LOVE COSTS

Love – international language

Do we know the cost of love? Are we aware of it? Do we know how big it is and do we even know it exists? When we hear the word "love" we think of happiness, hope, two hearts beating as one. But that is most certainly just the picture we get from fairy tales, movies, books. In reality love can be nice and sweet, but it hurts. We cannot escape it, it's cruel and vicious and we can't live without it. It has a strange way of finding us. When it does, it changes us completely. It can be the best and the worst thing that has ever happened to us at the same time.

If only we could fall in love with whom we wish. Love doesn't know differences. A white girl falling in love with a black boy. A guy falling in love with another guy. Love is equal, nothing can change that. The only problem with love, no, the only problem with people is that they don't accept all kinds of love equally. They are judgmental, superstitious and not supportive at all.

Our story starts deep in Morocco with a family of six. The family with three sons, aged 6, 18 and 22 and a daughter aged 16. Their last name was Brahim and they lived in a so called house, although it looked a lot more like a mansion. The head of the family, the children's father was Hassan. He was an owner of large fields and plantations, most of which were inherited from his father and grandfather. The business had passed on from father to son and had run in the family for quite some generations. Hassan's first wife Salma was the mother of the first three children. She died giving birth to her daughter, Khadia. Hassan remarried and his new wife, Latifa, gave birth to the youngest son in the family, Tarek. The oldest boy was named Ahmed and his younger brother was Adil. The first son had already married a girl from just as rich family as his. He and Amira had already moved to their new house in the capital of Morocco, Rabat. He found a job in a bank and he was expecting a child soon. The gender was still unknown due to the wish of Amira to be surprised. Ahmed and his wife decided not to take over the family business, leaving it for Adil.

The thing with this family was that they were very religious and old-fashioned. They did not accept homosexuals or bisexuals and marrying someone with a different religion was forbidden. Or at least it was for Hassan. Other members of the family did not get to say what they thought. You were allowed to think differently as long as nobody knew your real opinion. Nobody wanted to be different, yet no one was the same. At the age of 18 you're still growing and evolving as a person and Adil was certainly doing that. He lacked interest in girls and was finding himself liking boys more and more. He wasn't sure of what he was; he could not understand it since talking about this delicate topic was banned in their house.

"Khadia! I need to talk to you. It's important and since Ahmed isn't here anymore you are the only one I can talk to. I know you won't judge me and I just don't know what to think or do anymore." Adil came running down the hall in their house, breathing heavily when he stopped.

"Okay, I know it's harder now without Ahmed. Want to go to my room or yours to talk?" Khadia imagined that Adil would only ask her about girls or maybe school work, but she couldn't help him with these things since she was two years younger.

"Could we go to my room? It's more comfortable." And with that they walked down the rest of the hall and entered Adil's room. Khadia found herself a place to sit on the pillow that was on the floor and her brother sat on the bed.

"Now tell me." Khadia said. She was feeling proud of herself, her brother wanted to get advice from her!

"We shouldn't be talking about this." Adil was nervous, Khadia could tell. Her smile fell when she heard him say that. "What do you think of homosexuals?" He added quickly.

"You mean gays?" She had no idea where this was going. When Adil nodded she continued. "Well they aren't any different from us and I don't really care about who you love. I do think father is wrong. Everyone should be able to love whoever they want." Anger flashed in Adil's eyes and there was something else in them that Khadia could not recognize.

"We don't choose who we fall in love with! I didn't choose this!" The older brother was now screaming at his sister.

"Okay, I'm sorry! But what do you mean you didn't choose this? What didn't you choose?" Adil was scared, he hadn’t intended to tell her his secret. The words just sort of slipped out of his mouth and now Khadia would find out and tell their parents or friends. What if the whole school found out?

"Nothing, I was just saying that ..." As her brother was trying to get out of the situation, Khadia figured it out.

"Adil! You're not getting yourself out of this one. I know."

"What do you know? I told you nothing!" He panicked and his voice was higher than usual.

"Don't act stupid, Adil. I know you're gay. Is it offensive if I say that? It's okay to be one, but father would kill you if he found out. And to think that we are talking about this in the house. You’d better pray that no one heard us, it would be a disaster, believe me on that one. And ..."

"Khadia, calm down, please! So you are okay with it?"

"Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?" Khadia thought for a second and quickly added "Wait! Don't answer that!"

"I'm thinking of going away. I'm old enough, but I'm worried."

"Do you really want to go?" Khadia was scared; she was going to lose her brother. She understood him well, he wasn't safe at home.

"No, but I might in a few months. Now go before somebody hears us!" His sister left the room not knowing how to feel about it all. She was happy that Adil trusted her with it and she was sad because he was going to have to leave. Changing her father's mind and opinion on the subject was impossible. Him being different would probably make their father kill him!

"Khadia, your father needs you in his study now!" Her stepmother screamed from downstairs. In that moment Khadia felt her heart sink. Father found out Adil's secret and now she would get punished for keeping it. She walked slowly down the stairs and to the door to the study. She knocked softly and heard her father say "Enter". She was trembling with fear as she slowly opened the massive doors and sat down on a chair opposite to Hassan, who was sitting behind his desk.

"Do you know why you're here?" He spoke slowly, his voice showing no signs of anger.

"No, father." Khadia was careful not to lie to her father. She knew what the consequences would be if she dared to lie and if her father found out that she was untruthful.

"You are here to meet someone. I and his father have arranged a marriage between you two. You will be married by the end of the year. Understood?" Hassan was strict and he allowed no arguments.

"Please no, father! I want to marry someone I love. Those old traditions should be history by now. It's not fair to me or to him, please!" Khadia begged even though Hassan took no notice of it. He opened another door and there was Khadia’s future husband. He walked in and sat down next to her. Only then her father seemed to realize what Khadia had said before.

"You will respect me and our religion including the old traditions! They are part of our past, present and future and a little girl like you isn't going to change that! Dare to disobey me and there will be punishment!" His voice was cold, dripping with venom. Khadia was too scared to mutter a word so she just nodded.

"As-salam alaykum, Khadia. My name is Salim." Khadia took a good look of him, sure she could say he was handsome but she didn't like him, she didn't want to be his wife.

"No!" She screamed, tears filling her eyes. She stood up and ran to her room, bumping into Latifa on her way up. Latifa tried calling after her, but she just kept running, then slammed her door shut. Her stepmother walked to the study, only to see Hassan with more anger and rage in his eyes than ever before.

"Hassan! Leave the poor girl, it's a huge shock for a 16-year-old to hear those words. Do you think I was any better when I heard I was marrying you? I cried for a whole week! I didn't sleep or eat, I didn't speak, I was too weak to go to school or do anything at all. I didn't want this anymore than she does and you cannot blame her for that! Now leave the poor girl alone and let me talk to her." It wasn't Latifa's place to say anything and she shouldn't have. It was forbidden to object him and she was sure she would get punished but this time she didn't even care. It was cruel what they had done to her and it was cruel what they were doing now to Khadia. She had never told Hassan about that before and he was clearly shocked now. He shut up and stopped in his tracks, looking at her as if she had just fallen from the sky.

"But that was almost eight years ago. Why haven't you told me about this?" Shock was evident in Hassan's voice.

"You wouldn't listen. You didn't care just like you don't care now. Hassan, Khadia is your daughter! I never understood why my father had done that to me, it was like he didn't even care. My mother never once stood up for me and I'm not letting the same thing happen to Khadia. I'm not her mother, but I care for her just as much." She took a short pause and turned to Salim. "Salim, please, you don't have to listen to this. Go find Adil, he's probably in his room." This was the most Latifa had said at once in ages. Surprisingly, Salim did leave the study and went to find Adil. He could hear Hassan's shouting from behind the closed doors. This was probably the part where he punished Latifa for objecting him. He could also hear Khadia crying. He decided to find Adil first and then go comfort Khadia. He knocked on Adil's door and opened them slowly. He found his friend sitting on his bed reading Quran.

"Adil, I need your help!" Salim explained the situation to Khadia's brother and after that they both went to her room. She was in the corner, curled up and crying. The way her body shook with every breath she took broke Adil's heart. He ran to her and hugged her, holding her close. He tried to comfort her but she just cried harder. Salim decided to explain his side of the story and he needed her to know that he hadn’t chosen this either. He sat down on the floor next to her and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Khadia, please listen to me." Salim's voice was pleading.

"OK." The crying girl weakly nodded but her voice broke on that simple word. She continued hiding her face in her brother's shirt. Adil whispered something in her ear and she looked at him wide-eyed but smiled after a moment.

"I don't want this either, but I had to give in. I thought that we could see past the fact that we're married and be friends who are living together. But I'm not completely sure that I only like girls or if I even like them at all! You see, me and your brother are, well I'm not sure if we are, together." Salim was a bit ashamed and he wasn't sure if Adil and him were even together. They looked at each other and Adil was about to say something but Khadia stopped him before he could say anything stupid.

"Yes, of course you are! And that's the end of it. How long have you two been together?" Her previous tears and sorrow were now long forgotten and were replaced with happiness and smiles.

"Khadia, you don't understand. It was two days ago that Salim fell and I caught him and it kind of felt right and we kissed. We’ve known each other for two years now and he was so shocked when he found out about marrying you and we shouldn't be together because it's not fair to you." Salim wanted to cry when he heard those words fall from Adil's mouth. He was in love with Adil and he had enough of hiding, even if it meant not being able to be with him.

"No, Adil! You don't understand. If you two love each other then be together. I don't even care, I don't want to marry Salim anyway. Now kiss already you two!" Khadia had no shame at all when it came to love and didn't give much for religion. She had never seen two people kiss. It was forbidden to watch that kind of movies and they never showed them on TV. She read about these things in some book but it left her with so many questions. Salim and Adil looked at each other in an unsure way at first but they eventually gave in. Khadia was careful not to miss a thing. The sight in front of her expressed love and it was beautiful to watch. She swore to herself that one day she would experience that, too. Adil and Salim broke apart, breathing heavily. They had their foreheads pressed against each other and were looking deeply into each other's eyes. A few seconds passed when Salim whispered the words he had been dying to get out.

"I love you, Adil." Adil was in shock. He couldn't speak or move. All he could do was to watch Salim's face fall more and more with every second that passed without an answer. Salim looked down and nodded, tears were already threatening to appear. Khadia realized that if her brother didn’t answer she would have to marry Salim, Adil would leave and she would have to live the rest of her life with someone she didn’t love and someone who didn’t even like girls. Not to mention that she’d have to keep this a secret and she'd have to take it to the grave. So Khadia decided to take faith in her own hands and hit her brother on the head as hard as she could. Her hit wasn't strong but it was enough to wake Adil out of his trance. When he saw what he had done he took Salim's face in his hands, making Salim look at him. He was crying now and Adil gently wiped away his tears. He lovingly caressed his cheek with his thumb and looked in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Salim. I love you! Don't cry, please. I can't stand seeing you hurt because of me. I should have answered sooner I just couldn't believe you actually love me back. This is perfect." Adil didn't give Salim time to answer, he just kissed him again. Their love really couldn't be sweeter. Khadia was now over the moon. She jumped up and down while clapping and after Adil and Salim saw her so excited they both laughed heartily and hugged her. Salim promised to them both that the wedding would never happen.

Khadia was rudely awakened in the middle of the night. She slowly opened her eyes to see her brother leaning over her. She tried turning over and going back to sleep but she kept being shaken. She grumbled but managed to get out a quiet "What? Go away."

"Get up, we're leaving in an hour." Adil whispered. Khadia, who was still sleepy, looked at her brother to see if he really meant it. There was no smile on his face, no glitter in his eyes and she knew he wasn't kidding. She got up without another word and stuffed her relatively small backpack with a few clean clothes and a comb. The next few days, weeks or maybe even months were going to be torture. She didn't know who was coming, where they were going or how they were going to get there. She trusted her brother but she was scared. She had some hidden money she had almost forgotten about. She quickly put it in her backpack, it would definitely be useful. She took all her jewellery, too in hope she'd be able to trade it for money. She got ready and went to her brother's room. She found him sitting on the bed looking at a family photo. Their mother was in that photo and Khadia was surprised he still had it. She wasn't in it of course; her mother was pregnant with her when the photo was taken.

"We wouldn't have to run if she was still here. I miss her. Our father was happier back then." Adil's voice was sad but they had no choice. She never thought it would be so soon, she’d only found out about it all the previous day.

"We need to go." They got up and sneaked out of the house. No one heard them, luckily. Salim was waiting for them outside the gates and together they walked to the bus station. After hours of waiting the right bus finally came. In the morning Khadia found herself standing in front of a bank in Rabat. The building was tall and made of glass, opposite the building there was the sea and Khadia was already in love with the city. The bank wasn't open yet and they were waiting for their brother to arrive.

"Ahmed!" Khadia screamed when she saw him. She ran to him and hugged him tightly. Ahmed was surprised when he saw her and Adil. He’d never thought that he’d see them there.

After quite a lot of explaining, Ahmed decided to help them. In a matter of hours the trio was on their way to the United Arab Emirates, hoping for a better tomorrow. They got a nice place to stay and Adil and Salim found decent jobs. Nobody judged them here, they were finally free. Months later, Khadia was falling for someone she called "The one". And he really was her only one.

But no matter how painful love is, it always turns out beautiful at the end.

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