The Dream Left Behind in Madrid

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When the airplane took off, Sara called herself "Doctor" for the first time. Joyful to be leaving the Middle East for a distant place, she leaned her head against the window and watched Tehran fade away beneath the clouds. She was eighteen years old and carried a grand dream: she wanted to become a physician, study hard, and return to Iran one day with a prestigious degree. She had studied Spanish for nearly two years and was certain that she had already overcome the hardest part—mastering the language.

The first few months passed with excitement and wonder. Madrid's streets and crowded cafes were fascinating to her. She had placed her mother's photograph next to her study desk, and beneath it, she had written: "One day I will return, and I will be a doctor!"

But the university was different from what she had imagined. The basic science courses were heavy, and the professors lectured at a pace that made it difficult to comprehend specialized terminology and take notes simultaneously. Sara spent hours studying every night, writing down vocabulary, and reviewing hand-outs. However, this was specialized, academic language, vast and different from the conversational Spanish she had learned. The grades of her first exams were much lower than expected.

Subsequent results did not improve. Gradually, in the following semesters, she grew distant from her classmates, who viewed her country as terrorist-affiliated and did not warm up to her. She no longer had the energy for anything. As winter arrived, Madrid turned into a cold, alien city for her. Due to the intense cold and the scarcity and high cost of energy, she had to spend her nights in sleeping bags inside her student dorm. Watching families eating together reminded her of home, of her mother, her father, and her little brother. There was no one here to open her door and ask .why she had gone so quiet

"?In video calls, her mother would ask, "How are your studies going

".Sara would smile, "Good, Mom, I'm trying

But the truth was that she would stare at an open book for hours, struggle to get out of bed in the morning, and go to sleep crying at night. She was no longer afraid of bad grades; what was more .terrifying was that she felt she had no strength left to succeed

One day, Mr. Leo, the histology professor, asked her to stay after class. He told her she needed to change her study methods and make a more serious effort to continue her education. At first, the professor's words sounded reasonable, but Sara no longer knew why, despite all her hard work, she wasn't getting results. The professor seemed pleased with her company; with a thirst in his eyes, he caressed her hand, leaned his face close to hers, and suggested that if she would be his "guest" one night a month and submit to his desires, he would sign off on her passing .grade

Sara remained silent, stood up, and with a heavy heart and a racing pulse, quickly walked away from the professor's office. It was a profound shock, a wake-up call that made her even more .determined to carry out the thought she had been harboring in her mind

It was raining. She deeply missed the yellow and orange autumn leaves of Tehran's streets. Without opening her umbrella, she walked back to the dorm crying. She didn't change her wet clothes and sat on the bed. She picked up her phone and dialed her mother's number, but her finger hovered over the screen for a few seconds. If she called, she could no longer pretend everything was fine. If she told the truth, she might hear the sound of disappointment in her mother's voice. If she said she wanted to return, she might have to face something she had been .running away from accepting for months

.She made the call

Hearing her voice, her mother asked, "Sara? What happened? Why does your voice sound like "?that

Sara stared at the opposite wall. Out of habit, she wanted to say it was nothing, but the words caught in her throat.

"It's nothing, Mom... I'm just tired."

Her mother fell silent. A brief silence, but so familiar that Sara knew her mother hadn't believed her.

"Sara! Look at my image. What happened?"

Sara pulled the phone away from her ear, looked at her mother's image, and her sob broke.

"Mom! I'm tired. I'm so tired. I can't do this anymore."

Her mother said nothing. She just looked at her. And that silence was enough for Sara to finally break down.

"My grades are bad. No matter how much I study, it's like I don't learn anything. I can't sleep at night, I can't get out of bed in the morning. I'm afraid of the university and its people. I'm afraid of going to class. Even when I open a book, I feel like my brain is locked."

Her voice trembled, and words poured out through her tears. "I lied to you. Every time you asked how my studies were, I said they were good. They weren't good, Mom. They haven't been good for a long time."

Her mother put her hand over her mouth, but before she could say anything, Sara continued:

"I miss home. I miss your voice, the home-cooked food, the way someone would open my room door and ask why I'm quiet. No one here understands what I'm going through."

Her mother said softly, "I wish you had told me sooner."

"I was afraid of disappointing you."

"You are my daughter, not your grades and not your university."

Sara closed her eyes. Her mother continued, "If you return, you won't return as a failure. You will return to us; there is a difference between the two."

Sara shook her head, but something inside her was still resisting.

"But what about Dad? After all this time, despite all these sanctions, he spent so much on me, sent me euros regularly. Everyone was proud of me. I said I would go and become a doctor. Now, if I return, everyone will say she couldn't make it."

".Her mother said, "Let yourself talk to your father

A few moments later, her father came to the phone. Sara heard the rustling of the chair and her father’s cough. Her heart beat faster. She expected her father to ask why she hadn’t tried harder, .why she hadn't told them sooner, and why she wanted to abandon everything

"?Instead, her father only asked, "Have you eaten anything today

.Sara let out a brief laugh through her tears

".Dad! I’m talking about coming back"

".I know"

".I might not be able to continue"

".I know"

".If I return, everything might go to ruin"

Her father was silent for a moment and then said, "Sara, I didn't send you to Madrid to prove you are made of stone; I sent you so you'd have an opportunity to pursue your dream. If this path is ".breaking you, we must find another way

".Sara bit her lip and said, "But I failed

No, you realized that this path, under these conditions, is not sustainable. That is different from" ".failure

".But I promised I would become a doctor"

Your promise to us is not more important than you yourself. You weren't supposed to lose" ".yourself to become a doctor

These words resonated deeply within Sara. For years, she had spent all her energy trying to prove she could stay, endure, and disappoint no one. But now, for the first time, someone was .giving her permission to be weak, to say she couldn't do it anymore

"?In a barely audible voice, she asked, "If I return, will you still love me

"?Her mother immediately said, "What kind of question is that

Her father, more quietly but firmly, said, "Even if you never become a doctor, you are still my daughter. But if you still want to become a doctor, the journey isn't over. Perhaps this was just not ".the right path for you

.Sara held the phone with both hands, tears streaming down her face

".I don't want to be alone here anymore"

".Her mother said, "Then don't be alone

".Sara looked at the room and cried, "I want to come home

".Her father replied without hesitation, "Then come

These two simple words released something inside Sara. Not that all her fears suddenly vanished, or that she became certain of a bright future. But she no longer had to deny herself just .to stay

That night, after the call ended, she sat on her bed for a long time. Her phone was still in her hand, its dark screen reflecting her own face. She was afraid of returning, of the gazes of others, the talk of relatives, and the questions to which she didn’t have answers. She feared that perhaps .she really would never become a doctor

But there was a deeper fear: the fear of staying in a place where she was losing a little more of .herself every day

Sara opened her notebook and wrote on a blank white page: "I'm not returning because I'm weak. ".I'm returning because I must be saved

The next morning, for the first time in days, she pulled back the curtains. The rain had stopped. Madrid was still cold and alien, but it no longer seemed endless as it had the night before. Sara spoke with the university advisor, explained her situation, and asked for a few weeks to organize her affairs. She still had doubts, but her decision was no longer a flight of panic; it was a choice .to be able to breathe again

She bought the ticket back. On the day of departure, she organized her room, packed her books in her suitcase, and kept her Spanish vocabulary notebook in her hand bag. Before leaving, she .stood by the window and looked down at the street that had once seemed a symbol of freedom

"?She asked herself, "If I had stayed, would I have eventually succeeded

She had no answer. But this time, not knowing did not terrify her. She didn't need to know right then what the future would look like. It was enough to know that she no longer wanted to crumble .in silence

When she arrived in Tehran, her mother was waiting for her in the arrival hall. As soon as Sara saw her, she let go of her suitcase and threw herself into her mother's arms. Her mother held her

tightly, so tightly that, for a few moments, Sara felt as though all those years of loneliness were .lifted from her shoulders

At home, everything was the same: the chipped cup on the table, the flowerpot by the window, and the wall clock that was always a few minutes slow. These simple things brought her an .extraordinary sense of peace

Her return did not solve her problems overnight. She still felt sad sometimes when remembering the university and her grades, and she feared the judgment of others. But her family did not ask her to make a new decision immediately. Sara sought professional help and gave herself time to recover her strength. Later, she began exploring ways to continue her medical studies in Iran, .this time with a deeper understanding of the challenges of migration

One evening, she took her Spanish notebook out of her suitcase. On the first page, she had ".written: "For the day I become a doctor

".She looked at the sentence and wrote beneath it: "It is not over yet. I will succeed