

Salwa Mohareb Said

Salwa Mohareb Said has an M.A. in English from the American University in Cairo, Egypt. She has written short stories for children, been published in England by Longmans, and been broadcast by the Egyptian Broadcasting Service. At present, she is Director of Pensions for the Canadian Life and Health Association. The story reprinted here first appeared in the collection Arab-Canadian Writing: Stories, Memoirs, and Reminiscences (1989), edited by Kamal A. Rostom.



Choices

It was uncommonly cool for a mid-August evening, but Nadia remained in her chair in the backyard because she did not want to interrupt the thoughts flowing through her mind. Any movement would shatter the fragile network of sweet and cruel memories. If she could pull through those tough times ... surely she could survive the current crisis!

So what if they move to St. John's where she does not know a soul? So what if they have to sell the house she has grown to love? She has done all this before. The girls would have to leave their friends and change schools. Hala will be going to university next year ... it's too bad she could not stay in her school until graduation. She wondered how the girls would react to the news ... "Your father has been offered a promotion if he goes to head the company's operations in Newfoundland. I'm going to resign, and we're all moving to St. John's." Fear gripped her heart as she rehearsed what she was going to say to her daughters. She must be getting old. Where is that resilience that carried her through a much bigger move twenty years ago? Surely the risk involved then was far greater than today's. The distance between Toronto and St. John's is but a fraction of the distance between Canada and Egypt, physically, emotionally, and culturally. If she could pull up roots then and come this far, she can do it now. Compared to that major move of twenty years ago, this pales by comparison. Yet the fear and emptiness inside her were overwhelming.

She recalled herself as a young bride in her early twenties, full of drive and ambition. Nothing ever stopped her from going after her dream. She and her husband were two young professionals with a great future ahead of them, by local standards. They had their education, and their families' wealth and social clout to reinforce their claim to success. But they wanted more. They turned their backs on that security to chase a dream all the way across the Ocean. Was it courageous or foolhardy? Her sister, Mona, thought it was foolhardy. But she too was swept by the current of emigration. She did it grudgingly, not by choice, but because she was caught in the tide. Mona had looked around her to find all those she held near and dear leaving ... her best friend was off to Oxford to work on her doctoral dissertation. Her two dearest cousins were in Princeton, and Nadia, her beloved twin sister, was leaving for Canada. So, when Sami came home one day announcing that he had just come from the Canadian Embassy, she knew, in her sinking heart, what her husband was about to announce, and felt powerless to fight the overwhelming tide of departures which was about to engulf her too.

Nadia was all excitement and hope for the future. She looked forward to the challenges of a new life. Mona, on the other hand, looked on the move with dread and fear. The risks were too great! "We're leaving jobs, money, family, and social status to go to an unknown land with different culture, different values ... we'll never belong. We'll always be outsiders with no social position, no status." Nadia had nothing but ridicule for that position. "What great pleasure do you derive from your blessed social status? It's confining and tedious to have your every move watched. I feel like a prisoner of the family name and the social demands. I'd love to go where I can be a drop in the sea ... that would be the ultimate freedom." Little did she know, at the time, how often she would find herself in situations that would make her eat those words.

As she sat in her garden, twenty years later, she recalled those early years of adjusting to being a drop in the sea ... or worse, an outsider, an alien. There were more occasions than she cared to remember, where she

had to admit that she really hated being the proverbial drop in the sea. She had the honesty to admit it, but she also had the determination to fight it.

She fought it during those early, miserable cold days, when, as newcomers, she and her husband went looking for work and getting turned down time after time. They were overqualified ... underqualified, or lacked the relevant experience ... and a host of other fictitious reasons to avoid the true reason, they were an unknown, and few are willing to take a chance on an unknown. Having her intelligence and her education discredited was painful. Being distrusted because she looked different and spoke with an accent was painful. Coming back to their tiny apartment to find mail that invariably said "... we regret ..." was painful. But, the most painful of all was a feeling she would never admit to anyone, a feeling that the dream she pursued across the Ocean was unattainable. She refused to admit to those moments of doubt, not even to her husband. She had been a strong force behind their immigration, and felt the full weight of that responsibility and guilt.

Then, after her persistence and tenacity were tested to the limit, small accomplishments started to encourage her to go on. One day she went for an interview for a very junior position with a large organization. She knew that if one of them did not get a job soon, the money they were permitted to emigrate with would run out. She had secretly set a deadline in her own mind that if nothing turned up by the end of that month, they would have to concede defeat and return to Egypt. She went for the interview determined not to let her graduate degrees get in the way of her earning a living. She neglected to mention all her educational accomplishments on the application form. The interview went extremely well and she felt confident that she would be hired. Suddenly, the interviewer asked, "Do you have a university education?" The unexpected question took her by surprise. She hesitated for a moment wondering if she should lie, "y-yes," she stammered in spite of herself, looking down at her cold hands now trembling on her lap. "It's nothing to be ashamed of!" the interviewer said kindly. "Why were you reluctant to tell me?" "Because I really need the job. I can't get work at my real level because I have no Canadian experience. On the other hand, I keep getting turned down for junior jobs because I'm overqualified ..." "Well, the truth is you are. But, I'm prepared to offer you the job anyway. If all works out, you can move up within the company."

Heaven—sheer heaven! She had a job. It didn't matter how low the pay was. Someone finally accepted her. Someone was willing to give her a chance. When her husband had suggested that if things did not open up within another month or two, they should go back, she had resisted. "Yusif! We have to make this work. We always said that we would burn our boats so we wouldn't be tempted to sail right back when the going got tough. We have to think it out." Now that she had a job, she would not have to go back on those words. They can now build a life here. And so they did.

Those were difficult times. A lot of newcomers they knew faced the same problems. Some, like her, were undaunted and tenaciously fought their way up to varying measures of success. Her sister, Mona, was not one of those people. Mona and Sami had their share of problems in adjusting. But Mona cried a lot, and nagged a lot, and never stopped comparing past and present. Her preference was always the past. She had no desire to fight and struggle to create a new life here. It was too hard and required too many sacrifices. She was forever blaming her husband for unsettling her life and forcing her to change.

Sami finally conceded that they would never be happy here. He drove a cab to make a living, while he was studying to qualify for the Canadian equivalent of his engineering degree. Coming home to an unhappy wife and stacks of books to study, day after day, with no relief in sight, was too much to take. So, Sami and Mona made another momentous decision, and returned to Egypt.

Nadia and Mona were fraternal twins. They grew up in the same environment and went to the same schools, had many of the same friends. But their personalities were very different. Their friends used to joke about the disparity in their approaches to life. Mona was gentle, docile, and very conservative, while Nadia relished change and took on every challenge. Their mother used to watch them as they demonstrated their opposing solutions to problems, and shake her head knowingly with only one explanation for the great difference between the two. "The same fire which melts the butter, hardens the egg!"

Mona could not adapt to change, and had no desire to do anything contrary to what her mild nature dictated. Adapting required an effort and a fighting spirit. Mona refused to fight. She preferred to go home. For Nadia home was now here. She belonged here in this Suburban Toronto garden. She also belonged to the

beautiful skyline she saw every time she looked up from her desk in the office. She would never entertain the delusion that she was absolutely at home or at peace anywhere, but this was as close as she would ever get.

The front door, which she had left open, was blown shut by a sudden gust of wind, and the sound startled her out of her brief encounter with those forgotten memories.

She forced herself out of her reverie and out of her comfortable chair and walked absentmindedly to the kitchen. She poured herself a cup of coffee and reached out mechanically to push the "play" button on the cassette player perched precariously on the edge of the table. There was an old tape in it. An old Egyptian song she had forgotten about. The singer had long since died. But the beautiful voice was still there. Nadia felt a lump in her throat as she remembered the first time she heard that song twenty-five years ago. A simple song from days gone by could still awaken in her feelings ... feelings whose intrusion she could not allow too often, or she could not function. Feelings of love and longing for a land and a people she abandoned years ago, but never forgot. She did not want to forget, but just to dampen the pain that accompanied the memory, and to lessen the longing she would always feel. Forgetting was not within her power. The Nile that this voice from the dead was singing about ran in Nadia's very veins. She had no power to change that. There were thoughts and feelings and expressions that came alive in her mother tongue. There was a way of thinking, a tolerance, a sense of humor, a twist of phrase, and a whole view of life that were her birthright, and that no distance, physical or temporal, could possibly erase.

The voice from the scratched old tape rose in a familiar refrain, and Nadia felt warm tears running down her face. The same kind of tears she shed when she first came to this new land and homesickness overcame her. Tears no one knew about, then or now. She was the strong one, the fighter, the one who rose to every challenge and moved ahead undaunted. She never could permit herself such moments of weakness, except when she was alone. She did have an image to preserve. Besides, she always managed to fight her moments of weakness. Mona gave in to hers.

Nadia was a little annoyed with herself for allowing a song to invoke such a sentimental and emotional reaction. She had not reacted that way for years. Yearning, perhaps, but not tears! Was she becoming overemotional and sentimental, or was the thought of uprooting herself again too much to take? The first time she did that she was taking an immense risk, but her youthful enthusiasm overshadowed the magnitude of the step she was taking. With that experience to draw upon, she was approaching this new venture both stronger and weaker. Stronger because she was better prepared for the pain to come, but weaker because she now knew that the pain may recede with time, but it never completely disappears. It was here right now! Something reopened the old wound ... a voice from the past, singing in a language she rarely used now, of a river which, though she had not seen it for many years, was a part of her very being. She remembered Shakespeare's "What's gone and what's past help/should be past grief."

She wished it were so. But grief was ever present. She felt like Orestes, destined to be forever pursued by the Furies—never to be at peace. There may be moments of acceptance and even contentment. Moments when logic would convince her that she was as close to being happy as she could ever hope to be. But she knew, even during those brief moments, that her own Furies were lurking in the shadows ready to torment her. They were insidious creatures that manifested their presence in different ways and had a million disguises. Right now, they were in the form of her undying love for the land she chose to leave, for reasons she could no longer remember. It must have been those same Furies that posed as the reasons that made her leave in the first place. She ran then, and continued to be driven all her life. Her own Furies, at times appearing as dissatisfaction, at times as a driving ambition. Whatever their disguise, they always achieved their aim—to keep her running. Running from home and country ... Running in search of a dream ... Running towards success ... always running ... The end result being that she was never allowed to rest or be at peace. She did not believe that some angry creature from the underworld had really set them upon her to punish her. She had made choices in her life that courted them and drew them to her. She had defied the order of things by not accepting anything without questioning it, modifying it, changing it. She had declared herself a challenger to anything and everything that would presume to enter into her life. She had announced that she was in charge, and would change her world to what she wanted it to be, and would not acquiesce and take the easy predetermined route. By choosing to challenge, change and fight, she created the very Furies that would forever haunt her existence.

Nadia shuddered. She was sure it was not from the brisk breeze blowing in from the kitchen door, but from the realization that she had created these monsters, and, given a second chance, she would probably make the same kind of choices that led to their creation.

The girls came in from the movies. "Hi, Mom!" She asked how the movie was. "Boring," said Hala, the youngest. "I thought it was great," was the response from Leila.

Nadia told her daughters about the upcoming move. Hala was full of enthusiasm and wanted to start planning right away. "Great! Absolutely fantastic ... it'll be exciting to live in a new place ..." Leila was quick to interrupt her younger sister, "what do you mean 'Great,' you twit? We'll have to leave all our friends and ..."

Nadia watched the girls arguing and realized that she had really known how her daughters would react to the upcoming change. Their argument reminded her of her arguments with Mona, and of her mother saying, "the same fire that melts the butter, hardens the egg."

Nadia had not melted under the fire. Her youngest daughter was like her. The eldest was definitely the kind that would melt like butter. She would be the kind that always invokes sympathy and protection. She would never be called upon to fight any battles or put out any fires.

Somehow, Nadia felt sorry for the one who appeared to be the stronger and tougher of the two. The youngest would seek out challenges. She would never accept what life hands her down without questioning it. She would never give in to defeat. But, in demonstrating all that apparent strength, she will be inviting perpetual battle. She will appear to be choosing to be in charge of her world. But what she will, in reality, be creating, are her own Furies—who will relentlessly pursue her all her life.

T O P I C S F O R E X P L O R A T I O N

1. Twenty years earlier Nadia had made a big move from Egypt to Canada; today she is facing another major move in her life. What is the difference this time? What difficulties does prospective relocating from Toronto to St. John's pose for Nadia and her family?
2. What motives did Nadia and her husband have for coming to Canada? How did their reasons for leaving their homeland differ from those of Nadia's sister, Mona?
3. What are Nadia's recollections of their early immigrant years? Why did she feel that "her intelligence and education" were discredited by Canadian employers?
4. Why did Mona and her family decide to return to Egypt? Compare different responses the sisters had to the problem of difficult adjustment to a new life in Canada. How are their differences accounted for?
5. What recipe for success does the story offer to immigrant readers? Is there an implied message that success in a new country always necessarily involves a certain degree of assimilation? How does Nadia's life illustrate the last point? What is the cost of choices she has made?