Beating a Bully
By Ibtisam S. Barakat

I was in the eighth grade and my sister Maha was in the fifth when our family moved to a new town. It happened all of a sudden, and without much discussion. We had lost the only home we had owned shortly after the 1967 war in Palestine, and since then had to uproot many times in search for a town where Dad could work and we could rent a house. I don’t know what Maha felt about the move, because she was a shy girl and hardly talked back about anything. But I did not like leaving all of my friends behind and made sure everyone knew that.

In the new school I tried hard to get along with the new crowd. I pretended to like everything the popular girls liked—the way they stretched their words as they spoke through chewing gum; the way they coiled their long hair behind their heads, like spare tires on the backs of army jeeps; the long gossip sessions they had about someone they all knew and I didn’t; and the way their eyes sparked coyly as they spoke about movie stars. I also made myself laugh at the things they laughed at although inside I felt so lonely.

That quickly changed when I realized that there was nothing I could do to fit in with a group of girls that had spent many years together before my arrival. So I focused on studying, and in a short time, it became known that I would get the highest grades in all of my classes. Many girls then sought my friendship, and that made me feel stronger. But not when it came to a girl named Nahida.

On the first day Maha and I came to school, during recess, Nahida came to check us out. I was sharing a sandwich with Maha when Nahida snatched the food from my hand and began to eat it. When she was done, she threw the rest on the ground and left. Nahida was bigger than me and looked older. That made me scared to say anything. Maha, who often walked with her head down, now covered her face and began to cry. I pretended that nothing unusual had happened. When Nahida finally left us, a girl from my class came and whispered that Nahida was the strongest girl on the ground. She could beat up anyone she wanted, and no one would stop her. Nahida’s dad was the principal at the boy’s school, and our teachers did not want to upset him so they overlooked Nahida’s actions, the girl explained.

Maha and I decided not to tell our mother about Nahida, because Mom had told us in the beginning of the year that if we got involved in any trouble, she would take us out of school without any discussion. Our teachers also had warned on the first day of enrollment that any fights would lead to dismissal.
of all those involved. So after that day, during recess time, Maha and I would hide to eat our food, occasionally in the bathroom—in order to avoid Nahida's anticipated demand for a share. That made Nahida leave me alone, but she continued to go after my sister. She sought her out and hit her almost every day.

Girls would come and tell me that they had just seen Maha crying. I would run and ask Maha about what happened. But Maha would wipe off her tears and say that no one had hit her. She didn't want Nahida to hit me, too, if I got involved. That lasted for a long time, until I decided I could no longer tolerate my fear of Nahida or her beatings of Maha.

I could not sleep the night I made that decision. I kept on imagining myself fighting with Nahida. When I would reach the moment of making her cry, I would become too tense and would go to get a drink of water. My mother noticed I was not able to sleep and asked if I was all right. I said I was anxious about a test I was having the following day.

In the morning, and seemingly without a cause, I told my mother that if she ever took me out of school, I would use all of my grade A intelligence to make her and everyone in the family miserable. I didn't wait for an answer from her and rushed out to school. Maha followed me as if I were her mother and she a kitten of mine.

During the first two classes, I could not hear any of what my teachers said. I was only thinking of Nahida. At last, recess arrived. I chose to walk out with two girls whom I'd helped with homework often in the past. I told them I was going to search for my sister and would like to keep an eye on her from afar.

Maha stood on the playground with a group of her friends. Nahida ran up and hit her. She pushed a couple of girls aside and pulled Maha's braid to the ground. I ran to Maha. When Maha looked up and saw me, she started to sob loudly. That made me forget my fear. I found myself turning to Nahida, and I threw my entire body against hers. Nahida fell to the ground. I got up and slammed myself on her chest. Everything I had seen my brothers do during their fights with boys came into my mind.

I hit Nahida in the face, and I clenched my hands around her neck. I felt the rage I'd been holding back surge through me and strengthen my hands. I told her that I would kill her if she touched my sister again. I spit on her face. Then I asked Maha to come and hit Nahida before all was over. Despite her trembling, Maha arched down and pulled Nahida's hair.

The entire school had gathered around us by then, but no one attempted to do anything about the fight. When the teachers and the principal came, they
asked that I immediately get off Nahida's chest. I screamed at the top of my lungs that Nahida had been hitting my sister every day for a long time.

When Nahida and I stood up, her hair looked like a thorn bush; her clothes were torn up, and her face was covered with tears. I heard giggles come from behind me and knew it must have been someone Nahida had hit before. But I did not feel a victory. I knew I was going to be dismissed from school, and that my mother would soon punish me for adding yet another conflict to her problem-filled days.

“Go home and come back with your mother,” the principal said with a stern voice.

I had nothing to say and walked out of the school. Maha wanted to come with me, but I asked her to go back to her class. One girl yelled out that she would take care of my books and bring my school bag home. Another girl said she would take notes from the classes I would miss.

I didn’t go home. I sat under a tree for four hours and waited for Maha to walk by. We walked home together. Before we entered the house, Maha reached out and held my hand. She said thanks. That made both of us cry.

At home Mother could read our faces and knew that something terrible must have happened. When she asked, I told her I did not want to talk, and that I hated her with all my heart. Maha told the story.

Mother came with Maha and me to school the next morning. When all the students lined up before going into their classrooms, the principal asked that anyone who had been hit by me before that day raise their hands. No one did. She then asked those who were hit by Nahida to raise their hands. Several girls waved. The principal told everyone that from then on, if Nahida attacked them, even once, they would need to report it immediately. Nahida would then be expelled from school permanently.

Nahida and I were made to apologize to each other in front of everyone. When it was my turn to say sorry, I looked into her eyes and knew I was not sorry at all. I was happy that I was no longer scared. I looked at my mother, and to my surprise, she seemed to understand. Many girls wanted to be friends with me after that incident. That felt good. But what got printed on my mind was how Maha no longer walked with her head down. During recess she and I would pass each other by, and she would smile. The first time she did that, I could see the tender look in her eyes tell me she finally felt secure. That day, I felt strongest of all.