

“ This story could have happened, may be will happen or perhaps not at all. After all, It talks about life regardless who, where and when.

The Near One is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locals and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events or places is purely coincidental ”

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The Near One

A story of Trust, Love and Believe

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A dedication of love to a great nation, with all the respect to the founders of civilisation. My sincere appreciation to its generous soil and the history recorded in its precious sand that is worth tons of gold. To the pure hearts of diamond and a will stronger than iron. The French philosopher René de Lubicz said, for every human there are two homes, the one he belongs to and Egypt... To Egypt, may you always be blessed.

Just a small note,
the numbers of chapters are written in Hieroglyphic, the writing system in the great ancient Egypt.

The beginning

I waited by the window gazing outside, the night moved in slow silence while I looked forward for the sun to rise and another day to start. Sleepless hours made it hard to escape the worries and fear that shadowed every corner in our house. I have been waiting since months hoping one day to see my father returning back to me, to us again. This day I waited but with a smile, it was my seventh birthday and he had always surprised me with a present and a dinner in a place of my choice, he used to be the first to give me a kiss in the morning the second I opened my eyes but that was the first year he was not home with us.

An old man owned a small grocery store opposite our house, he also woke up before anyone else did in the neighbourhood. Everyday after he opened his shop he would sit on his wooden chair and feed the birds a loaf of dry bread then he would drink a tea that he prepared for himself. He stared at the skies most of the day like he was waiting for something to happen, I gazed there too for very long. Sometimes he glanced at my window and bowed his head greeting, he knew that I was always there waiting just like him. He smiled at me and so did I, he felt lonely and so was I.

My eyes clouded in tears as I looked at the box in a corner of my room, this was my secret box. Letters and poems I wrote to my father but never gave to him, I kept them hidden like the sadness in my heart and the feelings that I was not allowed to reveal but to myself but not to anyone else. Happiness and laughter had become memory the day my father decided to marry a second wife, my mother's best friend, Farida.

I did not know whether his absence was something good or bad. Before he left, screams, arguments and fights were our life leaving my mother always in tears with a broken heart. Sadness was not the only thing that I could not bare, there was the feeling of painful guilt that killed me deep Inside, I admired Farida and I could not hate her like my mother did or as I thought I should. In my eyes, she was neither

prettier than my mother nor was she a better wife but she had confidence and she was full of life. She knew how to smile even when she was upset, she was special in the way she walked, talked and was very good at getting what she wants. She was not a woman to settle for less while my mother lived to compromise and sacrifice. Farida lived to be happy and my mother lived to please everyone.

Months passed and I did not dare to ask if or when I will see my Father again, my mother was going through much, not only for losing the man she deeply loved but for taking care of the house and us, my small brother and my young aunt. To soothe my mother's pain and to pay back for my secret feeling of guilt, I took a silent vow to support and protect her by pretending that I was fine, that my father's absence did not affect me that much. I stopped to demand or even to talk and I kept my tears to myself acting like I was strong enough. I did everything I could, wishing to see my mother smile just for once like she used to before, but she never did, she never could.

I fell asleep by the window and when I woke up the sky was already dark, the old man closed his store, the day had passed and my father did not remember my birthday, a part of me wished that he would.

...

"Le Pasteur Aimant" The loving pastor was the name of my school, a private French nun school. Although we are muslims, my father believed that this is the only place where I would receive the best education and learn of obedience and the real discipline which I would need for my life. The monastery school was to train me to be the ideal daughter and to prepare for a perfect future mother and wife. It was the most expensive school in town and that was another reason behind my father's decision, only the children of the wealthy and high society figures were accepted there and that satisfied the self image that he cared for the most.

In my school, limits and rules were set for everyone alike, no one was to cross the line and if anyone did, the punishment was prompt and hard. There in this school I was introduced to a part of life where everything was ideal and perfect, where faults must not exist.

Respect, tolerance, well manners were not negotiable and there was nothing called an excuse for behaving otherwise. Above all there

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was one matter on top of the list which was a taboo to discuss and that was Faith. Few children got suspended from school and never returned when they broke that one rule. The only time we could talk about it was in the delegated class with our teachers separately and not outside these walls.

Three times per week we were separated, christian students went to the church while we remained in the classroom with our teacher. In the month of Ramadan, the muslim fasting month, our colleagues were ordered to refrain from eating or drinking at front of us as a gesture of respect and during the forty days of the christian fasting before Easter, muslims were forbidden to bring any food containing animal products as a payback for the respect we received. Faith was a fragile tinted glass that I felt differentiating us and was forbidden to be touched.

Day after day I grew curious of the reason we were divided at that certain time especially when we are told that we are the same before God, God who is constantly watching over us. Many questions filled my mind and I wondered of the answers for long, one day before my religion lesson I prepared the demands that kept repeating in my head and I decided to ask my teacher about.

"If anyone has questions raise your hand before the closure of our lesson today" my religion teacher said.

No one raised their hands as no one ever did but this time I did, "We believe in Jesus, right?" I asked her.

"Of course we do" she raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"Why then we are not allowed to attend the lesson with our friends?" innocently I asked.

Her face changed, "We believe in Jesus and in his virgin birth and all the miracles he had performed by the power and the will of God..." she replied penetrating me with her eyes, "His mother, the virgin Mary is the only woman who is mentioned by name in the Quran and she has been purified and chosen above all women in the world from the day she was born till the end of time. We have a chapter by her name in our book and we will get to that later this month".

I stood starring at her and she glanced at me in doubt.

"Do my friends believe in all prophets like we do?" I asked.

"Yes, pretty much they do" she answered a bit confused by my question.

"So why then we are not praying together!" I insisted to hear a reply.

"The class is over" she announced ignoring my question.

"Why are you not answering me?" I followed her out of the class.

"I said the class is over" she shouted.

"If I can't ask you, who else can I ask" I insisted.

"Believe is a private matter between each one of us and God..."

"Everyone has the freedom to believe the way they want, we must treat each other with respect, we cannot be the same in everything".

"But that does not answer my question. I..."

"You are asking a lot more than what a little girl like you should" she firmly said, "And you know that these questions are out of the school rules. Now get back to your class and forget about all that".

Few days passed and my next religion lesson was about to come, not having an answer to my wonders did not satisfy my mind and made me curious more than before. I knew I will be punished if I asked again so I decided to get the answer on my own.

"I am sorry, I don't feel well. Can I excuse myself to the bathroom please" I lied to escape my religion class.

"You can but don't be late" my teacher replied avoiding to look at me like she was scared I was going to ask her again about the same thing.

Instead of going to the bathroom I sneaked out of the corridor hurrying with my steps, checking behind if anyone could see me. The back door of the church was open so I rushed in and hid behind a statue of the virgin Mary, I wanted to see how my friends prayed, I wanted to hear what they say. I just wanted to know why can't I be with my best friend or she can be with me.

The door squeaked open and I knew it was Sister Michelle, she always arranged the church before their lesson starts. My heart beat so fast and I held my breath in, hoping she won't discover about my existence in the prayer hall. Her foot steps echoed around before it suddenly stopped.

"What are you doing here?" she screamed from behind my back and my heart dropped.

"I came to... I just wanted to..." I trembled.

"You know that you should not be here" she shouted.

"Yes, sister, but I do not know why I cannot".

"Did you tell to your teacher that you are here?" she narrowed her eyes firmly questioning.

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Frightened I lowered my head down, I realised that I have put myself into deep troubles not only for escaping my lesson and hiding in the church but also because I lied.

"You have made intentionally three mistakes, not just one" Sister Michelle pointed lowering her voice. My body started to shake and my mind raced to think of something to say although I knew nothing would help.

"Dania..." She shouted suddenly my name and I started to cry, "You know you are one of my favourite students here, I won't send you home with a letter this time but you know what will happen if you do that again?" she asked and I nodded in guilt.

"Crossing the line means consequences and you must get it so you remember well to not ever do that again".

Shaking I opened my both hands and received ten hits on each with a thick wooden ruler.

"Never again, is that clear?" she shouted walking out of the church and I knew I had to follow her back to my class.

My teacher got angry when she saw Sister Michelle coming along with me, "She was not in the bathroom, was she?" my teacher asked and Sister Michelle looked at me, her eyes ordered that I say the truth.

"I was not" I cried pressing my hands together as I saw my teacher raising her wooden ruler for another punishment, I had no choice but to stretch my arms and receive ten hits more.

"What is wrong with your hands?" my mother asked frightened when I got back home, she saw how red and swollen they were.

"Nothing!" I replied.

She narrowed her eyes in doubt and asked, "Did you do something wrong at school?"

"I just wanted to understand something and I got punished for that".

...

I felt insulted, hurt and ashamed but this has taught me one thing, there is and will be more in my life that I won't be able to talk to anyone about and that meant I must search for what I want on my own. The punishment has not taken away from me the will to know, it just made me think of another way to do so.

I saved from my weekly pocket money in a small jar and when it was full, I hid it in my bag and left home earlier that day, instead of taking the bus, I walked to a book shop nearby on my way to school.

"Good morning sir" I spoke in a hurry looking at the clock ticking behind his back, "Can I purchase a Bible please".

"You want the Old testament or the New one or both" he asked.

"I don't know, I have a research about religion at school..." I lied, "I am sorry sir but I must leave soon".

"Ok, Wait a second" he disappeared for a short while, "Here..." He placed two books on the counter when he returned, "That is the bible with the old and new testament and this is the Torah, an original version I kept for very long" he smiled.

"Thank you" I opened my saving jar, "How much does that cost?".

"Just give me what you have" he tapped gently my hand, "How old are you dear?".

"Almost eight" I replied leaving hurriedly the whole Jar and ran out of the door, I had to be present in line before the school bell rings.

That was the first adventure I ever made in my life, to search and discover in secrecy by myself. That night I waited till everyone at home was asleep then I got out of bed and turned on a side lamp. All three books laid side by side and I promised myself that I will read them all even if it took me weeks, months or more. I took a deep breath before I start, it was good to take away my mind from my father absence, at least for a while.

It took me three months reading secretly the books and I did day and night, once I read all for the first time, I started reading them all over again. I thought and analysed, I compared and wrote my notes, to my surprise I found a great joy in doing so. After reading for the third time, I laid back in my bed and smiled feeling my heart at peace and my mind finally at rest. Sister Michelle and my religion teacher did not punish me, in fact, they have done me a great favour and that was to let me read, see and understand for myself. They did not mean to insult me as I thought, they just misunderstood and feared that I would misunderstand. We all love and pray to the one and only God, each of us has his own way of worship and this makes sense especially when there were centuries between every prophet that has been sent to us. Diversity in the way of worship does not mean difference in the faith itself, each one of us has his own way of reaching out to the exact same thing.

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While I turned that page of wondering in my life after I have come to know the truth that no one wanted to talk with me about, an unexpected thing happened at one particular day. Before the religion class starts, Sister Michelle and my teacher came in and they both looked at me in a way that worried me a lot, literally I thought they have found out about my secret adventure and they were going to comment about that or even worse, I will be kicked out of school, my heart stopped just like it did when I got caught at the church before. All students stood up as they entered and soon the religion teacher gestured for us to sit down.

"From now on there will be a slight change in our rules" Sister Michelle cleared her voice.

"Once a week we are going to pray together" my religion teacher announced, "While our colleagues pray in the church we will join and listen in silence and with respect, we all will repeat Amen together with them".

"And when we are done with our prayer" sister Michelle continued, "We are going to help each other in removing the benches aside so we all pray with our friends and we will sit next to them on the ground. We will listen with respect and love in our hearts" she said quickly glancing at me with a hidden smile.

They both left and I found myself running behind them in the corridor. Sister Michelle turned, "How can we help you?" she firmly asked.

"I... I just wanted to say thank you" I quickly said.

"I hope we have given you the answer to your question" my religion teacher actually smiled.

"Go back to your class and remember... follow the rules" Sister Michelle pointed before they both turned, "This kid is my favourite, I feel she is going to be someone special one day, don't you feel so?" I overheard her as they walked away.

"She is already special Sister" my teacher said and they both laughed shaking their heads.

"Dania" The music teacher shouted, "Are you falling asleep!".

I could not overcome the tiredness I felt after months reading till the sunrise .

"Sorry Miss, I am a bit exhausted" I apologised.

"I know that you study hard for the exams but resting is at home not here" she firmly said, "Now, come and show me if you have learned correctly the notes" she ordered pointing at the piano.

I played the piece of music I worked on the day before, Claire de Lune from Claude Debussy, it was my favourite and I could listen to it and play it all day. The teacher applauded once I was done and gestured everyone in the class to do the same.

"Great" she complimented, "I am amazed you have learned the notes that fast"

"Miss..." I hesitated to talk, "I have not learned the notes, I just listened to it several times then I could play it on my own".

"You cannot play music without learning the notes" she objected and her smile disappeared.

"I can, I already did!" frustrated I replied, "This is how I like to play music, by feeling it, not by learning it"

"This is wrong" she yelled, "You must learn to do things in the right way otherwise you are wasting your talent".

"Reading the notes distracts me and it takes away the pleasure to play" I pleaded.

"Let it distract you till you get used to it" she changed the notes at front of me, "Now, play that one" she ordered crossing her arms.

I had to do what she said or an advice letter will be sent to my father for not obeying the rules. I hated playing the piano and never liked its sound, my favourite Instrument was the harp and xylophone which my father thought of as not a lady like, he refrained me from playing them and the piano was his choice not mine. The nuns recognised my talent and the music teacher made me the head of the music team, my father hired her to give me private lessons and although I hated it but I had to obey.

On the other hand, the painting class was the only thing I waited impatiently for, the only time I could express myself and my feelings, at least a bit more, it gave me freedom without certain guides. Sister Michelle liked my drawings much that she hanged some of them outside in the corridor as encouragement. In school there was not a slightest mistake that would slip out of hand but also everything good was highly recognised.

Music and art were not the only talents I got, my mind was very sharp and I memorise things fast, I knew every page in my books by heart without doing a mistake, this was the reason I always had full marks but this paid the attention of all teachers and nuns and I got

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surrounded by pressure to perfect everything, my handwriting looked like stamped and my answers were a copy and paste from the books, the more I thought I mastered what I learned, the higher the expectations had raised and I had to meet. It was satisfying, pleasurable and rewarding for everyone, except me.

The success I achieved was an indirect way to prove to my mother that I was doing well, that she need not to worry or to be sad about a thing. I was secretly telling her that she was not a failure but a great woman who can raise up a good child without her husband by her side. My father though had treated my accomplishments as they are the results of his right decisions and the genes I have inherited from him, he often said that he is proud and I knew that he was but only of himself. I worked hard through many sleepless nights without realising that everything I was doing was belonging to everyone but not to me.

Before Christmas, each student had to write a letter and place it under the tree. One gift we had to pick from a list given by the nuns and mention few words of a future wish or dream . That year I did not want to have a new dress or another expensive toy, I just wanted my father to love me as I am, for who I am and I wished that he will come back home.

That year, Santa did not grant my wish, neither did God.

Chapter | I

Cold breath blew softly on my face, a strong air circled around my head, upset I woke up to realise I was alone in my room. I went outside annoyed as I needed very much to rest, "Do you think that was funny?" I shouted at my aunt who enjoyed making silly jokes.

"Why are you screaming at her?" my mother asked shocked.

"Why is she blowing on my face..." Angrily I pointed at her.

They looked at each other like I was insane, "She has been here all the time watching television with me!" my mother replied.

"And where is my brother?" furious I looked around.

"He is sleeping on the couch, please don't wake him up".

I went back to my room doubting of what happened minutes before, I could have been dreaming but still it felt so real. Unable to close my eyes again I decided to read hoping sleep will find me again.

Before my alarm clock rang I was already out of bed, I had difficulties with my light sleep and it always took long that I can silence my overloaded mind.

Brushing my teeth I felt the same cold air of the night before but this time it was right behind me and very close. I turned and there was a huge shadow that passed very fast and disappeared in the corridor, frightened I screamed.

"What is the matter?" my mother came running.

"I saw something black, it is cold..." I squeezed my eyes shut throwing myself in her arms, "It felt the same like yesterday" shaking I continued to explain.

"You have not slept well, haven't you?" she blamed, "This is what happens when you do not give yourself enough time to rest, go get dressed and I will prepare breakfast".

I grabbed my school uniform and ran to the kitchen to be next to her, afraid to be alone.

"Do we dress up in the kitchen?" she criticised.

"I am scared... Yesterday ..." I tried to tell her again.

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"Stop it" she ordered, "There is no reason to be scared. Eat your breakfast or you will be late".

For days followed I tried my best to stay awake keeping all lights switched on in my room, the radio kept me company the entire time while I prayed affirming to myself that what happened was nothing but a result of exhaustion like my mother said. When I started to forget about, that one night arrived. The radio started to crackle and hiss, high pitch tones and noise that hurt terribly my ears, I got up with heavy eyes trying to fix it changing channels while this sharp sound was only getting more. I froze, my heart beat fast, the cold air returned again and this time it was much more closer than before. I wanted to scream but my voice got stuck in my throat, with the corner of my eyes I glanced on my side and there was a little girl standing at my bedroom door. I jumped out of place and finally could scream loud and when I did, she ran away.

Shaking in cold sweat I dropped myself in a corner tucking my face between my knees in hysterical cry.

"What's wrong?" my mother shook my shoulders.

"I saw her..."

"Saw who?" she shouted worriedly.

"A girl, she is small... Half of her face is melted like she was burned" I said in a brittle voice shaking out of control.

"You never listen, do you?" she took me in her arms, "Exams are not the end of the world, you can't do well if you don't feel well. Set limits for yourself before you collapse" She lifted my head up, "I do not want to hear you saying such things again. You will frighten your little brother, do you understand?" she whispered hugging me.

"Can I sleep with you in your room?" I begged her in tears.

...

My grandmother came to visit when she knew my mother was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"She does not sleep, she does not eat and she follows me like my shadow everywhere. I do not know what to do anymore, I already have enough of everything" I overheard my mother complain to her.

"May be she is unhappy because of all what has been happening..." my grandmother sympathised.

"Why now? After two years!" my mother rejected the thought, "She talks to herself in her dreams and when she is awake she is imagining things".

"I feel a change of air will be good for her. What about if she comes to stay with me for few days?" my grandmother suggested.

"She can't be absent from school".

"I am sure she can catch up when she returns, I am not leaving without her" for my good luck she insisted.

I felt a relief to go away with my her, I have admired how kind and calm she was and above all the way she was content with her simple life. We are told to be thankful for all what we have but not everything said can be felt. My grandmother had her secret way to be grateful all the time, she always reminded herself with what she has and forgot about what she has not, she never compared her life to anyone else.

Being at her home was like stepping in another world, a peaceful one. She had many things for me to do to keep me entertained and occupied, feeding the hens and rabbits in the backyard, caring for the vegetable garden and watering the plants. Her warm home always smelled of vanilla and cinnamon, fresh biscuits and cakes she loved to bake even when she did not have guests. She had no television and the radio was very old, set on one station that she never changed, songs that reminded her of the good old days with my grandfather.

Happiness she found in the simplest things and she spread it to those around her too. After a busy day she let me sleep in her arms, the first time since long I could close my eyes without thinking about a thing.

"Wake up dear, we have got to bake our bread for the day" she whispered softly caressing gently my hair.

Half asleep rubbing my eyes I followed her up the stairs to the roof top where her clay oven is, my grandfather built it on his own as a wedding present for her when they got married. The sky was still dark, the light from the oil lantern she held in one hand was barely enough to climb step by step. Silence covered almost everything except the singing of early morning birds.

"I have not heard the alarm clock grandma" I said helping her firing the wood.

"Sure you did not hear it because I do not have one" she laughed, "The rooster wakes me up everyday" she batted the dough while I

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gazed at the flickering fire, "Do you believe me Grandma?" I found myself asking.

"About the girl you have seen?" she turned smiling.

"My mother does not believe me..."

"It is ok". She caressed my face, "I know you will never lie about something like this".

"So why can't she..."

"Sometimes we tend to believe in what we want just because life seems easier this way" she gently said.

"Not everyone is able to handle the truth and many wouldn't want even to get closer to it" she faintly smiled turning the fired wood, "The truth can be ugly and scary for those who are not courageous enough, and it is painful for those who do not believe enough" she folded her sleeves and threw the first piece of dough into the fire, "Promise to be kind to your mother, she has been having a hard time".

"I have been going crazy Grandma..." I burst out, "I am not sure anymore if I am really imagining things or that what I saw is real".

"I believe there are many things in this world that we still know nothing of and things that we think we know but not the whole truth about" she turned the bread and prepared another one.

"You must pay attention to what is in your hands now, if you keep recalling the past you will miss the future my dear... Here, try the first piece we baked" she handed it to me smiling.

"I wish my mom would think like you".

"It does not matter what others think, what is important is how you think... Some People are resistant towards anything they have not experienced themselves, sometimes we are scared to know more and sometimes we think we know it all and that's even worse".

"I do not want to see this girl again".

"Just forget about her" she smiled, "When we speak about ghosts they appear and when we speak of fear, it manifests my dear. Do not worry, everything is going to be fine".

We took the fresh bread and went down the stairs with the first rays of light breaking smoothly through.

...

"What are you watching?" my mother curiously asked one day, "You have been so quiet for some good time".

"It is a documentary about snakes" I replied with my eyes fixed on the television.

"Snakes!" she screamed, "Why don't you watch something pleasant! No wonder you can't sleep" she snapped.

"Have you ever thought how strange this is, From the poison of snakes we could die and from the same poison we can heal" I said in deep thought, "They shed their old skin in order to grow and they do it with great caution and care. I wonder how this may feel, Can we do the same?"

"Sorry?" she frowned.

"Not with our skin I meant with our thoughts..." I explained, "Why is it hard for us to let go? Why are we so attached to so many things even when we know that it serves us no more".

She stood staring at me speechlessly.

"Mom, Do you think that bad things are made to remind us of the good? Or perhaps what we believe as bad is not bad at all".

"What do you mean?" puzzled she asked.

"The snake attacks for protecting himself, Is that bad?... For him it is not!"

She tilted her head watching me closer, "Where are you getting all that from?"

"Getting what from?" I asked confused.

"All what you said" sShe shouted, "You are talking like a ninety years old, you are so young to talk this way!" furious she switched the television off.

"What are you doing?" I screamed.

"You do not need to see this scary things and from now on you are not going to watch anything without my permission" she yelled, "How can you find such dangerous ugly animal fascinating!" she murmured loud.

"They are not ugly..." I snapped following her, "The snake in grandma garden understood me and he did not cause me any harm..."

She turned staring at me in panic, "Which snake?" she asked carefully.

"He passed right under my feet when I was collecting the eggs and when I stepped backwards he coiled himself and it looked at me".

"Are you crazy?" she yelled, "He could have bitten you".