

# The Tree-Lined Avenue

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Eighteen years ago, my father left our home in Syria to seek work abroad and make a better life for his family, but he disappeared and was never heard from again. We never talk about it. My mother raised her three children alone and, despite all her suffering and difficulties, she never wanted to remarry. I grew up and was able to study at university while she worked to help my family. When war broke out in Syria, I lived for a while in Lebanon and then in Iraq, from where, after many attempts, I obtained a visa to study a master's degree in Conflict Mediation at the University of Barcelona. In this city I have found a home, friends, a place where I can share my experience, my knowledge and desires, where I can live in the moment and keep moving forward with a smile, always looking ahead.

The story begins eighteen years ago, when my father left to find work outside the country, in search of a better life for the family. But he disappeared. I was twelve years old when I saw him for the last time. We did not hear about him after that, even his workmates knew nothing about him and never saw him again. I remember very well that my mother, my brothers and I did not talk about it. Each of us remained silent and kept our thoughts to ourselves. It was certainly a shock to us, but we quickly understood and accepted it. My mother lost any hope of seeing him again and assumed that he had married another woman. Her conclusion may be based on their previous differences, but I was not convinced. How can a father who loves his children to an indescribable extent abandon them so easily? I cannot forget all the beautiful moments he gave us as children. On the other hand, if we suppose that he did marry another woman, it would not have been easy because we are Christians and the church traditions do not readily allow

it. It would be easy for him to live his life normally, communicate with us and hide the truth about us. I still think something happened to my father that made him disappear: perhaps he went to prison for some reason, or died. But whatever happened to him, he simply did not exist in our lives and his disappearance has remained a mystery.

We accepted it quickly, even though it was hard, and we had no other choice but to move on. So my mother soon began to work to secure a good standard of living and provide the right conditions for us to continue our education. Mum! She is the start of everything and the origin of the story. Who am I to talk about myself!? How does my story and my journey compare with the greatness of her story and her journey!? Who and what would I be today were it not for my mother's sacrifices and discipline!?

Although her brothers repeatedly tried to marry her to another man and the Church stood by her in this special case, she was considered an abandoned woman. But my mother chose her

children and insisted on dedicating all her love and life to us alone, always being the spearhead in our struggle, while we, her children, acted as the shield that protects and preserves her from all harm.

A mother, a young woman, a tormented woman, in the prime of her life, and three boys, you can imagine what she faced from the packs of wolves in our society. She was a woman like a thousand men, facing all temptations and difficulties alone, and she succeeded, she succeeded in bringing up three men to give her support, love and care.

It was not long before my older brother and I realised that we had to help my mother and work as well as studying. We were diligent in both and were always able to reconcile them. It was a life full of trials, tribulations and difficult moments, but also of beautiful, emotional, proud and happy moments.

Until the war came... which I consider the second war in my life.

I can say that at that time my brothers and I were strong, mature men, able to face circumstances, despite their complexity and difficulty. I was able to go to university, although it was complicated and dangerous because of the security tensions, so getting to classes was not easy. The continuous road blocks, with battles and exchanges of fire: the whole thing was like a nightmare and I expected to wake up from it at any moment, but I did not, and we moved forward, every day another day of survival.

At university, I started a new chapter in my career, an important and decisive chapter, not because I started studying at university level, but because I met the Guardian Angel who would be my companion, my best friend. After my first class with him, I went to his office and introduced myself. Thereafter, we had many and varied conversations, and we soon became very close, like soul mates, as if our friendship was meant to be. He is the friend that a person finds once every seven lives, and he is

the brother from another mother, and he is the substitute father. I would need many articles to talk about my teacher and friend Joseph Matta, so in the future I will devote some of my writings to him, the Unknown Soldier of my country, the thirteenth disciple of Christ.

I will say that he always took my hand and guided me forward, taking me to intangible spiritual levels. And I have always shared with him a human experience that transcends time and place. If I am here today, it is because he wrote the first lines for me.

*A mother, a young woman, a tormented woman, in the prime of her life, and three boys, you can imagine what she faced from the packs of wolves in our society*

And he is still with me in every step and every experience.

After I completed my university studies, there were difficult years full of work and effort, but also experiences and good moments that I will never forget. I don't remember attending classes very much, firstly because the roads were dangerous and full of death, and secondly because I worked day and night when I could go out, to help my family in these trying conditions, and every day we returned home was a new birth, a new chance to live another day.

In 2014, my older brother took the road of death to Germany across the sea. He was and still is like a father who will never leave us again, but he is always at our side, my soul mate who understands me without speaking. He is successful in his work and life, persistent, firm, loving and supportive. He never leaves me.

Who am I to tell my story and my journey, compared to his story and his great journey!

I had to stay with my mother and my younger brother to take care of them and complete my university studies, but really they took care of me. My mother is my companion of my path



A mosaic by Joan Miró in La Rambla, Barcelona (Heracles Kritikos / Shutterstock.com)

and an inexhaustible source of love. In 2017, I was awarded a university scholarship to study a master's degree at the University of Barcelona, and it was an opportunity at the right time and in the right circumstances, having graduated from my university in the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences of the French Literature Department.

I went to the Spanish Embassy in Beirut to apply for a visa. The embassy had been closed in my country since the outbreak of the war in 2011, and, when I reached the Lebanese border, the security officers did not let me to enter, despite showing them the embassy appointment, and I had to wait for hours until one of the officers allowed me to enter.

And when I went to submit the papers on the second day, the employee was rude and uncooperative. She took my papers and had a quick look, and asked me several rapid questions that were not related to the reason I was requesting the visa. She did not wait for my answer but threw my application aside. Then she put an X on it and said, "We'll send you a response later." I was nervous, frustrated and offended. What was the justification for that behaviour? She may have been having a bad day, and today I am grateful for her behaviour as it was the beginning of an interesting journey full of great experiences.

I received a rejection a few days later, with no explanation as to why, and I stayed in Leba-

non because it was difficult for me to return to Syria. After a short period with the help of a friend I started working in a restaurant, for five months, for up to fifteen hours a day. I was not paid during these months for illogical reasons and on flimsy pretexts, so I decided to leave and look for another job. But in Lebanon at least I was surrounded by good people, the old friends I met again, and the new friends I made.

I started a new job in a company, and the team was like a new family to me. They gave me a lot of love and appreciation, and we have stayed in touch to this day.

Despite the ordeals, I had begun to relate to Lebanon and the people there, so I cried when, in 2019, I had to leave for Iraq to join my mother and my younger brother, who had left Syria for Erbil, the capital of the Iraqi Kurdistan, to be close to them and take care of them. But the decision to leave was a call of duty.

Iraq was a country eroded by the years of war. So you would imagine the people there to be would jaded, exhausted, their spirits dampened, but I have never seen such a friendly and loving people before, their hearts and minds open to all with joy and generosity.

When I landed at the airport and was waiting at passport control, there was an old man and woman in front of me, Uncle Saadi and Aunt Laila. We had a short conversation and then they invited me to their house. Two days later I went to visit them, and they welcomed me like their son returning from after years of travelling, and we soon became like a family. They never stopped showing their love and support for me. I will never forget their faces and every moment of love and security I felt with them.

My first month there was a time to relax and spend time with the family. I did not want to think about anything, not the past or what was to come. I just wanted to meditate and enjoy morning coffee with my mother and talk with my brother for hours.

After that, I started working and getting to know the city and its people. Erbil was a home for many of the Syrians, and the people of Iraq are among the most loving and beautiful people, despite their pain and failures. They never lost their sense of morality and love, rather their suffering increased their understanding of the suffering of others. I have never seen anything like the generosity of the Iraqis, they are a great people.

Months passed, and my mother, brother and I worked to secure a decent life, with no escape from difficult times. We faced many hardships as always, but with our solid will, love and support for each other, we overcame them, and there were always beautiful, emotional and human moments that give us motivation and passion.

*I contacted the University of Barcelona to inquire about the possibility of obtaining a place for me this year. I was sent the necessary papers to apply for the visa again*

Meanwhile, I contacted the University of Barcelona to inquire about the possibility of obtaining a place for me this year. I was sent the necessary papers to apply for the visa again, and another complicated process began. I contacted the Spanish Embassy in Baghdad and they told me that I had to go to the Spanish Embassy in Ankara, Turkey, since I resided in the Kurdistan region. But it was very difficult to obtain a visa to Turkey unless I paid a huge fee, so I wrote to Baghdad again and explained to them the difficulty of the situation. They agreed to give me an appointment to submit my papers, but travelling from Erbil to Baghdad needs a visa and that would take time and money. I started laughing, yes, everything that was happening was a reason for laughter for me, and after a lot of correspondence between me and the embassy, and between the embassy and the university, a lawyer was appointed to go on

my behalf to apply. In the meantime, the Covid-19 crisis began, and a general closure was announced in most countries.

Life returned to normal after a few months and, after much correspondence, I did an interview via Skype at the Spanish Consulate in Erbil, and then I got a visa at the beginning of 2021 after I wrote a pledge that I would not seek asylum there!

It may seem that I am telling the story of my obtaining a visa, but no, I am recounting this complicated process to show that I did not spend all this time waiting for the visa but rather I was continuing my life and making my way to find a better future wherever I was. But I did what I had to do for myself and my family to avoid feeling guilty or inferior.

Frankly, after I was refused the visa for four years, when I did get it, I felt very cold. Perhaps after all this time I no longer had the same eagerness to travel, but I had the passion to make my way anywhere, to move forward, opening new horizons. And if every new step is a risk, I love taking risks. Before flying to Barcelona, I kissed my mother's forehead and the good land of Iraq goodbye.

Despite all the clouds in my way, something was attracting me to Barcelona, yes, Barcelona and not somewhere else, and despite my feeling of belonging to every place I go to, I had a strong feeling of belonging to Barcelona, even before I arrived.

I landed in Barcelona, and for the first time in a long time I breathed clean air, free of gunpowder and the smoke of wars, an air that carried peace and stillness. The sun was warm, not scorching. And I entered the city like a groom who had come to meet the bride he had loved for years but had never seen before.

I did not feel for a moment that I was a stranger, from the first moment I felt that I had known the city for years as if I had grown up in it. It immediately felt familiar. I have many stories with many cities, both beautiful

and difficult, which gave me great experiences and refined my personality more and more, but Barcelona only offers me beautiful times, only beautiful, wonderful people, and peace, as if we were on our honeymoon, but one that would last forever.

The people here are so kind and friendly to an indescribable degree. Is the water that feeds the houses of the city rich in minerals, love and affection? If you walk in the street, you will see smiles from all directions, and if you need treatment in the hospital, you almost hope that you don't recover because of the great affection and kindness. I feel like everyone is hugging me all the time, not just with their arms but with their eyes, their smiles, their glances, and their manners.

*I did not spend all this time waiting for the visa but rather I was continuing my life and making my way to find a better future wherever I was*

I am now completing what I came for, a master's degree in Conflict Mediation at the University of Barcelona, and I have a wonderful group of classmates and professors. They are my wonderful new family, and who is more qualified than me to specialise in this field? I am the one whose life was filled with conflicts was able overcome them and always find solutions for me and my family. I am the one who my friends always turn to solve their problems, putting their full trust in me. And I have a long experience working with companies in my country and abroad, in concluding agreements, finding solutions and resolving disputes.

And because I feel that I am part of this city, since the first days I began to do voluntary work, including with the House of Solidarity – Community of Sant'Egidio. This represents the true face of Barcelona, where we receive the homeless, the lonely, and the elderly, prepare and serve food for them and take care

of them. This voluntary work gives me great joy and satisfaction. I also offer free Arabic language lessons to Europeans as well as other voluntary work.

Here, like everywhere I go, I seek joy but I also seek to spread joy.

I am searching for a homeland within a homeland, so I come to you, Barcelona. I am searching for safety outside the homeland, and I found it in your city. Is there a better place for hope and passion than here with you? I yearn for knowledge, giving, and sharing, and is there a better place than you for giving and sharing?

*I am searching for a homeland within a homeland, so I come to you, Barcelona.  
I am searching for safety outside the homeland, and I found it in your city*

My friend the thinker, philosopher and writer Lluís Pla Vargas says in one of his writings: “We are aware but it is hard to admit it. One unexpected day, you are back on the road, moving away from the homes created on an earlier path, rediscovering that we are born to travel. If you accept this, fate no longer matters: it is enough to be worthy of the path.”

Lluís was the first person here with whom I began to weave the threads of friendship. Every time I finish a conversation or session with him, I yearn for the next one. He has given me a sense of familiarity. Despite his great culture and rich knowledge, he is curious and longs for questions and knowledge, and knows how to listen. Lluís, with his youthful spirit, is a mixture of a friend, a brother and a teacher.

And my newest friend in town is Jordi Xavier Romer. He sent me a Christmas card saying: “Dear Qays, the gospels say that some wise men came from the East and followed a star to Bethlehem. For me, you are a star who also came from the East, from Syria to Barcelona, to bring me a message of peace and friendship. You are also an important component of the Christmas tree that grows in my heart. Thank you for being here, for your friendship, for being what you are.”

How can one respond to these wonderful words and noble sentiments?!

How can I forget Teresa Puig, the language teacher, who has accompanied me since I was in Iraq and insisted on giving me online Spanish lessons? This wonderful noble woman with a youthful spirit opens her heart to everyone without hesitation. Teresa: you are my mother in another place.

I am a person with a permanent feeling of gratitude; I live my life with gratitude, always gratitude, so I appreciate every hand on my shoulder, every hug that holds me, every beautiful word or smile. So I would like to say that I am so grateful to have such wonderful people in my life. And, last but not least, my dear friend Antonio Martínez, the brother my mother did not give birth to.

Whenever I sit alone and take a quick look at the story of my life and my journey, I remember Santiago, the hero of Paulo Coelho’s novel *The Alchemist*, and Heba, the hero of Youssef Zeidan’s novel *Azazel*. And the most important lesson I learned from this journey and all these experiences is to smile and move forward, and live the moment.