

## Ahlan Wa Sahlan: Welcome

At the entrance to my new school, there was a big sign over the doorway that, in big, bold letters, said: WELCOME. I had just arrived in Canada with my mother and four siblings. We were finally reunited with my father who had made the journey to Canada a year earlier and had been working to bring us to be with him. Together the six of us lived in a small one-bedroom apartment and struggled to learn English and explore our new surroundings. My first day of school is a day I try not to think about often but when I do, I think of that sign. I always wondered if that 'WELCOME' was meant as a sincere, warm-embrace-type welcome or the type of welcome you say to your cousins who come over too often and stay too long.

As I continued through the doors, past the welcome sign, I stepped into the hallway. The hallways of this school were much bigger than the ones I had known. Yet, with every step I took I could feel the walls closing in on me. It was as if the walls were questioning the reason for my presence. I walked through the hallway a stranger. I did not know anyone and they did not know me. In that moment, I did not even know myself. I had no idea who I was in this new environment, or who I was expected to be. I looked to the window on the left where the sunlight shining through offered a moment of relief from the ever-tightening walls, but in an instant it disappeared. The light faded to darkness. A clear sign, to my sixteen-year-old mind, that I was not meant to find comfort in this space. I did not belong.

I was as lost as I had been at the Winnipeg airport the day I arrived a month earlier. I was nervous, but mostly, I was upset that my dad was not there with me. He had brought me to this country and then sent me to fend for myself. I now understand that he felt that he would have made my first day worse. He thought he would have embarrassed us both because like me he felt lost. Unlike me, he was a grown man and certainly would have drawn attention wandering

around a high school. Eventually, a teacher noticed me in the hallway and helped me find my classroom.

I arrived at the classroom door and waited to be greeted. Where I come from it would be rude to enter a classroom without being invited in. The teacher was busy teaching and never acknowledged my presence. I felt invisible. After leaving that class, once again I was lost, but it was just about prayer time, so I went in search of a prayer room. Where I came from this was a typical and communal part of the school day. But, in my new school, my new community, my new country, I was alone. I tried knocking on doors, made gestures, and used the limited English I knew to try to explain that I was looking for somewhere to pray. I grew frustrated and sad. I wished to be back at my old school where I never had to wander aimlessly looking for a place to pray. It was always there, shared by everyone. The teachers even volunteered to take turns bringing fresh flowers and cleaning the room so that it was ready for a new day.

Nothing looked like it had back home. I had just left the West Bank, as a refugee, in the midst of the Second Intifada. The place that I had called home was beautiful. My family owned farmland and I grew up in a village where I knew everyone, and they knew me. I could look out my bedroom window and look at the hills and mountains. I would go for long walks, sit by the creek, and bring back flowers for my mom and grandmother. But in the months before we left, conflict began again and I arrived in Canada with vivid images of F16s flying overhead, armed tanks, and hundreds of soldiers flowing into the streets. After arriving in Canada, I had many sleepless nights wondering if the family and friends I left behind would be safe and dreams of violence that had erupted in the days before we left. In my dreams I could still smell the distinct odour of tear gas. I could hear the voices over the loudspeakers from the Mosques telling people

to fight the invasion with everything they have. To this day, these are things I have never forgotten.

Nobody at my new school invested any time or effort into finding out how to pronounce my name or learn about my history. Nobody asked about my journey or my experiences or what was important to me and I never had the opportunity to share the beauty of my language, my religion, or my culture. Every morning I woke up and tried to gather the strength and courage to get out of bed, to face the day ahead of me, and to come home and convince my parents that everything was going smoothly: “I’ve got this. I can do this.”

My teachers and classmates all thought I was older than the other students in my classes and it was assumed that because I did not speak English well that I was uneducated. I could feel the glares and judgemental looks and I could hear the whispers about my ripped and worn-out clothes. Little did they all know I had won awards for writing and poetry back home. I was an avid reader of history and political books. I was fascinated by the theories in science and math (though, I have never been strong at calculation). I had learned many of the topics covered in my classes, but I had learned them in Arabic. I went from a strong, passionate student, eager and willing to learn, to someone who realized they would never treat me like the other students unless I resembled them, unless I gave up everything that made me who I was: my language, my religion, my culture, my struggle, and ideally, my accent. I drew further inward and, like the hallways and the windows on my first day of school, I could feel that I was closing in on myself and all of the hope I had went dark.

I have come to the realization that the ‘WELCOME’ sign that ushered me into my new Canadian school was not what it appeared to be. I was not welcome in the sense that I could come as I was to be embraced and celebrated and belong simply for being me. I was not

‘welcome’ in the education system; I was tolerated. I have always wished that when I arrived at my new school in Canada and looked up at the big, bold ‘WELCOME’ sign that someone would have noticed me standing there, noticed that I was in awe of this space, and simply asked me to write ‘AHLAN WA SAHLAN’ to truly welcome the next student like me.