

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my family for their unconditional love and support.

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Thank you to all those angels fallen from the heavens at the right place and the right time.

And thank you, God, for this wonderful adventure.

N.S.

*To those who thought they would
succeed in ruining my life...*

CHAPTER I

Write my story?

Someone is watching me, I can feel it. I am being watched very closely-scrutinized. By a man, no doubt! If only this bus could go faster... Should I turn around? I hesitate... Not now! I am much too afraid. His eyes are on me; I can feel it, I know it. If he tries to hurt me... I will yell. But I can't go on like this, I must see for sure. *Stop trembling and do something!* One, two and three... There, it's done!

No one is watching me; no one even looks at me. The two men sitting in the front are absorbed in their books, my neighbour is looking out the window and the man in the back is asleep. I am relieved, although my heart is beating furiously; a shiver runs through my entire body.

Norah, you can be so ridiculous at times! All that is over, it is a part of the past. You are in Canada now; you are safe. Nothing will happen to you.

No amount of reasoning helps me allay my fears; I have difficulty controlling them.

I briefly glance at the dark-skinned man with curly hair sitting on the opposite side. Scarcely breathing, I feel my heart start to beat dangerously fast.

What does he want? With his Arabic looks... Whatever you do, do not stare, just ignore him! Do what I say! Your bus stop is the second to last one; he will certainly get off before you.

The stops succeed one another, much too slowly to my liking. From Atwater to Lachine, I concentrate on the ads posted on the bus walls, but he still does not get off. I can feel his eyes glued to my back.

They have found us, I am sure! He is following me. He must not discover where we live. What do I do? Get off now! Even though it is dark and I will have to walk for awhile, I must lose him.

I ring for the bus to stop. I get off and find myself on the sidewalk... alone. The door closes, making a suction noise, and the bus takes off.

I catch my breath. I remain motionless for a few moments, stranded on the sidewalk, dazed. The scenario born from my paranoia slowly dissipates. This story is nothing but pure imagination. Should I laugh or cry? I don't know anymore. My nerves are all distraught.

You have been in Montreal for a number of years now and nothing bad has happened to you. Why continue to think that you are being followed? For how long will these fears persist?

The sound of a car horn abruptly brings me back to reality. In wanting to make a turn, a car nearly ran me over. Time to return to the present moment! I head home but am so exhausted that I feel I will never make it to the top of the hill.

I rarely come home so late at night. I take a deep breath, soaking in the night. I contemplate the sky where a huge moon is suspended, surrounded by stars. Like a generous friend, it offers me tenderness and wraps my heart in a soothing touch. What joy to finally reach my home, my family, my safe cocoon!

Nowadays, I am never afraid of going home. For a long time, during my childhood, I was afraid of

walking through the door of my own home. I never felt safe there. I knew that the evening would undoubtedly end in yelling and crying.

Today, only cries of joy welcome my arrival. My three little brothers run towards me and jump on me. They generously shower me with radiant smiles and loving eyes. I would give my life for these three little guys.

Before the birth of the twins, I was completely self-centered. I was sixteen at the time and living an intense period of adolescent rebellion; and everyone around me suffered from it. If I had known then that life becomes easier when you put some effort into it, I would have started earlier. I recognize in these words the perfectionist in me showing through, that Critical Norah who tyrannizes me and constantly demands more.

Could I have done any better when, as a child, I was surrounded by and subjected to violence and abuse?

According to my mother, I was a child who confided very little in others. She is right... but I was muzzled. I had to prevent my secrets from spilling out. It was a question of life and death, for me and also for you, my sweet mother, so dear to my heart. However, today, those very words are choking me and are clamouring for *my* truth be known. I do not want them to prevent me from having my own dreams. I want to get rid of my inner demons. I want to live!

My 'unveiling' will not be easy, I am aware of that. For so many years, I have buried my secrets deep inside of me, trying to forget their very existence.

I was always convinced that the world could see how dirty, how twisted and deformed I was simply by looking at my face or in my eyes. Although my mother always carefully chose my clothes, I was constantly

afraid of being mocked and judged by others. And yet, I was never ridiculed. It was actually easy for me to make friends. I wanted to be perfect and to please everyone around me. Even today, I need to be encouraged, loved and admired. I am filled with self-doubt!

During grade school and at the beginning of adolescence, I strived to succeed at school and in sports in order to become popular. I was the nice and obedient little girl, the one friends could confide in when in need.

I never asked anybody for help. I never shared my pain. I never told anybody what was happening inside our home. I never cried in a friend's arms... until recently. I closed my heart to others for over twenty years!

My mother wrote our story in 2005, but I was convinced that nobody would be interested. Despite my lack of encouragement, she persevered in her project and her book *Le Voile de la Peur (The Veil of Fear)* was published on

March 8¹, 2006 by the Éditions JCL. Her ensuing success gave her the necessary self-confidence and energy to take on new projects. As for me, I am always near her side... though my life is going nowhere.

During the summer, I read those pages which perfectly described the journey that had brought us all to Canada. Reading those words transported me in the past with brutality and I relived my distress, my solitude, my fears and my silence. I could hear my

1. International Woman's Day

mother's voice talking about her life as a woman and her worries as a mother. As a young child, I had tried so hard to help and support her, but had I succeeded? And at what price?

Had I ever really had a child's playful, carefree spirit? I do not remember. I had always felt the compelling need to take care of others: my mother, my sister, my little brothers and, later on, my friends. I often feel tired because of the way I am and, still today, have absolutely no idea how to help myself. I let others take my place and I forget about myself.

Today, I find myself at an important turning point in my life. I do not want to remain at a standstill. I want to wash away my paranoid thoughts and paralyzing fears, to free myself from my nightmares and be able to take advantage of the freedom Québec offers. I must free myself from my past, but I am terrified that by talking about and reviving my memories, my wounds will start to bleed and the blood flow will never stop. I am afraid of being hurt by delving into my own story, my own memories and particularly... into my secrets. But I have no choice if I want to move on!