

Short Stories

These short stories appear in a book entitled *Bareed Mista3jil: True Stories*. Reprinted with permission from Meem.

BECOMING*

I was born in 1982.

Growing up in a Maronite family, I was a very religious teenager. I read the Bible three times a day. In the morning, I would read inspiring verses from the Psalms. After school, before doing my homework, I would read a passage from the Gospels, and before I went to bed, a passage from the Letters. I loved the Bible. It gave me strength, hope and joy. I wanted to be a missionary when I grew up, and even at a young age, I was a passionate preacher.

At the same time, I knew I was gay since I was six years old. Back then, I defined myself as different. I was a typical tomboy, always hanging out with boys, making fun of girls, cutting my hair really short, and refusing to wear a *fostan* or a *skarbeeni*.¹ I told people to call me “Paul” (like the Apostle) and they did. As a kid, it was never a problem. My parents loved me, my friends loved me, and I did great at school. I played the piano, I played a lot of sports, I wrote sappy poetry, I read 10 books a month, I told everyone that I had a crush on this girl or that girl, and everybody thought it was cute. And my favorite thing in the world for seven years was Girl Scouts. I went camping every chance I could, putting more effort into scouting than I did anywhere else. My homosexuality, although I didn’t have a name for it, never seemed unnatural to me. It was the most natural, most normal part of my being.

Then came that summer between Grade 6 and Grade 7, where all the girls suddenly return to school wearing bras, legs waxed, eyebrows plucked, and

all the boys come back to school taller, with deeper voices and facial hair. Suddenly, it was no longer about girls vs. boys. It was about girlfriends and boyfriends. My classmates changed. They started telling me that I should “*itbannat shwai*”² and go out with a guy. I would laugh and call them ridiculous and say, “*Aslan ana b7ibb il banet*”³ Some dismissed me as childish. My close friends were very respectful and accepting. They had known me most of my life, and they didn’t judge me. The only advice they gave me was to stop announcing it to people because it would cause me problems. Problems? I thought. Why would it be a problem? This is how I am. I honestly did not believe that homosexuality was a problem. It was just so natural to me and I was sure it wasn’t a problem.

But I took their advice and kept quiet about it. I didn’t change my looks or behaviors, however. I liked my boyish looks and clothes, and nobody around me seemed to have a problem with it. People mostly attributed it to my personality. “*3am bitrakkiz 3a darsa ou 3al activities, ma bela bil msa7bi*”⁴ And I felt accepted.

As the months passed, however, I became increasingly uncomfortable in my surroundings. Parties were not fun anymore; they became about girls and boys flirting and making out. Events and special functions became about girls dressing up in fancy clothes and makeup. It became a battle for me to fit in. I grew sadder and less secure about myself. I was rejected as a freak by the girls I liked. My mother grew impatient with my tomboy phase. “*Ma 7allik titghayyari?*”⁵ she said. But she still loved me and did everything she could to make me happy.

She was an elementary teacher at the school I went to, and always took great pride in my scholastic achievements. My father lived and worked in the Gulf, and only came to spend a month with us every summer. My mom raised me and my sister by herself. I was the light of her life and I was extremely, incredibly attached to her.

Then, at 14, came the shock of my lifetime. During my daily Bible readings, I came across a passage in Romans 1, a passage that would haunt me for years:

For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.

I read and re-read the passage, hoping every time that I had misread something. But there it was, staring me in the face. I got my Arabic Bible and looked up the verses there and they said the same thing: God gave them up. "*Aslamahom Allah*".

I was terrified and deeply ashamed. I was shocked by the idea that God had given me up because I loved women. How could that be? It didn't make any sense. Why would God give me up? I was obsessed with the idea that I would receive "in

[myself] the penalty of [my] error". My life was doomed for misery, I thought. But what had I done that was so bad? How could I be wicked and covetous and malicious and murderous and evil-minded? I was none of these things. Could it be that I was fooling myself and that this was what God really thought of me?

I panicked. I cried. I could not pray. I hid my Bible away. I felt doomed. God had given up on me. For weeks, it was all I could think about, and inside me, I knew there must be a mistake. Something must be wrong. It was impossible that I was a bad person and that God wouldn't love me. Why would the Bible say something so horrible?

A short while later, I received the answer to my torturous questions. By what I believed was God speaking to me, I came across an episode of the "*Al-Shater Yi7ki*" show on LBC with Dr. Ziad Njeim. It was about homosexuality. Gay men were sitting in the studio with masks on their faces or as shadows behind curtains. And guests included psychologists, sociologists, lawyers, and men of different religions. Most of the show was very negative, and the gay men guests were shouted at, called perverts and pedophiles, and mocked. And then one of the priests spoke. Through tears of joy, I heard him say that homosexuality was normal, and that Christianity was tolerant of gay people. He said the story of Sodom and Gomorrah was misinterpreted as anti-gay, but that it was really about a society that lived without laws, without humanity, without spirituality.

The other priest mocked him and said: "If you approve so much, why don't you become homosexual yourself?!"

He replied, still smiling, "No, I cannot become homosexual, just like a homosexual cannot become heterosexual". He was peaceful and calm and he changed my life. I was overcome with joy. I still wish today, 12 years after that episode, that I could find him and thank him and give him a big hug. I rushed to get my Bible and looked up the same passage again. Of course! I exclaimed. Of course God would not give me up! Of course I am not evil! I became happy and confident again. I was still

having a hard time fitting in with my school's social setting, but I coped well, mostly using humor. I joked and laughed and studied and went camping. And I continued to read my Bible.

And then, when I was 16, I did the one thing that I would regret for the rest of my life. Naively and without thinking, I was talking to my good friend, the school's Bible teacher, and I told him that I had struggled with my homosexuality and faith. His face turned white. "What?" he said. "Yes, but don't worry", I assured him. "I am fine now, I know that God loves me the way I am". "What?" he said again, "what do you mean 'the way I am'?" "I am a homosexual", I said, wondering why he wasn't congratulating me on my amazing achievement. "No", he said, "homosexuals are sinners. God hates homosexuals".

"No, He doesn't", I replied.

He got up and paced around the room. He looked panicked, like he had suddenly been struck with a deadly disease. "No, no, no", he kept saying. "*Ma biseer, haydi mishkli kteer kbeeri*. Get out of my office. *Mammnou3 ba3a tiji 3al Bible study*".⁶ "But... I can't not come... I want to be a missionary", I said.

"*Khalas! Tla3i la barra!*"⁷

Within an hour, he had told the Principal, the supervisors, and the teachers. And if you remember, my mother was a teacher at my school.

During the ride back home that day, she said nothing, not a word, but she had a horrible frown on her face. She wouldn't even look at me. I understood immediately that the Bible teacher must have told her something and that it was going to be a big problem.

At home, I heated up a plate of spaghetti to have lunch in the kitchen, when my mother suddenly had a nervous breakdown. She started breaking plates and glasses on the floor, screaming "*Keef bta3imli heik fiyyi?? Mannik tabee3iyyi... 3milit kill shee kirmelik... tlo3ti wi7di woskha!*"⁸ My heart sank and I was shaking and tears ran down my face as I sat there motionless. Glassware was breaking around me and food was flying over my head. It was the first time in my life my mother yelled at me

or called me names. "*Oumi footi 3a oudtik!*"⁹ she screamed, grabbing me by the hair and dragging me to my room. It was the first time in my life my mother physically hurt me. She banged the door shut and locked me in. For hours, I cried like I had never cried in my life. I could not stop crying. Through the door, I could hear her crying and screaming and breaking things.

How horrible, I thought, that I had humiliated her so terribly at school. How horrible I was. I felt like the biggest disappointment in the world.

In the evening, she barged through the door and dragged me into the bathroom. She had filled the tub with hot water and something – I don't know what. She stripped me of my clothes and shoved me into the tub. "*Fee shee mish tabee3i feeki, wi7di woskha, baddi in2a3ik hone la tondafi*".¹⁰ She locked the bathroom door and I sat in the tub, still crying, for three hours. *Tash-sheit*¹¹ over the hours. I thought of drowning myself in the tub. I tried to hold my breath under the water, but I couldn't. I wanted to die. My life was over, I thought. I wanted to die. My mother finally opened the door and told me to get out and go back into my room. She was calmer, but still angry and sad. She told me they had kicked me out of school, out of Bible study, out of Girl Scouts, out of the basketball team, out of everything, and that I would remain locked in my room forever.

For 12 days, I stayed in my room. My mother didn't say a word to me. She would open the door only to drop in a Picon sandwich or to tell me to get into the tub again. I stayed in bed for 12 days, doing nothing but crying and eating Picon sandwiches. I was starving and weak. I think now that she must have thought something was physically wrong with me, and she thought she would treat it with the Picon sandwiches and hot baths. But I was never angry at her; I was angry at myself for hurting her so badly. During those two weeks, she took me to the family doctor for a medical checkup. "*Shifli shou bihal binit, mareeda*",¹² she said to him. He checked me and ran tests, and nothing out of the ordinary came out. She took me to a priest, who talked to me for an hour about masturbation and

drugs and the horrors of sex before marriage. She took me to an old man, who I think was a psychiatrist, who prescribed pills for me. I don't know what they were, but I gained 30 kilograms over a couple of months. This whole time, I was like a zombie. I said nothing, I just stared blankly in front of me, and went wherever my mother took me.

On the 13th day, she woke me up at 7 a.m. and told me to get ready for school. "I don't want to go", I said. "Get up!" she screamed.

And so I went back to school. The first day was horrendous. They had placed my seat at the back of the classroom, away from everyone else. I was not allowed to interact with anyone. My classmates were baffled, but my friends had figured out what happened. In the playground, I was not allowed to sit with anyone. The supervisors were monitoring me and asked me to sit alone. My friends, of course, thought that was ridiculous and came and sat with me. They got yelled at but didn't care. "They told us you were sick", my friend said to me. "What happened? No one would tell us anything. We called you at home and your mom kept saying you were sleeping and asked us to stop calling". I didn't say anything. There were tears in my eyes. "We protested for days", she told me. "We went down to the Principal's office and demanded that we talk to you. He kept repeating that you were sick. What happened?"

"My mother hates me", I said. They were silent and stopped pushing me for answers. "They can't do this to you", one of them said. "We will not allow it. What are they going to do? Expel all of us?" After recess, eight of my classmates moved their seats to the back of the class to sit beside me. The teacher complied. It was the first time I felt empowered by group support and solidarity. For the entirety of the school year, my friends' love and compassion carried me through, as I faced mockery, disgust, verbal abuse, and physical violence from everybody around me.

I managed to get through graduation and make it to college. The years passed and my mother wouldn't

talk to me. I mean we spoke to each other, but we never really talked. As time passed, she got less angry and more sad. I've learned to cope with it and to forgive her for everything. I've learned that it was only out of love that she did what she did. I've learned that she was really worried about me being unhappy and dealing with society's homophobia. I've learned that she has only ever loved me just the way I am. But the hardest thing to unlearn was the overwhelming feeling of disappointing those I loved. That stayed with me till this very day.

I've learned that organized religion only wants to control people, and that the only true message of any faith is love. No matter how much hatred people throw at you, you just say thank you and give back love. I've learned that with good friends by your side, you can overcome anything. Nine years after my friends stood up to the school's administration to demand my right to equal treatment, I started a lesbian support group called Meem, based on the same principles of solidarity and friendship. And that little tomboy who wanted to be a missionary is now an activist for social justice. Every single day, I fight for peace, love, and gender equality. I grew up to be exactly what I always wanted to be.

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ENDNOTES

* The numeral "3" is used to represent the Arabic letter *'ayn* and the numeral "7" is used to represent the Arabic letter *ha*. This "chat alphabet" is adopted when communicating in colloquial Arabic over the Internet.

- 1. Dress or girly shoes.
- 2. Act more like a girl.
- 3. Actually I like girls.
- 4. She is focused on her studies and activities. Relationships are the last thing on her mind.
- 5. Isn't it about time you changed?
- 6. That's impossible! This is a huge problem. You can't come to Bible study anymore.
- 7. Enough! Get out of here!
- 8. How can you do that to me? You are not normal. I did everything for you. You turned out to be a bitch.
- 9. Go to your room.
- 10. There's something abnormal in you, you dirty girl, I will soak you here till you're clean.
- 11. My skin wrinkled up.
- 12. See what's wrong with my daughter; she's sick.