

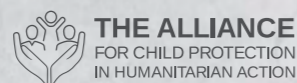
I am Mariam



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Hi... I'm Mariam.

This is my family. My mother, my little sister Maha, and my brother Samer.

And this is our cat: Zabouba.

Zabouba was the first to welcome us when we came here. She stood at the door of the room where the good man with a moustache let us stay.

She came straight to me, as if she already knew me, even though we are not from this town.

In our old house, before we escaped and came here, we had another cat named Lulu.

She was all spotted and speckled, like a little cow, and had a big black mark on her face.

Mother used to say that she was naughty like me because she always jumped around.



A year ago, while I was coming back from school, war planes began flying low in the sky.

I had never heard such a terrible noise. I thought they were about to land on me.

I ran home as fast as I could, but the noises kept coming closer and closer.

We escaped so quickly that we couldn't take anything with us. I couldn't find Lulu anywhere.

My mother assured me that she must be hiding because she's very smart.

As we left, Mother was looking in every direction, holding our hands firmly.

When I let go of her hand for two seconds, she became very angry.

She said to me almost in tears:

"You must always know the difference between right and wrong."

She always says that sort of thing to us.

We waited a long time in the bus, from the morning until evening.

There was a hole in the window where we sat. I could even see through it.

My mother trembled when she saw the hole, and she stopped us from going near the window.

"This is a bullet hole," I heard her whisper to our neighbour.

I was scared too. Much more than my mother, but certainly less than my little brother and sister.



I'M WORKING

We have been in this new town for one year now. Nobody wants to give my mother a job because she is not from here. The man in the clothing factory asked her to send me to work instead.

She did not like that at all, but we didn't have any money, and the good man with the moustache no longer brought us food like he used to.

She decided that I should go to work.

She woke me up before sunrise. "I'll take you to the factory," she said. There, they told me to sweep the floor and sometimes sit at a sewing machine.

The smell was terrible.

"Hurry up! I don't want to see anyone standing idle without work,"

the manager yelled all the time.

A pigeon was looking at us from the window. I called her Zahra.

Zahra was so funny. She always shakes her head to the right and to the left.

In the factory, I met a girl named Layla. Layla was nice, but she was always scared.

And there was a boy too. His name was Ahmed.

Everybody was laughing at him because he spoke with a different accent.

There were many strange rules in the factory. When I came home, I wrote them in my notebook:





FACTORY RULES

Very very strange rules...

- They get angry if you sit down, even though the manager sits all the time.
- Even if there's nothing to do, you must find something to do.
- If you're late for work, one minute is worth two hours of salary...
- Hands must remain sparkling clean, even though I use them to clean dirt all day.

- World's fastest lunch hour: it ends in five minutes.
- Work ends at 6:00 p.m. but you're never allowed to leave before 8:00 p.m.

I worked in the factory all summer.

In the fall, a young man named Murad came to our house. He was so tall his head almost touched the doorframe. He had a white card attached to his shirt.

"I'm here for Mariam. She must go to school," he said to my mother.

Then he looked at me and asked:

- Do you like school?
- Yes. I love school.
- Are they treating you badly in the factory?
- Mmm, like everyone else.
- And how do they treat you all?
- They yell all the time.
- I'm here to help you go back to school.



Then Murad gave me a book with many words and pictures in it.

He said it was a story, and that I should read it, or ask my mother to read it for me.

In the evening, I sat with my mother. She read the book to me, but I couldn't understand anything of what she said.

I asked her what the book was about.

"This book is about right and wrong," she answered. "You must always know that difference." Her words reminded me of the day we left our hometown.



I UNDERSTAND, I WRITE

Several days later, Murad came again. He asked me:

"Did you like the book?"

- No.
- Why?
- I didn't understand anything.
- It's okay, I have an idea. I'll explain what's in the book, and you can write what you understand in this little notebook.

He gave me a notebook with a nice picture on its cover, and he started talking.



- There are many wars and disasters in the world, and children are the ones who suffer most from them. But there are many good people in the world too, who help children.

- How?
- They help them get stronger and survive in difficult times.
- I am stronger than my sister, Maha.
- I am sure you are. But we still need to help you, Maha and Samer to get through difficult times.

I decided to write this in my new notebook:

Do you think you are strong too?

"We must help children survive in difficult times."



- But sometimes when people try to help, they don't do it the right way.
- I once tried to carry my brother and he almost fell out of my arms.
- Exactly. When we help children, we need to make sure that they are not harmed. All the time.

Have you ever tried to help anyone?

"We have to be careful when helping others, so we don't hurt anyone by mistake."

- And they should always pay attention to children's best interests —Murad said.
- Best interests?
- Best interests are all things that are good for the children. And this is very important.
- Vegetables are good for children
- You are very smart, Mariam.
- Mother says I will become a scientist.
- I am sure you will.

We must always look for things that are good for children, especially when we make decisions about them.

"A child's best interest is the most important thing. Everyone should always think about what is good for children."

Can you think of things that are useful for children?



- But before adults decide anything, they should always ask children first —Murad said.
- Ask them what?
- What they think about all the important things. Especially those that matter to them the most.

I thought what are some things that really matter to me:

- What's the fastest way to travel around the Earth?
- Can we count all the ants in the world?
- When did the last dinosaur disappear?
- Could we teach whales to sing together in a choir?
- What is it like back home? Where are my old friends now?
- How will I stay warm when the weather gets cold this winter?

- For example, how do you think we could contact more children at the factory?
 - We can ask Zahra to help us with that.
 - Who is a Zahra? Your friend?
 - Yes... My friend the pigeon. She looks at us from the window.
- He laughed and said, "Absolutely, adults should listen to children and always ask them for their opinion. Because children are so smart, and we can learn a lot from them."

What things are most important to you?

"Children are smart, and adults should ask them their opinion about things that concern them."



- Sometimes, people are treated badly just because they are different. For example, if you speak with a different accent, or use a wheelchair, or the colour of your skin is different, others might treat you badly.
- Children used to ignore me because I wasn't from here. They laughed at Ahmed in the factory because of his accent!
- This is called "discrimination" and is wrong. It is wrong to treat people badly just because they are different from us. Sometimes some people may not pay attention to you just because you're a girl. That's annoying, isn't it?

Have you ever been called names?

"People should not be treated badly just because they are different. This is called 'dis-cri-mi-na-tion!'"

- We must also make sure that all people get the help they need, without any exception —Murad said.
- You mean, without discrimination?
- Exactly. Because this is their right. And if they don't know how to get help, we should try to guide them.

Do you know how to get help from others?

"We have to show others how to get help."



- Because of wars or disasters, many children need help - Murad said.
- My cat, Lulu, needs help too. I couldn't find her anywhere when we left our old home. But she is also very smart and a bit naughty.
- Some children might get very scared, or sick, or very sad.
- I was afraid of the sound of the planes, and my mother too was afraid of the bullet hole in the bus window.
- That's why when there is a war, all people have the right to be helped, especially children and their naughty cats.

"Because of a war or disaster, children may become scared, sad, or sick, and we have to help them."

Adults are responsible for helping children affected by war. How do you think they should do that?

I have the right to learn and achieve my ambitions.

Children should be playing instead of working.

Children must be protected from danger.

I have the right to receive assistance and helpful services.

I have the right to participate in anything that relates to my life.

- To make this happen, children must learn about their rights.
- Their rights?
- Rights are what people need to live happily and safely. And all children deserve to have those rights met all the time, no matter where they come from or where they live.
- How?
- Well, first of all, children must understand their rights very well. Adults are responsible for living up to those rights all the time.

What makes you feel happy and safe?

"Children deserve to have what they need to live happily and safely. Adults are responsible for living up to those rights."



- But children can be very strong and smart too. They can help themselves and others.
- You mean like superheroes?
- Hahaha, quite often they are. Children have many talents. Some children can ask others for help when they need it, and some can even help their friends.
- I always like to help my friends.

Have you ever asked anyone for help?

"Children are strong and smart. They can ask for help and can also help their friends."



I AM IN SCHOOL

I am now in school. I don't go to the factory anymore. Murad, the Protection Officer, helped my mother find a job. The school gate is huge. It can fit ten children at the same time. Ah, and Zahra comes here every day too. She lurks from the class window and shakes her head. I hope she can learn our language and speak to us one day.

Because I learned how to be stronger, I wanted to help Layla, my friend from the factory. Layla was scared because the factory manager wanted her to stay there at night. Zahra and I were worried. We feared he would treat her badly. I told Murad about her, and he went and helped her too. Layla now comes to our school. I think we have become best friends.

Has someone ever approached you in an uncomfortable way?

"If someone makes a child feel uncomfortable, they should tell their parents or an adult they trust."



In our school there is a very nice place to play. They call it the children's space. We come here every day to sing and talk and be with friends. The adults ask us about our feelings, and the things that bother us.

I play a lot with Layla here. Layla didn't like to speak before, but when we started coming here things changed. She now laughs more, speaks a lot, and sometimes she even sings.

Whom do you like to talk to about your feelings?

"In the children's place we can talk about our feelings and the things that bother or scare us."



Yesterday, our teacher had a very serious face when he told us what happened to Rami, a boy from our school.

The teacher said that Rami was playing near a destroyed building when a wall collapsed.

Everybody gasped when we learned that the wall almost fell on him. Rami almost died. I mean, he almost died from the wall, but also out of fear.

Have you ever played in a dangerous place?

"Because I'm careful, I'll never go near destroyed buildings or other dangerous places or items, and I'll warn other kids not to go near them."

Sometimes the kids at school play battle games like cops and robbers.

They chase each other carrying sticks and pretending they have guns.

But one time, I saw one of the boys carrying a real gun. He was walking with real, grown gunmen.

But Murad, the Protection Officer, went to his house and spoke to his family.

Here's what he told us yesterday:

"Boys and girls belong in schools and playgrounds, not in the battlefield or hanging out with gunmen."

Where do you like to be?



A lot of bad things happen in war.
One of the kids in my class, Omar, was all alone when he came to this town.
He couldn't find his parents and that made him sad and angry all the time.
But the Protection Officers searched everywhere for his parents until they finally found them.
It took many months, but now he is the happiest boy in the world.
I will ask them to find Lulu for me too.

Do you sometimes have sad or angry feelings inside you?

“Children shouldn't be separated from their parents. If they are, they have the right to receive care and support – and help to find their parents again.”



This storybook is for children 5-12 years old. Kind adults, please consider reading it with them and asking them the questions it contains. Give them time and permission to express themselves and reassure them that their feelings are normal and that they are safe with you.

Please also look for the colouring book and audio version of Mariam's story.

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