

Between Two Worlds

Feras El Mahmoud
Between Two World

Between Two Worlds

Between Two Worlds invites us to question prejudice, build bridges between cultures, and recognize that our differences do not have to divide us; they can enrich us. This is an honest, moving, and thoughtful book about heritage, family, identity, and the search for one's own place in the world.

This book is not a political treatise. It is my personal story: the story of a boy who learned that identity is not a destination, but a path a path marked by doubt, hope, loss, love, and courage.

To the Readers

This book tells my story.

It does not claim to speak for everyone not for all people with Palestinian roots, not for everyone from an immigrant family, and not for everyone who grew up between cultures.

It is my truth. These are my memories, my questions, and my view of what has shaped me. Some thoughts may feel immediately familiar to you. Others may not. Both responses are valid. I did not write this book so that everyone would feel exactly as I do. I wrote it to make something visible: Identity is not always simple. Heritage is more than a word. Silence often has a history. A name can never explain a whole person. We live in a world that quickly classifies people by appearance, origin, language, religion, name, or beliefs. Yet no one fits completely into a single box. Every person carries more within them than others can see at first glance.

Perhaps this is the most important request this book makes: Look more closely.

Not only at me. At every person.

Because behind every life is a story that could be told.

Chapter 1

When I Realized I Was Seen Differently

People often say that children do not notice differences. But children see more than adults think. They notice looks. They hear undertones. They sense tension in a room, even when no one expresses it openly.

I was in first grade when I first understood that, to some people, I was not simply a child. Until then, my life had felt uncomplicated. I was born in Germany. I went to kindergarten there, learned to read and write there, and played in the same schoolyards as all the other children. Germany was the place I knew, the language I spoke, the streets I walked, the classrooms in which I sat. Yet one day I began to realize that others saw me differently not because of anything I had done, but because of where my family came from.

My Baba is Palestinian. When he speaks about his homeland, his voice changes. It becomes warmer, slower, and sometimes quieter. As a child, I could not name what I heard in it, longing. For many people, home is a place to which they can return at any time. For him, home had often become something else a memory, a loss, a part of his heart that never

stopped beating. He did not begin with politics or headlines. He did not begin with conflict. He spoke about everyday life, streets, neighbors, families eating together, and places that had once been full of life.

When you hear stories like these as a child, they turn into images. You begin to imagine places you have never seen, yet that somehow feel familiar. In this way, you grow up with two worlds, the world in which you live, and the world that continues to breathe through your parents' stories.

School was the first place where these two worlds met. For many children, school is simply a place of learning. For others, it becomes the first place where they discover how the world sees them. I remember words from teachers that I may not have fully understood at the time, but whose meaning I still felt. They were words that left deep marks sentences no child should hear, that I would never achieve anything, that I would always be one of "them," that I could never be integrated enough. As a child, you do not understand the political and social background of such statements, but you understand their message: Your future is limited, not because of your abilities, but because of your origins. Many adults underestimate what words can do to a

child. During these years, children are building their self-image. They learn who they are by listening to the voices around them. When a child is encouraged, hope begins to grow. When a child is diminished, something else grows, doubt. Sometimes anger grows too not loud anger, not anger that is immediately visible, but a quiet, deep anger at the thought that others believe they can judge your life before you have even begun to shape it. For many children from immigrant families, this anger does not arise in a single moment. It develops slowly, out of sight, through questions, remarks, and the constant feeling of having to explain yourself. This is also where the question of belonging begins.

Where do you belong? To the place where you were born, or to the place where your family's story began?

I was born and raised in Germany, but Palestinian and Arab culture are also part of me. Not because I lived in Palestine, but because family, language, values, and stories shape a person deeply. Identity does not come from one place alone. It grows from everything that forms us. Perhaps the best way to describe this feeling is through an image: sometimes it feels as though you are living beneath two

skies. One is the country in which you were born. The other is the story of your family. Many children from immigrant families spend years trying to find a place between those two skies. Some feel torn. Others eventually learn that identity does not have to consist of a single truth. It can contain several languages, several memories, and several forms of belonging. Perhaps the story of many children like me begins at the moment they first feel that others see them as different. But the decisive question is not how others see us. It is how we learn to see ourselves. Identity is not only something described from the outside. It is also something we build from within. Sometimes that process begins precisely where others try to set limits for us.

Chapter 2

Words That Last

Sometimes it is not the major events that change a person. Sometimes it is only a few words, spoken quickly and perhaps soon forgotten by the person who said them. For a child, however, those words can echo for a lifetime.

Children carry words within them. They preserve them not only in memory, but also in their self-image. A sentence an adult forgets after a few minutes can write itself deeply into a child's sense of who they are.

School should be a place where the future can grow a place where children learn that possibilities are open, dreams matter, and their path has not already been decided before they have taken their first steps. Yet for some children, school is exactly where a different experience begins: the sense that others have already drawn their boundaries before they have had a chance to develop.

When I was very young, I heard sentences that burned themselves into my memory. They were spoken by people who should have guided and encouraged me. Instead, I heard that I

would never truly achieve anything, that I would always be one of "them," and that I could never be integrated enough.

This is difficult for a child to understand, not because the child does not understand the words, but because the logic behind them makes no sense. A child does not begin by asking political questions. The question is much simpler, Why? Why should my future already be decided? Why should my background determine who I become? Why should I be capable of less than others? At first, a child often looks within for the answer. Maybe it is me, the child thinks. Maybe I am different. Maybe I am less capable. This is precisely what makes such statements so cruel, they reach people at an age when they are only beginning to understand themselves. Children form their self-image by observing how adults respond to them. When an adult expresses confidence in a child, that confidence can grow. When an adult communicates limitation, that can grow too as doubt, insecurity, and an inner fracture. For many children from immigrant families, this is where an inner conflict begins. At home, they may hear that they should be strong, that they can be proud of their roots, and that their story has value. Outside the home, however, they

may encounter a different message, that their origins are a stain they can never fully remove. An internal struggle develops between these voices.

Some children eventually begin to believe the voices from outside. They make their dreams smaller. They adapt themselves to the expectations imposed on them. They stop thinking boldly because they come to believe there is no point. Others respond differently. They develop anger. Not loud or immediately visible anger, but a quiet anger that intensifies over time anger that others tried to define their lives before they had the opportunity to do so themselves. This anger rarely comes from a single experience. It accumulates through comments, questions about a name, and looks that reveal someone has already formed an image of you before meeting you.

Over time, this changes the way you see the world. You begin to understand that some people notice a person's origin before they notice the person. Many children from immigrant families therefore learn to read a room at an early age. They quickly sense when they are welcome and when they are not. They feel tension before anyone says a word.

This sensitivity can be both a strength and a burden, a strength because it can deepen awareness, and a burden because no child should have to learn so early what rejection feels like.

With this experience, another question eventually arises, Where do I really belong? When others repeatedly show you that they see you as different, your sense of belonging becomes fragile. Home then becomes more than a place. It becomes a feeling safety, recognition, and the knowledge that you are seen without having to explain yourself constantly.

Perhaps this is why many children from immigrant families begin asking questions at an early age that others ask much later, Who am I? Where do I belong? What does heritage really mean?

These questions are difficult, but they also contain something valuable. They can lead to a deeper understanding of oneself to the realization that identity is not determined only from the outside, and that a person is more than the categories others assign to them. The words I heard back then were harsh and unjust. Over time, however, I understood