

Holding on

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Author's note: I met this family while I was volunteering at their English as a Second Language class. We struck up a friendship and they told me their story. All the details described are true and affirmed by the girl and her mother. They want readers to know about the atrocities the Yazidi people have suffered. I was inspired by this young girl's resilience in the face of trauma, her courage to bear the heavy burden of being the caregiver for her family while pursuing her dream to become a physician to serve her people. Her story is a daily battle for the strength to persevere and endure. The daughter provided signed consent. I have told the story from her perspective.

"Do you want some water?"

She nods her head. I open my mother's hands, withered and weak as they are, so she can grasp the glass between them. I look at her face as she slowly drinks; the worn lines reveal a story of struggle and grief. I take the glass back and set it down. Then I take her hands in mine and massage them, gently warming and rubbing them.

The doctors say it's not ALS [amyotrophic lateral sclerosis]. Maybe something postviral, but they don't know why she can't stretch out her hands or walk on her own anymore. The intravenous immunoglobulin didn't work, and they don't think she will get better.

There's no cure.

And so, I massage and squeeze her hands, hoping one day she will squeeze back. Hoping.

These are the same hands that once kneaded dough every day to make our traditional Yazidi bread. As a girl, she never went to school or learned to read Kurdish, but she taught us about our Yazidi culture. She taught me to make our red and white threaded bracelets that remind us of Yazidism, our religion. She taught me to make our bread. I can almost see that



Photo by Anita Cheng

Close-up photograph of the hands of the mother and daughter depicted in this article. They are wearing red and white bracelets, which are a traditional symbol of their Yazidi culture.

memory of her smiling, tossing floured circles onto the pan over the open fire. That was a long time ago. It seems like another lifetime — life before the genocide.

We Yazidi are a small minority people who lived in the mountains of Sinjar, in Iraq. We were farmers; we kept sheep. We lived quiet lives. Then in 2014, ISIS came.

I may have been only nine years old then, but I will never forget the day we were taken from our home. I will never forget standing on the stairs, my father looking into my eyes, mustering the most reassuring smile he could and telling me to leave the house with my mother, saying that he would meet us soon. “It’s okay,” he said. “Everything will be okay.”

I never saw him again.

Although I know they rounded up all the Yazidi men to be massacred, part of me imagines that, somehow, he alone escaped and that one day he will just appear.

That’s how it began. We were one of many families torn apart, separated. From there, the women and children were herded like cattle onto buses, sold like produce to buyers who looked us up and down. It was my mother’s strong hands that held me and my two little brothers close. When my little sister was separated from us and taken to another camp, it was my mother’s comforting hands that wiped away my tears.

I never saw my sister again.

I try not to think about all the girls being sold as slaves, what they were forced to do. What she was forced to do.

I remember the tight grip of my mother’s hand pulling me that night we ran away in the dark. “Run!” She had cried, “Don’t look back. Never mind the gunshots. Just hold my hand and run with me.”

And so, we ran. We ran from our captors to a Yazidi camp and, later, came to Canada as refugees. I went from a damp, cold tent without running water, a place where we were always waiting for food supplies, to being suddenly enrolled in a Canadian grade 7 classroom. It was quite the shock. Everyone assumed I spoke Arabic and was Muslim. They didn’t understand why I struggled. But we had hope. Life would be better now. We were safe.

But there were days when it felt like my mother had never stopped running. She would get flashbacks of monsters in the dark

and have panic attacks. At the thought of my lost sister or father, she would get swallowed up by terror all over again. She would turn to stone — silent, stiff, staring off, almost like she had stopped breathing. I’ve gotten used to holding her, soothing her with the sound of my voice, telling her to breathe, wiping the sweat from her brow with a damp cloth. I would wait for the episode to pass into tears of grief. “It’s okay. Everything will be okay.”

And then she got sick. She couldn’t walk, she couldn’t use her hands. The way she said my name was drawn out and slurred. At first, we thought it was a stroke. I stayed by her side in the hospital. Test after test failed to reveal a diagnosis, and the doctors seemed to lose hope that she would recover. I remember the way she would look at me after a doctor left the room, her eyes slowly searching my face for answers, for explanations I didn’t have or didn’t understand.

The month she was admitted to hospital, I failed my grade 10 science exam. I was devastated. How do you explain to teachers that it was hard to study because your mother was in the hospital for some unknown illness that had made her incapacitated? How do you explain that you didn’t show up to online class because you needed to be at the hospital to translate when the doctors came? How do you explain that you needed to take care of your little brothers, cook them meals, pack their school lunches and put them to bed, because there was no one else? How do you explain to the dentist that you had to be the one who brought your little brother to get his cavities filled, even though the COVID-19 rules only allow the official guardian, not a teenage sister, to come? “Where’s your father, then?” the secretary asked.

Where *is* my father?

That’s a good question. I pray over that question every day.

It’s okay. Everything will be okay.

I mostly try not to think about it. My mother needs me now. I can’t afford to think about dark things when my mother looks to me to navigate life in Canada, to translate and help her understand this world. My brothers need me now too. They look to me to do all that my mother can no longer do. My people need me. I remember when my brother hit his head while running in the refugee camp, and it wouldn’t stop bleeding. My mother was

frantic, desperately trying to get anyone to help. It was the people in the camp who ran to us, using old cloths to get the bleeding to stop. The day we left the camp for Canada, I remember seeing the faces of those who were not as blessed as we were. Children huddled under makeshift tents, live wires hanging down from someone desperately trying to get a radio to work. Some were sick, but there was no access to medical care or medicines.

And that’s why the grade 10 science exam mattered so much. If I want to go back as a pediatrician for those left behind, I need to make it here. If I want to bring healing to my people as a physician, I need to succeed. I can’t give up, no matter how hard it is today and what challenges lie ahead. We have hope. Life will be better now. We are safe.

That’s what I tell myself.

It’s true, isn’t it?

Is it?

I think of my mother possibly never making bread again, never being able to chase my brothers around again, never embracing me in her strong arms again. I think of her shrunken figure, propped up and unable to care for herself, her hands clasped together to hide their misshapen form. She seems so small now. So fragile.

As small and fragile as any elusive hope that could remain. Hope choked out by disease; hope chased out by monsters in the dark; hope suffocated by grief and loss.

I look up at my mother’s face as I continue to massage her hands. She always knows what I’m really thinking. She tells me not to worry about her, to just go back to studying. She tells me she’s fine. Her words are slow, effortful. Her hands feel small and crumpled, cupped in my own. I give her a squeeze and smile.

It’s okay. Everything will be okay.

Anita Cheng MD

Western University, London, Ont.

This article has been peer reviewed.

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