Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan is an international advocate for universal education. Convinced that education is the key to breaking the cycle of poverty, Her Majesty campaigns for more investment in girls’ education. She focuses much of her energy on creating opportunities and encouraging innovative public/private partnerships to increase access to, and quality of schools. In March 2008, Queen Rania launched her “Madrasati” (which means “my school” in Arabic) Initiative to renovate at least 500 of Jordan’s most dilapidated public schools, to make sure that all young Jordanians have access to bright, safe, well-equipped classrooms and playgrounds.

Maha of the Mountains

A Short Story by Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah

(This story is set in the Middle East.)

The boys threw stones at her, shouting and jeering. “Ya a’lylet al a’dab! You have no morals!”

Just a few more steps and she would be home. “Ma btistahi! You have no shame!”

Maha struggled to hold back the tears from insults that stung more than stones. Just a few more steps and she would be home. “Ma btistahi! You have no shame!”

Maha struggled to hold back the tears from insults that stung more than stones. At last! Her family’s small clay house. Gratefully, she closed the door behind her. Outside, the boys kept up their taunts. “Maha, ha ha! Girls don’t belong in school!”

One threw a heavy rock, hard, against the door. They all cheered loudly and ran.

Maha sighed. It wasn’t even her first day. Imagine when she had her books. Imagine when she actually left the village to walk to school for the first time.

“They’ll be waiting for me. They’ll throw more stones and Allah knows what else. But going to school is my decision. And I won’t let them scare me.”

Maha flopped on her bed and drew a deep breath. At least today was Friday. No need to sew or sell embroidery. She curled up and tried to rest.

The last few months had been exhausting. Fights with her father. Ridicule from her brothers. Now the other village boys had joined in. It seemed everyone was against her.

Except for Mama. Thank God for Mama and her reassuring hugs. Mama had never been to school herself, but she had supported Maha, insisting to Baba that even a daughter deserved the chance to learn.

“Maha, why do you never stop?” her father had barked over dinner. “Why all of
this nonsense of going to school? You know we can't afford it.”

“Yes, but Baba…”

“Well, then why won’t you stop? We wasted so much money on your brothers. Only one of seven stayed in school. One! We could have bought more meat. Or a better plough. Or fixed the water tap.”

“But, Baba,” she’d begged, “I can work at night. I’ll still sell my embroidery. And just think, when I can read I can earn more money! I’ll help take care of the family. Please, Baba. I promise. I promise.”

Maha’s father had closed his eyes, suddenly looking tired. His gaunt face was long and somber beneath his graying hair.

“Alright, Maha,” he’d said with a sigh. “But you have to pay your own way. I can’t give you any money for books…”

Maha had flown across the table to throw her thin arms around him. “Thank you, Baba.” She buried her face in his neck. “Thank you so much. I promise I’ll make you proud:”

“That’s enough,” he’d said gruffly. But even so, he’d held her tightly too.

Word that Maha was going to school had spread quickly in their small village. It wasn’t long before the whispering started behind her back. People pointed, stared, and sneered. One old man spat in her path. “Maha, ha ha!” the village boys jeered. “Girls don’t belong in school.”

The night before her first day of school, Maha helped her mother chop okra for dinner. “Mama, I don’t understand,” she said sadly. “Is it wrong to go to school?”

Mama gently took Maha’s hand. “It’s not you, hyati, my life. It’s just… well… people just don’t think it’s right for a girl to go to school.”

Maha frowned. “Why not?”

“They think girls should help at home, not bother with school. You know I never learned to read. And neither did your aunts or your grandmothers.”

“But, Mama, that doesn’t make any sense. Why should that stop me from learning?”

Maha’s mother shifted.

“Well, people also think,” she let go of Maha’s hand, “…they think it is a dishonor for a girl to walk alone. It’s dangerous, you know that. School’s an hour away.”

Mama’s face clouded with worry.

“But, Mama, I’ll be careful. You know I will. I don’t care what they say. I can’t wait to go to school. I can’t wait to read and write. I want to be a teacher. And someday, Mama, I’ll teach you to read as well! Tell me, what do you think of that?”

Mama’s eyes suddenly sparkled with tears. “I think we’d better finish dinner first.” She held out her arms. “Now give me a hug, habibet ghalbi, love of my heart.”

The seasons passed. Summer cracked the earth; passing rain healed the scars. Cold evenings returned to the highlands. A new school year was days away.
And Maha learned. She kept a diary. She read the newspaper headlines to her father. She taught her little sister how to count all her fingers and toes. Her eyes often hurt after many hours of schoolwork, homework, and sewing. But the harder she worked, the stronger she felt. The more she learned, the more she wanted to know.

Still, it wasn’t easy. She dreaded the walk, which began at 6 a.m. The journey took an hour or more. Not one part of the barren desert road was paved. By the time she reached school, her aching feet were caked with dust. And that wasn’t even the worst of it.

On her first day, no one she’d passed had said a word. Now, the insults were relentless. Villagers tried to shame her. “How can you do this to your family? School is no place for a girl!” The spiteful taunts echoed in her ears -- “Maha, ha ha! Girls don’t belong in school!” – long after she was safely back home.

Maha sat on her bed, pulled her blanket around her shoulders, and tried to focus on her book.

Suddenly, the door slammed shut with a bang. It was her father, and he was angry.

Her mother rushed past. “What’s the matter, habibi?”

Baba stomped his feet in fury. “What’s the matter? What’s the matter? She’s the matter!” he roared, pointing a shaking finger at Maha as she emerged from her bedroom, book still in hand.

“I can’t walk ten feet in this village without somebody making some rude remark about my daughter and the disgrace she’s bringing on this family. The women are talking. The men are talking. The village elders are talking. They came to me today to say they don’t approve of Maha going to school alone. Like I don’t know! They’ve been saying nothing else since all this school foolishness began. She brings shame on the entire village, they say! We can’t live with that kind of disgrace. No one does business with me anymore. It’s like we’re outcasts in our own community.”

His voice dropped. “Maha, I know what I said, but you can’t go to school anymore.”

“But, Baba!”

He had tried to hold her back before when the villagers complained. Some mornings he would say she should stay home that day, and she would agree and busy herself in the kitchen, only to run over the hill to school after Baba left for work. But this time, she knew it was different.

“No, Maha!” Baba’s dark eyes flashed. “Girls do not belong in school. That’s my final word.” He slapped his hand on the table. “Now, where is my dinner?”

Maha’s life returned to what it once was.

Boys still pointed at Maha; their sniggers hung in the air. Maha pretended she couldn’t hear. In truth, she barely cared. Her world felt as though it had been
reduced to the scraps of fabric she embroidered with beads. She sold what she could to other women in the village. Her stitches hemmed the hours.

_Salaam aleikum._
_Wa aleikumu salaam._

“May I ask, is this where Maha lives? Do you have a daughter called Maha?”

Neither Maha, who had come out to see who it was, nor her father, who had answered the door, knew what to make of the tall woman before them.

As was customary, Baba invited her in and gestured toward the worn floor cushions. Mama offered her sweet tea.

They could see years of learning in the woman’s eyes and hear the sound of the city in her voice.

“I have come from the capital city. I have come to see Maha.”

“See _me_?” Maha stepped forward. “Why do you want to see me? How do you even know who I am?”

“What a pleasure to finally meet you, Maha. I’ve heard so much about you. I’ve been told you were one of the brightest students Al Isra school ever had.” The woman held out a small cloth bag. “And I’ve brought this for you.

“Go ahead, take it!” She pressed the bag into Maha’s surprised hands.

Maha wasn’t used to such attention. The village children scarcely spoke to her now. Tentatively, she reached into the bag. There was something hard and smooth at the bottom. Her fingers traced the edges, feeling for clues.

It was a pen. Her first.

_Il hamdallah._ She cradled the pen in her palms, glanced at her father, then shyly at the lady. “Are you sure this is for me?”

“Yes, you’ll need it,” the woman smiled.

“But, why?”

“I’ve been looking for you for months, Maha of the Mountains! After all, how could I not? A little girl from a tiny village way up in the highlands, walking to school all by herself? Oh yes, Maha, your name is well known, even in the capital city!”

Maha’s face flushed.

“No, don’t be embarrassed. Your name is known for all the best reasons. Maha of the Mountains, your name stands for courage, determination, and success! We heard how you walked miles each day, enduring so much disapproval, and how you managed to work at night, and still be the best in your class. Your teacher was so proud of your progress. She thought you had so much potential. When you stopped coming, she asked everyone where you were; she looked everywhere to find you. Her search, your story, reached us in the city.”

“Really?” said Maha.

“Yes. It even reached our organization. We work with mothers and girls. We give them small loans, help them start businesses… whatever it is they need. And
Maha, we think that what you need is help getting to school."

"How will you help?" Maha’s mother asked, her hand protectively on her
daughter’s shoulder.

"Well, if you agree, each and every morning, one of us will be at your door
to take Maha to school. And every afternoon one of us will be at her school to
accompany Maha home." She turned back to Maha. “You’ll be safe. No one will talk.”
She smiled, “How does that sound?”

Maha couldn’t quite believe her ears. The city was so far away. For the lady
to come to her village would take hours, and then the walk as well. Maha’s mouth
widened, but her eyes softened. She clutched her new pen to her chest.

“Are you sure? Really? Every day?"

"Of course I’m sure! Girls have just as much right to education as anyone else.
Why should boys be the only ones in school? School is good for everyone. Once
you’ve been to school you can help support your family; you can help your village
grow strong. But going to school also gives you a voice! An opinion that people will
listen to."

The woman looked her in the eye. "Would you like that? Would you like some
company on your way to school?"

Maha raised her gaze to her father, who was staring out the window in silence.
"It is for Baba to decide. If Baba gives permission, I will go."

At first, her father did not speak.

Then, slowly, thoughtfully, he turned. "No one can tell me that I do not love my
daughter as much as my sons. Yes, my Maha can go back to school. If she is safe,
then she can go."

There was a sound at the door. Maha’s father got up and opened it to find his
doorway filled with all the young girls of the village.

"Really? She gets to go to school?" squeaked one.

An older girl stepped forward. "We’re sorry. We didn’t mean to listen, but we saw
that other lady arrive in the village. She asked all over for Maha and we were curious."
She poked her toe in the dirt. “But is it true? Will Maha go to school?”

With a raised eyebrow, he replied, “Yes, she will.”

The girls gave a deafening cheer and the boys watching nearby stood shocked.
After shouting a few congratulations through the door to Maha, they each ran off
back to their own parents.

The next day, Maha stepped outside with her bag and new pen to see that her
companions to school had multiplied. It was no longer just the kind and generous
lady from the city. Other girls had persuaded their fathers to let them go to school,
as well.

Maha couldn’t help it when a smile crept across her face.

While the boys had stuck their tongues out at her, the girls had watched with
envy as Maha walked to school on her first day a year ago. From that moment, they
had all wanted in secret to go, too.

Only when the lady from the city promised to accompany Maha were they brave enough to ask their families.

Three days later, as she hurriedly ate bread and foul before heading off to school, a swell of noise caught her attention.

She opened the door. A crowd larger than her entire village was waiting outside. There were cars, lights, cables, cameras, and a sea of faces she’d never seen before. Suddenly, they all turned their heads and lenses at Maha!

She froze to the spot as the kind lady from the city rushed over. “Maha, Maha, can you believe it? Maha, have you heard?” She hadn’t. “Maha, they heard about you. Your story made its way to some really important people! Then, the Minister of Education was told. And now…”

The lady had to catch her breath from the excitement of the news. “And now… the President is here!”

Maha blushed as the cameras whirred and lights flashed. “I told you your name has travelled far and wide,” whispered the lady in her ear.

Before she could work out what the lady had said, a man’s hand had reached out to her.

“So you’re Maha of the Mountains? You’re the little girl who fought to go to school? Who inspired a village?” He didn’t wait for an answer.

“Maha, your courage and determination have impressed me greatly, and I want you to help me get more girls into school.”

He crouched down.

“Will you help me?”

Maha looked at the girls around her who had heard the question. Their eyes were wide as plates and their heads were nodding wildly. Microphones recorded the deafening silence as they waited for her decision.

In a little voice, she said, “Yes, of course.”

The girls screamed with delight.

“I don’t want to make you late for class, Maha. How about I give you and your friends a ride to school? We can talk on the way there.”

Maha beamed. School bag in hand, her mother kissed her gently on the forehead.

The President waved to everyone as the cameras captured the girls climbing into the cars. As they pulled away, the hills rang with the cheer, “Maha, hur-rah! Girls belong in school!”

The End

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