**Alone and All Together**

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I'm half way out the door, already late for school, but I can't just ignore a ringing phone. Mom picks up in the bedroom at the same time I do here in the kitchen. It's my sister, Sally, calling to say she's okay, not to worry.

I am confused. Mom's home from work for the second day in a row, all glum and remote from one of her relapses ... and Sally's okay?

"I know you are, Sweetie," Mom says from the bedroom phone. Her voice actually creaks from disuse.

"No, Mom," Sally says. "Don't you have the TV on?" She gives us that impatient, exasperated sigh of hers that I haven't missed one bit in the week she's been gone to visit Dad and his new wife in Brooklyn. I can just see her rolling her eyes. "Turn on the TV."

Mom gets out of bed. First time in two days. "What channel?"

"Doesn't matter what channel," Sally says. "Any channel."

Both of us go to the TV room and then I see why. It is a sunny Tuesday morning, September the eleventh, and right there on live television the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York are burning black smoke. The heat is so intense, a newscaster is saying, that people are jumping. Holding hands and jumping. I turn away in case the camera zooms in. Outside our kitchen window, above the tarred roofs of the red brick buildings across the street, there's a view of the very top of the Sears Tower. The double antennas shine white in the sunlight. Behind me, Mom gasps, and starts in with the Arabic, *Udrub! and Ya barram!—*Old Country expressions of amazement and horror that Sitti, my grandma, used to say. Any other time I'd be embarrassed, but now as I turn back to the TV, her cries don't sound
excessive at all. Don’t let it be us, the words just pop into my head like a prayer. Let it be those white supremacists, again, like from Idaho or wherever. And not us.

Now the local news on WGN is reporting that, due to threatening phone calls, Muslim and Arab parents are leaving work to bring their kids home from school. I think of my friend Jamila. We started hanging around together when I began taking Arabic lessons. Just last year she decided to start wearing the scarf they call hijab, and she’s had some hassle about that already, kids making fun of her.

Mom asks me to put on the tea kettle, complaining her mouth feels dry. She’s got those rings around her eyes again, and she moves like an old woman. The new medications do that. She’s taking a combination now, what her doctor calls a cocktail. The one drug that’s supposed to help lift her spirits hasn’t kicked in yet, and the other one, which is supposed to calm her down, is working a little too well, if you ask me. I set her up on the sofa with pillows and a blanket. On TV they show it again and again, the one tower burning and the plane going into the other tower, and each time I want to turn away. The newscasters tell us about the Pentagon and then a fourth plane in Pennsylvania. And then right on TV, right while I’m pouring the tea for Mom, we watch one of the towers slowly begin crashing down on itself, like in those timed demolitions. Mom throws off the blanket, wants to call Sally again. The phone lines to New York are all so jammed, she keeps getting busy signals before she even finishes dialing. Mom says I can stay home from school.

I want to call Jamila but Mom yells to stay off the phone because what if Sally is trying to reach us? It’s not like we don’t have call waiting. Still, I don’t want to upset her more than she already is.

But then we both start crying when the newscasters tell us about the firemen who were in the building when it went down, how the signal devices attached to their gear are going off because they haven’t moved. The rescuers say they can hear beepers too, and cell phones ringing beneath the rubble.

The Sears Tower is evacuated, then all the downtown. I’d like to see that. I turn to say so to Mom, but she is asleep. It’s such a peaceful, beautiful day out, I want to go on a train and go down to the Loop and walk the empty streets. Cross over to Grant Park and have Buckingham Fountain all to myself. Maybe stroll down to the shore. Lake Michigan turns a deep green-blue when it’s sunny like this. But then my heart sinks, imagining everything so quiet, so empty, and me alone in the middle of it all.

A few hours later, Sally calls back, again using Dad’s cell phone. She tells us that the smoke has been coming their way all morning and they have to put wet towels under the apartment door and the window sills to keep it out. “We’re all okay, though,” she says, meaning herself and Dad. And his new wife.

Mom is on one extension, me stretching the cord on the other so I can keep an eye on the TV screen through the kitchen archway, and Sally far away in New York, all three of us watching the same thing, the strip at the bottom of the screen which is saying now that everything points to the hijackers being Middle Eastern extremists.

“I just wish they wouldn’t say it’s us,” I say, “until they’re, like, sure.”

“Us?” my sister says. “What us?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t. We were born here, and so were Mom and Dad, right here in Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A.”

“You’re not here, I want to remind her. I am.

“What I want to know,” Sally goes on, “is when ‘us’ stops meaning Ibn Arab and starts meaning American?”

Maybe my sister is right—ibn Amerkain! Any other time I’d laugh, but now I just say, “Tch,” a tongue click, which is something I learned from her. Tch is her way of winning an argument. No matter what you say back you’re wrong, is what tch means.

“What’s going on there now?” Mom asks.

Sally has to deliver another one of her sighs before she can start telling us about how all she can see now is the smoke that’s blowing their way from the World Trade Center. “Soon as we go outside,” she
saying, "our eyes start stinging." Something about her voice is different. As if she's talking about somebody else's eyes stinging. "The streets are so quiet for Brooklyn."

"Here too," I say, and begin to explain how quiet it is now that the planes have stopped coming in at Midway Airport, which is just a couple miles from our apartment house, but Sally interrupts, saying great, that's all we need is for everybody to get into a big panic. The whole world's blowing up around us, and she sounds annoyed. I look at Mom, but her eyes are closed as she listens. It's scary when your own family acts like they don't want to see what you see. Like one of those nightmares when there's danger and your family is all smiling and normal, and you're the only one who sees it.

It feels like the time Dad sat us down to explain why they were divorcing. They'd married too young, he said, and so they grew out of love. I remember looking over at Sally, my big sister, and there she was nodding her head and playing along as if, sure, that made all the sense in the world. But me, I was like, excuse me? You fall in love? And then you grow out of it? Like, hel-lo?

The reason Sally's even in New York is that Dad flew her out so she could start looking at colleges in the City. She's a senior this year and has perfect grades. I'm a freshman, and I won't go into my opinion of perfect grades.

Sally told me before she left that Dad had already talked to her about maybe living out there. Stay with them for a while and see if she likes the city. To take a little of the stress off Mom, he said. Fine with me. But my sister believing that they'd actually want her to move in with them just goes to show what a denier she is. They're practically newlyweds, Dad and his new wife. I'm so sure they want a teenage daughter sharing their tiny two-bedroom love nest.

"Everything's closed," Sally is going on in that same annoyed-sounding voice, "even that Italian place Dad keeps promising to take me to."

"Like, going out to eat is really important now?" I say. It's just an observation, but it sets her off.

"Nobody's talking to you," Sally says, taking her big sister tone with me. "And stop saying 'like,' " she adds. "It's so junior high."

Now Dad takes the phone. "Okay, you two," he says. As soon as he does, Mom turns quiet, so I end up having to talk to him. And I've got to admit, I find just the sound of his deep voice calms me down. Hearing it, I want to be home. But I am home. Does that make sense?

When Sitti, our grandmother, was alive, she used to look at Sally and me when we were quarreling and show us the Arabic gesture sabr, thumb and two fingers pressed together, meaning patience. Which is something our family never had a lot of. For a while after the divorce Mom used to get angry and start throwing things whenever the slightest thing frustrated her, a framed photograph that wouldn't stay up, a wine glass that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Sitti came to live with us soon after Dad left. Things eventually settled down. Then last winter Dad announced he was getting remarried. Mom looked like she was about to begin throwing things again, staring with the phone in her hand, but she didn't. Instead she seemed to just sink back down into herself. Finally, she began seeing a therapist. She's on medication now, and it seems to be helping, but there are still days she can't get out of bed. Sometimes I look at her gazing at some empty space above the TV, and I think depression is just another way of going away.

Sally kind of went away when she was fifteen. That is, the old Sally. One day it was like somebody'd waved a magic wand over her. All of a sudden there's the new Sally, this stranger, who was either rolling her eyes at something you said that was "so lame," or else just sitting there all mean at the dinner table. You'd call her name and she'd snap back "Wha-at?" in this totally rude voice. Sitti said that she'd grow out of it in time and be like "the other beebles" again. Maybe, but she hasn't so far, and it's scary watching your older sister go through a change that you yourself are headed for. I told Sitti that if I ever got like Sally to just take me out and shoot me. She said she would. "Okay, I do dat, habibi," she said, which is Arabic for sweetheart.
Sitti didn’t always exactly understand what you were saying. She came to America late and then she’d mostly lived not far from here in Chicago’s ‘Little Arabia’ around Sixty-third and Kedzie where you can shop and do everything else in Arabic. When she did speak English, it was with a thick accent, dis and dat, beebees for people because Arabic doesn’t have a “P” sound. And always with the Arabic expressions mixed in, insshallah, meaning God willing, and boost for be quiet; and when she called us by name it was our Arabic names—Salma, not Sally, and Labibeh, not Libby. What she called us most of the time, though, were Arabic endearments—ahlbi, my heart, adami, my bones, ya robi, my life breath. They can be so embarrassing when you translate them into English, but hearing them in Arabic always made me feel a part of her. She called us that, too, ya ba’adi, which means oh-part-of-me; and there was another one I thought was really strange, ti’breem, which means bury me. Which we did. Sitti had a heart attack one afternoon while she was watching “All My Children,” and she died in her favorite chair. That was last May. The week before prom.

Sitti had blue eyes, like me, which isn’t unheard of among ibn Arab from Syria, but most Americans don’t know that. Sitti said that when my mother was a little girl her hair looked just like mine, wavy and light, almost blonde. My sister has our father’s black, curly, curly hair that she hates and I always wished for. Dad still jokes that Sally is his Arab daughter and I’m the American one. Which is funny because I’m the one who used to help Sitti cook loubiyeh and kusa and beitenjah mishbeh; I’m the one who goes with Jamila two nights a week to the mosque to learn to read and write Arabic—something neither he nor Mom can do. Our family isn’t even religious, though Sally and I were baptized in the Melkite Rite. And that’s something else that surprises people, Christian Arabs!

So I may look like the American one, but it’s my sister Sally who always refused to answer Sitti in Arabic, and who kept saying “Not this again!” when she served us her special Sunday chicken stuffed with rice and lamb heshweb. There’s hot dogs in the fridge, Mom would offer.

After the divorce, Dad changed his last name from Tammouz to Thomas. Rasheed Tammouz became Richard Thomas. For business reasons, he said. Sally and me, our last name is still Tammouz. Mom’s, too. His new wife is blue-eyed like me and blonde, but a lot blonder. Her name is Dusty. Honest.

I see myself as a cheerful person, basically, a don’t-just-sit-there-do-something person, which is probably why I don’t have the nightmares that Jamila and Erin and some of my other friends tell me they’ve been having every night, airplanes chasing them, buildings tumbling down on them. I wake up each morning the way I always do, reaching around for the snooze button so I can drift just five minutes more. Not until I’m out of bed and heading for the bathroom does “it” come back to me. That’s when my cheerfulness sort of fizzles away. A shiver runs through me, and I am back in this world again. What I have are daymares. Brushing my hair, I imagine myself at Ground Zero, digging with my bare hands.

The planes have begun flying again, roaring over our roof down toward Midway. I don’t know if it’s the medication kicking in finally or what, but Mom seems to improve over the weekend. Monday morning she drops me off on her way to work. I’d like a little music but she keeps the radio on Chicagoland, an all-news station. All week there have been reports of “incidents” mostly in the southwest suburbs where a lot of the ibn Arab live: in Bridgeview, just to the north of us, three hundred people waving American flags and chanting “USA! USA!” tried to march on the Mosque Foundation; three of the demonstrators were arrested. In Oak Lawn, not far from Bridgeview, kids gathered outside the high school waving flags and shouting anti-Arab insults at passing cars. A firebomb was tossed at the Arab American community center where Jamila and I take Arabic lessons. Luckily, just the doors were damaged and nobody was hurt. In Palos Heights, just to the east, a man attacked a Moroccan gas station attendant with a machete.

Mom shakes her head, but she still won’t let me change the station. At a red light I watch people in the crosswalk on their way to
work. Some of them glance over at us. I stare back at them through the windshield. They don't know us, what we are, and I'm glad. I'm ashamed that I'm glad. As the local news ends, the reporter reminds us that the Sears Tower is the tallest building in the United States. "Does that," the reporter asks, "make Chicago the next target?"

At school we talk about "the events" in almost every class. The teachers are all careful, of course, and so are the kids who speak up, but I wonder if polite is how they feel down deep. Especially the quiet ones. Now and then I overhear some things in the halls. You can tell when people are being mean and when they're just teasing. Like whenever Tyrone, who's black, calls me a camel jockey because of my name, Labibeh Tammouz. There's no meanness in it. I know he likes me. And I just tease him back. But some names cross the line. Sand nigger. Raghead. Usually whenever I hear them I get real mad real fast and I don't care who knows it, but now just the thought of somebody saying them scares me a little, too. In Western Civ, Jamila is still wearing her hijab scarf, and when she sits next to me, I try to give her an encouraging smile. But I wish she would take that thing off. Okay. She was born in Egypt, and she's a Muslim, but she's an American, too. She's in honors classes with me and her English is just about perfect.

When I get home, Mom is on the phone again with Sally and I pick up the extension. People are helping each other in New York, Sally says, raising money, restaurants sending hot food down to the workers at Ground Zero. Lots of people were displaced because of all the debris, and New Yorkers are opening their homes, putting them up. Something about Sally's voice makes me stop paying attention so much to what she's saying—how cards and flowers are being left at firehouses all over Manhattan, and how everywhere you see flags flying—and I listen to the tone of it, shaky almost, like on the edge of something, tears, maybe, or anger. "Every day there's another memorial service, another vigil," she says, sounding about to go trembly.

"How about you, Sweetie?" Mom asks. "Are you going to any of the services?"

"Me?" Sally asks in a sharp little cry, angry or sad, I can't tell which. Neither can Mom, who glances up at me through the kitchen archway. "I can't believe you're saying that. What do you guys expect me to do, go to church or something?" The way Sally says "you guys," I realize that Dad must be right there in the room with her, and she's saying this to both our parents, blaming them for her lack of comfort. Blaming them for not raising us religious, maybe. And maybe it's also for the dark eyes they gave her, the olive skin and the dark, curly hair. Down deep, though, it's for having to feel alone in all this. That part I'm sure of because I feel it, too.

"It helps if you feel you're part of a community," Mom says in her soothing therapy voice.

Big mistake. "As if you'd know what that's like!" Sally says, her voice breaking into tears. "You're not even around anymore!" I hear Dad in the background, trying to comfort her. She's sobbing so hard she doesn't even say "I love you" before we hang up.

Hyde Park is just a few streets over, down near the University. There are bookstores there and coffee shops and delis and places that sell used vintage clothing. It's where my friends and I usually go to hang out, but today the streets feel different. For one thing, there's nowhere near the usual crowds. My friend Erin says it's because everybody's still glued to CNN. Not me. I'm glad to get out of the house, away from the TV.

Except for school, this is the first time I've been out all week. School is school, but here is different. It's like being in the world. I had asked Jamila to come with us—our usual Arabic lessons have been suspended because of threats to the mosque—but her mother was afraid of trouble. On the phone we complained about how unfair that was, but now I'm sort of relieved. Even though I don't look like her, I still keep getting this creepy sense that people passing by are turning and noticing me, as if they can detect Arabic in my brain, or something. I tell my friend Erin that, laughing, hoping she'll laugh too, and she does. We've been friends since second grade.

"If anybody's looking," Erin says, "they're looking at the dib over there, not you."
Erin is American, and *dib* is a word she picked up from me. It’s Arabic for bear, but really meaning a huge, clumsy guy, like an oaf. Coming out of a dollar store is Jamila’s little brother, Ahmed. Only he’s not so little. Still in junior high, he’s over six feet tall and walks all hunched over as if he’s not aware how goofy he looks with one shirttail hanging out. Exactly a *dib*. I notice his shoelaces are untied. The way he’s hurrying out of the store, he’s practically falling over himself.

“Hey,” I say to Erin. “I know him.”

“You do?”

Before I can answer, I realize that Ahmed is trying to get away from three guys who followed him out of the store. He looks scared. “Just tell us where you’re from!” a little guy is saying. He has a tight rubber-band voice. Ahmed stops and turns. The two others stay behind the little guy, who seems to enjoy showing them how easy this is.

“Chicago,” Ahmed answers, so quietly I can hardly hear him. He has no accent at all. As he makes as if to move on, the little guy steps closer, backing him up against a display window.

“So are you or aren’t you?”

Erin grabs my arm, and I look around for help. But people are just walking by like everything’s normal. *Do something*, I think, and I start to take mental snapshots, trying to see and remember. They’re ordinary guys, I imagine myself telling the officers. They all have on ball caps turned backwards. The guy doing the talking is wearing one of those shiny right muscle shirts.

“Am I what?”

“You know what I mean,” Ahmed turns but the little guy keeps facing him. “I said, you know what I mean!” His teeth clench as he speaks, his lips barely move.

I know what he means, too. Ahmed’s olive skin. His brown eyes and dark curly hair. Darker even than my sister’s.

“Why do you care?” Ahmed says. He begins to walk away. The guy almost steps back but then he gives a shove that spins Ahmed up against a display window, his shirttail flapping.

“Hey, I’m still talking to you.” Now people are stopping to look. He begins waving his hand right in front of Ahmed’s face, like imita-

tion slaps, and Ahmed puts an arm up to protect himself. Instantly, the little guy’s hand snaps out and grasps Ahmed by the wrist.

“Just say it—you are or you aren’t.” I watch his knuckles turn white with squeezing.

Ahmed tries to yank his arm away but the guy holds on and raises his other hand in a fist. I hear one of his friends say, “Raghead.”

I look at Erin next to me, but she’s making little swallowing noises like she can’t talk. And then there I am stepping in. I don’t even know what I’m doing, I’m just doing it, angling myself face-to-face with the little guy. “You let him go!” I say. My voice surprises me. It doesn’t come out screechy, like I feel, but low and strong. People begin stopping now, a small crowd forming. Ahmed just blinks. I’m not sure he even realizes who I am.

The little guy is stunned for a second, but just for a second. Then he and his friends start to laugh. I don’t care, so long as they leave Ahmed alone. “You losers!” I yell at them. That makes them laugh harder, but I step even closer and the little guy actually steps back, looking at me the way you look at a crazy person and wonder what they’re going to do next. I’m wondering that myself when I hear somebody call out “Whew!” We all turn and look. Some middle-aged woman in the crowd, a University type with a bandanna in her hair. She’s giving me a you-go-girl smile. Everybody else, shoppers, deli clerks, a panhandler, they’re all watching. I look up at a man in a white apron standing behind me, silent, poker-faced. Nothing’s going to happen to me or to Ahmed. I can see that in the set of his jaw.

The little guy must see it, too. He opens his fingers and lets go of Ahmed’s wrist. He and his friends don’t say a word, they just back off and walk away cocky, looking people in the eye so they’ll make way. That’s how you walk when you know you should be ashamed of yourself but won’t admit it.

When they’re gone, Ahmed is still standing there, jaw hanging open. Breathing through his mouth. I go up to him and touch his wrist. The poor *dib*. 
Going home, I see the Sears Tower everywhere I look. Out the bus window. Over my shoulder as I round the corner onto my street. Like it's following me home. Finally I stop and turn, right there on my front stoop, and I look up at it. Lit against the dark sky, its high beacons point right to Chicago, to us. Yes, it could happen here next time. And yet people are up there again, working. People are in airplanes, too, flying again. Being afraid is catching, but so is being brave.

The minute I get home I want to call Jamila. As soon as the mosque school opens the two of us are going together for Arabic lessons again, I want her to know that. But Mom is on the phone with Sally.

"Then what happened?" Mom asks. There's a husky softness in her voice, like you get sometimes after a good cry. Did I miss something? I reach for the bedroom extension. Sally is talking about how the city had a minute of silence to honor the victims. People all up and down Park Slope stopped everything and just stood there. Cars pulled over to the curb. "For a whole minute all you could hear was the wind," she says. "Do you know how long a minute is?" And then the sirens started up. From all over the five boroughs. From all the firehouses and police precincts. All the squad cars and ambulances. It sounded to her like voices wailing, calling to one another across the city.

And that, Sally says, was when she saw the sign in a coffee shop window: the Arab American community over on Atlantic Avenue was having a candlelight vigil to honor the victims of September eleventh. "It was just one train stop away," she said.

"Oh, Sweetie," Mom says, real tender, then in Arabic, "Ti'breeni."

"I was nervous to go there by myself," Sally says. "But as soon as I got off the train I found myself walking in a crowd. There were all nationalities. Muslim women. There were Asians. Lots of people with their children. And dogs. People stood outside their shops. Everyone was really respectful. We walked to the Promenade. People were praying. They held candles and pictures. Then everyone went quiet. The light was gleaming off the buildings across the river and off the column of smoke rising from where the World Trade Center once was. Every one of us. Mom, I was alone, and we were all together. Oh, it was such a beautiful day."

The phone is quiet a moment. I have a chance to ask now whether she's staying or not, but I figure I'll find out in good time. Sabr, Sitti used to say, patience. And she used to say ti'breeni to me too. Which means more than "bury me." I studied Arabic and I know that what it really means is more like Live after me. Survive me. What the ones we lost would want us to do. That's something. But I don't go into it now. Sally is crying and Mom's crying, and I just listen.
What happened?
Find the answers in the text.
1. Why does Sally answer 'any channel?', when her mom asks her which channel to switch on to?
2. Why has Libby stopped going to Arabic lessons?
3. What question is the little guy asking Ahmed when he says, 'So are you or aren't you?' (p. 180).
4. How do the other people react when Libby steps up to the little guy?
5. What decision does Libby make after the incident with the little guy?

Reading between the lines
Analyse the text and make interpretations. Be prepared to motivate your answers.
1. Why do you think Libby's mother allows her to stay home from school?
2. Why do you think Sally reacts so strongly when Libby says, 'I just wish they wouldn't say it's us until they're, like, sure' (p. 173)?
3. Consider what Libby means when, after hearing her father's voice on the phone, she says, 'Hearing it, I want to be home. But I am home. Does that make sense?' (p. 175).
4. Libby is learning to read and write Arabic. Why, do you think, is she doing this?
5. When Sally went to the place where the World Trade Center once was, she says she 'was alone, and we were all together' (p. 182). What do you think she means by this?

Opinions
Work in groups of three or four. Discuss these questions. Try to bring in your own ideas and experiences as much as possible.

For business reasons ...

... and when she (Sitti) called us by name it was our Arabic names—Salma, not Sally, and Labibeh, not Libby. After the divorce, Dad changed his last name from Tammouz to Thomas. Rasheed Tammouz became Richard Thomas. For business reasons, he said, Sally and me, our last name is still Tammouz. Mom's, too.

1. Could you consider changing your first or second name? Why/why not?
2. Do you think that, in Sweden today, a name can have either a positive or negative effect on the way people react to you? In which contexts?
3. If you knew that a different name might help you to get a better job, would you change your name? Why/why not?

But some names cross the line ...
You can tell when people are being mean and when they're just teasing. Like whenever Tyrone, who's black, calls me a camel jockey because of my name, Labibeh Tammouz. There's no meanness in it. I know he likes me. And I just tease him back. But some names cross the line. Sand nigger, Raghead. Usually whenever I hear them I get real mad real fast and I don't care who knows it ...

1. What does Libby seem to be saying? Do all insulting names make her angry, or does it depend on who uses the word?
2. Are there situations when you can call your friend an insulting name and this would be completely OK?
3. Can you think of other examples when it would not be OK for someone else to use the same insulting name?

Dib is a word she picked up from me
"If anybody's looking," Erin says, "they're looking at the dib over there, not you." Erin is American, and dib is a word she picked up from me. It's Arabic for bear, but really meaning a huge, clumsy guy, like an ox.

1. Can you think of any words that you and your friends commonly use that your parents or your teachers would probably not understand?
2. Make a list of such words. For each word write down an explanation in English. Then write down the reason why other people would not understand what it means.
3. Exchange your list with another group and compare them.