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Zoller: Breathe Easy



Breathe Easy

Claire Zoller

The smell of oven-baked lamb overwhelms my senses. My family walks into our favorite blue townhouse in Evanston, Illinois, and is greeted with the usual hugs and joyful screams. Natalie, my “fake sister,” drags me into the dining room. The table is covered in a beautiful gold tablecloth with a giant plate of rice and lamb. My favorite meal. Everyone surrounds the table after cleaning their hands and gets in position. Left hand behind the back and right hand prepared to dig into the massive plate of delicious food. Mariana, my “prosthetic mom,” drizzles a mystery sauce all over the rice and lamb and tells us to start eating. Everyone starts to dig their hands into the pile of food and roll up a perfect bite of lamb, rice, and sauce. The food is still scorching hot, and it burns my hand, but I can’t wait anymore. I roll up my perfect bite into a ball and plop it into my mouth. Wow. The lamb is so fresh and falls off the bone, the rice is warm and soft, and the sauce is salty, helping with sticking the rice and lamb together. Silence rolls into the room as everyone is too focused eating our favorite special occasion meal.

My chosen family’s home, the Halasehs, has always been a go-to place for Sunday dinner and holiday events. Since my own extended family lives in Virginia, and Mariana’s extended family lives in Jordan, we made our own family for dinners and holidays. The Halasehs consist of Mariana, her ex-husband (that we don’t talk to anymore), Natalie (who is twenty-two years old) and Adam (who is twenty years old).

Mariana Al Far was born and raised in Jordan. Tall, with dark olive skin, and dark brown eyes, she is a beautiful woman. At fifty years old, she is always able to turn heads because of her confidence and beauty. Al Far is always

Layout by Ru Yin Li. Photograph by Heba Alwalsli:
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/skyline-of-amman-city-jordan-11776090/>

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dressed in elegant and beautiful dresses, and she'll respond with "Oh, I just threw this on," with her perfect makeup and blown out hair. Not only is she beautiful on the outside, but she is also extremely kind and would do anything for someone she loves.

Growing up in an affluent family, Mariana Al Far was given many opportunities at a young age. With over 100 cousins, she has always had connections in Jordan,

tal, and the largest city in Jordan. Growing up a follower of the Christian faith (which makes up about 6% of the country), she was a part of the minority in a 92% Sunni Muslim country. Before Mariana had her two kids, and moved to the states, she was a highly regarded journalist in Jordan. She explained that her career inadvertently fell into her lap, and it all began with a simple tutoring gig. This was not any kind of tutor-



Mariana Al Far pictured with King Hussein of Jordan.

and it ended up working to her advantage. Because of her family's successes, she was given the opportunity to go to a prestigious school, which eventually helped her in her career. In school, she was taught multiple languages; she is fluent in English, Arabic, and French, and she also knows some Italian and Spanish.

Mariana grew up in Amman, the capi-

ing; she tutored diplomats of different countries in both Arabic and French. She was also able to create connections with diplomats through her fluency in three languages and her family.

One day, one of her students came up to her and asked if she would like to start working for BBC Jordan. Taken aback by the request, she knew she had to take advan-

Photograph courtesy of author.

tage of this opportunity. Mariana started off deep in the behind-the-scenes work of the station. She explained that back then there were wires that would send in stories, and she would sit by these wires, cutting them up and organizing them. *“Basically, I was Google, before Google,” she said laughing*

Eventually, Mariana worked up to become a “fixer.” She explained that a fixer—in journalism—did all the behind-the-scenes work: she would organize hotel rooms, help produce, and do many of the tasks behind the scenes. She became one of the best ones in Jordan. She explained that the average “fixer” would charge \$100, but she was able to charge \$500. When people from all over the world would fly in they would ask for her because she had connections to the King, the Minister of Government Communications, and could leverage these connections into the best stories. Since people loved her for these connections, she was able to create a strong name for herself as one of the best “fixers” in the country.

One day, one of the top corporate workers in BBC London came to BBC Jordan, and they asked Mariana to be the face of BBC Middle East. Word got out and the Minister of Jordan heard about it. He went to Mariana and said, “You can’t do that. We will pay you anything and allow you to be the face of Jordan if you stay.”

Faced with a decision, Mariana decided to stay in Jordan, but only with certain conditions. She told the Minister that she would only work weekdays at 8 p.m.—prime time to watch the news in Jordan—and that she could also continue her work behind the scenes as a “fixer.” Since she was so heavily desired in the industry, she was able to ne-

gotiate payment by appearances instead of getting a salary. Her “fixer” and newscaster careers were taking off; she was finally able to do what she wanted. Mariana would report and work behind the scenes (since that is what she was most passionate about).

Mariana’s career working as a newscaster coincided with a period of intense warfare in the Middle East; everything said on air was extremely political. As someone who was passionate about journalism, she took her job seriously. When she was doing the final edit of the script, if something seemed wrong or politically biased, she would talk to people until she could get the true crux of the story. Since politicians had so much pull, she would really need to push to get the truth heard.

Mariana explains, “I would fight everyone to make sure it was accurate and not false news. I had to fight to tell the truth. The people before me were readers and not journalists.”

Mariana was a journalist from 1989 to 2002 in the Middle East, so she was put in conflict heavy positions many times. On multiple occasions, she was put in extreme danger that could have ended her life. One specific moment was when she wanted to speak to the leader of the terrorist organization known as Hezbollah. The Hezbollah terrorist group was created by a group of Shia Muslims in the 1982 Lebanon War, in which Israel invaded Lebanon. The terrorist group was involved in multiple attacks on the United States as well; for example, they executed the infamous 1983 suicide bombing attack against the U.S. embassy in Beirut, Lebanon.

Mariana was determined to get the story of the Israeli-Lebanese conflict and show

the public what was really going on. Eventually, Mariana found a connection to Hezbollah. She deeply trusted the person who set her up with Hezbollah, and she felt that he would never put her in danger. She felt safe because another journalist wanted to come along to capture any photos, as well as her security guard.

Mariana, her colleague, and the security guard waited at the given location for their ride to come and get them. A dodgy white Volkswagen pulled up to the location, and three large men came out of the car.

“I’m not going,” said the security guard.

“Yeah, this is a big no for me,” the other journalist quickly responded.

Mariana stood there and weighed her options. She trusted the man that set her up

the interview. She asked him all the pressing questions, but she believed that she could do better and gain access to the leader of the terrorist group.

After interviewing multiple figures, the group wanted to take her to where the action was.

Once again, she was blindfolded and taken to another mysterious location. The location was a cave, where she sat with four fighters who had giant M16 guns, and the three men who had escorted her everywhere. *BAAANG*. She heard bomb after bomb in the background. Mariana attempted to stay strong and conduct the interviews. *BOOOOM*.

More bombs continued to blow. She knew she had to trust these three strange men and have faith that she was going to stay safe as long as she was there.

She looks back with pride, but her pride is complicated by what she feels was a loss of control. She had lost her morals trying to get a story, and she looks back knowing she made the right decision to quit to take care of herself and her kids.

with the connection to the terrorist group, but this would be a huge risk. Both her security guard and coworker backed out, which meant that she would have to go alone.

“Well, if you don’t want to go, I’m still going to go. Fuck it.” Mariana told her coworkers. She knew that this was dangerous, but what did she have to lose? The three men blindfolded her and took her in the white van. She didn’t know what she was getting into, but she was willing to take a chance for the story.

Mariana arrived in the mystery location—an empty room with two chairs and a table. One of the lieutenants came in for

The three men wanted to show Mariana what the hospitals were like, to show the injuries and pain these civilians were facing. Next thing she knows, Mariana is back in the truck and getting taken to the hospital to see what the effects of the war were. At the hospital, adults and children were getting rushed to the emergency room.

These people were covered in blood, and Mariana knew they needed help right away. She bolted over to one of the people who was covered in blood and began to ask questions to someone who was in critical condition.

Mariana recalls, “There was blood and shit everywhere. The doctor was screaming that I was the worst person in the world.”

A doctor sprinted into the hospital room and screamed, “GET OUT!”

“I was not the good person I am now. I wanted to get the story,” she tells me, thinking back to who she was then.

Mariana rushed out of the room and into the lobby of the hospital to find the three men that had brought her there. She told the men that she must see the leader of Hezbollah to get the full story. Mariana did not get to speak to him on that trip, but she had the chance to a couple weeks after this ordeal.

When she returned home, everyone was relieved that she had made it back. People thought she would never return from a trip that risky. Her friends and family were ecstatic to see her.

While she didn’t get to speak to the leader of the Hezbollah on that trip, she got plenty of other material to work with.

Mariana continued her journalism career, even after meeting her then husband and moving to Australia with him for his work. There she had her first child: Natalie. They stayed there for about three years and then moved to the United States, again for work related reasons, and had their second child, Adam.

In 2002, Mariana decided to end her journalism career. She had two kids by then and didn’t want to take any more risks. She wanted to be a mother first and have them grow up with a family. Although the kids didn’t have the blood relatives that Mariana had grown up with, they got their chosen family.

“My kids saved me,” Mariana said while thinking back on her journalism career.

Before her children, she was willing to risk it all and was putting herself in mentally draining situations. While working in journalism, she had become ruthless, and she was willing to do anything to get the story. She started to lose herself, and it was time that she made a change. She dealt with post-traumatic stress disorder from her journalism career, but now that her kids were here, she wanted to be a mother and fully focus on taking care of them.

Mariana now lives in Evanston, Illinois, in a blue townhouse. Both of her kids are off to college, and she spends her time running the Rotary Club in Wilmette doing volunteer work. She is happy now and surrounded by friends. She looks back with pride, but her pride is complicated by what she feels was a loss of control. She had lost her morals trying to get a story, and she looks back knowing she made the right decision to quit to take care of herself and her kids.

Our family dinner ritual always ended in tea and an assortment of desserts. We all sit in Mariana’s green painted living room, decorated with gold shades and beautiful art pieces from Jordan. We all crowd around the small coffee table and pour ourselves coffee and tea. I pour myself a cup of peppermint tea in a gold and white teacup. Mariana runs in and out of the kitchen with piles of assorted chocolates, cookies, and Jordanian treats. Squished up against my “fake sister,” Natalie, I take a sip of my tea. It’s so hot that I feel it traveling from my throat to my stomach. It burns, but in a comforting way. Everyone is screaming over each other, making inappropriate jokes for the dinner table—but that’s just our humor. One could say we have the humor of a twelve-year-old boy. Everyone is crying from laughter at something stupid my dad says, and everything is alright. We are with our family and that’s what matters. A weird, but beautiful mixture of American and Arabic culture.