

There Must Be a Freedom Square

And We Have Set the Date

By Razan Zaitouneh

As the Syrian popular uprising continues despite the brutal response by the regime that has killed more than 3,500 people during the last eight months, Razan Zaitouneh recounts, from hiding, her daily confrontations with the arrest, torture and disappearance of family members, friends and fellow activists. Through the cracks of repression, though, shimmers the widespread sense of connection and solidarity among the activists as well as their undaunted dream of freedom.

Razan Zaitouneh is a Syrian human rights activist, lawyer, and journalist who has gone into hiding after being accused by the government of being a foreign agent. She graduated from law school in 1999 and in 2001 started her work as lawyer. In the same year, Razan was one of the founders of the Human Rights Association in Syria (HRAS). Since then, she has been a member of the team of lawyers for defense of political prisoners. In 2005, she established SHRIL (the Syrian Human Rights Information Link), through which she continues to report about human rights violations in Syria. Since 2005, Razan Zaitouneh has also been an active member of the Committee to Support Families of Political Prisoners in Syria. In 2011 she received the European Parliament Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought.



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Just two months ago I was still on my travels, so consumed by the pain that I could only cope in the other world where I had taken refuge. It was no kind of fun to be playing Alice in Wonderland at my age but it was the only way to save myself from certain breakdown.

Many of my friends had left the country or wound up in prison. The public movement was near motionless. The general and his loyal interrogators were doing their best to ensure my days were as black as they could be.

Some never tired of advising me to keep my distance from the 'cases' I dealt with on a daily basis, to keep myself sane and avoid falling into the abyss of depression, and this I utterly failed to do. I was unable, for instance, to keep my distance from my aunt, Umm Mohamed, as she sat before me nervously drumming on her thighs as she stared straight into my eyes and insisted I tell her whether her son was alive or dead. I was unable to keep my distance from my uncle, Abou Basel, who phoned me on an almost daily basis, his voice wavering and fading away as he said, 'So what are we to do, my girl? Is the boy alive or dead?'

I had not heard from Umm Mohamed or Abou Basel since the start of the revolution, but I thought about them every day.

True, thousands had been arrested in the past few weeks, among them my closest and dearest friends, and hundreds had been martyred, many of them in front of the cameras' lenses, which gave us the sensation of death being close enough to feel the martyr's breath against our skin. And yet, despite the bitterness of the pain, participating in it in this way and the admission of its existence by others, openly giving voice to it, at least showed some regard to the victims and those who care for them. Perhaps this was the first achievement of the revolution: the participation in, and admission of, pain. No one knows what that means, save those who have spent long years in torment.

I reach down to your pain, Umm Mohamed, and to yours, Abou Basel. Abou Basel, who never stopped asking me if it was worth going out on a demonstration calling for the return of detainees, and this on a phone tapped at both ends, while I promised him all would be well, saying goodbye with meaningless reassurances as I said to myself,

'Demonstration? I hope the investigator lets that one slide in the next interrogation!'

When the Tunisian regime fell it was a day of great joy. We congratulated each other, friends and activists, and danced and partied until morning. When the Egyptian regime fell I felt that I had fallen with it. I burst into tears and entered a state of mourning: a selfish anger and rationally speaking, indefensible. The pages of social media websites transformed into virtual revolutions, a fever of fraternization, meeting and arrangements that left me dizzy, while the discourse between Syrians themselves, and that directed by outsiders towards them, was a blend of blame, bad language and belittlement. I had no urge to feel any more oppressed than I was already. It felt as if anger itself was giving voice: 'It might be our turn next!' Now, I feel a little ashamed of those feelings that made me smile and lower my eyes.

But I also excuse myself, just a little. The face of Fares in the hospital after he had surrendered his soul, faintly smiling, faintly reproachful, held me in its grip during those fateful days.

In March, 2009, Fares Mourad died alone in his cold house, located in one of Damascus' outlying rural districts. Since his release twenty-nine days previously he had been dying slowly. I had loved him very much. Along with his other friends, I had hoped to play the role of intermediary between the heavens and our earth and grant him better days, or keep him from death's shadow a little longer. It was all in vain. For the first time I felt the full weight of injustice in a case that directly concerned me; that I was just a lost creature in a land bold enough to kill a Fares every day, and to do it with silence and complicity.

This country has started to choke me, with its streets and cities, its alleys and restaurants and everything it contains. Fleeing abroad was a choice I rejected out of hand more out of stubbornness and pride than hope and at the same time, staying on in this way meant only being eaten away by oppression. And so I packed my bags and travelled, supposedly outside my work hours and it was not until I had laid my baggage down that I felt I was myself. And where? 'Free Douma'.

Those first sensations, those first tears, I cannot now recall, as though I was born again in the protests. For the first time I felt the truth of what Fares had always said, that he never reckoned his thirty years spent in prison as part of his life; that at certain stages a new life could

begin, though weighed down by the burdens of one's former existence.

Yet it was truly extraordinary how this laden link between the soul and places and people could shrug off its weight. I can still feel it now.

I lived in the countryside outside Damascus, in Harasta and Douma, for a number of years before moving back to the city, and I still feel some affection for the place.

Living in the countryside means taking public transport. It means the daily annoyances caused by the driver or passengers, it means driving through the ugliest neighbourhoods ever day, but more than anything else it means the daily suffering of an unveiled woman who leads a life at variance with the ultra-conservative values of her environment.

The goddess of the revolution had clearly not forgotten this superior attitude of mine—even though it was the product of my suffering rather than anything else—and she made sure that my first port of call on my return from exile was the city of Douma, shortly after the outbreak of the protests.

I can't be sure: were those youths and men shouting for freedom with such joy and enthusiasm the same ones I used to meet coming to and from my house, the ones who caused me such painful feelings of homesickness, who violated the sanctity of my body and privacy with their words and glances? Or were the people gathering in the revolution's squares different to those I had encountered in my daily life? Among these protestors the only stranger would be the Devil himself—in other words, not me—and I squeezed into the throng, shouting in a voice cracked with laughter I was unable to suppress. Here, no one objected to my presence as I was; a few showed a sweet male protectiveness that my negligible femininity was happy to accept. That powerful sense of safety was beautiful, safety not just from the security police keeping watch in the skies overhead, but from the feeling of alienation I had long associated with this very place. I would love to be able to recall how it felt, especially now that I am so alone and so many of my friends are locked away.

The same story repeats itself every day, sometimes many times in the one day. We are consumed with our work, barely able to take note of what was said to us or concentrate on the task before us. The news comes without warning, 'So-and-so has been arrested.' A lump rises in the throat, a faint electric shock tingles in the folds of the brain: just a few minutes, in any case, and then we are back working again. As a result we often lose focus, typing in the wrong chat window or sending to wrong email address.

Just hours ago, so-and-so was one of us. We make plans for tomorrow, we tell jokes about infiltrators, we stare hard at one another before saying goodbye and we embrace shyly, because none of us has had the chance to wash for days. This girl has volunteered to fetch the 'logistical' necessities for those of us who can't go out: smokes, crisps and coffee. We know that in a few hours this beautiful face might be distorted from pain and torture, that this familiar voice and laughter that has given us the strength to carry on, might become a scream in an ill-lit cellar, while we busy ourselves reporting on the number of tanks surrounding Tel Kalakh or the martyrs of Baniyas.

Most of these friends were just acquaintances before the revolution, just people we knew through people, sometimes barely that. Whether we like each other or not there are rarely any direct links: a group of young people who have become a vast and far-flung net of dreams and ceaseless activity, and most of all, of love. My heart won't let me call them revolutionaries; they are too beautiful and refined for that angry, merciless word, but no less brave and courageous: their hearts as one, suffering together. This sense of connection and solidarity with all, not just the 'revolutionary masses', has, I believe, given us strength in our most difficult and darkest moments.

If only it was confined to those whose faces and names I had known before. The uprising is an act of Cupid.

I cannot count the friends I have made from one end of the country to the other. I don't know the real names of most of them, nor their ages, backgrounds or affiliations. Via the virtual world I have walked with them around the places they come from, places I have never been. The names of cities and regions sound different now. They are all new and we are rediscovering them. They all belong to us, as far as the map stretches. My friend from Baniyas, hiding in a cellar with 'the rats', my friend from

Latakia, full of rage and very kind, my friends from Deraa, Saraqib and Homs: all of us have vowed to meet in Freedom Square. The truth is that Freedom Square has become a necessity, not to complete the revolution, but because we have set dozens of dates to meet with friends there, and friends don't break a date.

Of course once this goal is achieved, once these friends of different ages and backgrounds and beliefs have finally met, there will be little left to bind them save a beautiful memory and our knowing one another.

I can't believe how long we have been ignorant of one another, holding fast to our childish stereotypes. Those years of fear, of turning inward, threw up so many obstacles between us.

The most wonderful thing about my friends is that they never stop being joyful, whether before the arrest or afterwards, before the demonstration or afterwards, before the raid, or afterwards, it makes no difference. They never stop expressing their astonishment at themselves and others, or celebrating the freedom that remains till now a possibility.

The most wonderful thing about my friends is that they're here, filling the country with what it has been lacking for so long: affection and freedom.

Translated from Arabic by Robin Moger.

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