

DESCUBRIRME EN QATAR

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[Descubrirme en Qatar/ Discovering myself in Qatar. By Carla Pascual](#)

The following three chapters of the book were translated by the author using GPTChat in order to generate a sample of Descubrirme in Qatar. Email

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Chapter 1: heat hit

It was in the passenger cabin of the airplane in London where I got a glimpse of what awaited me. Upon entering, I found myself surrounded by fully veiled Arab Muslim women dressed in black. As they chatted, they took personal items out of their large luxury handbags and arranged them in their spacious business class seats. I felt at a disadvantage: why would they know more about me than I did about them? They observed my simple style: jeans and a t-shirt, my naturally curly hair, or disheveled after a 12-hour journey from the United States. They might have deduced something about my personality or mood, while all I knew was their height, some aspects of their build, and their confident and self-assured demeanor. We were headed to Qatar, in the desert Arabian Peninsula; I, to assume my new position as an associate researcher at Carnegie Mellon University, the American university where I had recently graduated with a master's degree.

Seated in my wide seat, I pulled out the ham and bacon sandwich I had bought at the airport, as the airline flight attendants were on strike and wouldn't be serving food. In Qatar, pork is not allowed, so I bid farewell to it in this sandwich. I savored it slowly, relishing the crispy, perfectly fried bacon that enveloped the sandwich with its intense and slightly burnt flavor. My delight was interrupted by questions that only then occurred to me. What if my students are fully covered? How will I know who's who? What if they impersonate one another during exams?

A few months ago, before graduating at the age of 27 on the Pittsburgh campus, my friend Silvia told me about her recent trip:

"I went to the campus Carnegie Mellon opened in Qatar last year."

"Where?" I asked. On the world map, she pointed to a small peninsula in the Persian Gulf.

"Why there?"

She explained that Qatar had the world's third-largest reserve of natural gas, the fuel of the future. Overnight, the country became rich but remained underdeveloped.

"Is it possible to live and work there if you don't speak Arabic?"

"Yes, the signs and labels are in English. Classes at the university are taught in English, and there are people from many different countries."

Upon returning home, I typed "Qatar" into the internet browser. The country seemed to me like a land of opportunities, a desert where everything was yet to be built. And not just to me, but also for the 750,000 foreigners living there, representing 80% of the population. Most of its history, Qatar had been a poor country traversed from one end to the other by Bedouins in camel caravans, carrying their red, green, and black striped tents in which they spent the night, along with a few belongings for survival. In the 20th century, it was a British colony that relied on pearl trading. Technological advances in the 1990s allowed Qatar to export its natural gas by ship, not just through pipelines, and generate substantial income. It was a pity for the British, who had granted Qatar independence about 20 years earlier and missed out on deciding about that wealth.

The rise of Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani as the emir in 1995 put Qatar on the path of development. I wanted to be there for the countless opportunities it would offer, so I started researching how to go and work at the campus. By some stroke of luck, my professor Jon, who was moving there with his family for three years, offered me a position as his assistant for the statistics class he would be teaching.

"Additionally, I would like to conduct research on e-government in Qatar, Chuck," I said in a phone call to the university dean, who made the hiring decisions.

I still didn't know if I wanted to pursue a Ph.D. and dedicate myself to academia or become a professional. My time at the university would help me explore the former path and make a decision. Either way, the research I would conduct would help me specialize in the field of e-government and set myself apart in the future with my international experience, which already included Mexico, the United States, and the Cook Islands. Chuck agreed to create the position of associate researcher and hire me. The door I knocked on opened, and now I found myself savoring the last bite of my ham and bacon sandwich on the plane heading to the country that would be my home for the next 10 months.

At the call of the flight attendant, the Muslim women around me paused their lively conversation, took their seats, put on their headphones, and listened to music. Until I fell asleep from exhaustion, I saw that they remained covered from head to toe.

I woke up to the captain's announcement that we would soon be landing in Doha, and I noticed that the Muslim women kept their bodies covered with *abayas* and their heads with *nigabs*, which only revealed their eyes. Wouldn't they be eager to uncover themselves after a 10-hour flight? It was me who was anxious to arrive in Doha and finally see what it was like, even though my first encounter with the city would be at night.

Marjorie, my American "buddy" from the campus, greeted me at the arrivals area. As we crossed the terminal building's door, the humid August heat hit me. Immediately, my body reacted by sweating, and all I wanted was to go back inside and enjoy the air conditioning. Marjorie kept moving forward.

"The car is to the left," she indicated in English, the language I would continue to speak after living in the United States for two years.

I followed her; there was no turning back. We got into the car, and the thermometer showed 40 degrees Celsius at 22:13 on August 15, 2005.

"The summer is very hot, that's why most people leave Doha, both Qataris and foreigners," she explained as we made our way to my apartment.

Soon, we reached the illuminated waterfront with no buildings on the beachside sidewalk, and the Persian Gulf appeared. I understood that it was the humidity that made the heat feel sticky and unbearable.

"It will be a relief to come to the beach to cool off," I said.

"In the city, there are no beaches for swimming, except for a couple of hotel beaches," she replied, and with her words, the live I had imagined in a city with public beaches where I could enjoy my weekends vanished.

We moved away from the coast and entered the city, circling around its roundabouts. The streetlights allowed me to see the exterior, but exhaustion prevented me from noticing what was out there.

"My husband is pursuing a Ph.D. in robotics at the Pittsburgh campus," Marjorie explained. "His thesis advisor is Chuck, the university dean, and he invited us to come here to continue his research and teach. It's our second year."

"And how is it?"

"We're happy, but we don't plan to settle here permanently. It's far from the United States."

I felt the distance that Marjorie mentioned as soon as we got off the plane, entered the terminal building, and witnessed a monotony unfolding before me. It was the traditional attire of the Arabs: men in white and women in black. Yes, we were in a very distant and unfamiliar place.

Since there was no traffic, we quickly arrived at Samarya Gardens, the residential complex where I would live. Marjorie explained that Qataris live in their own houses, while foreigners live either inside or outside residential complexes. The university had chosen the latter option to provide housing for its staff. An Indian man in a white shirt and dark blue pants lifted the entrance barrier for us. We drove along the illuminated central median, lined with grass and adorned with palm trees several meters tall. We passed the clubhouse, and Marjorie explained that when it was completed, it would have an outdoor swimming pool and a gym.

"When will it be ready?" I asked, and she remained silent.

"I don't know, one never knows. *Insha'Allah* is a word that Arabs say all the time. It's like saying 'if God wills.'"

"*Insha'Allah*, *Insha'Allah*," I repeated the word several times, from which the Spanish word "ojalá" comes.

We struggled to carry my two suitcases up to the second floor using the spiral staircase. Marjorie opened the door to the furnished apartment and showed me my bedroom with a king-size bed, its own bathroom, and a very spacious terrace with a glass door that provided a view of the Khalifa International Stadium. It was undergoing expansion work for the 2006 Asian Games. Being the host was a way for Qatar to position itself in Asia and showcase its development.

"They will probably compete to host the Olympics or the World Cup in a few years," she said.

She handed me my cellphone with the number for the chauffeur service so that I could call and have them take me to the welcome breakfast at the university the next day. She also gave me a piece of paper; it didn't have my address written on it but an explanation: the name of the residential complex, the street, next to the American School as a reference, and the number of my building. No zip code, the piece of information that, undoubtedly, I would have been asked to provide if calling a taxi in the United States. I had doubts about whether the driver would be able to find the place with those references.

"I'll also tell him that it's a recently built residential complex."

"That won't make a difference; there are new constructions everywhere!"

Marjorie was right; Doha was growing rapidly thanks to the sale of natural gas and the labor of expatriates, from construction workers to world-famous architects. She welcomed me again and said goodbye.

I opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of orange juice with uncertainty, yet driven by the craving fueled by the memory of freshly squeezed orange juice that my mom used to make for breakfast in Mexico. I poured a bit into a glass and took a sip that confirmed my suspicion: it was artificial. I hated those juices; I had had enough of them in my last two years of living in the United States. If someone asked me what scent characterizes that country, I would say the smell of artificial Minute Maid orange juice.

In my bedroom, I prepared myself for sleep and lay down on my bed. I liked my new apartment; Hendrick and I would live very comfortably in it. Hendrick was my boyfriend, a postdoctoral student at Carnegie Mellon's Pittsburgh campus. We had planned for him to come to Qatar during the December holidays and stay for my second semester to continue his basic research. As for me, the salaries were high, and working there for two semesters would allow me to pay off the educational loans I had taken to finance my studies. I would also save for my first few months once we returned together to Pittsburgh, and the most exciting part was that we would travel around the region.

"Which countries would you like us to visit?" I asked enthusiastically a few months ago when we discussed the opportunity to come.

"Israel," he replied and burst into laughter.

"You're crazy! That's not allowed; Qatar and Israel are enemies. Okay, seriously. We should go to far-off countries, I don't know, Madagascar, Uzbekistan. I want to go to Oman."

"Oman? What's there?"

"I don't know, but it has always intrigued me."

I fell asleep, remembering that we also wanted to go to Kenya and Vietnam.

At five in the morning, jet lag opened my eyes. I heard a melodic chant, somewhat nostalgic, in a male voice transmitted through a loudspeaker; it was surely the call to the first prayer of the day. Since I hadn't been able to appreciate Doha the previous night, I got out of bed without even stretching to start exploring it. The sun began to rise, and through the window, I saw the typical scene of the Arabian countries' horizon: a kind of sandy haze blurred the orange sun in the distance and painted the sky a pale yellow, resembling a reflection of the desert terrain. There was the minaret of the mosque, where the call to prayer had come from; it also appeared blurry. I opened the window, and even at that early hour in the morning, the humid heat moistened my skin suddenly and tickled my nose. My mouth became dry, leaving me with a thirst that would accompany me throughout my stay. My five senses told me that I had arrived in Qatar.

Chapter 2: A desert land

The moment had come to venture out and explore Doha under the sunlight. "Good morning, madam, my name is Ayan, and I will take you to Carnegie Mellon. Would you like a bottle of water?" the driver said to me.

From his accent, it seemed he was originally from India. I took the bottle of water from his hand and drank it eagerly. "It's great that Ayan speaks English; he can explain the places we pass by," I thought as we set off on our way.

Doha was beginning to spread over the desert, crossed by a few avenues and waiting to be built upon. It wasn't that I couldn't see well the previous night due to tiredness; there just wasn't much to see. There it was, right in front of me, the desert for the first time, its yellowish surface devoid of life and punished by the relentless sun. Nothing grew in it. Like that vast desert, I felt desolate. "I can't wait for you to arrive, Hendrick," I thought, biting my lower lip as I looked at the landscape through the window.

I was used to the city of Morelia, where I grew up in Mexico, renowned for its churches, convents, and colonial plazas made of pink quarry stone. In Doha, I occasionally saw houses, painted white to not absorb the heat. The surroundings were monotonous, and there was no interesting place or building to ask Ayan about: sand, white houses, white cars, more sand, and the landscape repeated itself... "How will I not get lost driving in the city if everything looks the same?" At least, the signs were in English, as Silvia had told me. If I had made a pre-employment visit, would I have decided to move here? Probably not, despite my eagerness to develop my career and travel to nearby destinations in Asia, Africa, and Europe with Hendrick. "I must be crazy," I thought.

From the taxi, in the distance, amidst the desert's nothingness, I caught a glimpse of an oasis: Education City, the campus that Sheikha Moza ordered to be built to attract the world's top universities and make Qatar the educational and scientific hub of the region. She is the only one of the Emir's three wives who participates in the country's direction and has become his consort. The Emir founded the Qatar Foundation in 1995, to which Education City belongs, and Sheikha Moza presides over it.

Ayan abruptly descended from the new asphalt to drive on the solid yellow surface of the desert and navigate dusty paths. "The avenue is not completed, and it's easier to enter this way," he explained.

Once inside the campus, the desert transformed into an interesting landscape as we drove among buildings designed by world-renowned architects, interspersed with green grassy areas and still undeveloped plots. I had read that the Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta designed the Texas A&M building, a university dedicated to teaching engineering related to the oil and gas industry. Dozens of Indian and Sri Lankan laborers were constructing it under the scorching sun at 45 degrees Celsius. They wore blue one-piece uniforms and covered their heads with a cloth and then a cap. Days later, I learned that several of them had died due to these inhumane working conditions. Legorreta was also designing the Carnegie Mellon building, where business and computer science subjects will be imparted. Meanwhile, the university was housed in the Weill Cornell Medical College, whose building was designed by the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, just like the building for Liberal Arts and Sciences that captivated me: its exterior fiberglass panels adorned with geometric motifs alternated with gaps to accommodate windows. Besides decorating the building, they shielded it from direct sunlight and heat. What a brilliant idea!

Ayan stopped in front of my destination, and I got out of the car to cross the plaza and reach the entrance. I had never felt sunlight so intense on my arms and scalp. Finally, I entered, and the oasis that Education City had seemed to be dissolved: the interior of the building was white and monotonous, another desolate landscape. The air conditioning was the only pleasant thing. I followed the signs that led to breakfast through the wide hallway with a high ceiling. White fabrics hung from it horizontally, reminiscent of constructions before advances in air conditioning technology: they constructed skylights, and the fabrics covered them from the inside to insulate the heat. They looked like clouds, unlike the vast sky of Doha, where there were none. I also didn't see a single window until the area where breakfast was served, a window with frosted glass that seemed to open up to a cube of interior light.

In the distance, Jon was chasing one of his children around the circular tables and the buffet to get him to sit down. Once he took his son's hand, I approached to greet him.

"It's good to see you, Jon," finally, a familiar face.

"Welcome!" he replied, trying to control his son's tugging. "I recommend you sit at the table in that corner; they seem to be your neighbors. I live in another housing complex, painted pink," and his son's tugging carried him away.

At the table were Jason, Frank, and Taryn. I noticed orange juice on the table, and I longed to smell it. I sat down, brought the glass to my mouth, and smelled its natural aroma. I felt comforted. I took a sip; it was sweet and thick in consistency due to the pulp. I nearly finished half of it.

"What brought you to Qatar?" I asked them. Both Jason and Frank were pursuing their doctorates, Jason in history and Frank in computer languages.

"As a historian, I want to experience the Muslim world firsthand, especially after the September 11 attacks," Jason elaborated. He had reddish-blond hair, and sharp jawline and nose. "This is Taryn," he said. She was blonde, and her big smile and sparkling eyes greeted me. I remembered Hendrick and wanted to know if they were spouses, but I didn't dare to ask.

"What do you do, Taryn?" Frank asked.

"I will be looking for a job as an English teacher. Where are you from?"

Frank was originally from Taiwan and migrated to the United States with his parents as a child, where he changed his name from Lin Ching-Chuan to Frank. I learned that besides being neighbors, we would also share an office. My anxiety subsided.

After breakfast, I looked for Marjorie among the attendees.

"There's not much in Doha," I shared.

"It's a city that is just beginning," she said, and I asked for help in calling Hendrick from my cellphone.

I dialed; the call went through, and the ringtone started sounding on the other side of the world, where it was five in the morning. Yes, I woke him up. Despite that, he was glad to hear from me.

"I would sum up Doha in three words: yellow, white, and blue."

"You can make many colors with those three; you almost have the primary ones."

I tried to combine them in my mind, but no new color emerged. I promised to give him more details via email when I had internet access at the university or in my apartment. "I miss you."

"I miss you too."

"But I miss you more," I said, remembering Doha's solitary desert.

Chapter 8: *Ramadan* or the month of the revelation

Anqi invited me to her office. As the director of institutional relations, she met with high-ranking government officials in a country where most managerial positions were held by men. This was not different from the West. What was different in Qatar was the gender segregation that did not allow men and women to interact unless they were family. But to do business with Qataris, one had to have a personal relationship with them.

"I have invited one of them to have dinner at my house with my husband several times, but he hasn't accepted," she told me.

Anqi and I lived at a disadvantage. Qatari men and male expatriates would chat and socialize for long hours in restaurants or in the *majlis*, a private room covered with carpets and cushions on the floor arranged against the wall to sit on. In the past, the *majlis* was a red woven tent with thin white, black, and green lines, similar to those in which the Bedouins lived in the desert. Currently, it is a private room in brick-and-mortar houses. Being separated, women knew little about the ins and outs of business and politics, let alone how to influence them. Women's access to high positions would take a long time.

"We are going to have a dinner at Chuck's house, and we hope that several prospects we want to establish relationships with will attend," she told me, and it seemed like an excellent idea to overcome the obstacle of gender segregation.

It would be for the following week, before Ramadan begins. I had read that it is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, during which the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century CE. I would like to be revealed a research topic that I could work on with the government, and how Hendrick and I could continue together. Was it too much to ask?

What I was unaware of was the daily life during that month:

"It is a month of extraordinary prayers and charity for Muslims," Anqi explained. "They fast during the day to appreciate what they have and to connect with the less fortunate. They break the fast at sunset, and the rest of the night they socialize. At dawn, fasting begins again."

In short, Muslims "stayed up all night," and it sounded like everyday life would be turned upside down.

"You don't need to abstain from eating and drinking, but avoid doing it in front of those who are fasting."

Among those who attended the dinner was Asad, Director of the Government e-Portal, where procedures and services were available to citizens. As soon as he arrived, Anqi introduced me to him. He was probably not Qatari, as he was dressed in a gray tailored suit with a tie. I felt pressured to find a research topic, so I started talking to him about the features of the portal, which I had reviewed a few days before.

"I saw that the portal allows for starting various procedures," I said to initiate the conversation. I spoke a little more. His gaze wandered, and he readjusted himself in the armchair. He seemed uncomfortable, maybe I had been too abrupt. Then I asked him if we could have a meeting in his office. He agreed, although I felt he would do it more out of obligation than interest.

Jon approached us and also addressed Asad regarding the e-government portal. As a scholar of decision sciences, Jon used the decision tree method to narrow down the subject: he threw out a first question and options for a response. Based on Assad's answer, Jon moved on to another question with its corresponding response options. Asad's gaze brightened, he even leaned forward. Jon was agile, while Asad could barely respond when Jon already had another question with a couple of options for him to decide between. Asad was astonished; he probably felt challenged. When Jon reached a final result, he said, "Carla can help you with that topic."

I nodded automatically, even though I had no idea what they were talking about. I hurried to take out my notepad from my bag and wrote the topic down. Could this be the revelation I had been waiting for? Chuck invited us to start serving the food. I glanced at the overflowing platters of tabbouleh, yogurt dip, grape leaves, and lamb rice. It was the same as always, but it looked very elegant. As I tasted the dishes, I was surprised by the freshness of the ingredients, so I took the opportunity to celebrate the revelation I had received, even though I would have to decipher it later.

Also, due to *Ramadan*, the nightclubs would be closed. It seemed like Doha would become an even more boring place than it already was, so we wanted to make the most of the last few days to have fun. Taryn was recommended to go to The Pearl nightclub, located in a hotel, like all the others. It caught our attention that it played Arabic pop music, not just English.

The Hijna calendar is based on the lunar cycle, and we would have to wait for the First Crescent Sighting Committee to see it and declare the start of Ramadan. From Jason and Taryn's apartment, we couldn't see the moon, and we debated whether to go to The Pearl or not. Jason resisted, why we had to rely on the Committee?

"Science is capable of accurately predicting lunar cycles, so why all the mystery? Whether they see it or not," he said.

"I guess they prefer to gather and wait for the moon instead of consulting science," I said with a smile.

"It'll be a waste of time," he concluded.

"Come on, Jason, if it's not open, we'll figure out what to do. I'll drive," Frank said. We headed to The Pearl, and during the journey, we couldn't help but keep our eyes on the sky to see if we spotted the moon, while Taryn talked about making progress in organizing the trip to Kenya, where we would go on safari during the last week of Ramadan.

"Are you coming to Kenya with us, Carla?" Frank asked.

"Mmmh, I wanted to take that trip with Hendrick next semester, but I don't know if he'll come," I explained the situation. I was very tempted to join them. We arrived at the entrance of The Pearl and found the door closed.

"I told you it would be a waste of time," Jason complained. From the excitement of going dancing and having fun, we transitioned to abstinence for a month. On the way back to the car, Taryn was searching for the moon.

"I don't see it," she said.

"It doesn't matter if you don't see it, Taryn," Jason said. "The Committee saw it, and that's enough."

The pleasant temperature inspired Frank to suggest going to the Al Corniche promenade to walk and enjoy the sea. As we walked in the now-refreshing breeze, I realized that Doha was a quiet city, which I appreciated. A group of three Muslim fully covered women in black walked towards us; they were of average height. I overheard them having an animated conversation as they passed by.

"How does it feel to be surrounded by covered women?" I asked Jason and Frank.

"I don't find them attractive," Frank responded.

"They don't seem like women to me," Jason said. Whoever decided that women should be covered in black had succeeded: black color blurs the curves of the body and makes it unappealing to look at them.

A few days later, Amel invited me to celebrate *Ramadan* at the Intercontinental

hotel. She was the only Qatari woman who was a member of a faculty at Education City and taught English literature at Carnegie Mellon. We were of the same generation, and since we were introduced, we had gotten along very well, as if we had known each other for a lifetime.

"The hotels set up traditional tents in the gardens and on the beach. Inside, there may be a *majlis* or tables with Western-style chairs, and we come to celebrate during the night," she explained to me on the way to the hotel in her BMW5, the largest model of the brand. Qatari nationals had benefits that allowed them to indulge in various luxuries like this. "Do you know what a *majlis* is?"

"Yes, it's a space where men gather," I replied.

"It also refers to the gathering of people around common religious, political, or social interests, so women can also gather in *majlis*. Oh, and it's also the legislative assembly, and Qatar is the first Arab Gulf country to allow women to be elected to it."

"Are there other women participating in politics?"

"In 2003, the Emir appointed Sheikha Ahmed al-Mahmoud as the Minister of Education and Higher Education. Also, that same year, a woman was elected by direct vote for the first time in any Arab Gulf country."

"Oh, really? For what position?"

"Municipal councilor. Her name is Sheikha Yousef Hasan al-Jufairi."

The participation of Qatari women in politics was truly a revelation to me. I was surprised until a new surprise awaited me as we walked through the hotel: the luxury stores displaying shoes and handbags in the shop windows. The prices were exorbitant, and yet Qatari women paid for them.

"The *abaya* only reveals our shoes and handbags, that's what sets us apart in public," her explanation made sense.

I also noticed that the *abayas* were being modified; they had started to include some designs with discreet colors. Amel's *abaya* had black lace on the cuffs and revealed her long-sleeved vertically striped shirt: hot pink with green emerald. She looked so elegant.

We sat in a tent for women. I could have ordered an alcoholic drink because it was allowed in hotels, but I didn't because Amel wouldn't drink due to being Muslim, and also, to my pleasant surprise, there was tamarind water, just like the one we drink in Mexico. It's customary during *Ramadan*, like the apricot juice that Amel ordered. However, I did accept her offer to order a *shisha* for me. The waiter brought a box with several tins of tobacco, and this time, I chose the cinnamon flavor. I took a puff that showed my improved technique. Amel even said I looked sophisticated, which made me laugh. I started to relax and forget about my nervousness regarding my meeting with Asad. I had reviewed the Qatar government's online portal repeatedly but couldn't come up with concrete ideas to propose to him. I had read about the revelation, the research idea that Jon suggested during lunch, and I still didn't understand it. I had debated whether to go to him and ask for clarification or abstain to avoid being bombarded with other unintelligible ideas. Suddenly, the tickle of cinnamon attacked my throat and disrupted my thoughts. It made me cough, and my sophistication crumbled while Amel burst into laughter. After several sips of water, I regained my voice.

"*Ramadan Mubarak!*" she said. "It means 'may you have a blessed *Ramadan*.'"

"*Ramadan Mubarak* to you too."

Weeks ago, I was astonished by the way Sheikha Moza thought, whom I heard in an interview on the TV show Doha Debates. How would Amel feel about it?

"We talked about handbags and shoes earlier, don't you mind wearing the *abaya* and not being free to dress as you wish, to show your style?" I asked.

"I dress in my own style, the question is who I show it to."

To herself, to other women, and to her husband. Men were not on the list of those to whom Arab Muslim women show their style and appearance. As Frank and Jason said, they didn't catch their attention. The conversation was becoming interesting, and I took a sip of water to prepare myself and continue asking questions.

"And how did your family allow you to move to London to study for a doctorate?" I inquired.

"I obtained permission from my father once my sister reached the age to study abroad. That way, both of us could accompany each other."

"Do you miss London?"

Amel sighed and rested her chin on one of her hands.

"Doha is so boring," she said. She not only loved London for the countless activities it offered; it seemed like she needed it. On the other hand, in Doha, there were few places to go, and she had restricted activities as a woman. For example, Qatari males spent their weekends at the swimming pools of five-star hotels, like the ones we saw at the Four Seasons hotel. But women couldn't be there in swimwear.

"We expatriates also get bored," I said. In Doha, there were only about five or six nightclubs, a cinema complex that showed movies with scenes of sex and passionate kisses removed, a couple of small parks, and the beach an hour's drive away. There were no cultural activities nor outdoors activities.

"We have our own parties and play board games. Once we have internet in the apartment, we'll probably dive in it," I continued. I invited her to come with me to my yoga class, and she clarified that she couldn't if the class was mixed. Our plans ended there because, yes, it was a mixed class.

"Did you wear the *abaya* in London?"

"You know, when I decided to start wearing it as a teenager, I felt happy because I felt like I had grown up. In London, it was a burden; it felt like a costume that wasn't my true self. Now that I'm back in Qatar, my 'modern Amel' has mixed feelings. I don't know what the *abaya* symbolizes for me."

"Sheikha Moza believes it's liberating. I mean, since it covers women, they're freed from the burden of having the body society expects. Women simply have the body they want... or can have! How many have fallen into anorexia wanting to be thin?"

"Are you saying I'm fat?"

"Of course not," I replied.

She burst into laughter.

I was enjoying the conversation, I felt happy to have a Qatari friend. On the way to my apartment, I noticed the display on her car's screen: it indicated that Saudi Arabia was 150 kilometers away, and it had enough gasoline to get there.

"Look! We can go to Saudi Arabia," I said. "Well, no, women can't drive there," Amel looked at me with a furrowed brow.

"Well, also because I don't have a *burqa* to cover myself from head to toe," she burst out laughing.

"Well, and because we didn't come with male relatives."

"You're getting high from the shisha," she said and laughed heartily.

It was the day of my appointment with Asad, and I didn't feel confident about the topics I would put forward. I hadn't dared to consult Jon to understand his proposal or find others. I feared coming out with my hands empty once again. His attitude upon receiving me was the same; he seemed obligated. I explained the research topics I had in mind, but he didn't show interest. He dealt with very technical subjects, and I had no knowledge about them. I saw his impatience and bid farewell. Once again, I had failed to capture the attention of one of the most important e-government institutions. What could I do? It was true that e-government was present throughout the government, but which institution should I turn to? I felt more lost and insecure than ever, in the midst of an ocean full of possibilities and with my compass broken.

I entered the auditorium, and the Arabic discussion between Maha and Mohamed caught my attention.

"What are they discussing?" I asked Noor.

"Which projects to propose for Innovation Week," she replied.

She argued in a normal volume, with conviction and freely. Despite his insistence, she didn't feel intimidated. She continued the discussion and even raised her voice. How would he react? I immediately looked at him: he responded calmly, without feeling confronted or needing to respond with a louder voice or aggression. He seemed accustomed to women arguing and he not always winning. This dynamic repeated on other occasions among my students. I thought that perhaps I should have presented my proposals to government officials with a louder voice. Maybe I had been too soft, too polite to please them.

Hendrick called me in the afternoon. I told him about the plans to go to Kenya, and he didn't reproach me for not waiting for him to go together.

"I got a job," he said.

Now was the moment of truth. Did I want to hear it? I pressed my lips together and closed my eyes. I took a breath to be able to speak.

"I'm glad," I said. It was true, but at the same time, I was so afraid to know where. Could I be with him in his new destination after my stay here? There was silence, and I didn't dare ask where, while he perhaps waited for me to ask.

"It's in Germany," my heart sank.

"I don't speak German, I couldn't live there."

"I know, but it's a good opportunity."

What was that response, "I know"? Wasn't he going to try to be together or at least pretend he wanted it? My anger raised the temperature of my body and my face, it took away my words. I took a breath.

"When are you leaving?"

"In a month," he replied.

Abstinence from Hendrick seemed to be the revelation about our future, and my eyes welled up.

Driving on the way back home, I gazed at the surrounding desert. I found myself working on the other side of the world, due to my studies in a foreign country. So far, globalization had smiled upon me, but it had its limitations. Sometimes choices had to be made, and Hendrick chose his professional development over our relationship.