

PROLOGUE

Rahnia's Reproductive Journey

On February 4, 2007, I met Rahnia in an in vitro fertilization (IVF) clinic called Conceive, located strategically on the border between the emirates of Dubai and Sharjah, two of the seven principalities that make up the United Arab Emirates (also known as “the UAE” or “the Emirates,” terms that will be used interchangeably in this book).¹ Rahnia was a stunning half-Ethiopian, half-Eritrean Muslim woman who had fled the civil war in her divided countries,² becoming a teenage refugee in London. There she eventually met Ahmed, a fellow Muslim refugee from Sudan. “It was very hard to hunt down a Muslim man in the UK [United Kingdom],” Rahnia explained. “And when I met him, it was very hard to conceive, very hard. But I’m very optimistic. I see bright light at the end of the tunnel.”

Rahnia agreed to share with me her story of marital infertility and duress and the tumultuous journey that had landed her in a clinic far away from home. With her three-year-old IVF daughter, Wisal, by her side, Rahnia told me this story, hoping that it would somehow “help others” in their own quests for conception. Her story is transcribed verbatim, with minor editing for clarity and definition of some key terms. (Medical terms used by Rahnia are defined in the medical glossary at the end of this book.) I have included my questions to Rahnia, although most of her story was delivered to me in English and with no prompting. I have italicized parts of Rahnia’s narrative that she delivered with particular emphasis. With Rahnia’s knowledge, I have changed her name (and those

of her family members) to protect her identity, given the sensitivity and confidentiality of several parts of her story. However, the story itself has not been altered and is presented here in its full form, in Rahnia's own words.

In Her Own Words

Rahnia: “Well, let me tell you my story. We tried for five years, but there was no natural conception. We tried going to different doctors, using different medications. They did hormonal treatments, but they said the only option was IVF. That was in the UK, and actually, *not one doctor diagnosed the problem in the UK!* No diagnostic tests were done in the UK. This is because there is no system of private medicine in the UK. Most people use the National Health Service [NHS]. I work and I pay taxes, and so I'm entitled to use the NHS. But they did no diagnostic tests, and I was given some kind of medicine, tablets, to stimulate my eggs. I tried for years without any doctor telling me what was wrong. So I traveled to Egypt.”

Marcia: “Oh, I've lived in Egypt! Why did you go to Egypt?”

Rahnia: “Well, Egypt was a coincidence, because my brother was there, and I went to visit. And at the same time, I was depressed, and so I thought I would see an obstetrician. I found a local doctor, and I explained my situation, and she said: *'You've taken all this medication without any diagnostic test?!'* So a [diagnostic] laparoscopy was done there, in Cairo, at Misr El Gadida Hospital. I couldn't find one IVF center there, and actually, I wasn't sure at that time if I was interested, because I was not sure if IVF was my best option. But, as I was growing older, maybe one option was pregnancy through IVF.”

Marcia: “What did they tell you in Egypt?”

Rahnia: “This is very confidential, but I had chlamydia [a sexually transmitted infection]. It was untreated and perhaps I had it since I was a teenager. This is the reason why I am infertile. My [fallopian] tubes—there are lots of adhesions [that is, scar tissues], and they removed the adhesions. They did a good job, and we were both, my husband and I, treated for chlamydia. This chlamydia I did not know about in the UK. It was discovered in Egypt. To boost my fertility, those Egyptian doctors also gave me Clomid [a fertility drug] again.

“Because I live in the UK, and I had taken all of these medications there, I wanted a shortcut. So I went to seek IVF in the UK in 2002. But,

actually, I had to pay for it. I would have tried to use the NHS, because you have one entitlement for [free] IVF if you've been infertile for several years. But you have to wait for two years [on the NHS waiting list]. So I had to make a shortcut. I said, 'Let's make the impossible possible.' I got money from family and friends to go to a private clinic. The cheapest IVF, including the cost of medications, was still about £3,000 [approximately \$5,000]."

Marcia: "That's a lot of money!"

Rahnia: "When you're desperate, you do the impossible. But I was unlucky again. I had an ectopic pregnancy [a tubal pregnancy]. It was on the right-hand side. But it was not discovered by the clinic that I was pregnant."

Marcia (shocked): "Really?"

Rahnia: "The level of service there in the UK is very bad. I went for a scan [an ultrasound]. They said, 'Okay, you're pregnant but spotting. Let's give it a few days.' That same night, I fainted and was rushed to the emergency. They had missed the ectopic, and I would have lost my very life. I went back to the NHS for the emergency ectopic, and they said they didn't know how that private IVF center could have failed to treat me. I had to have my tube removed, my right tube, and the left one was damaged. I lost *so* much blood; I was given four units of blood, because it was an emergency situation. Though I *must* say that those doctors at the NHS, they saved my life."

Marcia: "What happened then?"

Rahnia: "Well, again, I was desperate. That was 2002—no, 2003. At that time, because I had the ectopic pregnancy, automatically I was put onto the [NHS] waiting list [for IVF], but they said it will be two years. Again, I was desperate. I had been trying for five to six years, and I didn't want to wait two more years. Again, I went to another [private IVF] center, which brought me luck. I had her [pointing to her three-year-old daughter, sitting by her side] through a regular IVF cycle. It was similar to the first one, the cheapest I could find. And this time, I had some frozen embryos. I had *several* frozen [IVF] cycles, a countless number.³ There in the UK, they never count frozen embryo transfers. They only count fresh cycles. They don't acknowledge frozen cycles for some reason, maybe because they don't succeed as much."

Marcia: "Did you ever get pregnant with a frozen cycle?"

Rahnia: "I actually got a clinical pregnancy with a frozen cycle.⁴ I had *so* many frozen cycles. Each time I would go for a fresh cycle, I would get

eight good embryos, *very good, very good*. But they only allow you to use two embryos in the UK. They will only put two back [in the uterus]. If I have six frozen, and if they can only transfer two at a time, then I can try thrice. That cost, of about £500 to £600 [\$850–\$950], is nothing compared to a fresh cycle. I had two fresh cycles at two different clinics, and I got her [Wisal, the daughter] on the second one. After her—I did three fresh after her. And *a lot* of frozen cycles. It could be seven to eight fresh and frozen cycles overall. But I’ve never been successful after that one cycle. I’m still trying. I’m trying.”

Marcia: “Do you feel like you need a second child?”

Rahnia: “To be honest, I’m in a better situation with my daughter. God blessed me with her. But I have fear. In case an accident or something killed her, as a mother, I have all kinds of worries. It’s *terrible*. I want at least two children, whatever God gives. The joy you get from children can’t be compared.”

Marcia: “So you keep on trying IVF?”

Rahnia: “Yes, but, as I said, in the last cycle, it was a fresh cycle, and it cost a fortune. They did a blastocyst transfer, and it was *very* demanding. It had a lot of consequences. But I had *good eggs*—at least ten good eggs. I was blessed with very, very good eggs, and so they got actually eight or nine embryos, all very good. Obviously, they have to be kept differently in the blastocyst phase. We reached four very good embryos by day five. But according to UK law, I was only able to put back two [in the uterus]. I lost two, because they couldn’t freeze them, and they were discarded. I *begged* the doctor to put at least three [embryos back into the uterus], but he said that the clinic would [have to] ‘close its doors’ if he did that. I understand that he has to follow the rules, but they are extremely strict.”

Marcia: “It’s not like that in the US, where I come from. We don’t have these kinds of restrictions.”

Rahnia: “I *love* the US. I actually searched to go to the US, one clinic in Virginia, but it’s very expensive. They have a ‘package’ amount, but it’s many thousands of dollars. And that clinic said they will make you pregnant or give you your money back—a refund.”

Marcia: “Could you have gone?”

Rahnia: “No, not really. I am working in a job there in the UK. I work in recruitment. We recruit for casual workers in a company. And even though I like my job, my personal circumstances create stress. All the stress. It was [would have been] *really* hard for me to leave, to go to the

US. Finally, I decided to take an unpaid leave from work, an unpaid leave. They are very nice to enable me to leave.”

Marcia: “So you decided to take a leave from work to travel?”

Rahnia: “Yes, because I had to journey in my life. First, to get pregnant. Then to go back from where I came, to see my family. I left sixteen years ago because of the war. I was able to come out due to the consequences of the civil war, but some are still trapped there. I thought part of the reason IVF failed so many times is my longing—my feeling of needing to go back. I said: ‘Let me rest my soul before I do another IVF.’ Plus, my extended family hasn’t seen my daughter. So I went back. I tell you, *I’m on a journey!* That’s why I came to Dubai. I intend to do IVF!

“My husband wasn’t in favor of this. My husband said, ‘Put the treatment off. It will drive you mad!’ But I arranged to go to India, Mumbai. I found a clinic. I searched the Internet, and I found clinics in India, the US, Canada, and Italy. Before going to Africa, I had already gone to Italy. But unfortunately, the guy [doctor] I met, he was only able to do a [diagnostic] laparoscopy. He couldn’t help me with IVF. It was not his field, he told me. He found water in my remaining tube that needs to be removed before I should consider IVF. Plus, Italy also restricts the number of embryos, just like the UK. If you produce lots of eggs, they can only put two to three embryos back, and the rest are destroyed. *That’s blocking my way! I had to run away from there!*

“Back in the UK, I met a friend of a friend, who was pregnant with twins. I met her and, even though people don’t openly talk about IVF—people are not honest about their fertility treatment—she obviously had heard rumors that I’ve been trying for years. She got pregnant through IVF in this center [Conceive], but she was not willing to give me the number. So I was hunting down the number on the Internet. I found a center in El Rashid Hospital in Dubai, and I e-mailed a few other places, and they put me off: ‘You’re better off in the UK. Why would you come here? You are in a better place [in the United Kingdom].’ But the level of service [in the United Kingdom] might not be good. And they have restrictions, rules you have to obey.

“I went to the Internet, thinking I’ll just find Conceive there. I found Conceive, but only the address. Their website was ‘under construction.’”

Marcia: “Were you surprised?”

Rahnia: “It was a shock! It’s such a developed country [the UAE], and yet again the website was missing. It’s so surprising. When I came here and I see a nice clinic like this, and they don’t even have a website! But

at least I got the number [of Conceive], before I traveled back to Ethiopia, Sudan, and Eritrea with my husband. At least I could put to rest those feelings. I saw my family, and I saw for the first time how difficult their situation is. But what can I do? I can't help the whole country. So I e-mailed Dr. Pankaj [Conceive's clinical director] from Ethiopia. But there was no response. I called, and there was no response. I called the emergency number, and I'm not even—I'm not a patient, but I called the emergency number. I was told that Dr. Pankaj was in India until the new year.

"I *had* to catch him, so I came from Ethiopia straight to this clinic on New Year's Day. I *insisted* to the receptionist that I needed to see him. She said that this was his first day back and he would be very busy. But I said I *must* see him. I saw him and explained the situation. He was even astonished and said, 'Why are you here?' But no one understands what I'm going through, the rules, the restrictions in the UK. Even the fluid in my tube cannot be removed there."

Marcia: "Why not?"

Rahnia: "Because in my situation, I have my [IVF] daughter, and so I'm on the waiting list. I had my previous place on the list withdrawn because I now have a child. I want more children with my husband. But as long as you have a child from the same man, you're done. *Khalas* [finished]! I have a child, but, okay, I want one more. But in the UK, they gave me a scenario: If I have another relationship, then I could have another IVF child to 'bond' [with a new partner]. *Am I forced to divorce my husband? Leave him?* I don't blame them [the NHS]. They are doing what is fair. But minimal things, like the fluid removal—I pay taxes. I work. I should be entitled to that."

Marcia: "So you came here to Conceive."

Rahnia: "So, in early January, Dr. Pankaj actually discovered fluid in the tube on the left—what do you call it?"

Marcia: "Hydrosalpinx?"

Rahnia: "Yes, hydrosalpinx. Can you write it down? [I wrote it down for her on her interview consent form.] So he said that we should remove that and then proceed with IVF. My husband was here with me, because we'd come from Ethiopia. But they were fully booked here, and so they couldn't do it right away. He said I should go back home and then he would book the [operating] theater for February. So it never occurred to me that he meant for me to have the laparoscopy to remove the fluid [in the United Kingdom] way back in January.

“Today is February 4. I came all the way back from London, and I haven’t had the fluid removed. But he *won’t* turn me down. When he scanned me, the water is not there. It’s a good sign *or* a bad sign, because the water could come back. He told me, ‘It’s a gamble.’”

Marcia: “So are you willing to try IVF here, even if it’s a gamble?”

Rahnia: “Yes, sadly. Well, I’m trying to be optimistic. Now, I’m just starting Gonal F [a hormonal medication]. I just want to try a cycle [of IVF]. Obviously, here, there are not restrictions on how many embryos you can put back.”

Marcia: “Here, they normally put back three, and they do freeze [excess embryos].”

Rahnia: “India was the best, actually. In India, they do put in four embryos. If there is a multiple pregnancy [three or more fetuses], they do ‘reduce’ [through a form of selective abortion]. So I’m ‘holding onto’ India. But I went back to London in early January, and then I just came back here on January 30.”

Marcia: “Do you have a place to stay?”

Rahnia: “No, I’m actually staying in a hotel, using my credit card, and *it is expensive!* But I’ve been traveling like this, just because of the fear I have. I know my situation is better than a childless couple. But I day-dream. I have a fear of something happening to her [Wisal].”

Marcia: “Does your husband want more children?”

Rahnia: “Oh, yes. My husband—I *do* think he wants more children. Of course, he wanted more than the one daughter we have. And society itself. I consider myself to be ‘invisibly disabled.’ *It is a disability, and it cannot be discussed openly.* You’re isolated in your own world. I *hate* where I come from [East Africa]. That’s not a nice thing to say, but I *hate* the people I associate with. They just get pregnant easily, quickly, and they wouldn’t see a problem with it. I’ll just give you an example. My friend, we started at the same time. I had my daughter, and she had her son. And now she’s on her fourth. For her, just like a ‘click,’ and she’s pregnant.

“The society bullies you.”

Marcia: “Verbally?”

Rahnia: “No, not verbally. But people say: ‘What are you trying to *be*? Are you trying to be westernized? A westernized woman? *You are an African!*’ Usually, the people I meet, would they understand that I’ve got a fertility problem? *No, they won’t!* You can’t really openly have a conversation with friends.”

Marcia: “And your family?”

Rahnia: “My in-laws, they put pressure on him, obviously, and I have to deal with him. Our people just put you down. It’s really too much for a human being to handle. I don’t blame anyone. I was just born unlucky in terms of being infertile, and I know, deep down, I *will* have another child. I *do* believe. I *strongly believe that I will have another child.*”

Marcia: “But it sounds like you’re under a lot of pressure right now.”

Rahnia: “I think, yes, the whole world surrounding me is looking at me. ‘What’s she doing? Is this [pregnancy] going to happen to her?’ I just pray that God will bless me, then everyone will be quiet. *They will find a different target! Someone else to focus on!* But it’s not easy, being *far* away from your country. We say we are ‘settled’ [in the United Kingdom]. We try to integrate, become educated, work. But your own society criticizes you for who you are. And to be honest, they are telling him: ‘*Leave this woman. She’s infertile! Find another one!*’ All of them—the Sudanese, Ethiopians, Eritreans. All the ethnic minorities from Africa have got this attitude. Even from the Middle East as well!”

Marcia: “But aren’t you protected a little bit by being in the UK?”

Rahnia: “To a certain extent. But I’ve been married for ten years, and if I were back in Sudan, there would be no stopping him. *He would definitely have a few wives and endless children!* The whole family, everyone would get a name[sake]! So, yes, it’s protective in a way to be in the UK. To be honest, my confidence is *not* down because of this problem. Sometimes I stand up to him. ‘I am *not* the one with the problem!’ Sometimes in arguments—he said, ‘If I don’t love you, I wouldn’t go through all this.’ I told him, ‘If you think you are doing me a favor, it’s not a favor! I have ovaries. I have eggs. Only my tubes are the problem. I can get a sperm donor for £250 [\$400]. But we are married. We are an entity. It’s a ‘package’ when you’re married. *If you had had a fertility problem, I would have done the same for you!*”

“So, in a way, you see, I can lift my head when I’m in the UK. In the UK, they *don’t* care if you have a child. A child is like a commodity; it’s like a mortgage. They start their families at the age of thirty-five, and I totally agree with that attitude. But, because [of] where I come from, it’s a culture clash. I’m in the middle of this, and I pay two prices. All this criticism.”

Marcia: “What about your family? Do they try to protect you?”

Rahnia: “My family? Well, they’re all right. But it’s better talking to a stranger than to my family. They listen. They do have sympathy. But

they are not up to my expectations in terms of support. I still get the feeling that they're holding back. And, obviously, none of them do have any problem. *No one is infertile in my family*, or not that I know of, really. I've lived outside for such a long time, that my home is in the UK. I do feel it's my home, but society is trying to make you feel . . . UK society tries to make you feel like 'You don't belong here.'

Marcia: "So you're caught between two worlds."

Rahnia: "It is like that. There are two problems. I can't really talk about the political situation in my own society, and integrating into the UK is difficult. I must say, however, that I love UK people, the British. I really admire them. I like them. *I just feel I owe them something, because they rescued me when I was a refugee.* They rescued me from war and rape and all these kinds of things in Eritrea, in Africa. They saved me, and they educated me to work. I owe them my whole life. I'm so grateful, and also my husband came as a refugee from Sudan."

Marcia: "And as a refugee, you're entitled to a number of benefits, right?"

Rahnia: "As I said, regardless of where you come from, as long as you pay the national tax, you're entitled to get medical care. There is no segregation in medicine, which is good. But here [in the UAE], it's citizens of the country only [who receive subsidized care]."

Marcia: "Did you know that before you came here?"

Rahnia: "Well, I got onto the Internet, and oh my God! *The minute you type in the word 'infertility,' you just open 'India'!* There are different ways to search on Google, and still you get India, which is really interesting, very interesting. Dubai is still backward. It's not on the Internet. But I'm here now, and my husband, he's back in the UK. He will be coming here, maybe February 11, that day. Dr. Pankaj says, 'We'll tell you the specific day when your husband should be here.'

"This time, he [her husband] was very pleased when he saw Dr. Pankaj. The first thing Dr. Pankaj identified was water in my tube, and he actually said that this is the reason why I've had *so many failed IVFs!* It's due to the water, which 'poisons the embryo.' This satisfied my husband. Deep down, he thought that something is wrong with my tube or my ovaries, or whatever. Dr. Pankaj said I've got water in my tube, and he said he just needs to remove or clip my tube prior to the IVF. *My husband was overjoyed, because this is the treatment!* He said it's water in the tube, and it makes sense. He only had to make one [ultrasound] scan, and it gave all the context for my failed IVFs. We expected in the

UK to find out what is wrong, but no one ever mentioned this in the UK. It cost me a fortune to track down, to find just a simple reason. So it all came down to a problem I have, like a simple problem. He said, ‘You’ve got a problem, and first you have to solve the problem.’”

Marcia: “You said you’ve spent a fortune. Is it costing you a lot to be here?”

Rahnia: “Right now, the two of us are in Dubai in a hotel, and I’m using credit cards. I’m hoping it’s only two weeks; I don’t want to stay more than two weeks, because it costs me a fortune. Every day here is 250 dirhams [\$70], minimum. It’s more expensive than rent, than a mortgage in the UK.”

Marcia: “Back in the UK, would you call yourself middle class?”

Rahnia: “*No! We’re lower class in the UK.* So this is really difficult for us. It’s extremely difficult, to have all these expenses, having to use credit cards and go into debt. I would say so far, just to estimate all the previous treatments ’til now, I’ve spent £17,000 [\$27,000]. *That is a lot of money, to put myself into debt!* But for this, it’s important. So what can you do? I have to try. I just pray and ask my God to make this treatment be the last one. Please bless me with a child—or twins or triplets! I don’t mind.”

Marcia: “Does your husband want a son?”

Rahnia: “Yes, there is some pressure, but they never spell it out. But you can see it. But to me, really, it’s not about a girl or a boy. It’s just having a healthy child and to have a sibling for my daughter. That is my main concern. *It would matter to my husband to have a son.* But if our daughter has a sibling, it will calm him down.

“I just feel that my marriage is on the edge of the hill. *If there is one tip, it will just*—it is on the edge right now. We are having a hard time. It’s a marriage problem. He is getting pressure. I can understand. But all this medicine I’m taking. I’m injecting myself. Then the husband, the discrimination, the expense, and the waiting. I just wish I had married a Western man. It wouldn’t be a problem then.”

Marcia: “Did you ever consider that?”

Rahnia: “I wouldn’t mind being with a Western man. If it would have clicked, I wouldn’t mind. But it’s just a cultural issue. I wish I would have ignored my culture. When I married, I needed to believe I was being sensible. But should all of your culture and society interfere with your marriage? In Western society, no, they can’t, or at least less so.

It's just the comfort between you and him. So infertility is less likely to be a problem.

"But his mother, she's Egyptian."

Marcia: "Oh, really?"

Rahnia: "Yes, she migrated to Sudan years ago. They are all Turkish-Egyptians, living in Khartoum. My husband left as a refugee to [go to] the UK. Some of his family are in the UK, but mostly in Sudan. *But the telephone is enough to create misery in your marriage!* They're always calling. I hate their attitude. The minute they call, [they ask,] 'Is there anything on the way?' I had to ignore them. But the first year of marriage, I would talk to them. The last four years, until I had her [Wisal], *I ignored any phone calls*, so that I wouldn't have to speak to them. It hurt. *It hurt endlessly.*"

Marcia: "Can I ask if you would ever have considered egg donation as a way to help with your expenses, even though you're Muslim?"⁵

Rahnia: "I'm not opposed to donation. I actually contacted, I already contacted a few centers in the UK to help me with the cost if I would donate my eggs. I was turned down, not because of my eggs, but because of the number of failed IVFs. I would have done this without notifying my husband, *because it is just my egg, not his sperm!* It would be creating happiness, just helping another couple. *This would satisfy me.* Other women can't even ovulate; they have no eggs. Why not help them and, at the same time, help myself with the cost? Yet again, I was restricted because of the failed IVFs."

Marcia: "Did you know that egg donation is not allowed in Islam?"⁶

Rahnia: "Yes, I knew the religion was against it. *They might just slaughter me if they knew!* But I live in the UK. It's a civilized country. So they have a different attitude toward religion and life. *I'm not harming another!* I'm helping another, not hurting anyone. If adoption is allowed, right, why not donate eggs?"

Marcia: "But adoption isn't allowed in Islam."

Rahnia: "*It is legal, I think. I can adopt.* You actually get a reward for adopting a child.⁷ So donating eggs is like adopting a child."

Marcia: "Would you consider adopting a second child?"

Rahnia: "I *did* consider this. But my husband—I wouldn't discuss this kind of thing with my husband. But if I did, I think I would get my way. If it was a choice between donation or adoption, he definitely *would* adopt, but donation, no. But our financial situation wouldn't allow us

to raise an adopted child. To donate my eggs, *he would not allow, but I would!* It will help me, and it's not about finances only. I would still be using my credit card. But it's about making another infertile couple complete. It's a gift. I was incomplete before I had my daughter, and now I feel I can help. I have to be there for others. I definitely think my eggs would help others. But it's just the restrictions—all of the laws in the UK—which are really irritating.”

Marcia: “So they make no exceptions to the law in the UK?”

Rahnia: “In the UK, *they cannot allow the laws to be broken!* The clinics would refuse. One of the professors—actually, this is very interesting. When I had frozen embryos to put back, and three of them were very good, *he wanted to put them all back.* But he can't. I begged him to consider it. He said, ‘There *are* three, but I can't put them all back, I can't put them back.’ I see in his eyes that he wants to, but he can't because of all these restrictions. He is wanting to, but he can't.”

Marcia: “We don't have these kinds of embryo transfer restrictions in America.”

Rahnia: “I love America for all of these kinds of freedoms. Why not allow more embryos? Why control all of this at the government level? You just make people run away from your country, literally. *I have to run, imagine!* I have to basically run from one point to another—to Italy, to Egypt, to Dubai. And my plan was to go to Bombay.”

Marcia: “Let's hope you'll stop running!”

Rahnia: “I just hope, *insha'Allah* [God willing]! I just hope that this problem disappears for good.”

Marcia: “Where are you now in your cycle?”

Rahnia: “I've already gotten scanned. I've gotten an appointment, and I've had my first injection. I'll be injecting myself for the next seven days.”

Marcia: “Will you stay here, or go back to the UK?”

Rahnia: “I think I should stay here. I don't know really if it's better to be here. The cost is maybe the same as if I travel to the UK and come back again. The hotel is 250 dirhams [\$70] a day. The flight is £250 to £280 [\$400–\$440] for a round-trip flight, but my daughter is maybe £220 [\$345], because of the child discount. So, together, it's £500 [\$800] for me and my daughter to fly, and then my husband will come. So the sensible thing is to stay here, even if it's 250 [dirhams] a day for a hotel.”

Marcia: “Where are you staying?”

Rahnia: “In Dubai, the Shams Hotel.”

Marcia: “How did you find them?”

Rahnia: “Actually, I contacted a hotel by Internet, through e-mailing from Ethiopia. The Internet is very limited there, and so my booking was canceled. When I got here to the hotel, they said, ‘We e-mailed you because we don’t have space.’”

Marcia: “What did you do?”

Rahnia: “The taxi driver just brought me to another hotel. Luckily, *there are lots of hotels in Dubai!*”

Marcia: “Was the second hotel okay?”

Rahnia: “Well, it’s okay. What can you do?”

Marcia: “How are you and your daughter managing?”

Rahnia: “We just walk around. I’m really bored. For eating, we just ‘take away’ every day—breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

Marcia (commenting on the remarkable poise of Rahnia’s three-year-old daughter): “She’s amazing. I’ve never seen such a well-behaved child!”

Rahnia: “She’s calm. I’m grateful. God compensated me in that aspect.”

Marcia: “Is your husband happy to have her?”

Rahnia: “Oh, yes! *Extremely happy. I don’t think he loves anything else but her.*”

Marcia: “Do you love him?”

Rahnia (pausing): “Kind of. Yes. But I don’t know what love is anymore. It was a pressurized thing when I married him. My family was looking at me as an ‘*African girl, lost in the West!*’ I can have boyfriends, and so they pressured me a lot to marry. This guy [her husband] approached me, I and said, ‘Okay,’ just to shut them down. He saw me somewhere and asked me to marry him. *But I did accept!* There was no way of, like, finding another Muslim man in Britain at the time. So I went into marriage just in terms of honor to my family.”

Marcia: “Had you had any other relationships?”

Rahnia: “I did have another boyfriend in the UK, because it was *very* difficult to get a Muslim man. *I can’t* marry a Christian man, because it would dishonor the family. But, if the time was now, *I would* have married, regardless of the family. My old boyfriend, he had a car accident and passed away.”

Marcia: “Oh . . .”

Rahnia: “Yes, it’s very sad. He was a British guy, and he would definitely take me back now if he were alive.”

Marcia: “Can I ask, how do you think you got chlamydia?”

Rahnia: “To be honest, I really don’t know how. This is a question I couldn’t answer. I was not really sleeping around. I only had one

boyfriend. I never liked to go around. I really don't know. After marriage, when they discovered I had chlamydia, I sat down and talked to my husband. I know that I never deceived him in any way. *But he might have been deceptive.* I don't know. I can't know."

Marcia: "Was he upset about the chlamydia?"

Rahnia: "There were no arguments. No issues to discuss. I was honest with him that I had had a boyfriend previously. I would really like to know how I got this, to rest my soul, to rest my mind. *Because a sexually transmitted disease caused my infertility!* When I told my husband, he asked me no questions, and he accepted the treatment. He was treated also. In a way, maybe he was unfaithful, or from before marriage. I don't know. He didn't say that he was not. And there was no anger.

"I said, 'Okay, deep down, at last, we got somewhere. Even in the UK, such a simple test to detect chlamydia. Sixteen years of living there, and they never suggested it. It never occurred to them that I might have that kind of chlamydia. *Thanks to those Egyptians!* They detected it. They are the ones who treated it. I praise them, honestly."

Marcia: "Are his sperm good after the treatment?"

Rahnia: "He's absolutely fine. I just suspect he gave me chlamydia, but I don't really care. I don't know if he has affairs, *but I don't believe men!* And a big issue is *HIV and AIDS, oh yes!* And definitely you have to be healthy. You cannot just play around. Every time we get the results [of HIV testing], I say, 'Oh my God! This kind of gives me faith that he never cheated on me. But I was confronting him, and telling him we must get tested. At first he asked, 'How dare you?!' But we've had multiple tests, always on my initiative. I'm *very* careful, because that small infection caused all these things to happen to me, *so I'm extremely careful about HIV.*"

Marcia: "Do you use condoms with him?"

Rahnia: "Condoms? Oh, yes. Throughout our marriage, although not constantly. But when I need to, I have them. It's the only solution to keep any kind of infection away. I can only trust myself. I try to believe him, just so that I feel comfortable in my marriage. But I am the one to distrust. If my Dad cheated on my mother . . ."

Marcia: "Did he?"

Rahnia: "Yes! It happened, in Africa. And I know that it's *very easy to have an affair!* I could easily have an affair with my colleague."

Marcia: "Do you ever feel like you want to divorce him and marry a British guy?"

Rahnia: “I thought about that. Now, that will bring me back to the invisible disablement matter. The reason why? So, for example, as far as I can see, in the UK society, I might perhaps find a nice guy. But for a nice relationship to develop, to make it bond, you need to have a child.”

Marcia: “Even in the UK?”

Rahnia: “Yes, I see lots of my colleagues. They have a partner for a few years. If the relationship is solid, they definitely have a child. If not, they walk away. So I am invisibly disabled. I have to stick to this marriage.”

Marcia: “But what about a divorced man with children?”

Rahnia: “Yeah, but still, from my friends, what I’ve seen, *unless the guy definitely doesn’t want more children*, most of them do, regardless of their previous marriage and children. But that’s the freedom I have. The advantage I have is that I could definitely live on my own with my daughter. If you have your freedom, with no cultural issues pressing on you, you will definitely find your soul mate, I believe. I just wonder about being with someone else. *I think about it a lot, really*. But every marriage has its own issues. I think I’ll be happy [in this marriage] if another child comes, but I’ll also be happy if my marriage walks away. I’ll be grateful if I have a child, and my confidence will be boosted. I’ll live happily for the rest of my life, *insha’Allah*.”

Marcia: “How will you manage with another child? Will you continue to work?”

Rahnia: “In this financial crisis, I have to work. I have to leave my daughter at day care and have other people take care of her. In the UK, you can only go to school at age five. At age four, all children go to preschool. At age three, you’re entitled to a £100 grant [\$160] a month for two and a half hours [of day care] per day. But because I work full time, she goes to a private nursery. I have no choice. I have to be working. It doesn’t get me a lot of money, but it’s peace of mind, primarily. If I stay home, I only think of cooking, and I lose my skills. I just focus on what to eat, and it’s demoralizing. I made the decision when she was nine months to look for work. I found a job. Luckily, they are very nice people, but it’s not big pay. All my money goes to her nursery. Every dollar goes to send her to nursery. But I do realize that I’m investing in her. I had the opportunity to withdraw her from the nursery, because I’m on unpaid leave right now, so I can take her out. But I want her to learn English well, in addition to Amharic and Arabic.”

Marcia: “What does your husband do for a living?”

Rahnia: “He works retail. He’s a salesperson. *Our finances are very shaky!* We only have money to live from day to day. But it’s okay. At least I’m not on benefits [welfare]. *I couldn’t do that!* Because I do want to work. I could be on benefits, but I want to work. I went to university and have an honors degree in computing and business. In terms of the UK, I am more educated than my husband. He was educated in Egypt, all in Arabic. I can only barely read and write Arabic, but he speaks so-so English, with an accent. It’s very difficult for him, culturally. But we just have to work and pay off the debts. We’re £17,000 [\$27,000] in debt. It will take us a couple or three years’ time to pay this off. But if this [IVF] works out, I will be able to save that money. *All this money just to have a baby!*”

Marcia: “Can I ask you, what do you think of the term ‘reproductive tourism’? Could you call yourself a ‘reproductive tourist’?”

Rahnia: “Reproductive tourism? The first time I have seen the word, to be honest, is when I read actually the [study] ad. I kind of understand what it means, but it doesn’t describe me.”

Marcia: “Why not?”

Rahnia: “Well, it actually is too light of a term to describe my disability, which is invisible. Maybe this disability is ignored, not known by others. It’s never discussed. But maybe some people would like to know my suffering. I’m going around the world, and my words have never been heard by any one person besides you. Because nobody asked me. Nobody asked me why. Nobody cared. I need some level of understanding. I need to be recognized. *What I’ve been going through is not tourism!* I have seen some kind of fertility tourism on the Internet in Malaysia. *‘While on holiday, do your IVF!’* I would definitely associate that with just another holiday. But the term ‘tourism,’ perhaps in my own view, doesn’t actually reflect what it is. What I’m trying to do is more than tourism—*a lot more than tourism. It’s desperation!* It’s out of desperation that I’m doing this. *‘The impossible to make possible.’* It’s desperation that’s really driving me from one country to another. It’s desperation that drives me around the world. So the term ‘traveler’ would be right, *but not a tourist!* The term ‘tourism’ is *not good.*”

Marcia: “Do you have anyone to talk to about all this?”

Rahnia: “There *are* other people, but I don’t say to them what I’ve done trying to get pregnant. Then it accumulates in me, with no way of letting it out. Up until this point, I couldn’t say any of it—not to the right person. There was no right person until you came along.”

Coda

In the days that followed, I saw Rahnia many times in Conceive's ultrasound scanning area, where I gave small treats to Wisal, including papers and pencils for drawing. Rahnia reiterated several times how much my being there had helped her to "sleep well at last," and how much I had unburdened her by listening to her entire story. Toward the end of February, Rahnia's husband, Ahmed, flew to Dubai for the semen collection necessary before the IVF procedure.

All seemed well on the day of Rahnia's egg collection, which was on a Thursday. However, when I came to the clinic on a Sunday morning, I met Ahmed, who I noted was very tall and visibly agitated. He said that something had gone terribly wrong over the weekend. Indeed, I found Rahnia in acute distress on her way to the operating room. Apparently, back at the hotel, Rahnia had developed a high fever, nausea, and diarrhea, with profound pain over her entire body. Even being touched was exquisitely painful. Ahmed had called Conceive's emergency number, and painkillers were prescribed for Rahnia. But as the infection grew worse, Dr. Pankaj advised Ahmed to take Rahnia immediately to the emergency room of the American Hospital in Dubai. Rahnia and Ahmed had no money, however. Their entire trip had been put on credit cards, and they felt that they could not risk the expense of a lengthy hospitalization.

Given their predicament, Dr. Pankaj told Ahmed to bring Rahnia immediately to the clinic, where high-dose, intravenous antibiotics were administered. Rahnia spent two days and nights in a clinic bed under intensive antibiotic therapy. Dr. Pankaj performed a diagnostic laparoscopy, only to discover a massive pelvic infection of unknown origin. Furthermore, the pelvic infection had spread into Rahnia's bloodstream, leading to a more generalized septicemic infection. Cupfuls of bloody liquid were removed from Rahnia's pelvis, in an attempt to try to discern the origin of her infection.

I kept vigil with Rahnia, as she lay in agony in the recovery room. When Dr. Pankaj came to check on her, she asked both of us, rhetorically: "Why me? What kind of sin have I done that caused all these bad things to happen? Maybe I was not good to my mother. I don't know." Dr. Pankaj said kindly, "Well, the Hindus have an answer for that. Everything bad that happens in this life is simply the working out of your karma from a previous life. You have no control over it." I added, "You have done nothing wrong. It's not your fault."

Fortunately, the intravenous antibiotics delivered at Conceive seemed to work, significantly reducing the symptoms of infection. When the infection appeared to be under control, Dr. Pankaj told Rahnia that she needed to return immediately to the United Kingdom, because she was risking her life by not being able to access emergency medical treatment in the UAE. He told me—and later Rahnia—that the “worst things happen to the nicest people.”

By midweek, Rahnia was feeling much better, and I found her sitting by herself in a clinic chair. She recounted her physical ordeal in excruciating detail, and I told her that going through all of these IVFs was not worth it if it meant risking her life. She agreed that she did not want to leave her daughter an orphan. She told me that her husband had been “really there for me” during this whole episode, and that without him, she couldn’t have managed this difficult month in the Emirates. I sensed that this life-threatening episode had brought them closer together. Perhaps Ahmed realized that his wife, the mother of his only child, had almost died in her attempt to conceive under cultural pressure.

I saw Rahnia on her last day at the clinic. She, Ahmed, and Wisal were scheduled to leave for London at 4:00 PM on Emirates Airlines. She told me that they had had to switch their flights many times, with extra charges being levied with each new ticket. Finally, Ahmed had argued with the airline, telling them that it was unfair to compound these charges when his wife was facing a life-threatening medical emergency. Fortunately, the airline relented.

At our final farewell, both Rahnia and I became tearful, telling each other how much we had helped each other and how special we found the other to be. She promised to e-mail me, although she admitted that getting to an Internet café was always difficult for her. She hoped that I would publish her story, so that “my words will be heard” by others.

I learned from the clinic later that week that Rahnia and her family had returned home safely. I never learned what kind of infection had nearly killed Rahnia, nor whether it was sexually transmitted in nature. Most of all, I hoped that Rahnia would become pregnant with the child that she was desperately seeking. Two weeks later, Conceive contacted Rahnia back in the United Kingdom. Sadly, her reproductive journey to and from Dubai had come to a bitter end, as her ninth attempted IVF, poisoned by an unknown infection, had failed to produce a pregnancy.