**First Place: Growing Up**

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It is ironic somehow, we were kids with hands barely long enough to reach a doorknob but we had dreams so big they could reach the moon. Yet, as we grow and the larger our bodies become our reach is shortened instead, until we stop even reaching for that doorknob. Physically we are bigger, older but our dreams became so small an infant can fit them in his/her palm. Is it the irony of life?

I look at my 8-year-old brother; he is playing with his cousin who often comes for a visit. Nothing unusual, but there I see it. Abdulrahman states with a proud smile and sparkling eyes, "I'll be a policeman, I'll catch all the thieves in our country! Everyone will always live happily in peace," Abdulaziz responds coyly with a winning smirk that makes him seem like he's going to unleash some sort of super power he kept under wraps or, as if more realistically, he'll simply expose his hidden status as a multi-billionaire businessman. "I'll go to the moon," Abdulaziz states and pauses, with the same smirk still playing on his lips when he proceeds: "I'll take you along if you'd like! We can both be astronauts and then return and bust all those thieves!" He smiles now, eyes still filled with stars, a mixture of hope and expectation as if he will soon own the world if he just hangs in there and waits just a while longer. That look in their eyes is what drew me to their seemingly small insignificant conversation. Two children who know nothing of the world, had a look that indicated they had begun to fly somewhere, a place I found myself wanting to be part of. They are just having a conversation one would say, outwardly, yes; but that mere gaze is the price we pay for growing up. What we lose is that shine in our eyes that used to exhibit our ability to dream. They can see their dream turn into reality in full belief without a single trace of self-doubt. It is a sight to behold, to envy, but it goes unnoticed, unappreciated, deemphasized by most, everyone busy getting immersed in all the noise that's blocking our eyes and ears forging us to become mere clones of each other. Can we tell when exactly we lost that twinkle -- that part of ourselves that most can hardly even recall?

Let us try to remember... I see a small version of myself in our home playroom. I am building some sort of aircraft that will end up flying in a year or two if I'd work on it hard enough. It was my cousin's and my little secret. We will be the first ones to fly on it before we publicize our achievement.  We worked on it every night. We gathered cardboards, screwdrivers and pins; pins that we simply stuck in as buttons, but we genuinely believed our plane would fly.

Now, however, I have the resources: the education, the money, the physical ability to chase my dreams, but I don't have a fraction of that belief.

Ironically, I've become crippled by my very own thoughts, that once made me believe I could fly on a cardboard with pins.

"You cannot make it,"

"How can you pursue a career in drawing? Anyone can draw."

''It's nothing more than a hobby."

"You are a disappointment."

"You will not be able to maintain a career with writing. Study medicine or engineering instead or anything of real value and then take writing courses."

"You want to be an entrepreneur? It's another word for unemployed."

''Make your parents proud, they taught you so well. Don't degrade them."

The list goes on.

Then here I am...

A “university lecturer”, a “doctor”, a “lawyer”, a “manager.”

I made that 'stable career' but then what?

Every morning I wake up go to work from 8AM until 2PM/4PM. The same schedule each, long passing day.

Is this the life we struggled and fought for?

Is this my dream?

They would say, "You made it!"

"We are so proud!"

"You're an inspiration!"

"My daughter wants to be a doctor just like you!"

But then what? Is this actually my dream or theirs?

What is success? And what is growing up? They are words we hear so often but the fact is that these words are over-used and have long lost their real meaning. Is money success? Or is success doing what you love most?

How can we know if we will succeed or not if what we always take is the safest route? Even if we have to take risks, it is worthwhile. The award for reaching that safe destination is a diversion from the real prize. The real prize is the fulfilling of our dreams. That longing stare that accompanies us and finally indicates that what we have yearned for all our lives it is now in our hands and between our fingers is so tangible and heavy with our hopes, tears, passion and dedication.

The successful, in plain words, are those who were able to hold on to their dream and believe in it every step of the way. Whoever managed to make it out of childhood while retaining "that shine in their eyes" are the ones who make it big in life; not necessarily big as in in front of others, but big in front of themselves. Arguably, who is more important?

A success story of our own is the most important story of all I believe.

We are the ones living that life. In the end, the one who will always stay with me is “me.” I will have to face “me” every day and every night.

So again, whom should we care to impress more?

Society or our very own selves?

Look closer, behind the smiles. People’s souls are a time-capsule, vessels filled with lost hopes and forgotten aspirations deep down in their hearts, injured souls with buried memories of times when they used to know how to dream before life or 'growing up' took it away, trapping them in a modern jail named 'routine.'

A fragment of what could be...

Are we destined for that life?

I dare say no.

Let us not become that.

Let us be "astronauts and return to bust all those thieves," forever.

Hopes and dreams, evermore.