

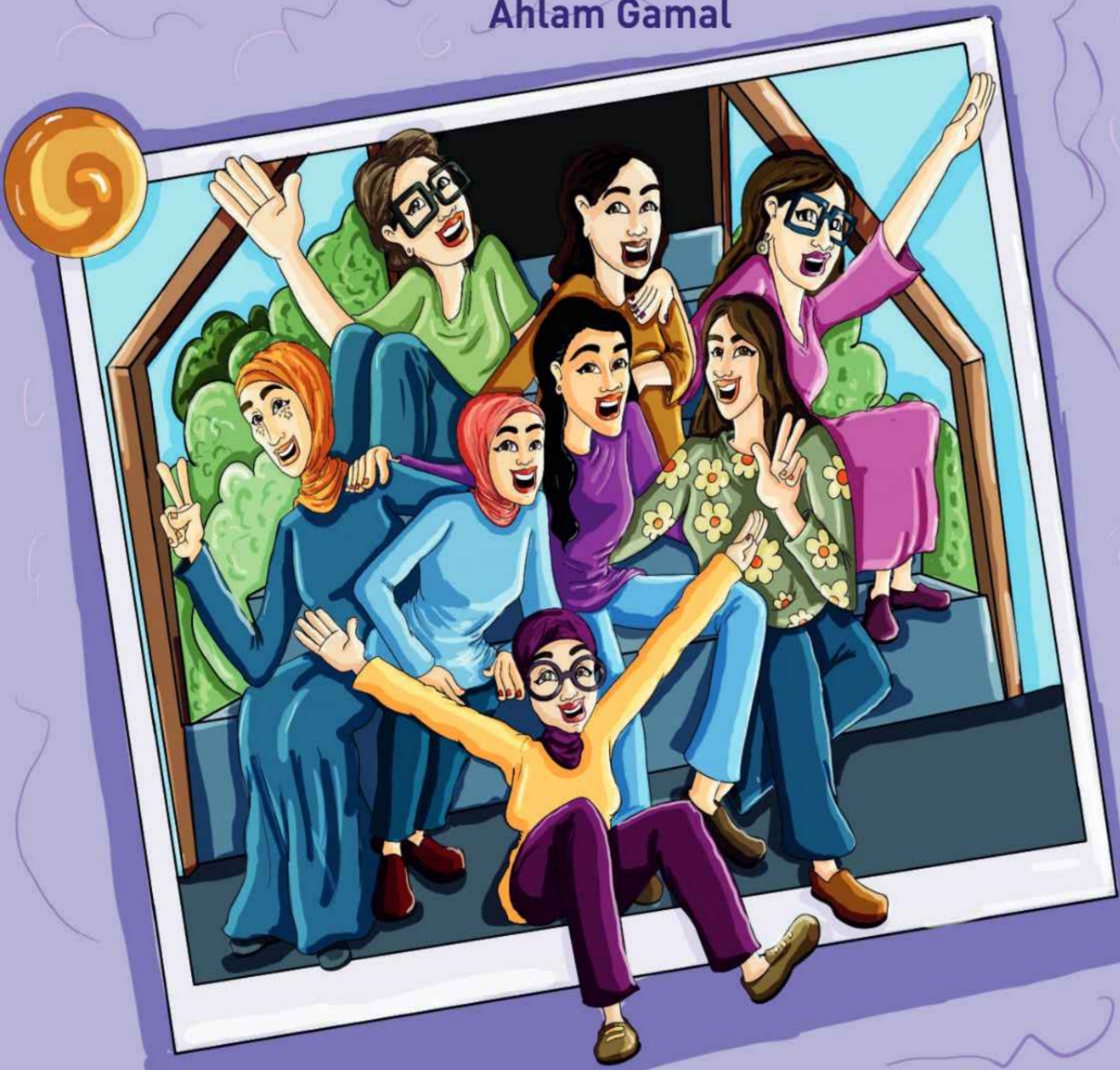
She  
LEADS



# Behind The Scenes

Their story

Illustrations & Design  
Ahlam Gamal





## Advocacy campaign to support girls' mental health:

The "She Leads" project produced a collection of short stories to advocate for girls' mental health. The campaign, titled "Behind the Scenes," aims to highlight the psychological pressures girls face in Arab countries and raise awareness about the importance of education and mental health. The campaign uses comics as a form of storytelling, emphasizing the role of art in self-expression.



### Stories

### pages

• Campaign Definition	
• Expectations and Troubled Hopes	1-3
• Lana	4-7
• A Girl in War	8-14
• I and I	15-20
• The Bird	21-25
• The High School Bogeyman	26-30
• Between Fears and Hopes	31-36
• My Painting	37-38







My name is Nisreen, and I'm 16 years old. Life feels full of challenges. School and all the pressure that comes with it make me feel like I'm missing out on the best years of my life, without really enjoying them.



I'm always thinking about the future and what's expected of me. It feels like a huge responsibility, and I'm scared of not meeting those high expectations. I don't want to fail or see disappointment in their eyes.



At the same time, I want to spend time on my hobbies and take care of myself, but every time I try, I feel guilty, like I should be studying instead.





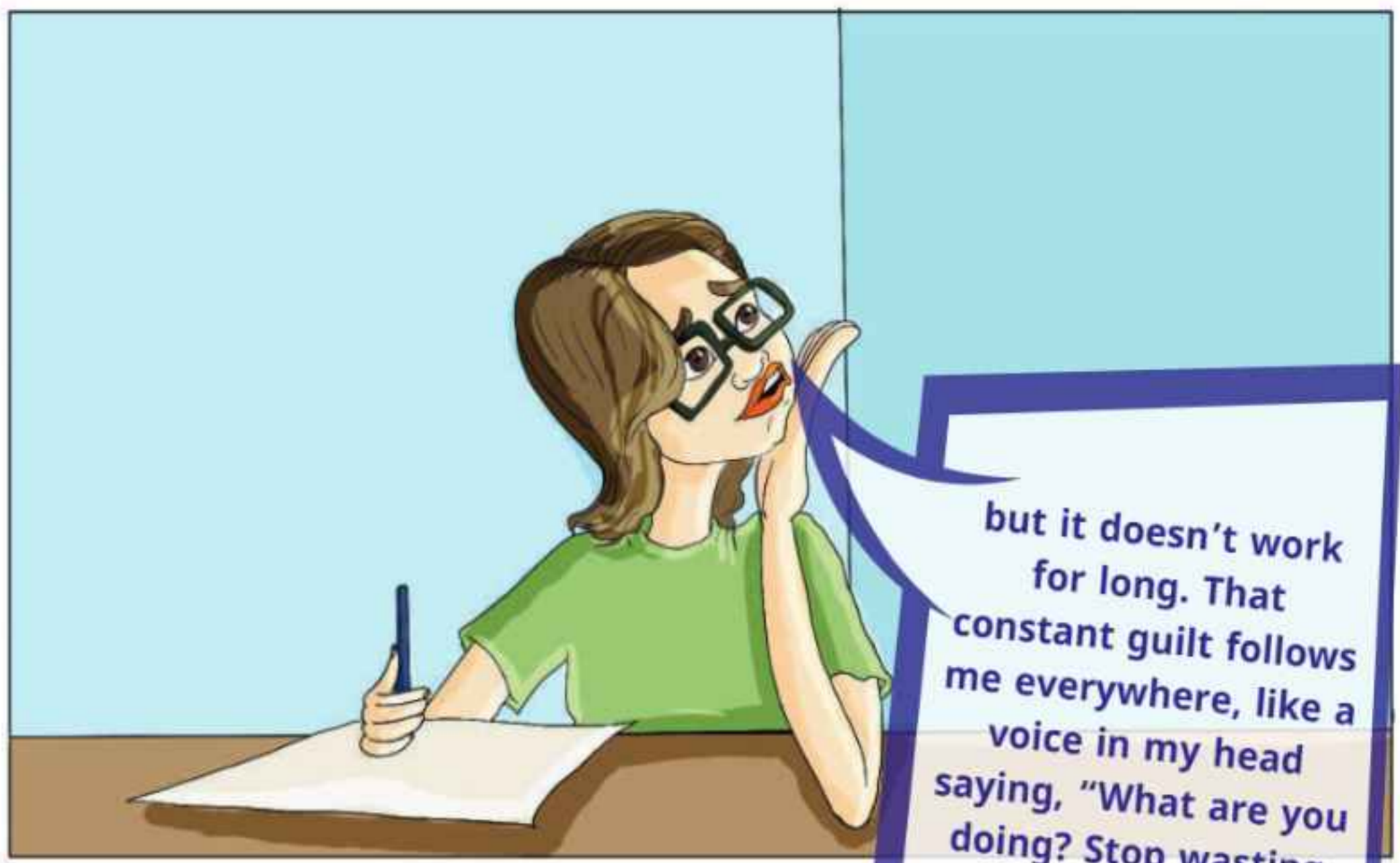
The support I get from my family is wonderful, but it also makes me more afraid. I don't want to let them down or break their hopes. No matter how hard I try to get the best grades and be the best version of myself, I don't feel happy or satisfied.



I know there's more to life than just perfect grades, but it's hard to find joy when I'm stuck under so much pressure. I'm constantly trying to balance the expectations others have of me with my own needs, but it's really hard, and it leaves me feeling anxious all the time. Even though I give everything I have to my studies, using all my energy to reach my goals, the thought of one day regretting that I didn't enjoy my teenage years still haunts me. I try to balance my school life with my personal life







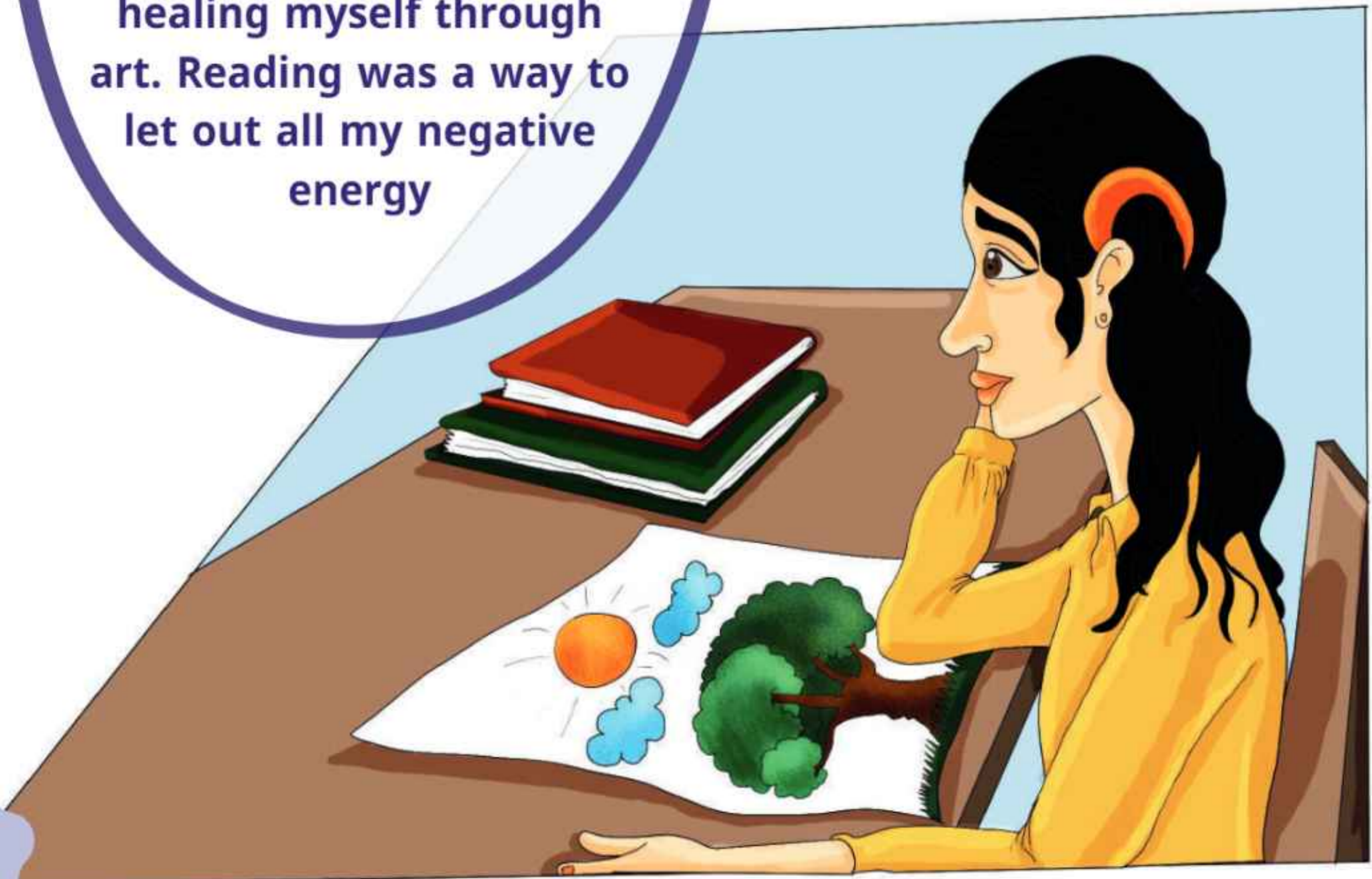
but it doesn't work for long. That constant guilt follows me everywhere, like a voice in my head saying, "What are you doing? Stop wasting time; you need to study. If you want to make your family proud, you must study. Don't forget, studying is the only weapon that will stay with you forever."







Understanding my mixed-up feelings wasn't easy. I was a teenager, not even sixteen yet, trying to escape reality with books and art. I didn't realize at the time that I was healing myself through art. Reading was a way to let out all my negative energy

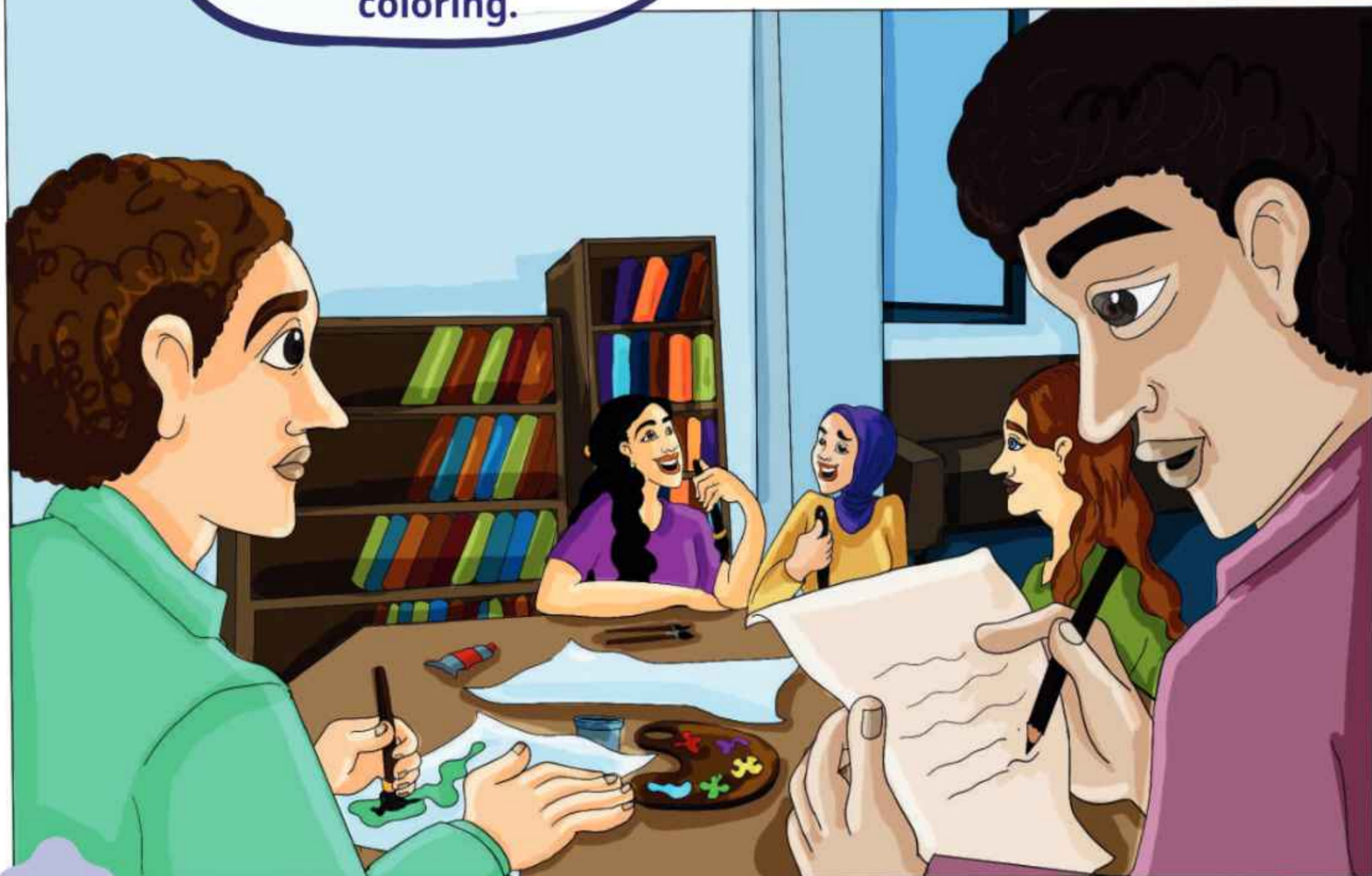






As I got older, I started to understand that art is a way to care for my mental health


I began to bring little art projects into every place I worked, creating a healthier mental space with drawing and coloring.







Now, I'm 23 and working as a coordinator for mental health events through art at an institution



Yes, I've come a long way from being that little girl who cried when she was seven because she felt defeated. I've healed, kept going, and found success.






What if all the windows I look through are colored with phrases like "What you desire" rather than "What you must do"? The nightmare of obligation and duty has always haunted me in every brushstroke, every flower in the garden, and every thread in my dress.

Absolute perfectionism is one of the irrational ideas that a person may entertain at some point in life, especially during adolescence. This stage is highly sensitive and significant in a person's life, as it is filled with various emotions. So, what if:


- What if parents embraced positive parenting based on compassion, dialogue, and support?
- What if parents explained to their children what adolescence means and the changes it brings?
- What if parents worked to reinforce their children's positive behaviors and correct their negative ones?
- What if teachers employed effective teaching methods centered on competition and decision-making?
- What if counselors helped students understand themselves and their behaviors?
- What if technology and social media played an active role in rejecting the concept of absolute perfectionism by teaching how to use social media as a tool to raise awareness on important topics







Hi, I'm going to share my story honestly. I'm not really sure how to write this, or maybe I'm too tired to write it all down because everything that happened has really affected me deeply.



I'm Fatima, I'm 24 years old, and I graduated in 2022 with a degree in Multimedia from the University College of Applied Sciences. The college was bombed, everything was destroyed. I'm a photographer and a writer, and just a person trying to live life. Trying to live the normal life I'm supposed to have.



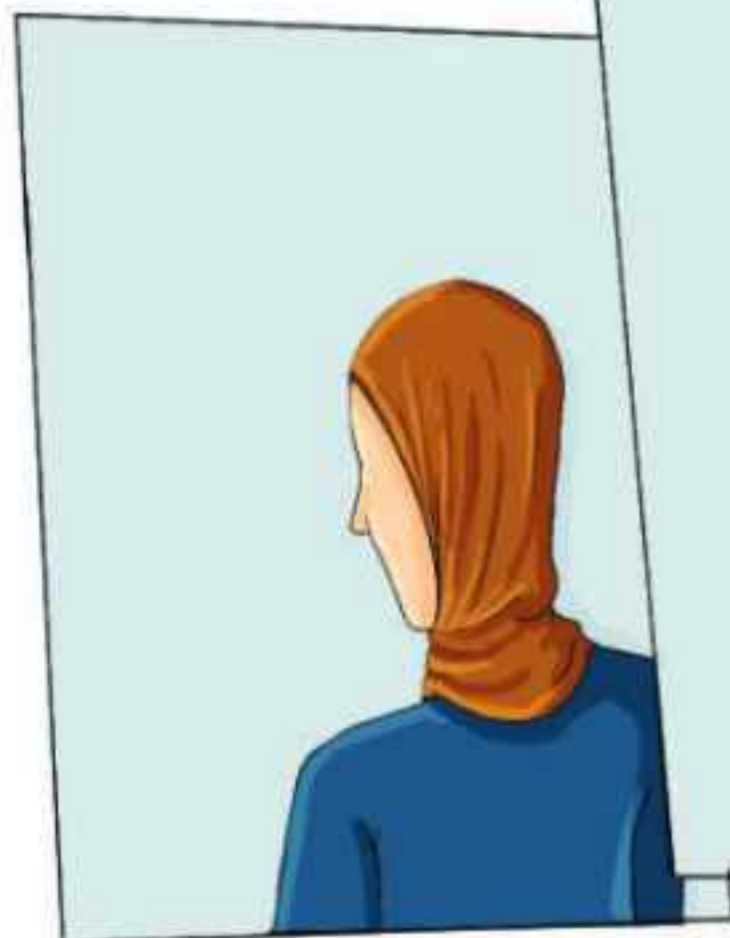
I want to talk about the loss I've experienced so much in the past months, starting from January 13th. On January 13th, my family was bombed. Eleven members of my family were killed,



The most important people in my life. The house they were staying in was bombed. These were the people I had the most memories of on my phone, the people I had the most memories with. My uncle, his wife, my grandmother, and other relatives were all in the house. My cousin's wife and her five children, who were like my own kids, were also there. After that, I stayed home for five months. I didn't take pictures, didn't do anything. My life was on hold.







I wasn't doing anything except washing dishes and sometimes reading. Sometimes I would just sleep and think about how we'd get through the day, what we were going to eat, and how we could survive.

## Family memories

"Pray for me, Uncle."

"I pray you graduate and get a great job to help your Dad."



"My love, Grandma, give me a hug, congratulations!"


"Grandma, I got a job with an official contract as a photographer at an organization."



At first, I couldn't believe they were really gone, that they were actually dead. The idea that they weren't with us anymore, the idea of death, felt impossible.


I had to force myself to get up and keep moving, even though I was struggling with the feeling of loss. It wasn't the first time I lost someone, but this time was the hardest.



A woman wearing a blue dress and an orange headscarf is walking away from the viewer down a dusty, debris-strewn street. She is carrying a camera in a blue bag. The background shows damaged buildings with missing windows and rubble. A speech bubble points to her from the left.

I picked up my camera and went out into the streets, walking aimlessly for miles. I had only one thought in my mind: I wanted to make them proud, even though they were gone



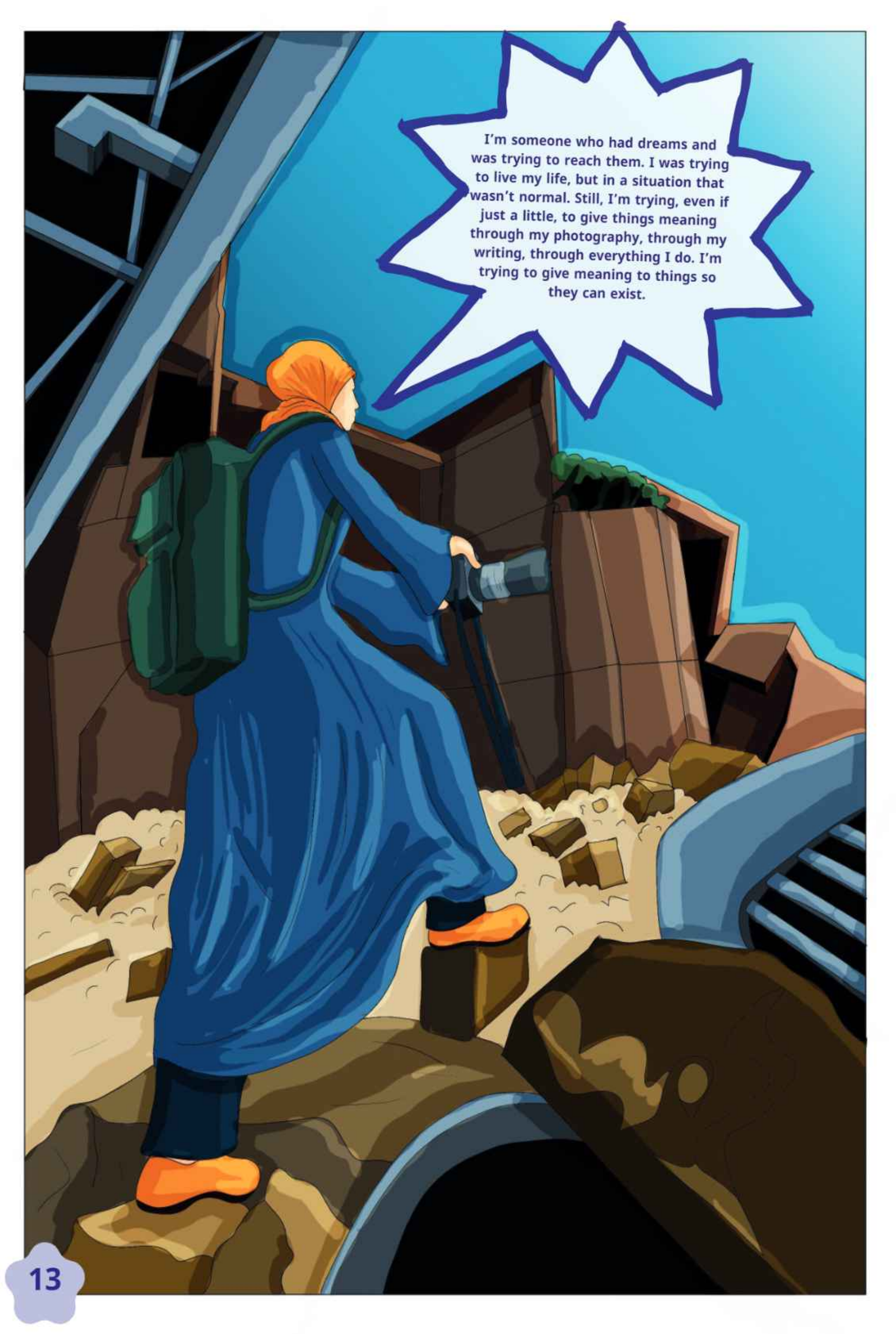


I wished they could see what I'd accomplished, but I'm sure they're happy where they are now, in a better place.



The feeling of loss has changed me. Nothing really matters to me anymore. It doesn't matter if I lose something or if I even die. Once you've lost the most important thing in your life, everything else feels meaningless.





I'm someone who had dreams and was trying to reach them. I was trying to live my life, but in a situation that wasn't normal. Still, I'm trying, even if just a little, to give things meaning through my photography, through my writing, through everything I do. I'm trying to give meaning to things so they can exist.





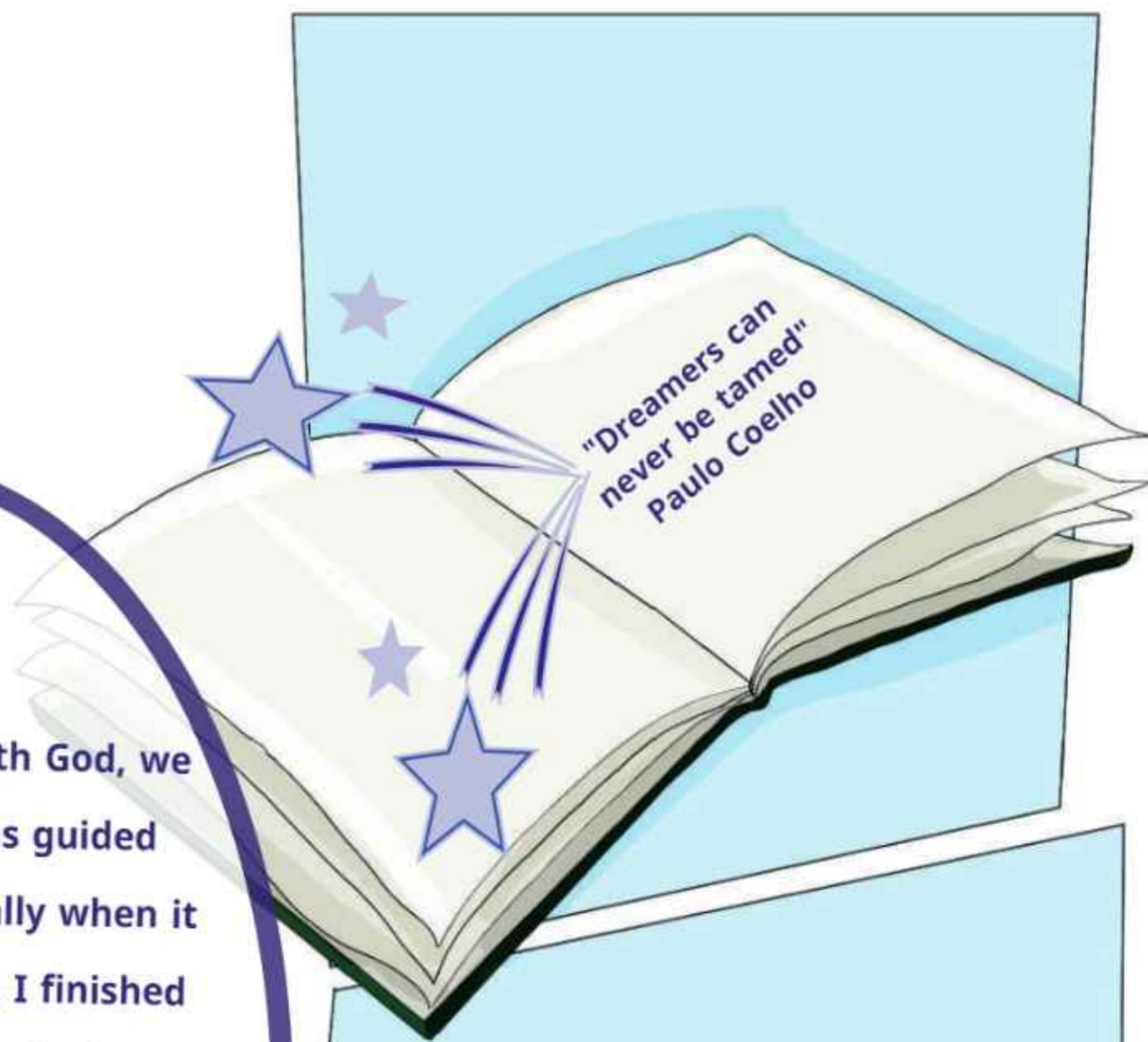
What if the sky I gaze upon every day were a pure, soft pink, just as I wish it to be, as it should be, instead of the darkness that overshadows it from the bombs and missiles flying through the air? Why do I see the faces of my family in those missiles and hear their joyful laughter, distant and far from me? If only what has happened, never happened.

Political circumstances and wars have a significant impact on an individual's mental health, often leaving behind the pain of loss and deprivation, in addition to physical injuries, psychological disorders, and other negative affects. So, what if:

- What if psychological support and healthcare were provided to girls during times of war?
- What if political participation of girls was increased?
- What if comprehensive support were provided to girls to maintain their physical and mental health?
- What if international policies adopted peaceful resolutions to conflicts, avoiding the tragedies of loss and displacement?
- What if human dignity and rights were upheld during wars?







I've always believed that with God, we are safe, and this belief has guided every step of my life, especially when it came to my studies. In 2017, I finished high school in the experimental sciences track, but I didn't get a high average, which left me with limited options. I enrolled in a biology and earth sciences program, repeating the phrase, "I will become an engineer."



This was a reflection of the idea in our community that success is limited to being a doctor or engineer. I tried to follow this path





but once I started, I quickly realized it wasn't for me. I didn't enjoy the subjects, and I had no passion for continuing. After two months, I decided to quit and look for another direction. I took a reorientation test and decided to take an exam in law.



For a year, I wasn't studying or working, and my family wasn't happy with my decision. During this time, I felt depressed and frustrated



but I managed to convince them that I could succeed in this new path. I passed both tests and chose to study law, despite hearing comments like



"Law? Did you study science in high school just to switch to law now?"

and "Law is really tough!"







I ignored the negativity  
and focused on my  
studies

In my first year, I ranked  
third among 100 students



That victory felt so sweet! I  
kept up my hard work, and  
by the time I graduated, I  
was still in the top three of  
my class.





Afterward, I received several offers for master's programs, but I wasn't accepted into the one I originally wanted. I accepted the situation and chose a prestigious university to study for a master's in public law.



It was the first time I left my hometown. I moved to the capital, sharing an apartment with strangers, which was a big change. Later, I found out that I was accepted into the master's program I had really wanted!



I couldn't hold back my emotions and cried with happiness. Even though I had already settled into a new life, I knew my dream was finally coming true. In one day, I had to find a new roommate, leave my apartment, and move to the coast where the new college was located. Despite the challenges, I made it!

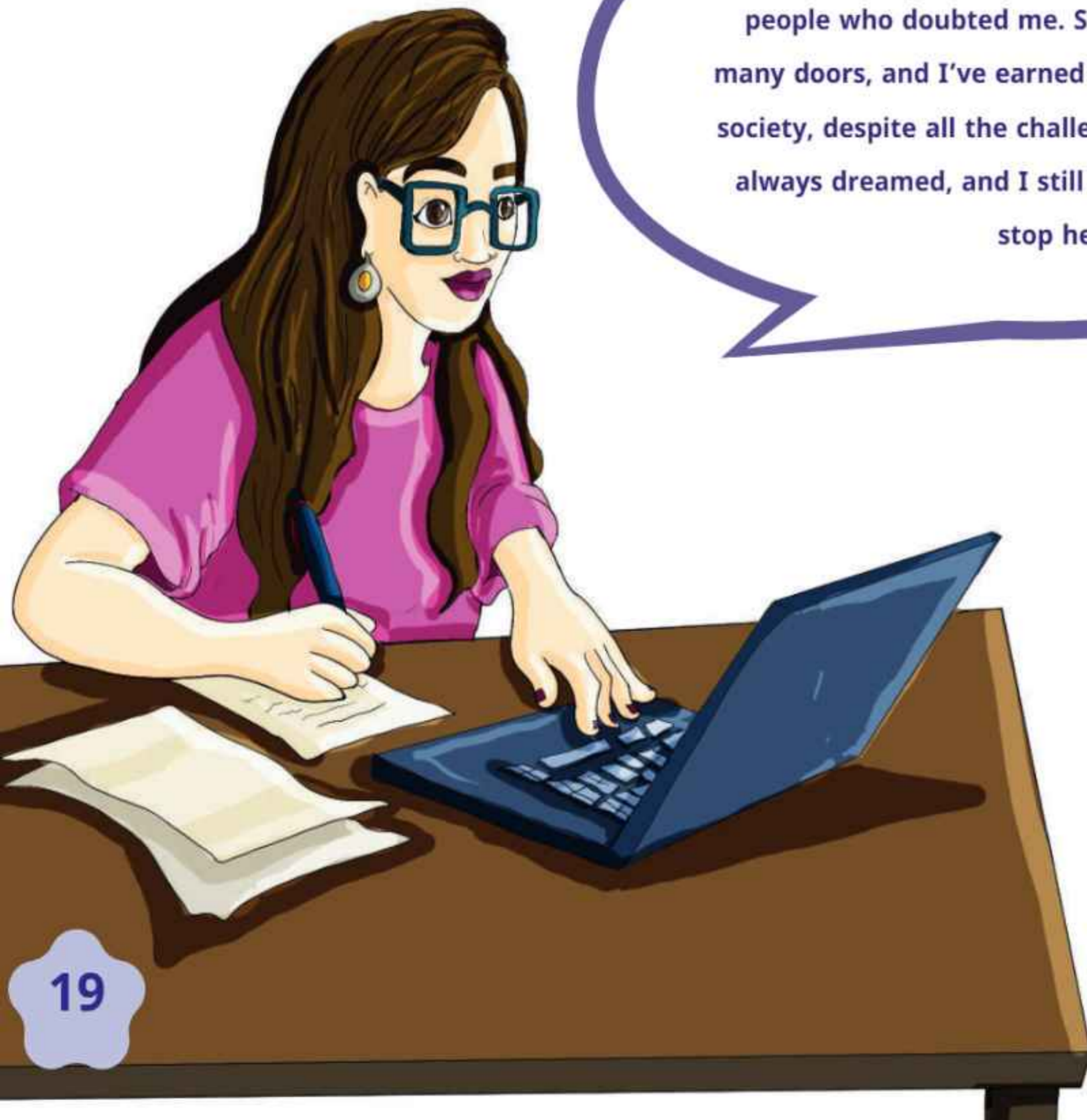




I started studying for my master's in diplomacy and international relations and have now completed two years with distinction. I'm currently working on my master's thesis about the geopolitics of gas, oil, and the energy transition in the Maghreb region!



Everything I've achieved is because I didn't listen to people who doubted me. Studying law opened so many doors, and I've earned a respected place in civil society, despite all the challenges along the way. I've always dreamed, and I still do. My journey doesn't stop here!







Nourhan crafted one of those remarkable success stories where individuals face tough circumstances and overcome all obstacles to reach their dreams.

I painted the goals I wanted to achieve with every step I took, yet society's brush constantly interrupted my strokes. So, what if I had my own path, walking it as I wished, as I loved?

- What if girls were able to identify their needs, desires, and academic inclinations?
- What if members of society contributed to raising awareness about personal freedom and making important life decisions through awareness sessions for all community members?
- What if parents provided support, compassion, and encouragement to their children?
- What if counselors helped students identify their specific needs and academic interests?
- What if girls had the ability to determine their needs and academic inclinations by raising awareness of their rights?





My name is Elisar and I am 27 years old. About 20 years ago, when I was eight years old, I was experienced sexual violence. My story lasted for about 8 years, as several of my relatives assaulted me. Every time one of them traveled, another would come instead to complete what the first one had left



I have been a victim of harassment since I was a child. I was harassed by my uncle. I did not realize that what he was doing to me was called harassment or rape, and I did not even understand what these actions and behaviors were. He used to tell me that he loved me so much that I believed with him, and I was enjoying it somewhat, but how could I realize this when I was an innocent child who did not see it as anything but a game that brought together adults and children.



This continued until I was twelve years old and I heard my aunt say by chance that an uncle had assaulted his niece. Here I felt surprised and asked my aunt, "Can't an uncle marry his niece?"



She replied, "Of course not, an uncle is like a father."

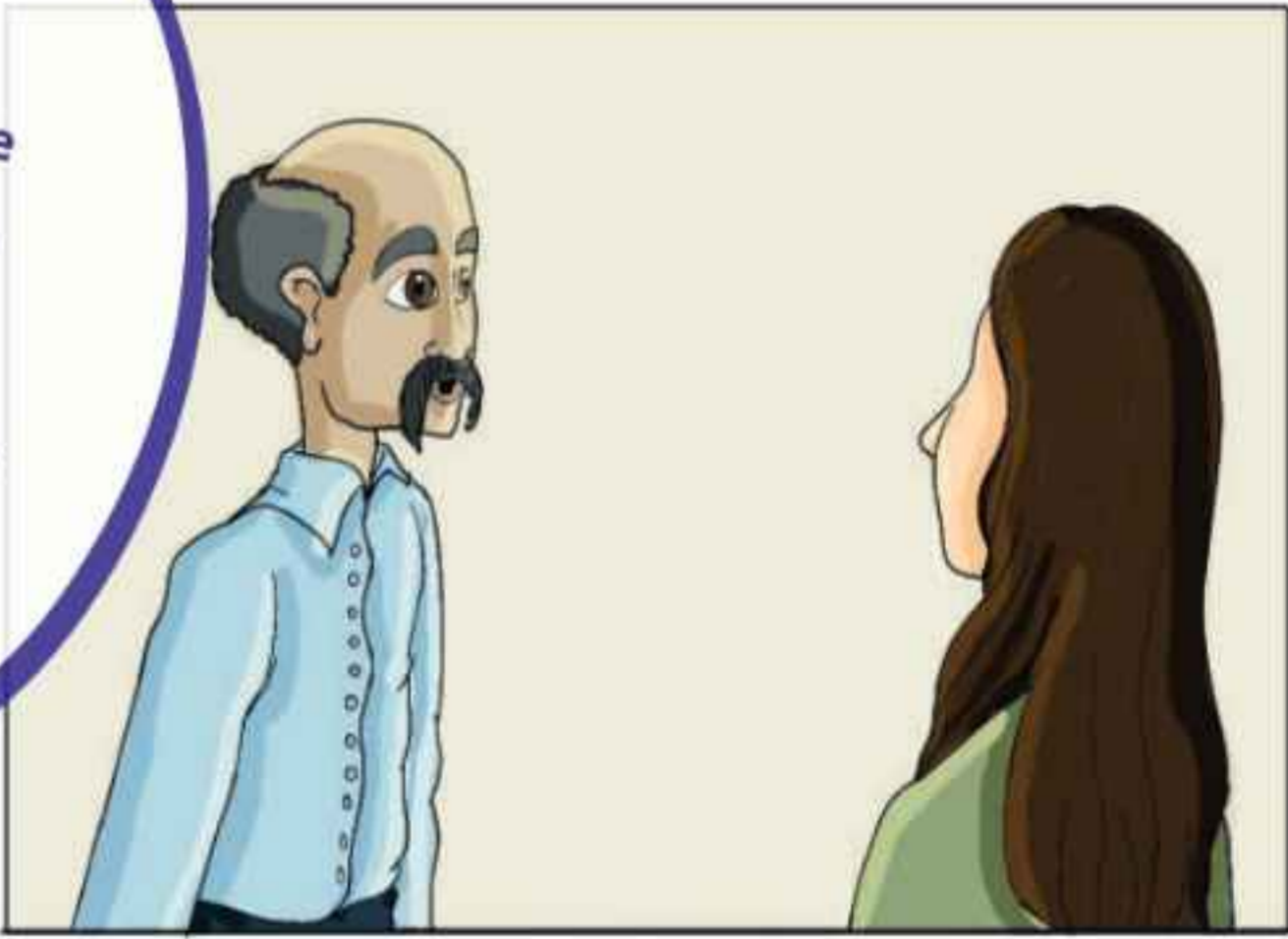




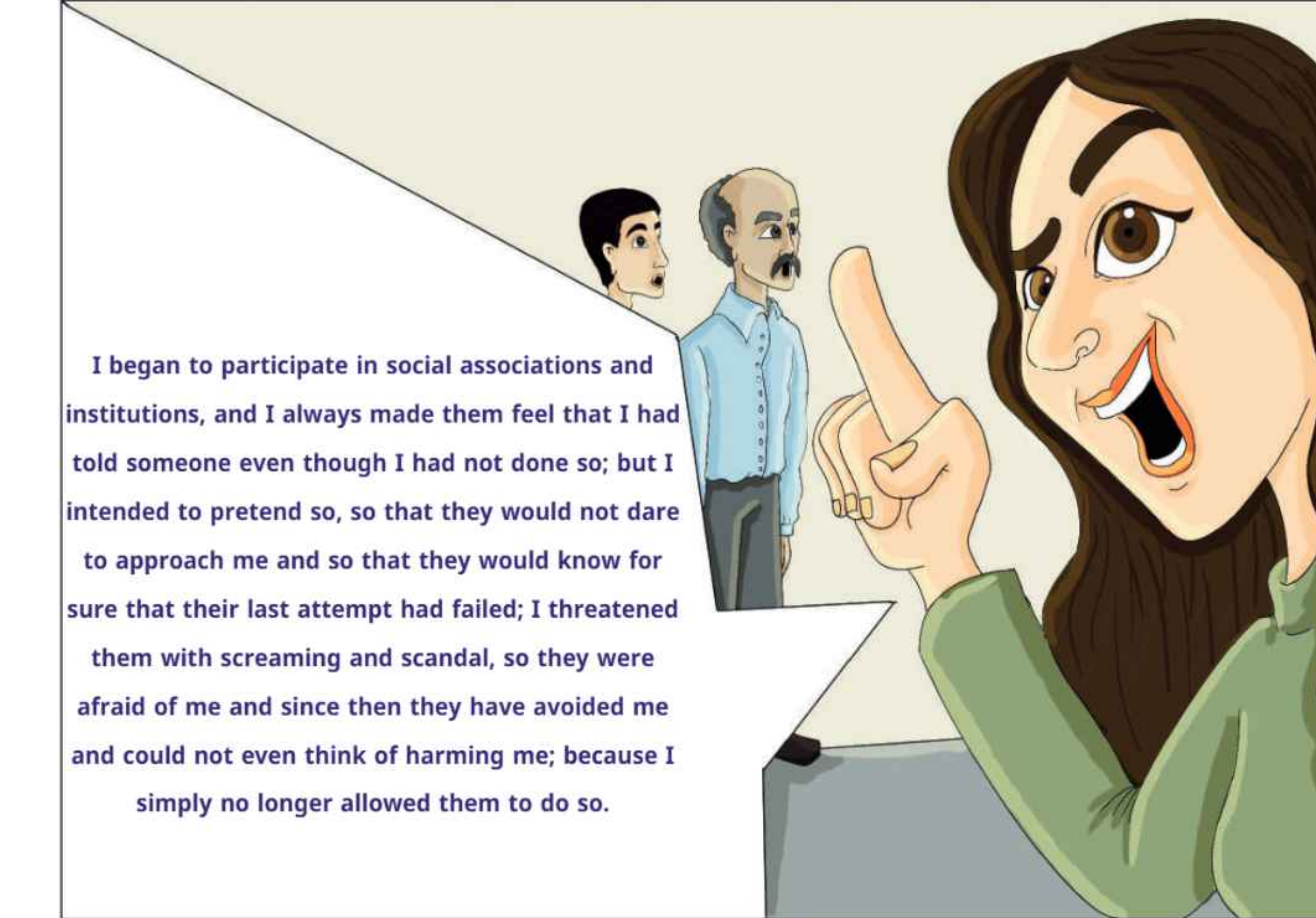
**!** Silence fell for a moment and I was overcome by a feeling of shock and fear. I then learned that I was being raped without even knowing it

Unfortunately, my uncle was not the only rapist in the family. When my older uncle traveled, the younger one came and completed what his brother had left off. I lived with this cycle for years, weak and afraid of confrontation. I wondered how a little girl like me could face all this evil from the world of adults? How could she deter them? Especially since I was thinking about my parents and siblings and their reaction, and I feared that something bad might happen to them. So, I remained silent and patient for fear that any of my family members would be harmed.

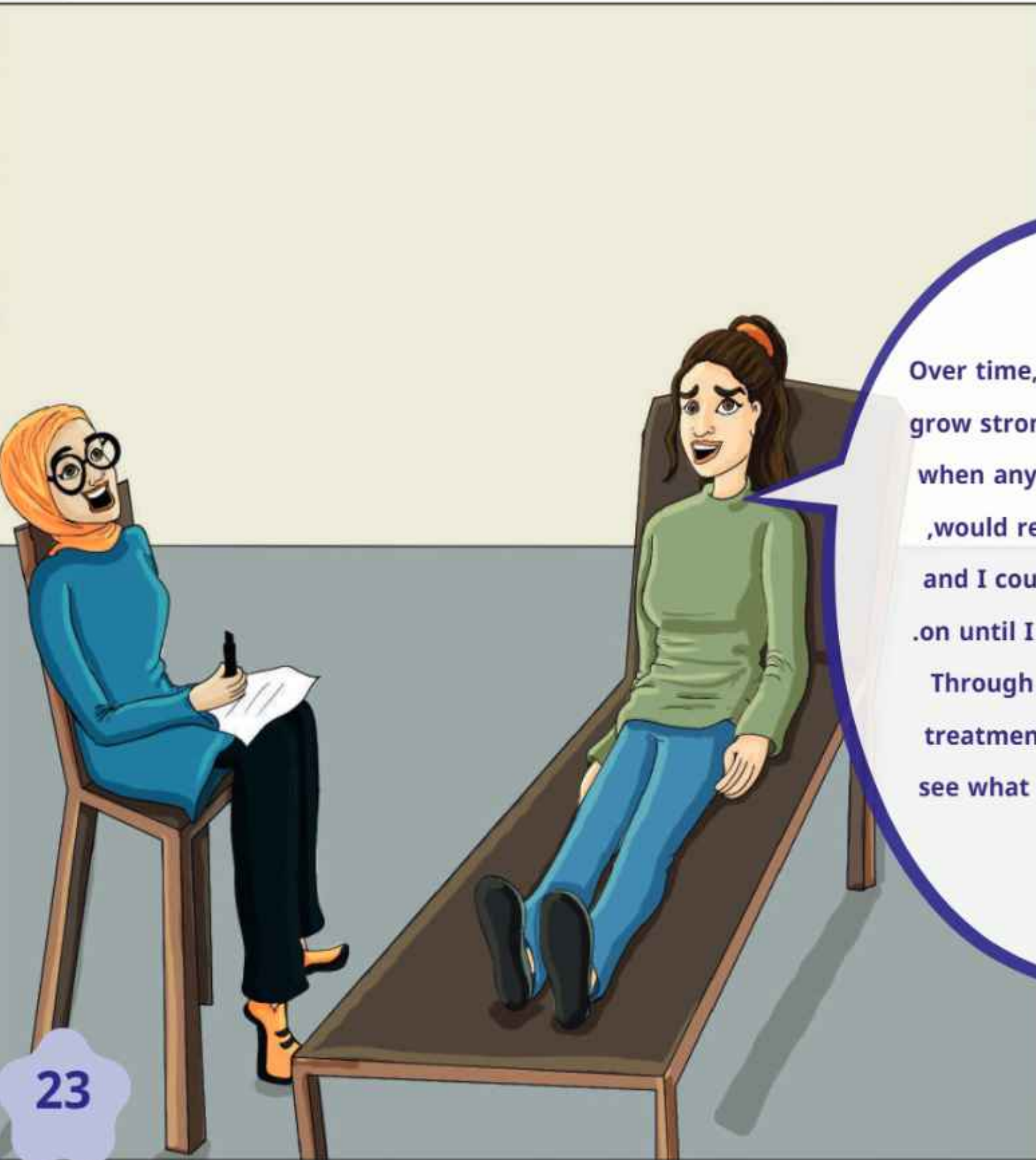
This was the case until my little uncle finally traveled, but it did not end there, as my cousin came to complete the mission. That stage was a nightmare that terrified me from my relatives who did to me what an enemy would not do to his worst enemies. After I turned sixteen, my cousin got married and his father returned from traveling, and here I began to gather my strength, and work on developing my skills and personality







I began to participate in social associations and institutions, and I always made them feel that I had told someone even though I had not done so; but I intended to pretend so, so that they would not dare to approach me and so that they would know for sure that their last attempt had failed; I threatened them with screaming and scandal, so they were afraid of me and since then they have avoided me and could not even think of harming me; because I simply no longer allowed them to do so.



Over time, I began to feel better and grow stronger, but I still had trouble when anyone touched me. My body would react with physical spasms and I couldn't control it. This went on until I decided to see a therapist. Through therapy, I finally got the treatment I needed and started to see what had happened as a lesson to learn from





I began spreading knowledge among my friends to protect them and other girls around me.


Now, when I look at every girl, I feel like it's my job to protect her from the evil in this world. I also believe in giving girls the knowledge and strength they need to avoid going through what I went through.

Today, I'm telling my story, hoping it will reach as many girls as possible and help protect them. I want you, the person reading my story right now, to know this: no matter where you're from or how old you are, you are strong. You can face and overcome any challenge. Don't be afraid to stand up and report harassment. If we don't speak out, things will only get worse.

This story of mine is about pain, suffering, and weakness, but also about strength. It changed me, made me grow, and helped me see the world differently. I'm proud to say I'm no longer that girl who can be defeated. We weren't made to be defeated—we were made to turn our weakness into strength and to turn defeat into victory. Remember, you are strong, and you didn't let them hurt you. They won't be able to hurt you, no matter how powerful they seem. We have to stay strong, show them our strength, and that's when they'll stop. That's when they'll know there are boundaries they can't cross. I hope my story has given you some strength and hope to keep going on your journey, just like I'm continuing mine today.







What if I had recognized the toxicity of the environment surrounding me, even if my mother believed I was living in a healthy one? What if I had the ability to see those warning signs when I thought I was flying above the clouds in a rosy world? What if I had a shield that protected me from all the evildoers?

Different forms of abuse are among the most serious threats to a person's character and mental health. To protect girls and the community as a whole from such abuses, what if:

- What if parents played an active role in positive parenting?
- What if parents were dedicated to providing affection, safety, and support to their children?
- What if mothers and fathers focused on educating their children about physical boundaries—what is allowed and what is forbidden?
- What if counselors and specialists raised sufficient awareness about self-defense?
- What if government and security institutions participated in protecting victims from abuse, offering safety and support, and providing safe spaces whenever they were needed?
- What if media contributed to raising the local community's awareness about personal boundaries and self-defense?
- What if teachers worked to enhance students' self-confidence?
- What if religious leaders conveyed the message of religious awareness to members of society?





High school is a really important and stressful time. You face a lot of pressure, sleepless nights, and negative emotions. It's even harder when your family has high hopes for you, confident that you'll get excellent grades and be accepted into the top universities. They often have specific expectations - either you become an engineer or a doctor.



For many families, they won't feel proud unless you achieve their dreams. They aren't interested in you going to a college of education or arts, as those fields aren't seen as prestigious. On top of that, families put a lot of effort into saving money for education, which makes you feel an even greater sense of responsibility.

When I started high school, I spent long nights studying, barely sleeping, and my whole focus was on achieving my dream. But when exams began, something unexpected happened. A group started stealing exam papers and sharing the answers with other students.

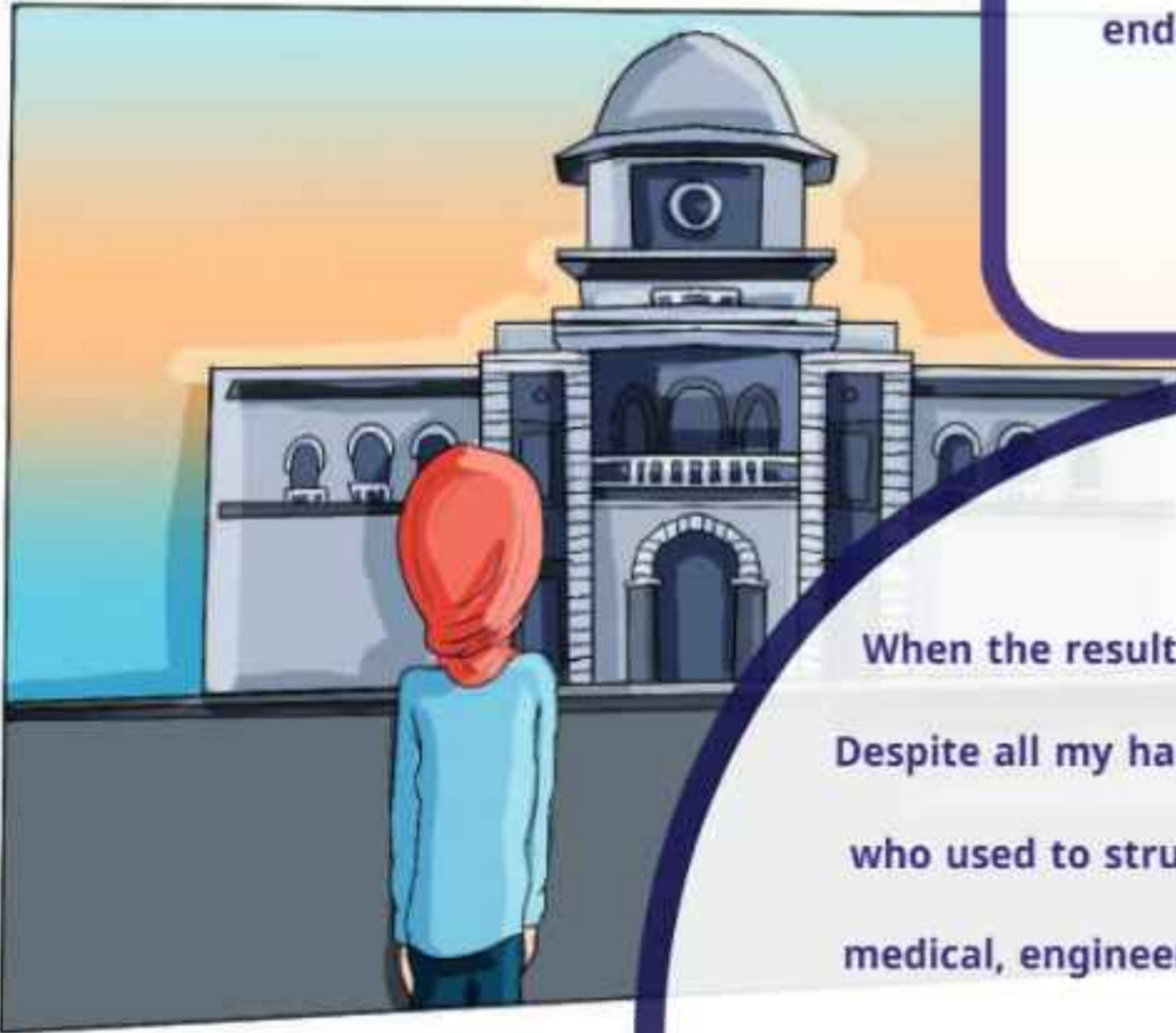






I didn't know about this, but I noticed some students finished their exams quickly. Later, I found out that these students had been cheating.

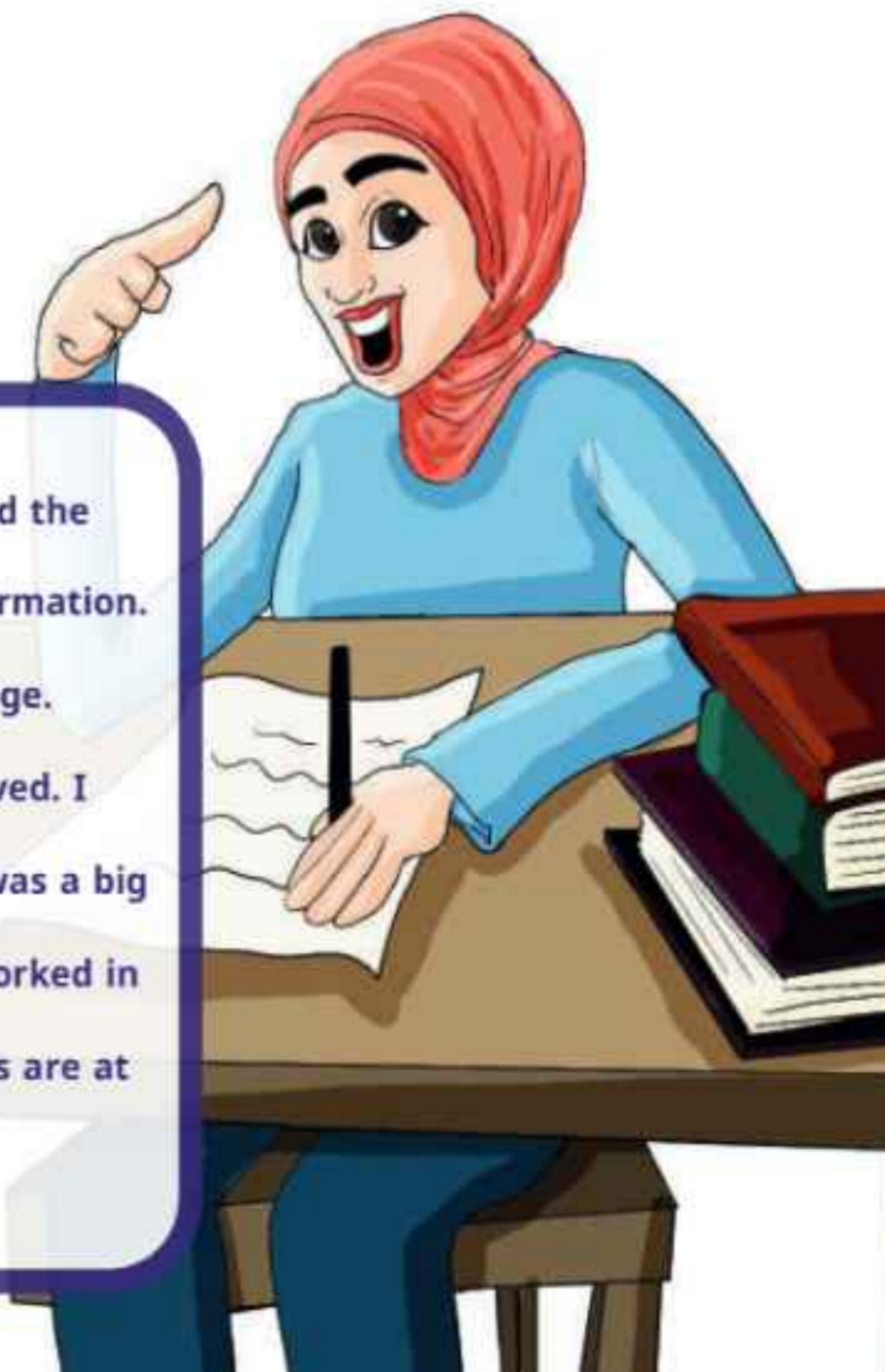
At that moment, I felt like my dream was slipping away. Students who cheated were now on the same level as those of us who worked hard. The chaos during exam time made everything worse. Some exams were canceled, others delayed, and it added even more pressure. Finally, the exams ended, and I prayed that my dream wouldn't be lost.



When the results came out, I was shocked. Despite all my hard work and effort, students who used to struggle were now getting into medical, engineering, and pharmacy schools, while my score wasn't enough for those prestigious colleges. I was devastated. It was the biggest disappointment of my life. I had an aptitude test for the College of Fine Arts, but I couldn't bring myself to attend



I wasn't ready to accept reality, so I left that path and joined the College of Education, studying Educational Technology and Information. It wasn't what I had dreamed of, but I took it as a challenge. In my first year, I started developing my skills in things I loved. I trained in journalism and managed to get a press card, which was a big achievement for someone not formally trained in the field. I worked in the women's section for over three years, and now, my articles are at the top of Google search results.







I couldn't believe how far I had come!  
But I didn't stop there. I entered the fields of entrepreneurship and innovation, winning second place in my governorate and sixth place nationally for a developmental project that helped my region. I even got first place in another competition for creativity!

Then, I ventured into radio. I produced and presented several shows, including one called The Story of a Prophet on Facebook and YouTube, and people loved it. It had a positive impact, and that made me really happy.



I also became a member of the Egyptian Youth Parliament, managing social media for the parliament in my area.





Voiceover work also caught my interest, so I took courses and got really good at it. I then specialized in information technology. I worked as an IT engineer for two years in Egypt while still studying, and later worked in Saudi Arabia under the same title for three years.



This journey, filled with ups and downs, taught me that resilience and perseverance can lead to success in unexpected ways. I learned that setbacks don't define you—how you move forward does.







The high school are one of the most important stages in a student's academic journey, as they determine the future steps they will take. What would happen if justice and transparency were absent from this crucial phase?

I used to see myself standing at the threshold of the field I had always dreamed of, in every page of my books. I imagined the graduation cap, adorned with flowers and basil, gracing my forehead. But the harshness of injustice and the lack of security burned those flowers, turning them into ashes.



The high school exams are one of the most important stages in a student's academic journey. During this time, anxiety often takes hold of students due to personal challenges and pressure from their families. What if:

- What if parents provided support to their children during this stage without placing them under pressure?
- What if parents understood their children's needs and considered their abilities without causing undue stress by misjudging their capabilities?
- What if girls were able to determine their academic interests through programs designed to identify their strengths and inclinations?
- What if institutions were fair and just in administering exams?
- What if there were strict laws to prevent cheating during exams?
- What if teachers and counselors conducted tests to reveal students' academic interests and inclinations?
- What if counselors played an active role in providing guidance programs during the high school exam phase?





Nada married at  
a young age, just  
17 years old.



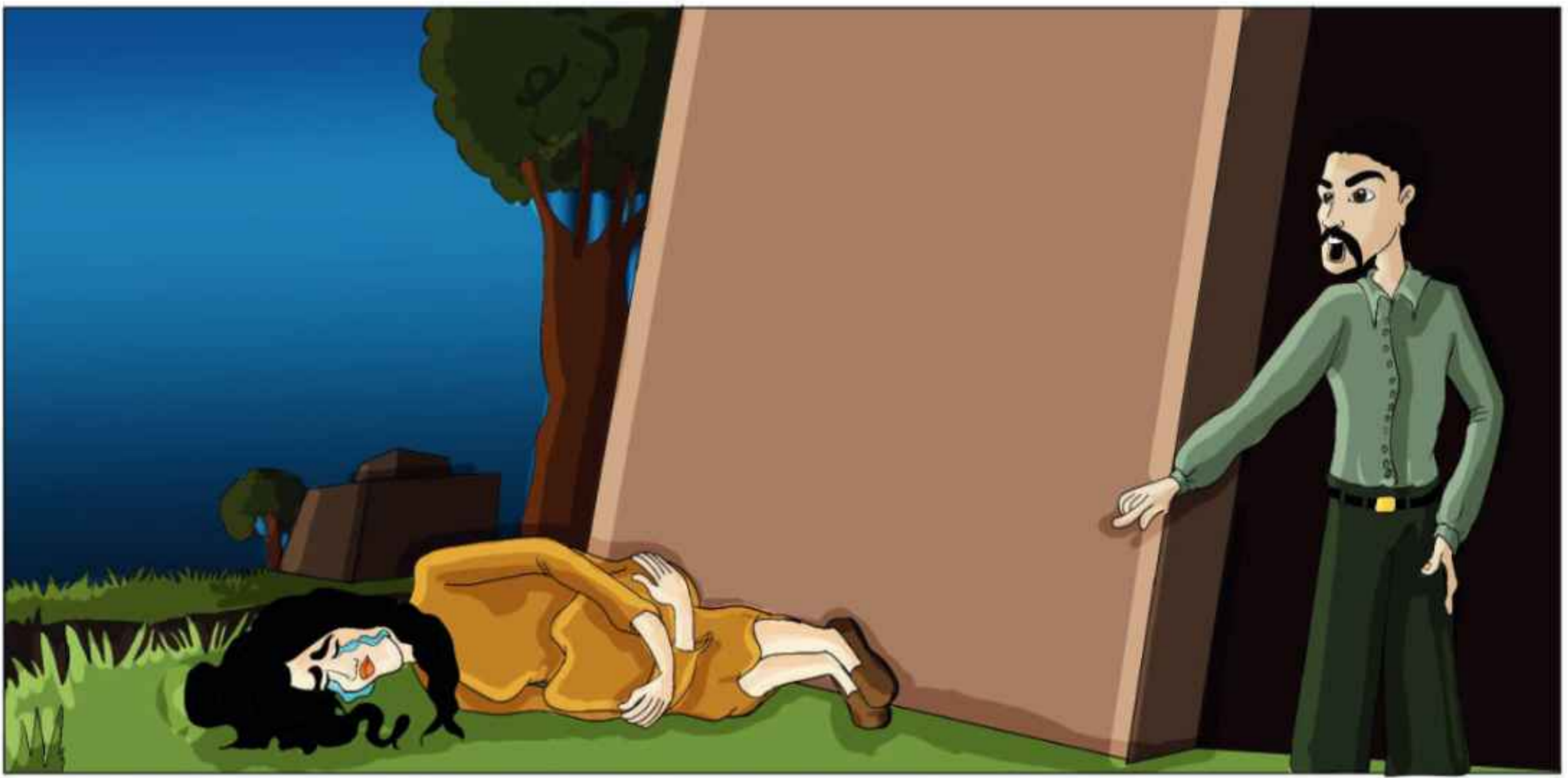




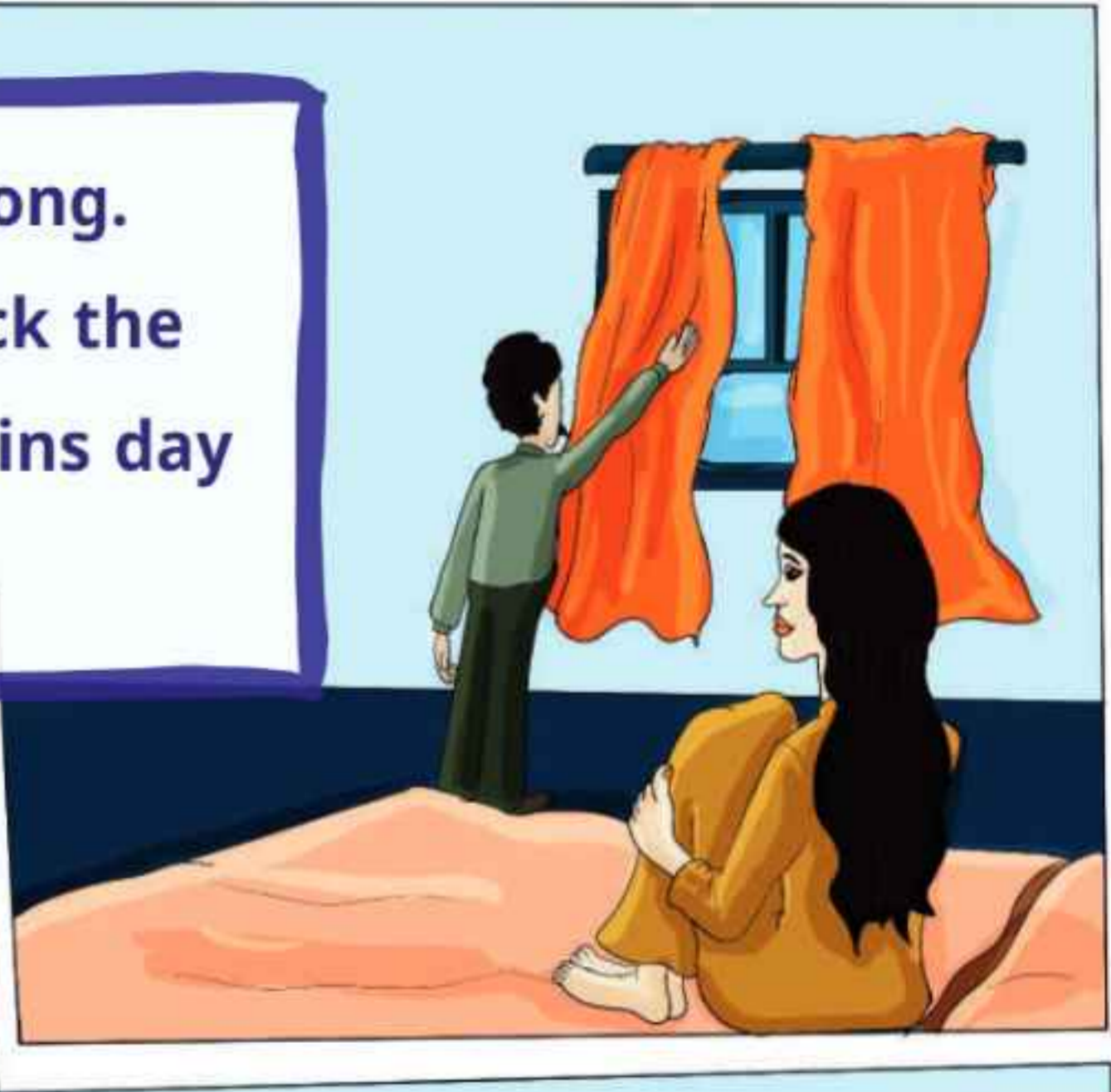
He was extremely suspicious, always accusing me of cheating, even if someone just walked by on the road







the marriage didn't last long.  
Nada shares, "He would lock the  
windows and close the curtains day  
and night."








I was too scared to tell anyone what was happening, and even now, I still get terrified and start shaking whenever I hear loud noises or yelling.








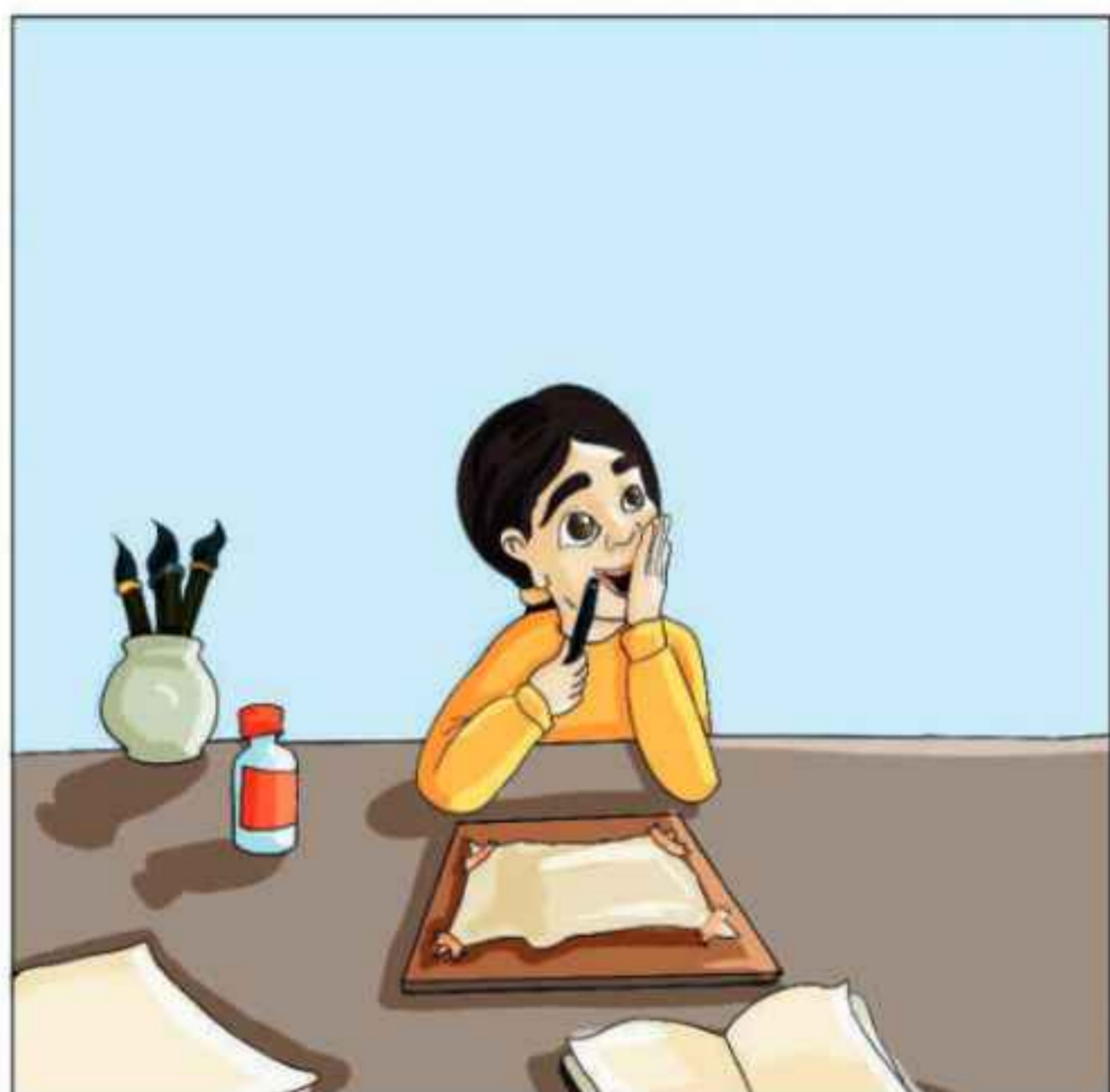
"This continued until one day, my father passed by and saw my husband hitting me. He broke down the door and saved me from him."

Her marriage wasn't registered and she didn't even receive the legal rights she was entitled to. Although she initially saw this marriage as a way out of her family's financial hardships, it didn't last long.

Nada explains, "I was also afraid of the word 'divorced' and worried I would lose my friends. But after the divorce, I was overwhelmed with support from both my family and friends. Today, I'm married to a man who loves and supports me, and he has never once asked me about my past."







What if I were organizing the toys in my room instead of folding my husband's clothes before I even discovered what life truly is? What if I were painting with watercolors on my hands and cheeks, instead of seeing the marks of slaps and abuse all over my body? What if the very place where I should have felt safe was the one that stripped me of my rights, as if nothing had ever happened?

Some families resort to marrying off their daughters at a young age due to difficult economic and social conditions. This issue is one of the most prevalent in societies struggling with economic instability. Due to ignorance and a lack of awareness regarding the violence young girls face and the physical and psychological harm that follows, what if:

- What if families were aware of the physical and psychological harm resulting from the marriage of underage girls?
- What if girls were fully knowledgeable about their rights, such as the right to education, healthcare, and a dignified life?
- What if public institutions contributed to raising awareness about the harms of early marriage from both a health and psychological perspective and launched comprehensive community campaigns on these issues?
- What if the state created job opportunities for families and provided a strong economic environment that could reduce early marriages?
- What if girls were educated about what constitutes a healthy and ideal marriage system?
- What if psychological specialists helped explain the concept of the cycle of violence, social boundaries, and how to break this cycle?
- What if advocacy campaigns and support efforts led to the formulation of clear laws to prevent child marriages?
- What if security institutions used their authority to restore the rights of abused women, protect them, and enforce the harshest penalties on abusers?





Since I was a child, I've always loved having my own personal space. I enjoyed spending time alone, doing my favorite hobbies and setting aside time just for myself. At the same time, I liked being around people and socializing, so I was never an introvert. I loved having fun, playing, and hanging out with others



My curiosity pushed me to explore and understand everything happening around me. As I grew older, I started to love my time alone even more. That quiet space inside me, full of colors and drawings, became a place I'd escape to when life felt too much, when things got overwhelming, or when my mind was racing





It was like I would escape into my own world, where I could find peace. No one else could understand or heal me the way I could. I always knew how to pick up the pieces and bring myself back to balance, as if nothing had happened.

From a young age, I had the strength to get through tough times while keeping a free and forgiving heart. I learned that life is made up of both good and bad, and I worked hard to stay on the good side. Although I understood the gray areas in life, I didn't want to be a part of them. I believed that the truth lies within each of us, and to find it, we need to be honest with ourselves. When we let our inner light shine, the beauty of our soul speaks for itself without needing words.



This has been my journey of discovering myself through art. Drawing became more than just a hobby; it became a way for me to express myself and connect with others. Through art, I learned how to feel for others' pain. The hardest part was realizing I couldn't always heal or help them.



But I told myself that maybe, through my art, I could make someone smile, fall in love, believe in themselves again, or heal from their own struggles. Art could be a way for someone to face their own challenges. I discovered that art was the only way for me to heal from the tough times in life, and it's the only way for me to truly be myself.





# She LEADS



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