she threw herself into publishing. Even though she didn't have a diploma, she translated many significant texts.

Years have passed, not only did she raise a modest career, but she also raised three beautiful children. While she was an outstanding mother who met her kids' wishes, she did not give up on her desire to intellectually contribute to people. For that, she kept on writing and producing. But also planted the importance of preserving one's identity in her kids' heads. Her biggest wish was to share her productions with her kids when they grow old.

After eleven years, just as she had lost all hope, the government issued a new law, allowing people with hijab to enroll in university. Even though she was five months pregnant, she renewed her record the next day of the government's announcement. She was 32 when she graduated with honor.

After Fatma graduated, she wrote an article on the 20th anniversary of the 28 of February 1997. This was the first time Fatma could ever cry about the post-modern coup and her stolen eleven years. While she was writing this paper, she cried for hours. This was a catharsis for her. Sharing her experience with the public mended her trauma scars. She acknowledged that someone out there is listening to her voice, is inspired by her, and, most importantly, believes none of it was her fault.

The word inspiration has many equivalents in many languages. But to me, it can only be associated with a feeling; the pride I felt when I placed my mother's pictures of when she earned her Ph.D. into our family albums. When she smiled fearlessly, wearing the lime green hijab with golden engravings on her head, holding her degree, she was no longer Fatma; but Dr. Fatma.

It has been almost 25 years since the 28 of February 1997, the post-modern coup announcement. For these 25 years, no one could grasp why the people with hijabs were targeted. No one understood how their presence in the university would harm the country's improvement. Yet, within those 25 years, my mother showed incredible resilience and courage to an unfairness she couldn't understand thoroughly. No matter how hard it was, my mother preserved her identity and taught her son never to give up, just like she never did. Growing up with her stories and anecdotes, I recognized that a figure in my life shows me what strength is.

Her smile that she wore as she fought for everything throughout the years never ceases to fill me with sheer inspiration along with the will and courage to fight for others—my mother's fearless smile.