

Unlocked

Online Therapy Stories

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PROLOGUE

When the pandemic hit the world, I had already been seeing my therapy clients online (via video-conferencing) for a decade. Unlike most other people, my work flow and my daily routine were hardly impacted. My colleagues who had been practising in person in a therapy room had to switch to online overnight. My clients and I were already used to meeting through the lens of our webcams, and seeing each other's faces on the screen. It allowed our work to be uninterrupted.

That very dramatic moment was a rare situation in which all of us – therapists and clients – were dealing with the same major crisis, in a very similar context, becoming fellow travellers facing the same storm.

All therapeutic work described in this book happens online. Not long ago therapists met remote work with suspiciousness, feeling that the use of technology can reduce therapy to something 'less.' These stories show the contrary, demonstrating how a curious and skilled online therapist can make the most of the unexpected gifts that 'screen' therapy offers – be it the intrusion of a pet, a parent breaking into the session or a client taking her therapist for a trip outside. This book takes therapeutic conversations out of the confinement of a physical therapy room, breathing a new energy and new possibilities into the therapeutic process. Therapeutic conversations that happen through the screen have a surprising close-up quality and foster a different kind of intimacy and intensity.

My remote therapy work during the pandemic provided inspiring and humbling lessons. It brought me back to the Stoic

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philosophers who, as timely as ever, teach us that the obstacles that we encounter are actually fuel. ‘The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way’, wrote Marcus Aurelius. Any obstacle has a paradoxical ability to also be the vehicle by which we surmount the obstacle. Every hour spent with my online clients during these challenging times also reminded me about the resilience and the creative potential of human nature.

Crisis has a powerful capacity not only to reveal us as people, but also to make apparent some previously hidden knowledge about our life ‘before’. This is when therapy is most efficient, exploiting this revealing potential, turning life obstacles into fuel that allows impressive break-throughs.

There is no need to preach the power of therapy in facilitating individual change; the power of *online* therapy, which used to be widely questioned, is probably more peculiar. During the pandemic, the limits of remote therapy have been stretched and it has shown its full potential – its power to get us out of a locked room. A simple computer screen turns into a window towards the other. Even with an unstable internet connection (a widespread concern about online therapy), technology makes a strong human connection possible, which is the most powerful ingredient of any therapeutic success.

Each story in this book is a therapeutic investigation into one particular client’s life crisis and its underlying psychological issue. The therapeutic dialogue between the therapist and her client is charged in suspense. It leads us, not unlike a good whodunit, towards a resolution that will inspire the reader to re-think the potential for change that his or her own personal crisis may offer.

It also reveals part of the therapist’s own story that informs her work. Throughout the ten case studies, the reader gathers different

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sides of the therapist's personality and background, ending up with a sense of who she is. This echoes what happens in therapy – without the therapist self-disclosing much, the client will get to know her in time.

There is certainly no perfect solution to the problem of writing about therapy patients, and each therapist-turned-writer has tried in their own way to perform this balancing act – between respecting their clients' confidentiality and the need for a therapeutic story, from which other therapists and clients may learn. I have tried my best to do this as well. Inspired by real clients who I was seeing in online therapy during the pandemic, these stories are heavily fictionalised. Personal details have been modified and disguised, in order to fully protect my clients' identities. The therapist who narrates the ten stories is also fictional, although resembling me at times.

Marcus Aurelius (2002). *Meditations: A New Translation*, by Gregory Hays. New York: Random House.

I

Laila

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Laila is very good at hiding. This is the first time we meet, and as her unveiled face appears on my screen, I can barely distinguish her features hidden by the thick darkness of the room.

From her initial email, I know that Laila is in her late 30s, unmarried and, as a result of these circumstances, is living in her parents' house in a very conservative Middle Eastern country. She warns me straightaway that it has been a difficult and risky decision for her to engage in therapy, especially online and with a western therapist. It is also her only option if she wants to keep it away from her family and confidential.

Privacy is an issue. Her parents' house is vast and has many rooms, but her nine siblings come and go as they wish, following the rhythms of their prayers, meals and social obligations. Some of them are married, and their young children are constantly running around the house, untamed and loud.

Connecting with Laila for our first session, I automatically become an accomplice in her rule-breaking behaviour. Starting as partners-in-crime results in an immediate intimacy and a strange sense of kinship that usually takes time to create in therapy.

“Where are you now? Is this your room?”

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“Yes, it is my room, and fortunately the door is locked.”

I overhear children’s voices and some music resonating from the bowels of the house. By contrast, her room is very quiet and, from the little I can see of it, rather spartan.

“I told them I was having a migraine and had to lie down.”

“Do you have migraines often?” She smiles sadly: “Yes, I do.”

As we would realise later, this was the only excuse she had found as a child to isolate herself and get some personal space. Nevertheless, Laila’s migraines’ ‘purpose’ does not make them any less real or painful. They can last for days, and self-isolating in a dark room has become a habit that her family accepts as another bothersome part of her character, alongside the irritating stubbornness that she displays on certain occasions. The recently installed lock on her door, which has caused many heated conversations with her father, is also the welcome consequence of her ‘condition’.

“I am not sure therapy can help me. Something terrible is about to happen ...”

Before she can finish, we are interrupted by a strong knock on the door. Shaken by its invasive forcefulness and Laila’s abrupt backing away, I do not have time to fully realise what is happening, and she is gone. My screen suddenly goes blank.

For several days, I can’t stop thinking about this aborted session, worrying for Laila and wondering whether she will ever make it back to my virtual therapy room. In the meantime, Paris empties as a result of the lockdown. Bewildered Parisians watch its deserted streets from their windows or balconies. Their screens become the only way of maintaining a connection with others. The fleeting conversation with Laila is nearly forgotten when an email from her arrives. This time she is resolved to start working with me, as soon as I am free. We arrange to reconnect the following evening.

Laila

As Laila joins the video call, her face instantly fills my screen in an unexpected close-up. She is wearing a dark purple hijab neatly framing the beautifully defined features of her face. A fierce energy emanates from her. No distance or screen dampens that down.

Laila tells me that she has been postponing therapy for years, unsure of how to proceed. It started with her parents insisting that she consult a local psychiatrist, perplexed as they were by her moodiness and unwillingness to engage in any discussions about marriage plans. Laila hated it. One of her older brothers, chosen to drive her to the appointment (as she was obviously not allowed to drive), would wait for her in the corridor. She could feel his presence behind the door and his annoyance at what was just another time-consuming task for him.

The psychiatrist did not unveil anything (nor did Laila unveil her face in his presence). He did not seem very interested in her concerns and promptly prescribed antidepressants and a break from work. It convinced Laila not to come back to this or any other local doctor. Taking a pill would not make her problems go away. The risk of being forced to leave her job scared her.

She works as a nurse in the maternity ward of a large hospital and, strangely enough, her work has become her most cherished space in finding some privacy. There, she is valued for her skills, away from her father's constant scrutiny.

"How do you feel about talking with me, a western woman living thousands of miles away?"

"I do not know if I can trust you. But I have no choice."

I tell her that confidentiality is the very basis of therapy, but I don't know if my words are enough to reassure her.

So here we are – two women sitting in front of their computers in two opposite parts of the world – talking with each other through

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a screen, in a language that is neither one's mother tongue. Having grown up in an autocratic state, I know too well that a foreign language can turn into a space of freedom, a boundary and a safety blanket, unavailable in one's mother tongue.

Laila has to talk in a hushed voice. Her family members are constantly passing by her room, and sometimes I clearly distinguish their voices resonating in the tiled corridors of her parents' vast house, approaching and vanishing again.

Do they speak English? Yes, a bit, but not as well as her. Laila has been passionate about learning English since her teens. She has always felt that this language offered her a space for free thinking and privacy, which she considers unattainable to her in Arabic. Her father has always scolded her for spending too much time reading in English or watching American films, but since she has had to study English for her nursing degree and, later on, to work at the international hospital, he has grudgingly conceded her this 'frivolousness'.

Since her late teens, Laila has been avidly using social media, where she now has the majority of her meaningful social connections, her 'online friends,' as she calls these virtual bonds. In this parallel world, women are able to befriend men; friends can exchange unveiled pictures of each other, discuss intimate topics and even share their religious doubts.

"Last time we spoke, you said that something terrible was about to happen. What did you mean?"

Laila shoots a quick look towards the door as if to check that nobody is there to intrude her space, but the house is silent.

"My parents received another marriage proposal for me ... they know that this is maybe the last chance to get rid of me."

"Do you know this man?"

"No, but his mother is coming tomorrow to look at me."

Laila lowers her head and slips away from the camera, so that only a part of her forehead, covered by the hijab, stays visible.

The marriage hunt started when she was eighteen, and her parents' attempts to find her a suitable husband have become ever more determined and desperate. First Laila could highlight the flaws in the aspiring grooms that would make good deal-breakers: lack of a respectable career, a physical defect or, even more convincing for her parents, lack of religious fervour. As time went by, the suitors grew older, their flaws became more obvious, but her parents' desire to finally settle their insubordinate daughter also became more urgent.

This time, it is an older cousin who is already married and is now considering taking a second wife.

"I am getting too old to be a first wife ... but not old enough to be left in peace." Laila's voice cracks and she is close to tears.

That evening I find it hard to join in the conversation over the now-traditional online aperitif with friends. The mundane topics around COVID symptoms, current government strategy and facemasks feel far removed from what I am still struggling with: the prospect of a forced marriage on Laila.

This is one of those times when I almost physically stumble on the limits of what I am able to offer to a client; therapy can be an empowering force but certain brute realities of existence can have a stronger adverse effect. I desperately want Laila to be free, and the intensity of my yearning is only a distant pale echo of what she is probably feeling, trying to get to sleep in her lonely room. The laughter of my friends and the jazz in the background are making Laila's isolation even more blatant in my mind.

I grew up as an only child and, at bedtime, my desolate condition would usually feel cruel. I would lie in bed for hours, fantasising about potential siblings, little doll-like brothers and sisters to dress

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and feed. Laila, on the contrary, has many siblings but this did not make her any less lonely; none of them understood her stubborn rebellion against the family rules or arranged marriage. I imagine her sitting on her single bed, scrolling through on her laptop her online friends' intimate messages. Would she be able to act on what we had plotted, maybe foolishly, together?

That night I dream that I am lost in a strange place – maybe an abandoned hotel or a school – unable to get out of its intricate staircases, endless corridors, and vast empty rooms. I am pacing through the rooms as a forlorn ghost, unable to find an exit or someone to ask for directions. Rescued by the morning alarm, I have to lie down for a few seconds, trying to distinguish the harrowing dream from the nightmarish reality of another lockdown day.

During the day I find myself checking emails between sessions, hoping to hear from Laila, but she keeps silent. Or is she kept silent? In my current monotonous reality, Laila's story starts to resemble a television drama with weekly episodes on my computer screen. I do not need Netflix, as my clients' real-life stories are filling the void left by the lockdown that has robbed me of many of my daily joys. Laila's distress washes me away in a powerful emotional wave that I am unable or unwilling to control; I find myself washed out on the shore of my balcony, covered with the debris of my own frustration, hurt and with a deep feeling of loss. I stand there contemplating the grey field of Parisian rooftops with hundreds of red chimneys erected in a frozen dance; birds are swirling in the still air, oblivious to the lockdown. For the first time I regret not smoking, as a cigarette would probably have been a good kick right now. My tea has become cold and tasteless. I go to the kitchen and pour myself a large glass of crisp white Burgundy.

By the time I go to bed – later with every passing day – Laila's email is waiting for me in my inbox: *"I barricaded myself in the*

room as planned. Did not come out when the man's mother came. I don't know what happened there. Have to go now, as my father wants to talk. Will write later."

My heart starts racing; I know I should not be checking my emails at this time, but the lockdown seems to have altered many rules. I know that I have to do something. I go to the bathroom and wash my face with cold water. I look in the mirror and dislike what I see – an ageing woman with unkempt hair and puffy eyes. Since hairdressers shut down, my usually dark curls are showing more and more grey. I open the drawer, fetch the scissors and start cutting, methodically, until the sink is filled with hair. As I cut, I think about my husband telling me that he really prefers women with long hair; all the things I could not say no to come over me like a big wave. My own anger takes me by surprise; how can I have all this inside, after all these years of therapy, trying to heal? Then I realise that this is not just about me, but also about Laila. I am outraged and rebelling on her behalf.

Next time we meet online, the connection takes a while to settle, like the surface of a lake disturbed by the stone thrown by a child, and her bright face appears. She looks at me in bewilderment and I start thinking that something has gone wrong. But before I can utter a word, Laila takes her hijab off in a resolute gesture. This is the first time I see her head uncovered – she looks like a little girl, and her hair is even shorter than mine, she is almost bald. We stare at each other in amazement and the mirroring effect of our screen encounter becomes even more striking. She is the first to talk.

“I cut my hair. You did too?”

“Yes, I did.”

“If my father finds out, he will be really mad.”

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“Do you want him to see it?”

She keeps silent for a moment, playing with her hijab, which is lying on her lap like a little dead animal.

“In a way I do, even if I am scared he may kill me.”

“Kill you?”

“I mean . . . I don’t know. I never did anything like this before.”

She looks directly into the camera; in her wide-open eyes I see a mixture of excitement and defiance. Now it is my turn to feel scared.

“But does he really need to know?”

“No, maybe not yet.”

With her naked head she looks so young and vulnerable that I want to protect her, to make sure she is safe. But I have to remind myself that she came to me in search of empowerment. Trusting me, she took a risk, and it is now my turn to trust her. I feel like the parent of a toddler who is climbing a jungle gym for the first time, realising that the child could fall and hurt themselves, but also has to learn this new skill in order to eventually master it.

“My father called me yesterday after he learnt I did not show up in the reception room. He was very upset.”

“Is this over now or will she return?”

“Anyway not before the lockdown is over.”

“Oh, good. This gives us a few weeks to figure something out.”

“Yes. I do not want to marry, ever.”

She stares at me with her intense dark eyes and I desperately look for words to reassure her, but I stumble as I am not certain that we can fight against her father’s will, the omnipotent power over his daughter given to him by his country’s tradition and law.

“Can you talk about it with your mother?”

“I tried. She keeps repeating that I have to marry and have children, otherwise I will never be happy. She does not know any other way.”

“What about your older sisters?”

“They all wanted to get married. Now they think I should too.”

“What about your online friends?”

“Yes, they understand. We talked about the ways out. They advise me to get ill or to lose a lot of weight. Just to gain some time.”

Laila shows me her room. It looks like a prison cell, although the bare necessities for a reasonably comfortable life are there. The only objects Laila cherishes are a few books on a shelf and a television. But even those tend to attract the unwanted attention from her family – why doesn't she watch television in the common room? Why does she need all these *American* books?

The electric light is always on, even though the bright Middle East sun shines outside nearly all year around.

“We are strong on privacy here,” Laila explains.

The shutters are closed all the time, to prevent neighbours getting a glimpse of the women of the house. As a result, Laila has no access to the outside world. Before the lockdown, almost her only outings consisted in commuting to her workplace in her brother's car, with tinted windows for the same reasons of privacy, making everything outside look bleak and slightly unreal. Laila recognises that often she feels like a ghost, as the familiar world turns into an uncanny copy of what reality is supposed to be. The days go by in a sort of depleted way, a succession of small familiar tasks, starting with making coffee for her father, ending with the evening prayer. Only then, as she finally locks her door behind her, taking off her hijab, does Laila feel that she is still alive.

After our session I gasp for fresh air. The balcony is not enough; I also feel a terrible itch to be moving. I put my running shoes on and venture outside after signing the compulsory '*attestation de déplacement dérogatoire*' ('self-declaration form for travel'). I feel rebellious again and, as I start running, I take my mask off my

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face and shove it into my pocket. The prospect of a police patrol stopping me only heightens my resolve.

The riverbanks are closed, but I ignore the warning sign as I sprint down to the calm and vast Seine. As I follow the river, very close to the edge, I can smell its slightly rotten water, finally free of pollution. The water carries a sense of calm power, vague possibility and quiet hope. But Laila lives in a desert. I have not run properly for weeks and the air soon starts hurting my lungs. I ignore the pain and keep pushing towards the Eiffel Tower, looking ghostly and slightly out of place in the middle of the empty city.

The next time I connect for the session with Laila, it is with a palpable sense of dread in my stomach. I realise that Laila is late, which is unusual. I open Telegram, our prearranged back-up option, only to find a message from her asking to chat here instead. Of course, we can. This is not the time for worrying about strict boundaries.

“My father found out that I’d cut my hair and confiscated my computer. He thinks that it is all because of the American films.”

“How did he find out?”

“I think my mother told him. She tells him everything.”

“How are you doing?”

“It does not make such a difference to me. It is just that my door is locked on the other side.”

Using a chat room adds the option of staying hidden. Laila seems comfortable with this new set-up; I am less used to sudden restrictions. She is so accustomed to things being taken away from her that it does not seem to throw her out of balance.

“For how long will you be punished?”

“I don’t know. It depends on his mood.”

Laila

“Has it happened before?”

“Yes. When I was a teenager I spent a lot of time in here, but I actually liked it. It gave me some peace ... this is when I studied English.”

The language that she learnt while imprisoned has eventually become her space of freedom. Ironically, we use English for a therapy session, both being in breach of her country’s expectations. As we are chatting with our respective doors locked, it feels like two teenagers secretly communicating behind their parents’ backs.

“As a teen, did you have friends to talk with?”

“No. Not really. I did not have social media back then.”

Laila is sounding distant. Is she typing something to her friends simultaneously?

“Can I ask you about something?”

I am glad that she asks, whatever the question may be.

“Do you think about me sometimes?”

If she only knew how much I have, she would probably feel uncomfortable.

“I do. I worry for you. And sometimes I wonder how much I am really helping you.”

“You don’t know how much you have been helping me.”

I am regretting that this conversation is taking place by chat, but again, we have to settle for what we have. I would prefer to see her eyes, even if the screen turns eye contact into a weird imagination game. Doing with less, turning things around: these are lockdown lessons that Laila has had to master well before many of us.

It is the sixth week of lockdown and I am lying in bed at midnight, unable to calm down the frenetic flow of my thoughts.

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All the little things that my life 'before' was made of are spinning in my mind – a coffee with a friend in the nearby café, a chat with the friendly waiter at the bistro where I stop by for lunch, a stroll to an art museum, a quick drive to the seaside for a lunch of oysters, outside under the pale Normandy sun – all things made impossible by the need to keep away from others. In the end, life's pleasures are a lot about being with or at least near others.

As I am quietly mourning all things lost, my phone buzzes, announcing a Telegram call. Before picking up, I notice that the screen displays an international number with a prefix I cannot place.

"It's Laila."

Her now familiar voice is filled with a mixture of dread and excitement; I suddenly feel completely awake, with a jolt of adrenalin rushing into my blood.

"Where are you, are you ok?"

"I am in Bangkok ... at the airport. I ran away."

"Are you alone? Does your family know where you are?"

"I don't know. I am so scared ... if they find me, they will kill me."

Her voice is that of a little girl; the kind of voice my daughter would have when waking up from a horrible nightmare in the middle of the night.

"How can I help you?"

"You cannot. It is too dangerous. My online friends are helping."

She keeps silent for a moment; I am waiting for her to reassure me that everything is ok, that she will be fine somehow. My heart is pounding heavily in my chest.

"Laila ...? Are you there?"

"I have to go now! I just wanted to say goodbye and ... thank you."

Laila

Before I am able to respond, she is gone, her voice abruptly replaced by the long beep of a dead line. As I put down the phone, I suddenly understand all that I have been missing. Everything clicks into place. Laila had been preparing her escape all along. I feel betrayed, like an object that fulfilled its purpose and can now be discarded. After a few moments the hurt gives way to anxiety: what will happen to Laila now? I pick up my phone again and start scrolling the international news. No mention of a Saudi girl on the run. Not yet.

The next time the phone comes alive in my hands, it is past midnight. Laila sounds different, she talks with a new urgency that makes me sit up in bed, alert.

“Why didn’t you tell me about your plan?”

“I couldn’t. It was too dangerous.”

I can now hear some muffled male voices and a noise as if somebody is banging on a door.

“Where are you now? What is happening there?”

“I am in a hotel room, still at the airport. Look at the news.”

Laila disconnects or maybe the call drops out.

I return to the live news page still open on my phone screen: this time Laila is there. I recognise her frail silhouette in the slightly blurred images. A short video shows her walking through a dark corridor flanked by several men in uniform – Thai police most probably. They escort her somewhere. With her black T-shirt, a red backpack and an uncovered head, Laila could easily pass for a normal teenager were it not for the policemen with watchful looks surrounding her in a tight circle. She looks vulnerable but proud.

This time I call her back; she responds in a second.

“What is your plan?”

“To ask for asylum. I am not leaving this room until I see somebody from the United Nations.”

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As we talk, I can hear the banging on the door and the voices getting closer again; something smashes loudly on the floor.

“They are trying to get me to unlock the door.”

“Are you sure they cannot break in and harm you?”

“I don’t know. I barricaded it with all the furniture that I had in here.” Her voice is trembling; I can sense her terror almost physically.

“Do you want us to stay on the phone? Is this helpful?”

She keeps silent for a second; I can hear her heavy breathing.

“Yes, please.”

I grab my dressing gown and, headphones in my ears, I go to the kitchen and make some coffee. I have to keep my hands busy to keep the anxiety at bay. The futile routine of making coffee contrasts with the mayhem in a Bangkok hotel room on the other end of the line; it is surreal. But Laila’s voice confirms that this is not just a bad dream of mine.

As we sit and talk, her online friends are rushing to attract as much attention as possible to her case. After just a few hours, social media is buzzing with her story, but it is still not enough to reach a high-ranking UN official. She keeps silent for a long moment and I can hear her tapping on her phone, fast and furious. I just stay there, listening to the noises from yet one more room where she has had to lock herself in. I hope this is the last time she has to do that.

Then Laila starts talking. She tells me all about how she has planned for this since the very first day of the lockdown. Her family was scheduled to have a holiday in Turkey and when it was cancelled, she managed to keep the travel authorisation signed by her father. The household was shaken by the lockdown, and the usually steady routine was disrupted as all family members had more time on their hands. With Ramadan starting a few days before, Laila knew that this was the right time for her to attempt the

escape. The impending marriage, which now seemed inescapable, had left her with no other option than to act before the end of the quarantine.

“You have helped me to feel stronger, I have had hope again.”

That night, those who know Laila are not sleeping. After a few hours of social media frenzy, she finally receives a message from a French journalist.

“He wants me to record a video and post it on social media. To attract more attention.”

I see his point. The only images of Laila that are circulating online are blurred and vague; her scream for help has no face yet. But I also know what showing her uncovered face to the whole world would mean for her. Her family would never get over the shame; they would be unforgiving.

“Are you prepared to do this?”

She stays silent for a long moment. I listen to her accelerated breathing; she is hyperventilating.

“Laila, let’s try to breathe more slowly, breathe with me.”

For a few minutes we are inhaling and exhaling together, finding a shared rhythm.

“I am so scared,” she whispers.

“I know you are. I am scared for you too.”

“They will kill me.”

“Let’s make sure they cannot. Do you remember the first time you showed me your face?”

“Yes ...”

“You did it then, even though it was risky.”

“I did.”

A few seconds pass and I finally hear her voice, trembling

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but clear. Laila tells the world about who she is and why she has barricaded herself in this room. She asks for asylum. As soon as she is done, the video of her talking to the camera appears in my Twitter feed. Then we both observe how her video makes a storm; it is also taken by this storm and propelled further and further around the virtual world. To watch this happening is fascinating. There is no way back for Laila after this, we both know it.

I suddenly feel exhausted; outside the sun is coming out from behind the sleepy buildings. Paris is waking up, oblivious to what has been happening to Laila that night. I make myself another coffee and take it to the balcony. As I watch the sunrise, Laila is crying, at the other end of the world.

I use my phone again, this time to photograph the sky and the rooftops, bathing in the pink light of pale morning sunshine. As she receives my picture, both of us already know that she will make it.

“I have to go and unlock the door . . . There is somebody from the United Nations here. Thank you for staying with me.”

“Yes, the world is waiting for you outside.”

We hang up, and back on my computer screen I watch her march out of the room under the glare of the waiting cameras, towards a future in which she will probably still have to hide for a while. As I contemplate my city slowly returning from a deep and troubled sleep, I hope that the days of locked rooms are over for Laila.

II

Jane

London, UK

By the time Jane returns home, we have both grown tired and mildly frustrated with her therapy progress. She keeps connecting for our erratic sessions from different hotel rooms, various Starbucks of the world and even far-away airports. I never know from which place she will call me next, and this inconsistency rattles me a lot. This up-in-the air, unpredictable lifestyle has been Jane's reality for more than a decade; she is a freelance journalist living out of her suitcase, covering migration flows, populations fleeing wars and refugee camps. Sometimes, I wonder what Jane's deeper reason for being in therapy is. She mutters something about her anxiety and I am left with my questions again, free to guess and no clear answer, at least not yet.

The fast-spreading COVID pandemic finds Jane back in London where she is crashing on her friend's couch, preparing for her next assignment which was meant to take her to South Sudan. With her departure to Africa delayed, Jane makes the hasty decision to go back to Scotland to spend the lockdown at her parents' house in her native village.

After all, she needs rest and sleep, and there she has at least a decent-sized room and has no need to cook or do her own washing.

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Jane is resolved to recover from years of not sleeping enough or sleeping in all kinds of uncomfortable or unsafe surroundings. I secretly hope that this forced stop to her peregrinations will help us to catch our breath in therapy too.

When I suggest that we continue our sessions during lockdown, Jane reluctantly agrees, but I already doubt that this will happen.

Several months into her therapy, I still know nearly nothing about Jane's hometown or her childhood. Not only has she been avoiding these topics with determination and skill, but also her crisis-fuelled life has been providing us with plenty of other, more urgent matters to attend to. Jane has been busy surviving dangerous situations, under constant pressure. Fearless and always ready to accept a new assignment, Jane is a good journalist and always seems to be in high demand.

I sit in front of my screen waiting for Jane and I am slightly anxious as I know that she will not be able to hide from her past any more: in her childhood home, it will certainly find a way to catch up with her. I have never been to Scotland and have always dreamed of going, so now I am excited almost as if Jane were taking me there with her.

When she finally logs in, the image on my screen is out of focus – she is using her iPad as usual. “The connection is pretty bad here, not much better than what we are used to,” she announces, warning me already about the imperfection of her hometown. Despite her words, her face is now clear on my screen; this is the very first time I can see her so well.

Jane's back-at-home version is wearing an old, oversized white T-shirt, which makes her thin arms look girlish. She looks exhausted; her usual energy, fuelled with anxiety and work pressure, has gone or been left behind in London.

“Since I came back I have not been sleeping well, it is too quiet

