

Scars that Speak

some wounds never close.



Gihan Kamel

1

The shouting starts before breakfast.

I sit at the table with my cereal, trying to make the cornflakes stay quiet in the milk. Mum stirs the tea too hard, the spoon clinking against the mug. Dad paces, his slippers slapping the kitchen tiles.

“I told you already, not like this!” His voice is heavy, like a hammer hitting the floor.

Mum doesn’t look up. “I’m tired,” she whispers, but even whispers can make him angrier.

I stare at my spoon. If I move too much, the chair squeaks. If the chair squeaks, Dad will look at me, and I don’t want him to.

Dad’s hand slams on the table. The bowl jumps. Milk spills on my arm, cold. I don’t breathe.

“Why can’t you listen, just once?” he roars at Mum, but his eyes flash past me like I don’t exist.

Mum’s lips press into a thin line. She wipes her hands on her apron. Her shoulders curl like she’s trying to hide inside her own body.

My chest feels like a cage with a bird flapping inside. I want to say something—maybe a joke, maybe, “Dad, look what I drew yesterday.” But my mouth is full of milk and fear, and I swallow both.

Then Dad sighs, big and heavy, like a balloon losing air. For a moment, I see something softer, something tired. His hand trembles before he hides it in his pocket.

“Finish your food,” he mutters, and leaves the kitchen.

The silence after shouting is worse than the shouting itself. It sits on my shoulders. Mum lowers herself into a chair across from me. Her eyes are red, though she hasn’t cried yet.

“Eat,” she says, but her voice is somewhere far away.

I nod, but the cereal tastes like wet cardboard.

That night, I hug my pillow tight. The walls are thin, and voices slip through.

“You don’t understand me!” Dad shouts.

“You don’t see me!” Mum’s voice cracks like glass.

I bury my face in the pillow, but the words crawl in anyway.

And then, softer, Dad says something I’ve never heard him say: “I wanted more than this. I was supposed to be more.”

I don’t know what he means. But I remember once, when Aunt Margaret visited, she told Mum, “*He’s been like this since he was young, always pushing, always trying to get out of his own father’s shadow.*” Dad walked in and she shut up quick.

Later, Mum told me her father used to say she was “too soft for this world.” I didn’t understand then, but I think maybe she still believes it.

I don’t know their whole stories. I only catch pieces, like puzzle parts under the sofa.

2

Dad talks the loudest when he’s angry, but he talks the truest when he’s tired.

Last week, he came home late, shoes dusty, shirt clinging to him. He didn’t shout, not right away. He sat on the edge of the sofa and rubbed his eyes. I was pretending to colour at the table, but really I was listening.

“I worked since I was twelve,” he told Mum, his voice rough, like gravel under a wheel. “Do you know what it means to stand in the market all day, carrying sacks heavier than yourself? My father... he never gave me a kind word. Only orders. Only fists.”

I froze, my crayon pressed so hard it broke. Dad never talks about *his* father. I only know Grandad from one faded photo in Mum's drawer — a stern man with eyes like iron.

“He used to shout at me the same way,” Dad muttered. “Maybe worse. Said I was useless, that I'd never be more than a cart boy. I swore to myself I would prove him wrong.”

Mum stayed quiet. She's good at that.

“I worked, I studied at night. I built everything with my own hands. But it's never enough. Never enough.” His voice cracked on the last words, and I swear, for a second, Dad sounded smaller.

He didn't know I was listening. He didn't see my heart squeeze, because I didn't know Dad ever felt like me — small, scared, invisible.

At Uncle Robert's house one Sunday, I heard more. Grown-ups talk like children don't understand, but I do.

“Your brother was always the stubborn one,” Uncle said, sipping tea. “Always fighting with your father. He wanted the world, and nothing less.”

Mum shifted uncomfortably. “And look where it got him.”

I didn't know what that meant, but I tucked it away.

Sometimes, late at night, Dad walks around the house, talking to himself. His footsteps stop outside my door. I hear him mutter words like *future*, *money*, *failure*.

He wants to be a big man, someone important. I can feel it in the way he straightens his back when he talks to strangers, the way his voice gets deeper, proud. But at home, his pride is like a heavy boot — it crushes everything under it.

And I wonder — if his father had loved him softer, would Dad's voice sound softer too?

But I'll never ask. Because when the morning comes, Dad is thunder again.

And thunder doesn't answer questions.

3

Mum doesn't talk much about before. But when she does, her voice gets softer, like it belongs to someone else.

One evening, when Dad was late, I found her folding clothes on the bed. She looked tired in the yellow light. She didn't notice me in the doorway when she whispered to herself, "*I was never meant for this life.*"

I asked, "What life?"

She startled, like I'd caught her stealing. "Nothing, love. Go play."

But I didn't go. I tucked the words away in my head, like I always do.

I know pieces. Aunt Margaret once told Mum in the kitchen, "You were still a child when your father passed. Your brother William raised you like a daughter, not a sister."

Mum didn't answer. She just kept washing the cups, her hands moving fast, her eyes somewhere far away.

Sometimes when she thinks I'm asleep, I hear her telling Dad:

"I lived in my brother's house. His wife never wanted me there. I ate what they gave me. I wore what they chose. I wasn't anyone. Just a shadow in their hallway."

Dad usually cuts her off with a scoff, but I hold on to her words. I picture her sitting in a corner of a crowded house, knees pulled up, hugging herself while everyone else lived their lives.

A girl who didn't belong anywhere.

Mum likes books. Or maybe she used to. Once, when she was dusting the shelves, she found an old one with her name scribbled inside. She sat down on the floor right there, tracing the letters with her finger.

When Dad came in, she closed it fast. He frowned. “Still dreaming?” he said. She shook her head and tucked the book under the cushion.

But later that night, I saw her take it out again, holding it close, not reading — just holding.

I think Mum wanted a gentle life. Maybe a little house, a garden, books by the window. But instead, she married Dad. Maybe Uncle William arranged it. Maybe she thought it was the only way to leave his house.

Sometimes, when she stares at nothing, I wonder if she feels she traded one cage for another.

At the market, she never looks at the balloons or the bright things. She walks past them like they aren't there. She buys potatoes, onions, bread. Things that fill but don't delight.

Her life feels like that too. Plain. Heavy. Filling but not nourishing.

And me — I watch her, wishing I could be enough to bring her real smiles, not the thin ones that fade too fast.

But her sadness sits in the room like another person. And no matter how hard I try, I can't make it leave.

4

It started on a rainy evening. The windows rattled with wind, the kind that makes the house feel smaller. Mum was peeling potatoes in the kitchen. Dad came in, wet coat dripping on the floor, his face already stormy.

“Couldn’t you at least keep the place warm?” he barked, shaking off the rain.

Mum didn’t answer. She just kept her eyes on the potato in her hand, the knife sliding slow, careful.

“I’m talking to you,” he snapped.

Her hand trembled. The knife slipped, nicking her thumb. A bead of red appeared, bright against the pale skin.

I gasped from the doorway.

Mum pressed a cloth to her hand and whispered, “It doesn’t matter.”

But Dad exploded. “Everything doesn’t matter! You—always with your silence, your sadness, your... uselessness!” His voice was thunder, shaking the pots on the shelf.

Mum’s lips tightened. For once, she looked up. Her eyes glistened but didn’t fall. “Do you think shouting makes you a man? Do you think this house is only yours?”

The words cut sharper than the knife had. Dad’s face turned red.

He grabbed the bowl of potatoes and flung it against the wall. It shattered, white pieces flying like sharp snow. The sound rang in my ears, louder than the thunder outside.

I ducked into the hallway, heart pounding, breath stuck in my throat.

From the crack of the door, I saw Mum sink into a chair, covering her face. Dad stood over her, chest heaving, then turned away, muttering, “You’ll never understand what it costs me.”

Silence. The heavy kind.

I pressed my back against the wall, small as I could make myself. My legs shook. All I wanted was to run in, to shout “Stop! Please!” But my voice wouldn’t come. So I stayed hidden, the sound of rain dripping from Dad’s coat mixing with Mum’s muffled sobs.

5

After the night of the potatoes and the broken bowl, I decided I needed a place of my own. Not a real place — I don’t have one — but a secret one.

I found an old shoebox in the wardrobe. I lined it with tissue paper and slid it under my bed. That became my hiding place for everything that mattered.

The first thing I put inside was the chocolate wrapper Dad gave me once, months ago. He had come home with his voice tired instead of angry, and without saying a word he’d dropped the chocolate into my hand. I ate it fast, but I kept the wrapper, folded small. Because that was proof that sometimes — just sometimes — he could be kind.

Then I added one of Mum’s hairpins, the kind with the tiny pearl on the end. She’d dropped it in the kitchen, and I picked it up. She didn’t notice, but I did. To me it felt like a piece of her, the softer her, the one who might’ve lived a different life.

Later, I put in a drawing I made of the three of us — smiling stick figures in a little house with a big sun. At school, the teacher said it was lovely. At home, no one looked at it. So I folded it and kept it safe.

Every time they shouted, I felt myself shrinking smaller, like if I stayed still enough, I might vanish. But when I opened the box, I felt something else: that maybe I wasn’t nothing. That maybe, if I kept all the tiny good bits, I could remember them when the house felt like it was cracking in half.

It made me secretive. Careful. Always watching. I learned to read faces fast, to hear moods in the way footsteps hit the floor. When Dad's shoes stomped hard, I knew to disappear. When Mum's eyes glazed over, I knew she wouldn't hear me.

At school, though, I was different. Loud, even. I cracked jokes. I made the other kids laugh. Because I wanted them to like me, to notice me. At home, I was invisible. At school, I tried to be the opposite.

But inside, when the laughter stopped, I always felt the same: like a boy sitting next to a storm, clutching a shoebox under his bed, praying it would be enough to hold him together.

I don't tell anyone about the box. It's mine. My proof. My armour.

Because even if I can't change them, even if the shouting never stops, I can keep the pieces that make me feel like I exist.

And that's how I learned to hold myself tight — with scraps, and wrappers, and broken smiles — because no one else knew how to hold me.

6

I don't like nights.

The dark isn't the worst part. It's the noises. Houses make noises when everyone's asleep — pipes creak, branches scrape the windows, the fridge hums in the kitchen. But in my house, the loudest noise is voices.

Through the walls, Mum and Dad's words leak into my room like smoke.

"You'll never understand what I carry on my shoulders!" Dad booms.

"You crush everything you touch!" Mum's voice breaks, high and sharp.

I pull the blanket over my head, but it doesn't block them. I press the pillow against my ears, but the shouting finds its way in. Always.

Sometimes I dream that the walls fall down, and everyone outside can hear too. The neighbours, the teachers, the kids from school. They all stand and watch while my parents tear each other apart, and I'm in the middle with my hands over my ears.

When it's quiet again, I lie awake staring at the ceiling. Shadows move across it, shapes that look like hands reaching for me. I imagine monsters under the bed, in the wardrobe. But the worst monster is the one outside my door: Dad's voice when it's angry, Mum's silence when it's broken.

That's the thing — I'm not scared of the dark. I'm scared of what the light brings out in them.

The nights are teaching me things.

They're teaching me to stay alert. To always listen for footsteps, for the crack of a slammed door, for the sigh that means the storm is coming back. My ears never rest. Even when I fall asleep, I dream of running, of hiding, of waiting for something bad to happen.

It's like my body knows — never relax. Never trust the quiet. Quiet always means the next shout is coming.

At school, when the lights go off for film day and everyone laughs, I freeze. My chest tightens, and I wait for someone to start shouting. No one does, but I can't shake the feeling.

When other kids tell stories about monsters, I laugh with them. But inside I think, *I already know what monsters sound like. They sound like my parents when they forget I'm listening.*

I think the nights are changing me.

Making me smaller on the inside, even when I act big on the outside. Teaching me that safety isn't real. That doors and walls don't keep the scary things out, because sometimes the scary things live in the room next to yours.

And I wonder — if I grow up in this kind of night, will I ever stop hearing their voices, even when they're not shouting anymore?

7

The shouting wasn't so loud that day. It was worse. It was quiet.

Dad sat at the kitchen table, his head in his hands. His shoulders looked heavy, like he was carrying bricks. His tea went cold in front of him.

I stood in the doorway, waiting for the thunder. It didn't come.

He lifted his face and I saw his eyes. They were red, not from anger, but from something else. Tiredness, maybe. Or sadness. I didn't know grown men's eyes could look like that.

For a second, I thought about walking over, putting my hand on his sleeve, the way Mum sometimes does with me. But then he rubbed his face hard and muttered, "Useless. All of it."

The moment vanished. He wasn't my Dad to comfort — he was a wall again.

Later, I found Mum sitting in the bedroom, staring at the wardrobe like it had answers. The laundry basket was full, but she hadn't touched it.

"Are you alright, Mum?" I asked.

She blinked at me, slow, like she'd forgotten I was there. Then she smiled — but it wasn't the kind that warmed you. It was the kind that said, *I don't want you to worry, but I can't stop you either.*

"Go and do your homework, love."

So I went, but the image stuck: Mum's face, blank, empty, like someone had turned out the light behind her eyes.

That night in bed, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

Dad, the strong one, the loud one, looking broken. Mum, the soft one, the quiet one, looking gone.

It twisted something inside me. I wanted to believe parents were solid, like furniture you could lean on. But now I saw the cracks.

And it scared me — because if they could fall apart, what was holding me together?

The next day at school, during art, we had to paint "family." Everyone else painted stick figures with smiles. I painted a house with cracked walls.

"Interesting choice," the teacher said.

I shrugged. I didn't know how to explain that when I look at Mum and Dad now, I see the cracks more than the walls.

I think that's the hardest part: loving them and fearing them at the same time. Wanting to run from Dad's voice but also wanting him to hold me. Wanting Mum to protect me but seeing that she can't even protect herself.

It's like standing in a room that's splitting down the middle, and not knowing which side will collapse first.

8

At home, I try not to exist.

I eat quietly. I walk softly. I slip around corners like a shadow. If Dad's in the lounge, I stay in my room. If Mum's upset, I pretend to be busy with homework. The trick is to be good, invisible, untouchable.

The more invisible I am, the less chance I'll get caught in the storm.

But at school, I'm the opposite.

I shout answers before the teacher calls on me. I crack jokes that make the class laugh, even when they aren't that funny. I tell stories with big hand movements, so everyone looks at me.

Sometimes I even get in trouble for talking too much. But the telling-off from the teacher doesn't scare me. Not like the shouting at home. At school, being noticed feels safer than being ignored.

It's strange — the kids think I'm confident. But really, I just don't want to be forgotten.

When I make them laugh, I feel a spark in my chest. A warm spark. Not like at home, where my chest feels heavy, like stones are piled inside it.

At school, I can breathe. At home, I hold my breath.

One day, during break, my friend Liam said, "You're always the loudest. Bet your parents can't get a word in at home, eh?"

I laughed so hard my stomach hurt. But inside, I felt something else — like a door closing. Because if Liam knew the truth, he wouldn't believe it. He wouldn't believe that at home I hardly say anything at all.

That's when I realised: I had two selves. The boy who shouts and jokes, and the boy who hides and listens.

And sometimes, I wondered which one was really me.

I think this split is shaping me, even if I don't fully understand it yet. At school, I want people to see me, to hear me, to like me. At home, I disappear.

It's like I'm practising being two different people.

And maybe one day, I won't know how to stop.

9

The fight started over nothing. They usually do.

Dad came home, tired and heavy, his shoes leaving muddy prints on the kitchen floor. Mum was already there, stirring a pot of stew.

"Again? Stew again?" he snapped, tossing his keys on the table.

"It's what I had," Mum said quietly.

His face darkened. "You never think. Never."

Her shoulders tensed. "I do what I can."

And then it spiralled. Voices rising, cutting, spilling into every corner of the house.

I slipped into the hallway, clutching my secret box, my chest thudding like a drum. I crouched behind the coat rack.

Then it happened — Dad slammed his hand down on the pot. It tipped, clattered, and stew spilled across the floor. The pot rolled, hit the tiles with a crash, and broke the silence of the whole street, it felt like.

Mum gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. Dad stood there, shaking, his fist clenched.

I covered my ears. My whole body shook. I wanted to scream, but no sound came.

The smell of burnt stew filled the air. The sound of breaking echoed in my chest long after the pot stopped rolling.

Later that week, it was quieter. Quieter, but sharper.

I brought home a drawing from school. We'd been told to paint something we loved, so I painted a park — green trees, blue sky, a family on a picnic blanket. I imagined it was us, only smiling.

I ran into the lounge, waving it. “Mum! Dad! Look what I made!”

Mum looked up from the ironing, gave the faintest smile, then set the iron down again. “That’s nice, love.”

Dad glanced for a second, then back to his newspaper. “Do your homework,” he muttered.

The paper fluttered in my hand. My heart sank.

I wanted to shout, *See me! Please, see me!* But I just folded the picture small and slipped it into the shoebox under my bed.

That’s the thing.

Sometimes the shouting is so loud it rattles the walls. Sometimes the silence is worse.

Both tell me the same thing: that I’m not really there.

And every time something breaks in the house, I feel another crack opening inside me too.

10

I thought I'd leave it behind when I grew older. But I didn't.

The shouting stopped being outside my door and started living inside my head.

At school, when teachers raised their voices, my chest locked tight. Even if they weren't shouting at me, I felt twelve again, hiding behind the coats.

In friendships, I was two people: the loud one who made everyone laugh, and the quiet one who pulled away the moment things got real. People thought I was confident, but really I was always waiting for them to see the cracks.

By the time I was a teenager, I carried Dad's voice in my blood. The sharpness. The short fuse. The hunger to prove something.

I caught myself snapping at people — friends, girlfriends, anyone who got too close. The anger came fast, out of nowhere. And afterwards, I hated myself. Because I'd see Mum's face in my head — the way she shrank when Dad roared — and I realised I was becoming the thing I swore I'd never be.

But stopping felt impossible. It was like someone had written his thunder into my bones.

And Mum's shadow followed me too. Her sadness. Her silence. The way she drifted through life.

I found myself drifting as well — through jobs, through relationships, through days that all felt the same. I'd chase something new, thinking it would fill me. But nothing ever did. Every win tasted empty, like eating bread without salt.

I understood her better then. That blank stare at the wardrobe. That tired half-smile. I carried both — Dad's storm and Mum's fog — inside me.

Love was the hardest.

I wanted it. God, I wanted it. But every time someone tried to get close, I pulled away. Or I demanded too much. Or I pushed them until they left.

Because deep down, I didn't know what love was supposed to feel like. I'd learned that love shouted, or love stayed silent. Love was either thunder or a ghost.

So when someone tried to love me softly, I didn't trust it. I didn't believe it.

And happiness... I kept waiting for it. Like it was around the next corner. In the next job. The next flat. The next person.

But it never stayed. Because how can you hold happiness if you grew up learning that good things disappear fast, that quiet only means shouting is coming, that smiles fade before you can touch them?

Sometimes, late at night, I still picture the shoebox under my bed. The chocolate wrapper, the hairpin, the folded picture. Proof that there were moments, small ones, where I felt seen.

But they were never enough to drown out the storm.

And the storm — it lives in me still.

11

Freedom. That's what I thought moving out would give me.

No more slammed doors. No more nights under the blanket with my ears ringing. Just me, my own space, my own rules.

But silence followed me. I didn't know what to do with it. I'd sit in my tiny flat, kettle boiling, and feel the walls close in. Silence never meant peace to me — it meant danger, waiting. My chest would tighten, as if Dad's voice might still burst through the door.

So I filled the silence. Music always on. TV playing even when I wasn't watching. Friends over late. Anything to keep from being alone with the quiet.

At uni, I was the loud one. The one who always had a joke, always had a story, always drank the most at the pub. People said I was the life of the party.

But inside, I felt hollow. Every laugh I got was like a drop of water in a desert — gone too quickly, never enough.

When I dated, it was worse. I wanted closeness but didn't know how to stand it. One minute I clung too tight, drowning them in attention, desperate not to be left. The next, I pushed them away, snapping over nothing. I watched their eyes turn wary, the way Mum's eyes had around Dad, and hated myself for it.

I promised I'd never be like him. But the thunder was in me.

And the fog too. Some mornings, I'd lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, unable to move. I heard Mum's voice in my head: *I was never meant for this life*. And I felt the same.

Work wasn't better. Every boss's criticism cut deeper than it should have. I'd hear Grandad's voice through Dad's: *useless*. I'd stay late, overwork, chase promotions, desperate to prove them wrong — but every win tasted empty.

I was still that boy with the shoebox, looking for scraps of proof that I was worth something.

And at night, when the flat was finally quiet, I'd lie awake and wonder: *Is this what growing up is? Carrying their storm inside me, wherever I go?*

12

Marriage was supposed to fix me.

That's what I told myself. If someone loved me enough, maybe it would silence the thunder. Maybe it would lift the fog.

At first, it worked. The warmth of another body next to mine. The way she looked at me with belief, with hope. I wanted to be the man she saw.

But old storms don't die easy.

When work piled up, I came home sharp, my words cutting without meaning to. "Why can't you just—" I'd start, and then stop, hearing Dad in my own voice. Her eyes would dim, the way Mum's had. That look of pulling away, of becoming small.

It killed me. And yet, it kept happening.

Some days, I'd be silent instead. Withdrawn. Drifting in the fog. She'd ask, "What's wrong?" and I'd say "Nothing." But there was always something.

When I became a father, it got harder.

I wanted to give my child the world I never had. Soft words, warm arms, safety. I held him tight, swore I'd never let him feel invisible.

But when he cried too long, or when I came home exhausted, I felt the anger rise. Fast, dangerous, like a storm cloud forming out of nowhere. My voice would snap before I could stop it. He'd flinch — just like I used to.

That moment broke me.

Because I saw the cycle with my own eyes. Dad's thunder in me. Mum's silence in my wife. My child learning the same lessons I had — fear, tension, doubt.

I wanted to run. To shout at the ghosts of my parents that they'd ruined me. But ghosts don't listen.

The truth is, I carried them both inside me. Dad's hunger, Dad's temper. Mum's sadness, Mum's helplessness. Two lives stitched into mine, dragging me between storm and fog.

And it made me wonder: Is this all life is? Passing the storm down, one generation after the next?

Or can someone finally break it?

13

I used to think time would fix it. That if I just kept moving forward — got the job, got the house, got the family — the past would stay behind me.

But the past doesn't stay behind. It hides in the corners, waits in the silence, and then comes out in your own voice when you least expect it.

My wife doesn't argue anymore. Not really. At first, she fought back. Now she just goes quiet. I see it in her eyes — the shrinking, the way she folds in on herself. The same way Mum used to.

And every time I see it, I feel two things at once: power and shame. The first makes me hate myself. The second makes me angrier. It's a loop I can't escape.

My son has learned to read my moods. He's still young, but he watches me the way I used to watch Dad. The way footsteps hit the floor, the way a door shuts. He knows when to vanish, when to be quiet.

It should break me. It does. But even that doesn't stop me.

Last week, I snapped at him for spilling juice on the carpet. His face crumpled, his little shoulders hunched. I saw myself in him, so clear it made me sick. I wanted to grab him, to say, *I'm sorry, it's not your fault, it's mine.*

But instead I turned away, muttering, "Just... just clean it up."

Because saying sorry feels like admitting I've lost. And that's Dad's voice, not mine. But it lives in me.

At work, I'm the same. I chase and chase, always trying to prove myself, always hungry for more. But no matter how much I get, it tastes empty. And when someone criticises me, even gently, I hear Grandad's voice in my head: *useless.* And I feel twelve again, breaking crayons in my hand.

So I push harder. I stay later. I grind myself down. But the shadow of failure never leaves.

Nights are the worst. The house quiet, everyone asleep. I sit in the dark, scrolling through my phone, drinking tea gone cold. My head fills with questions I can't answer.

Why can't I stop shouting?

Why can't I just be better?

Why do I feel both too much and not enough?

Sometimes I picture the shoebox under my childhood bed. The chocolate wrapper, the hairpin, the drawing. Proof that I was once small and hopeful, collecting scraps of love.

I wonder if my son will need his own box.

That thought crushes me.

And so the cycle turns.

Dad's thunder in my voice.

Mum's silence in my wife's eyes.

*My child learning the same rules I did:
be small, be careful, wait for the storm.*

I swore I'd never repeat their mistakes.

But swearing doesn't stop the storm.

And storms don't end just because you want them to.

