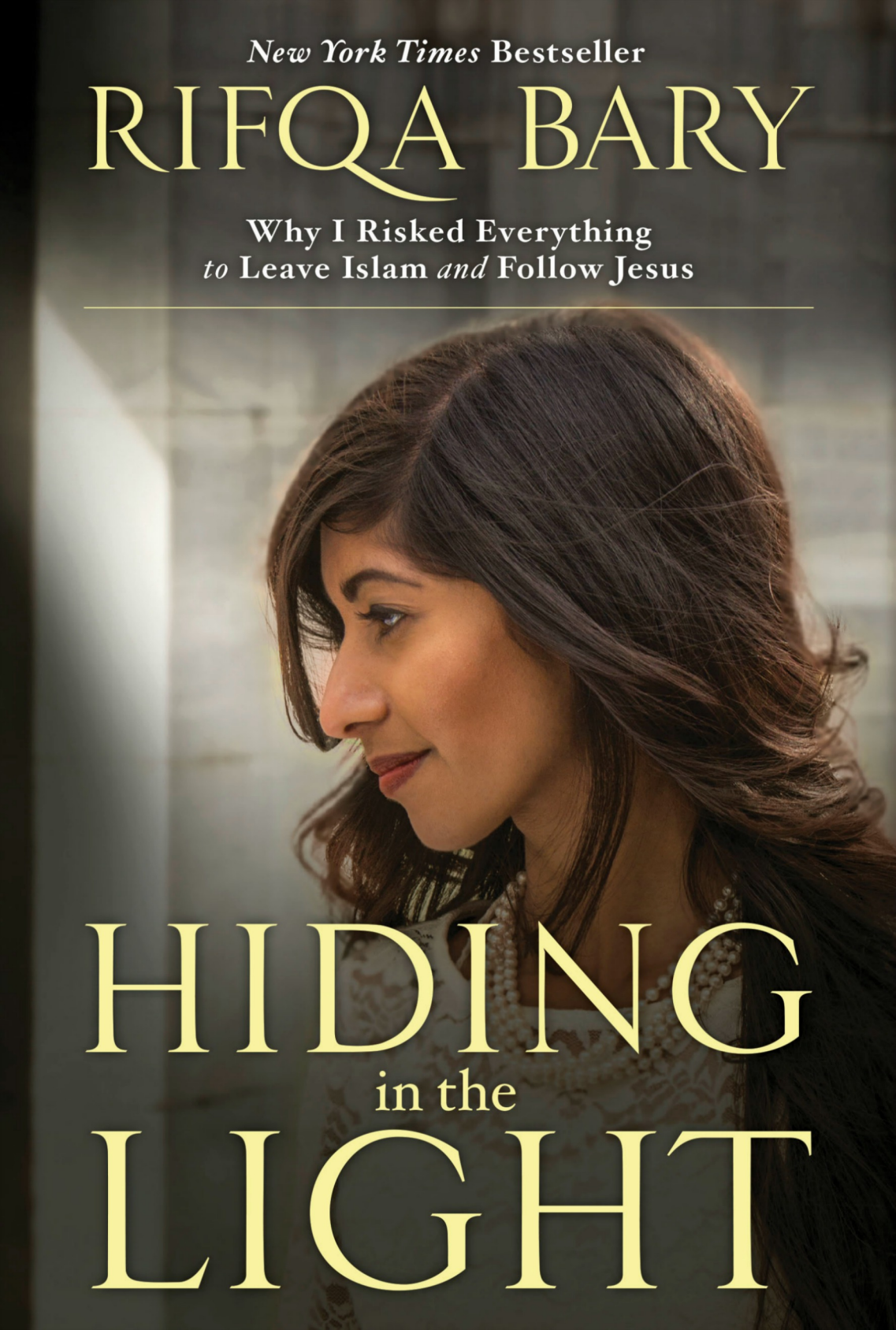
New York Times Bestseller

RIFQA BARY

Why I Risked Everything
to Leave Islam *and* Follow Jesus



HIDING in the LIGHT

Praise for
Hiding in the Light

"Rifqa Bary's story is a powerful testimony to standing for the truth in the face of many difficulties and tall odds. In the words of this young woman who has already been through so much, we are painted a picture of stark cultural contrast—that of slavery and liberty, duty and love, and bondage and freedom. As much as anything, this is a story about the first freedom upon which America was built—the freedom to believe and live one's life according to those beliefs. Rifqa's inspiring story reminds us why we must continue to stand for faith and freedom!"

—Tony Perkins, president of Family Research Council

"Rifqa Bary's story unveils God as the Father to the fatherless whose pursuit of His children is fiercely beautiful. Once I started reading, I couldn't put it down. She invites readers to walk beside her on her fascinating road and to see the God she saw when she said her very brave yes to Jesus."

—Sara Hagerty, author of *Every Bitter Thing Is Sweet*

"An extraordinary glimpse into the faith of a Christ-follower and the sovereignty of God. Rifqa's story informs, inspires, and empowers."

—Max Lucado, pastor and author

"This is truly an inspirational story of a young Muslim girl's journey into the arms of Jesus and the discovery that Jesus is everything that she had been looking for. Her heartbreaking journey is hard to fathom, and yet her suffering was the one thing that led her to Jesus. This story will give you not only insight into what it means for a Muslim to convert to Christianity and the heavy price associated with that, but also the importance of Christians breaking through the stereotypes and reaching out to Muslims in love."

—Naghmeh Abedini, wife of imprisoned pastor Saeed Abedini

"Not only does Rifqa Bary's story bring to light key tenets of Islam we so need to understand, it will show you the courage true faith provides. This is a book you will finish in a hurry, as you'll want to know what happens next! Thank you, dear Rifqa, for counting all as loss for the sake of our Savior."

—Kay Arthur, cofounder of Precept Ministries International and author of *When the Hurt Runs Deep*

"Enrapturing heart and spirit, Rifqa masterfully shares insights into immigrant Muslim life, tearing the veil of mystery with the power of the gospel. Although chronicling her own account, her words echo the cries of young Muslim women worldwide, and manifest on each page is the signature of our sovereign God. Rifqa's story is authored by Jesus—come read what He's written."

—Dr. Nabeel Qureshi, best-selling author of *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus* and speaker with Ravi Zacharias International Ministries

"I hope you can feel the gentleness of Rifqa's heart as I did when I read her story—I love it! In my own experience as a child, I had hidden in a cocoon of despair and lived with the brutality of loneliness—I understand how she felt. When you give your heart to Jesus Christ, you have to be brave. I was so touched by the sadness and the joy of someone who never denied Jesus."

—Nicky Cruz, evangelist and author of *Run, Baby, Run*

"Rifqa is my hero, and this book details her amazing story never before told in its entirety. Even though it was all over the national news, if you thought you knew what really happened—think again. I stayed up all night reading this book. *Hiding in the Light* is a testament to what happens when one ordinary person is touched by the one extraordinary Savior of the World."

—John Stemberger, president and general counsel, Florida Family Policy Council

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***to* Leave Islam *and* Follow Jesus**

HIDING in the LIGHT

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To my precious baby brother, Mohamed Rajaa Bary.

I can only imagine the unanswered questions that may plague you. Why did the big sister you adore leave you and never come home again? My hope is that this book is a long letter explaining why.

Although you may never understand my answer, my prayer is that the words bound within these pages allow your heart to heal. My prayer is that one day you will forgive me for the pain I have caused you. I left not because I did not love you enough. I left because I encountered a God who was worthy of forsaking all . . . even the most prized little man in my life.

If only you could peer through my dreams and see how I ache to hold you in my arms like I did so many years ago . . . but this time I never let you go.

Author's Note

In 2009–2010 my story broke in national and international media. As often happens, many of the news reports centered on speculation and untruths. This book fulfills my desire to give an accurate account of my personal experiences within my family and community. Please understand it is not my intention to malign Muslims or Islam.

Though the story contained in these pages is true, I have changed the names of many individuals for reasons of privacy and safety.

HIDING in the LIGHT

Prologue

The mosque discovered my secret.

And now my parents knew it too.

The cover of early morning darkness was fast slipping away. Mom was still sleeping. Dad had cut his trip short and was on his way home. I had to get out of there *now* to survive. It was the only way I could escape the penalty, not for any crime I'd committed but for what I believed.

I wrote with trembling hands in those final, desperate moments, inches before sneaking from my bedroom to the front door and out into the unknown:

> *Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior. I refuse to deny Him, nor will I ever. I pray and hope you find His mercy and forgiveness. Love you both dearly.*
>
> *—Rifqa*

I took one last look over the room that had been my refuge. I propped the note on my pillow, whispered a breathless goodbye, and was gone.

What I was running away from was certain.

But what I was running toward . . .

God only knew.

One

My skin shone like caramel in the summer sun as I played in the garden outside our home in Sri Lanka. Honeysuckle sweetened the air. I drew in a breath and let it fill my lungs, small as they were. I was only five, such a little girl in a world so big, yet I felt carefree and safe. Joy bubbled within me. I raised my arms and imagined them as wings. I was a mighty bird drifting across the cloudless sky. Running in circles with my wings spread full, I gasped, laughed . . .

And then stood still.

For in that moment I felt something strange and new. A Presence, quiet and comforting, hovering, nearly tangible. It pressed in closer and closer.

I had never experienced anything like this before. But I wasn't scared. I felt strangely protected, cherished, even loved. Peering closer toward what seemed to be its direction, I half-expected to see the empty air staring back at me with noticeable face and features. Instead I saw nothing. But I knew *Someone* was there, a strong Man who seemed to stir the breeze as He moved. Too visceral to be invisible.

Goose bumps broke out on my skin, and powerful excitement filled my tiny frame. Resuming my play, I looked back, still expecting to see a physical person. Again there was no one. I laughed. It became a game. Play, turn back, giggle. Play, turn back, giggle. This Presence was so enticing, so warm. I didn't want our time to end.

And even when it did, somehow I knew He would come back again.

I was a happy little girl growing up in Sri Lanka, especially when I was with my mother, my "Mummy." I always wanted to be by her side. Her

big, beautiful smile warmed me, and her hearty laugh echoed throughout the house.

If I close my eyes, I can still picture her in the long cotton gown she wore at home, remembering how she tried to get me to eat when I was very young. I reached for her long, curly black hair, teasing her with my mischievous eyes.

"One more bite, little Rifqa," she said in Tamil, our native language.

Opening my mouth wide, I let her feed me with her hands. I savored the taste—rice balls flavored with curry.

"Okay. Let's make this one an airplane! Open wide, Rifqa!"

Mummy's plane delivered its payload. I chewed open-mouthed and let out a squeal. She made meals fun, knowing it was the only way she could get me to eat. Airplane after airplane flew across the table and into my mouth.

Back then my mother occasionally spoiled me when Daddy was out of the house. Sometimes she let me try on nail polish, even though my Muslim family did not allow me to wear it because they say it makes us unclean. But she let me keep a stash that I would hide and then wear when no one could see. I knew once I was old enough to pray, I would not be allowed to use it anymore. Still, I would never forget the twinkling of my fingernails in the dim light of my room.

Early memories of my dad aren't as easy to recall. But I do know I adored him. I thought he was *huge*! I now realize his height is average, but back then he was the biggest person in my little world, which made me believe he was safe and would keep me out of harm's way. I loved his attention whenever I could get it, and more than anything, I ached to be special to him—like a prize he would forever treasure.

My father supported us by selling gemstones, often to dealers in America. It was not unusual for him to be away for months at a time on business. I didn't understand as a child why he was gone for so long, but I remember my joy when he returned. Once when he came home after one

of his lengthy trips, he looked different. His normally clean-shaven face was dark and fuzzy. I reached up to feel his cheek, then put my own cheek against his prickly face, squealing with delight. Instead of running away, I rubbed my other cheek against his and shrieked some more. He smiled at my fascination with his beard.

Over the next few years he frequently brought me clothes or candy from his faraway travels. Though I delighted in those, the real treats for me were the rare times he stayed home for more than a few days in a row. Those were the times when we could all be together.

Despite being gone often, my dad was a faithful leader at our mosque. It was both his honor as a man and his duty as a Muslim. Just as I was born Rifqa Bary, just as I was born Tamil, I was also born a Muslim. Of course I was too young to understand, at five, what Islam really meant for me and the people around me, but it was quite clear that this was who we were, what we would always be. The strict Muslim culture was all I had ever known, so I accepted it as normal. Every person and every day belonged to Allah. That's just the way it was. Who would ever feel the need to question something so settled and certain?

My devout family followed all the required rituals of Islam: the five daily prayer recitations, the fasting and feasting, the memorization of the Qur'an. Some of my earliest memories involved getting up at three or four in the morning during the holy month of Ramadan, eating a meal before sunrise that my mother had prepared, then going back to bed, under orders to say a special, memorized prayer that I recited to myself as I tried drifting back off to sleep. By as early as age seven, I was expected to participate in the all-day fasting—no food at all, not even a drink of water—until seven or eight at night when we were allowed to break our fast with some dates as well as a Sri Lankan soup my mother made every day for the occasion.

I also remember the Imam coming to our house each week. Even though he taught me to "read" the Holy Book, I had no idea what any of

it meant. I spoke Tamil and a little English, but I couldn't read in either language. The Qur'an is written in Arabic, and to translate it is considered unholy by the Muslim leaders where I grew up. We only had to be able to quote from it—perfectly, in Arabic—to earn the approval of our elders and the mosque leaders.

But although its language and mystery was a source of great confusion to me, my father's praise made all the hours spent studying worth it. I tried for his sake to be a good student of Islam, as did my big brother, Rilvan.

Rilvan is two years older than I, so our relationship (like most siblings who are similar in age) swung wildly between close friendship and red-faced hatred. He was my closest companion, and I loved him dearly, even if I wouldn't admit it then. I would shadow him around the house until he finally snapped in annoyance, and I would run away only to return undaunted. When he was in a more tolerant mood, we would play tag and run around the house together, shouting and laughing, taunting and teasing.

One day shortly after my sixth birthday, my father returned home from a business trip with a little metal airplane he'd been given at the airport. Rilvan was playing with it, and I demanded a turn with it too.

"No, Rifqa," he said. "Daddy gave it to *me.* You can play with it later."

"Let me see it!" I shouted. "Just for a minute!" I said, before unsheathing my secret weapon. "I'll tell Mummy!"

"No," said Rilvan, hugging the plane to his chest.

"Mummy, he's—"

"All *right,*" Rilvan said, groaning and heaving the airplane straight at me.

I remember seeing it cruising toward me, but after that things are a blur. All I remember is the blood. So much blood, everywhere, running down my face, soaking my orange dress. My mother, hearing my cries, rushed at me from another room, while Rilvan stood silently, horrified, staring in disbelief at his hands, like, *How in the world? All I did was—*

Time felt like it had stopped. In fact, the last sight engraved on my

memory that day was the hands on the clock, each pointing straight up, exactly 12:00 noon . . . before my world went pitch black.

What happened next was a swirl of detached, floating images, weaving into and out of themselves in waves of trauma and consciousness. I remember hearing my grandfather's voice: "Help! Somebody please help!" I remember the faint, frantic echoes of doctors and nurses, one of them, I guess, announcing to my family, "We cannot take her here, I'm sorry. Her wound is too serious. She's bleeding too much. You'll need to take her to the other hospital that can perform the kind of surgery she needs. But hurry! She might not make it if you don't get her help right away!" I ached for my mother's comforting presence. Limp and lifeless, I lay in my grandfather's arms, moaning for breath.

Not till several days later would I fully recover my senses. All but one. My right eye, so badly damaged from the metal plane's sharp edge, would never respond to the various surgeries and treatments they employed in hopes of restoring its function. Despite weeks in the faraway hospital, under the care of its supposedly more highly trained staff, my sight in that eye failed to return. It never has. Its caramel brown color faded to a milky gray.

But as distressing and disorienting as my partial loss of vision proved to be—gone at only six years old—the oddest loss came from somewhere else, somewhere equally (if not more) unexpected.

From that point forward, I felt as if I had been marked. I couldn't quite wrap my head around it, but something had changed. As soon as we returned from the hospital, my family began to treat me differently. When they looked at me, the warmth in their eyes would cool. Where before they would laugh at my stubbornness or persistence or whatever, now they would much more likely chide me to behave myself and keep quiet.

Why? I wondered. I mean, it's not like my injury had crippled me. I'd been able to adapt and adjust and pretty much do everything I could do before. I was still the same Rifqa, I knew. But their behavior toward me

had changed all the same. They seemed to feel that I had become a burden. It was as if every time they looked into my blemished face, they saw something in me they just couldn't acknowledge.

In any case, even the most minor mishap or demand of mine could now invoke their sharp anger, resulting in serious consequences. Although physical discipline was common in my culture, I hadn't witnessed it in my own family until this time. I remember clinging to my mother's skirt hems one afternoon, begging her to play with me. I must have whimpered one time too many, because she finally just snapped. With a jerking lunge, she scooped me up and threw me. I crashed down on the cold concrete floor, scraping my knees and banging my elbows.

"Stop it!" she screamed. "I do *not* have time for you today, Rifqa. Go!"

At first I craved her attention more and more. But as the bruises and the shouting matches began to increase, I started to hide from her. Her rage would surface without warning, and if I did something she didn't like or took too long to finish my chores, I could expect a stern reprimand. Even accidentally spilling milk or something would earn me a stinging cheek. There was no denying the growing hardness in my mother's heart.

I remember finding a stray kitten, for example, roaming around our neighborhood. He was gray and covered in white splotches, and his eyes would shine brightly when he craned his neck to look at me. I named him Ajay. He limped on his back left leg and would tense up whenever I touched him, so I could tell he had been abused or neglected somehow. I held him for hours and hours in the yard, trying to imagine why anyone would abandon him. He was so friendly; he couldn't have possibly meant anyone any harm. He just wanted attention . . . and maybe a bit of milk. Whatever happened, I was intent on keeping him alive. I was the only one who could.

Every day I brought him a bowl of milk because my parents wouldn't

let him inside. They told me he was unclean, like so many other things were, and wouldn't even allow me to touch him in their sight. I offered to give him a bath if he was so unclean. But they said that wasn't what they meant.

"It's ugly, that thing," Mummy would say. "It could have rabies. We don't know. Just . . . just leave it alone, Rifqa. Leave it where it is."

One morning, however, my mother's mind seemed to change toward Ajay. We were leaving for the market when she said I could bring the kitten along. I was ecstatic. Finally, I had worn her down! I scooped up Ajay and climbed into the yellow rickshaw my mother had chartered.

The ride was boring but the market was grand. There were more tents and pavilions than I could count, and the air was thick with merchants crying their wares and with shoppers trading gossip. Every now and then a breeze would stir up a little column of road dust that would tumble down the aisles, as if it were shopping as well. The gathering was large but well-tended to. Tall palm trees lined up like armed guards behind the endless rows of shops, and low shrubs fenced in the area from the nearby highway. Ajay recoiled against me when we first came upon the crowd, but as we wandered through the market, he eventually poked his head out to investigate the savory smells and strange noises, to which he added his own mewling. My mother walked beside me without saying a word. She consulted her list and methodically found our groceries.

We completed our shopping and walked back to the waiting fleet of taxis and rickshaws, carrying our parcels, Ajay at our heels. But Mummy's eyes, I could see, were like stones for some reason. She was tired, impatient, and strained. Then, suddenly, with one frustrated sigh, she stomped on the ground as hard as she could, trying to scare the cat away. Ajay stiffened, arched his back, and darted into the tall grass by the road. Gone. It was the last I ever saw of him.

I stood there in shock, staring into the empty air. Why? Why would my mother do that? But with no other word of explanation, she grabbed

me, swung me up roughly into the rickshaw, and motioned for the driver to take off.

"Rifqa," she said. "I told you not to go near that thing. I let you play with it all afternoon, but that's enough. It's gone. We're leaving."

The memory of that day burned into my mind, as it probably would into yours, not only because of my heartbreak at losing Ajay, but because, in a certain way, the image fits my mother (and my father) so perfectly. Voices stern and eyes void of emotion, their message self-evident: *Go away, go away, go away.*

It was another early lesson in life. My family was not to be trusted.

When I was about seven or eight, a distant uncle came to my house to watch me one day while my mom and brother left to go somewhere. He had dark skin and jet-black hair that was always gelled to the side. His almost black skin seemed darker against the white shirt he was wearing. The stench of his body odor filled the room.

I was uncommonly small for my age. And my uncle, perversely recognizing the contrast in our strength and size, took advantage of my inability to defend myself and sexually violated me that day. Even though I didn't understand what was happening, the ordeal made me feel disgusting. I knew better than to cry. I wanted to be strong. But I felt weak and scared. Something inside me died that day.

The next time my parents sent me back to be watched by him, my uncle told me he would kill me if I ever told anyone what he had done. I believed him, yet I couldn't stand carrying this secret. I didn't want to ever be left alone with him again, so I later told my mother what happened. But rather than comfort or defend me, as I'd hoped or expected, she simply started wailing with grievous tears, "Don't tell your father! Don't tell anyone!"

My father found out anyway. And he was enraged. But not so much

at my uncle. In some Muslim cultures, like mine, this kind of violation is a great source of dishonor. Yet the shame is not attached to the abuser; it is cast on the victim. So not only was I viewed now in my parents' eyes as a half-blind picture of imperfection, but I was also a shameful disgrace to the Bary name. My mere presence and appearance were a stain against the most important thing of all—our family honor.

In this way, I was sort of like the kitten. Dirty. Devalued. Unclean. And in my naive mind I wondered if I, too, would be chased away. I could only guess at what would ultimately become of me, because we never talked about this episode or my feelings again. We simply ignored it and moved on.

Literally.

Two weeks later my father announced that we would all be going with him the next time he left for America.

This sudden change of plans took our tight-knit community by surprise. In the following weeks our home was filled with a rotating circle of friends, acquaintances, and other well-wishers, all of whom exhibited varying degrees of curiosity. My parents were well-regarded at the mosque and around the town, and their abrupt interest in emigration struck many of our neighbors as suspicious. Mummy and Daddy wore guarded smiles all through those weeks, embracing their friends a bit too tightly and laughing at their jokes a bit too loudly. They told me to keep to myself and not bother the grownups, but I understood what they really meant, the subtle, underlying message. They worried I might say something embarrassing. About my uncle? I didn't know. I never really knew. But better to keep quiet. I understood that much, loud and clear.

Actually my parents might have been right to worry about the impression they were giving their neighbors. Some people just couldn't resist the potential for gossip. Our more inquisitive visitors, with perfect nonchalance, oblivious to the social discomfort they created, would wonder aloud about our reasons for leaving.

"For Rifqa," my father would reply, when pressed to explain. "Better hospitals in America. Better surgeons too." He would look at me, warning me with his eyes. "If we can't find help for Rifqa there, we won't find it anywhere."

That couldn't have been the real truth, however. The last doctor to examine my blinded eye had frowned and told us that beyond some cosmetic corrections and other procedures to prevent pain and infection, there was very little that medicine could do for me in my home country or any other. But the word *America* seemed to hold some sort of bewildering power over people that allayed further questions.

We were leaving.

That was all.

So we left for the United States in 2000 on a temporary visa, though my father's plans in moving were never temporary. We ended up staying without the necessary legal paperwork after the visa expired.

As for me, I'd lost so much of myself in those first few years of life, I didn't really mind leaving my homeland behind. I remember watching out the window of the airplane as my island grew smaller and smaller, swallowed up by the ocean's waves and the coming night.

I never returned to Sri Lanka. And I don't think I ever returned to being a child.