

Kinana ISSA

From *A Strand of Hair*
novel-in-progress

Fifty
Light floods me

Zero
I drown in darkness

Fifty... Zero... Fifty...

Sixty fifties and zeroes a second playing with her eyes, and in the end she sees only light. There is nothing strange about this. Every neon light in the world works this way: a fifty kilohertz frequency blinking on and off and leaving our eyes with the illusion of unbroken illumination. In fact, it's alternations of light and dark which, were they clear to the naked eye, would send a girl raving mad in half an hour, but unseen as they are, they act more like dripping water cutting slowly and steadily into a rock. It just needs time.

Zero
It wasn't the neon light alone that was carving this cleft through Loujain's head. It seemed as though everything was conspiring against what remained of her mental faculties, and her four years spent studying medicine was not sufficient for her to understand what exactly was happening up there. Would she be better off if everything was sunk in darkness? Would that allow her to switch off her heightened senses and sink into forgetfulness? Or would it only leave her more alert, to prevent her waking to the sound of a rat gnawing at her genitals?

Fifty
Her house is in the centre of town. Her family chose it carefully, so it would be full of sunlight for as much of the day as possible. Sunlight strengthens your immunity, prevents depression and lightens your bones—plus it kills all the microbes and harmful insects that hide in the mattress. But Loujain, once she'd taken possession of her own room, always made sure to lower the blind so that she could sit there naked, or nearly so, without the neighbours' glances bothering her.

Zero
The light was unending, wan, dull. She couldn't tell if the wan-ness was a quality in the light or in the shabby yellowed walls that absorbed all its rays; it was the first time she'd tried to work it out. Loujain had never before allowed the light or the reek of rot to reach her. The whole room, with its neon, its damp, its insects great and small, lay outside the bounds of her understanding. Her six senses were tuned to considering what was taking place outside the door of the room, no more, and everything else left to run on the highly consistent autopilot program in her head—from killing cockroaches to welcoming the occasional and deeply disgruntled female visitors who are announced by approaching footsteps on the other side of the door.

Fifty

All social visits began the same way. Her parents would enter the house with relatives or friends, men and women assembling in a single room to swap small talk and social niceties, then the men would come together in one circle and the women gather in another. Until the age of ten, Loujain had been free to move between the two circles and had always chosen the men. It wasn't clear to her whether this was because she found the men's conversation more interesting, or because she found it irritating to observe her mother's boredom during conversations about family matters and her contrasting enthusiasm when the topic was eggplant preserve, particularly as her working days at the Organization for Family Affairs left her no time to make anything other than lunch and supper.

-|-

Like a blind man trying to see with his fingertips, Loujain closes her eyes and begins to feel the features of her face to find out if anything has changed in the past two months, but everything seems strange and distended when approached so gently and slowly. Her eye sockets, both delicate and solid, are not disfigured by any deep depressions as was suggested to her by the shape of her protuberant eyes. Her narrow cheeks sprawl out before her thin fingers like two vast desert wastes, her nose towering up between them like a sharp-peaked mountain that widens as it falls to a smooth, empty plain, after which she reaches the limits of her face, limits that tell her nothing of its shape. She has nothing with which to compare all these new details. Everything she knows about her face she learnt from the mirror. The only fixed point, it seems, is the thickness of her eyebrows, which she hasn't allowed to grow like this for some eighteen years; etched in her mind, their wildness perches above the eyes of a teenager of a teenager who sees all the minor details that nobody but her can see. But even this fixed point is not so fixed, for they feel like a songbird's down, brushing light and delicate against her fingertips. How is it the eye perceives this fragile soft creature to be a dense and straggling thicket in such sore need of trimming and pruning—of redrawing even—to lend her face its feminine appearance .

This is not the first time she's tried touching her face, but it is the first time that she has attempted to discover what it looks like without an intermediary—and it does not look as though she takes much pleasure from the discovery, indeed, she feels as though her face has belonged to someone else all this while, that she desperately needs to reclaim it this very instant. She takes a deep breath, closes her eyes for a long time, and begins elsewhere. Her waist. Maybe it will tell her if her face has become rounder or more drawn. But that's no good, either, for although the roundness of her face is affected by a noticeable change in weight, four kilos up or down, feeling about her waist with her bare hand is not so easy, since the folds left by her sudden weight loss -following the end of the last love affair - have enfolded her hips in a jelly-like blanket that she's been too squeamish to try to touch before. She has, it seems, begun to realise that the jelly blanket is not the only thing preventing her from reclaiming herself in this place. Loss, any loss, does not just cause skin and muscle to grow slack, it leaves behind much flab in the heart, as well.

Loujain' eyelids begin to tremble and part and the white neon rays glimmer through her lashes, blotches of light that slowly widen to reveal to her the shape of the cell, familiar to the point of detachment: mouldy, unpainted walls, stretching out two metres then a meter across, behind which hides a small washroom that leaves little space: enough for the solid black door to open and shut. Like all the cells of this world, this one's walls are covered in writing and she is genuinely unable to understand how the prisoners have scratched all these words, because no one enters without a thorough search, which would prevent the prisoners bringing anything, even paper tissues, in with them. She envies those who have scratched on the walls their ability to do so, not because she wants to scratch her name, but

because she, from her first day, realised the importance of recording something to mark the time. Were it not for breakfast neither she nor any of the other prisoners would know that only a single day has passed between one sleep and the next and even this knowledge that a new day had dawned would not have been enough to ensure a precise reckoning, for after a fifth day only trained minds are able to preserve calendrical precision. Loujain, with her slack mind, can only pluck a woolen thread each breakfast-time from the military-issue blankets that constitute both her bed and its covering and knot it, to know that she has spent two whole months here and that today is the very day she was born thirty three years ago.

-2-

“The heavens’ teeth were chattering with the cold and it had nothing at hand to warm itself but a few clouds, so it wove them into a greatcoat and put it on. After a while the warmth began to spread through its body and the sweat fell copiously to cover the ground until the Damascus dust gave out the scent of the skies and it was then that I was born... That’s what my sister, six years older, told me, though my mother remembers nothing about that day except the reek of the hospital’s disinfectant and the doctor’s green scrubs in the anaesthetic room. I had to go with mother to the hospital so she could take me out from inside her because her secret cord was wrapped two times around my neck, and had she done it without a doctor’s assistance I would have turned blue and choked... Before I was born the doctor had discovered this using a device that showed everything inside her belly on a little screen, and he saved me. My mother might not remember what happened on the day I was born but she clearly remembered the day she found out I was in her. That summer my grandmother had died from the heat but mother hadn’t thought it possible to die from the heat and believed that the doctors, not knowing the real reason, had told her that this was the cause of death.”

Loujain’s heart thumped with alarm as the teacher read out her essay in front of the class and she watched the other children for signs of displeasure or gratification but their features told her nothing. Even the teacher’s face wasn’t beaming with its usual satisfaction and pride. Loujain started to think that she’d made a mistake in handing in her homework without consulting her father’s opinion of what she’d written. So what if he rewrote her entire essay or launched into a lecture on the importance of proper structure? And even though her father’s intervention might lead the other children to hold her essay in contempt she would at least have earned her teacher’s approval—but as for now... Loujain was unable to stay sunk in these thoughts for long, brought up short by the sound of the teacher asking the children what mistake had been made in the essay. Loujain had had a suspicion that the teacher was not singing her praises as she usually did, but it had never occurred to her that she might have made a mistake of any kind: her father was a professor in the department of Arabic literature at Damascus University and only spoke to his children and acquaintances in purest classical Arabic. Though his neighbours and his children’s friends found this habit laughable it gave Loujain, turned ten today, linguistic abilities beyond the reach of some of father’s students. And yet, it appeared that she had made a mistake. What could it be? And why hadn’t the teacher simply corrected it as she recited the essay to the class instead of asking everyone to identify it?

In seconds the room was alive with murmurs as the children tried to locate the error: “Anaesthetic room?” “Dying of heat?” “The doctors were ignorant?” “A device that showed the belly’s insides?” It was like those nightmares in which the other children laughed at her for coming to school in her pyjamas or barefoot, and it made Loujain so dizzy that she would have thrown up had the teacher’s angry voice not saved her:

“Raise your hand if you have the answer. I won’t have mayhem in my class. If you open your mouth without my permission I shall be forced to call your parents or send you to the headmistress’s office to be punished.”

This was enough to restore order in the room and Loujain was at last able to lift her head, in time to see the teacher single out Sanaa—her rival for grades and good reports—to give the answer:

“There’s no way her mother wouldn’t remember anything about the day she was born. Mothers remember every last thing about their children.”

A boy called Sami, smitten with Sanaa, couldn’t resist the opportunity to provoke the object of his admiration:

“And did your mother remember everything when you asked her?”

“She didn’t tell me anything because she’s travelling. But she remembers everything.”

“Mothers don’t know everything. Yesterday my mum told me off for something I didn’t do and I think Loujain’s mistake was that she didn’t tell us how the sun wove the greatcoat...”

“The sun could easily weave a coat with a loom or knitting needles but there’s no way her mother could...”

“Sanaa dear, mothers might sometimes forget things because of the pain and difficulty of childbirth. Your friend Loujain was wrong when she said that the sun wore the clouds to keep warm in winter. The truth is that those clouds cause the cold by blocking the sun’s rays. While we are writing our essays it’s important to bear scientific facts in mind and not ignore them. Isn’t that right, Loujain dear?”

Loujain had no idea, as she nodded her head, that her teacher was wrong about this. Eight years separated her from the geography lesson that would reveal the truth, and when that moment came, her ten-year-old self was farther than her imagination could carry her: all she could do then was loosen the knot of her orange scarf to let the air into her lungs.

-3-

It wasn’t long before the cold began to burn Loujain’s throat and to give herself a little extra protection she fastened the top button of her shirt, but even so her neck remained exposed and chilly. The neckline of the light woolen cardigan she wore on top was extremely low and she had no intention of taking it off and wrapping it around her throat lest she exposed the rest of her body to the cold. Except for the military issue blankets there was nothing to keep her warm, which left her with two options: the prick of the cold or the prick of the cheap woolen blankets against her skin, whose only contribution would be to start her coughing. After a little thought she came up with a third option: using the cell. She paced up and down, which helped spread a little warmth through her body, but as soon as she stopped the cold returned to sear her throat more savagely than before.

Loujain refused to allow the cold to ruin the first moments of calm she had experienced in this place and she lay on the ground, fashioned one of the blankets into a pillow, laid her head on it and covered herself with two more. Only yesterday she had shared this very space with three other women. Their incessant clamour had drowned out sound of the guards, forcing her to sit by the steel door with her back against it if she wanted to hear the sound of their approaching footsteps and have time to concoct the lies she’d tell them. Now, with the interrogations over and the whole cell to herself she could sit anywhere in the room and think about whatever she liked. The other women had spent their time stirring up endless squabbles with the guards, surrendering to them completely or otherwise weeping constantly. As far as Loujain was concerned, these reactions were nothing more than a despairing admission of the jailor’s power, as though they were saying, “I resist so that he can force me to submit,

or he forces me to submit without resistance,” while her tireless efforts to make herself at home appeared to many of the female detainees as “un-revolutionary and weak”—even as this lack of rebelliousness enabled her to strip their captors of their power. She never allowed any of the guards or interrogators to feel as though they had any power over her by acting as though it were she who had chosen to be here and could leave any time she wanted.

The experience of being detained had not lived up to her expectations. Not only had the cell not been filled with light—contrary to descriptions in poems—it also became clear she would enjoy no “solidarity” with her fellow prisoners. The departure of her competitors for the military-issue blankets had been far and away the best thing that happened during her time inside. Now, at last, she was able to relax and flee into her waking dreams. But what she hadn’t anticipated was that, following the departure of the voluble cellmates who’d prevented her sleeping, she would encounter a new adversary in the cell’s permanently-switched-on white neon light.

The light was capable of penetrating her closed eyelids and even after she had removed her cardigan and covered her face with it, the white spots continue to dance about inside her head. After a bit she got up and went over to the only source of water allowed to her, the faucet attached to the toilet bowl in the little cabinet in one corner of the cell. She smeared her face with water then returned to her place on the floor.

Once she’d managed to overcome the nagging artificial light and her body had begun to relax she heard the sound of a woman coming from the nearby interrogation room, and she took her cardigan off her head and sprang towards the cell door. Sweeping locks of brown hair from her ear she pressed it against the cold metal door. Fractured, unintelligible words followed by the sound of approaching footsteps, which sent her back to her position on the floor. A short while later the door opened to reveal the face of a pale girl with long, black-brown hair. Loujain’s whole body froze. As the new girl was taking in the filthy place she’d just entered she was startled by the sound of Loujain’s angry voice: “I don’t want you here!”

Nashwa's nostrils expanded and her facial muscles contracted, announcing that she was about to explode. But her experience with Loujain’s haughty attitude, which could get Nashwa to jump off the floor in response to Loujain’s silence and haughty stare, stopped her, and the two girls fell into a long silence, only interrupted by the sound of cooking pots and a distant scream of a prisoner—something that Nashwa thought it to be an angry security officer trying to rush the cook in order to get his food.

Nashwa noticed that Loujain's clothes were really funny —“who would wear a dotted red shirt with a buttonless fuchsia wool jacket!”--she took this thought out of her head and checked out the cell. It was a small dirty room, barely fit for two sleeping persons, and on the floor were two coarse brown blankets, obviously both her bed and cover for this night.

This sight drowned her mind in blank silence, which lasted for hours, or maybe a couple of minutes. In a cell, time is rarely recognized, even for those who know by heart all prayers I times.

The sound of mosque’s aazan was the only voice able to penetrate the thick walls of the Security Branch, the only voice that reminds you of outside world. The only proof that somewhere a clock hand is changing its position and shadows are growing bigger or smaller with the rotation cycle of earth around the sun.

But that silence was not broken by the aazan; it was Loujain's heartbeats that grew louder, to tell them both, that prison guards were on their way. Loujain knew it was dinner time; she stood in the corner of the cell and bent down. That made Nashwa notice a plastic bowl filled with some disgusting food.

Loujain took the bowl and stepped up on a small threshold covered with a blue plastic curtain, hiding a room inside the cell.

Nashwa heard the sound of water running behind the curtain and was curious. Turning to find an answer to the questions that began jumping in her head, she felt something cold tickling her, then realized the black door behind her was squeaking. Nashwa moved away while Loujain was reaching the door with what now was an empty and wet bowl. She bent down to put her bowl on the floor and brought in another one, filled with yellow liquid. Then she stuck her head outside the cell and yelled “we're out of bread!”

For some reason, this phrase reminded Nashwa of her mother. She saw her covering her head quickly with a white veil and running after her husband, her toes hanging out of her black slippers:

- Abou Khaled, don't forget the bread...
- Have I ever forgotten it?

Then her mother would come back mumbling “Have I ever forgotten it, have you ever remembered without me telling you a thousand times.”

The sound of the bread bag hitting the floor saved Nashwa from remembering what would happen next. And got her back to Loujain's face and hazel eyes while she was rolling up the bread pieces and dipping them into the yellow liquid. On her third cone, without turning her head, Loujain told Nashwa coldly, “No one eats the first day, but I would advise you to eat something so you may be able to bear this cold.” Nashwa didn't care about the food, but she was curious about the bread-coning thing: “why are you using bread instead of a spoon?” As expected, Loujain gave Nashwa a sarcastic smile: “metal is not allowed in here.” The answer Nashwa got was not satisfying, as she thought a plastic spoon might be a reasonable alternative. But she has already regretted asking Loujain in the first place. She swallowed her words and continued watching Loujain coning the bread. Nashwa felt thirsty and wanted to ask for water, but instead heard herself saying: “I don't understand why you're always angry. And neither do I understand the grudge you've been holding against me all these years. Now I'm in front of you, in a cell underground, incapable of thinking about my interrogation or the reason that got me here in the first place. All I can think about is how much easier it is to ask my jailor for water than to ask you about anything.”

The distraught Nashwa walked angrily towards the divider to bring some water from the room she thought was a small kitchen. But when she lifted the blue plastic curtain, she froze and her eyes started to fill with tears.

Even with her back turned, Loujain was able to tell what was going on. And while she was dipping her tenth cone in the bowl, she groaned in an un-used voice: “This is exactly what I needed, the tears of bourgeoisie, and their disappointment with the bad quality of service in the Security Branch.”

But Loujain remembered the first time she took a drink of water in the cell, and a thread of invisible empathy started to form towards Nashwa. Loujain did not go stiff at that time, and did not cry. She just remembered the alley where her cousin Khadija lived. She remembered how dirty the house was despite Khadija's daily cleaning routine, with the army soap her husband used to bring back from his long military duty shifts. The alley was always dark no matter what time of the day or year it was, and it had the same smell as this cell. But somehow it did not seem to matter to Khadija's children: they enjoyed playing soccer there, their feet half-shod. Afterwards they would rush inside, happily, to feed their turtle some lettuce leaves lifted from the floor of Abou Adnan's grocery shop.

The cell's "kitchenette" was just like Khadija's toilet-- the same bare concrete walls turned yellow, and the same stinky smell left by humidity and time, which neither Khadija's cracked hands nor the cake of army soap could get clean.

It was the same as Khadija's toilet but...The protruding water pipe², wrapped in plastic to prevent it from leaking, was only used for anal cleansing and flushing excrement down the hole. Not, as here, for dishwashing, face cleaning, and drinking as well. While Loujain was trying to stop the flow of memory that brought back Khadija's weak body with its expansive blue and violet bruises, the cell's door screeched again, making her body shudder in fear.

"Loujain, come here" Abou Nader's bored voice came from outside the cell, signaling the start time of Loujain's interrogation. It also dried Nashwa's tears and drove her to the door to ask the jailor "may I have a glass of water?" Abou Nader pushed the door wide open, looked at Loujain who was putting on her sandals and said indifferently "give her some water." The image of the water pipe made Nashwa scream in disgust, as if summoning all her religious upbringing: "but the water in toilet is impure, the devil drinks with you!" Abou Nader gave Nashwa a careless smile and said: "Hurry up Loujain, what are you waiting for." Loujain rushed out and the door was closed right away, leaving Nashwa alone with her tears.

All that Loujan could see walking behind Abou Nader was Khadija's body, her bruises which, no matter where they appeared, always seemed fresh, whenever they would pay her a visit. Loujain never understood why she was haunted by that image since Khadija's death. But when she dipped her thumb in the blue ink to seal her confession report, instead of her thumbprint she saw her mother's swollen eye looking at her.

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

*

An extract from "The Gardens Speak"- a sound installation

About Khalid

My child, what do you want with my story?

I really don't have it in me, neither to speak nor to complain. My heart aches for my country and its children. My heart goes out for Hama, which—after everything it had been through—is witnessing the return of Assad as he chokes its children and crushes their hearts. I would have preferred to be sitting in my shop right now, selling potato chips and cola to children rather than lying [flat on my back]here telling you my story. Or I could be enjoying a cup of tea with my neighbour Abu Ahmad before we both head out to a protest.

I would have preferred that my father, uncle, and many of my neighbours had not died as martyrs in the 1982 Hama massacre committed by Assad.

I would have preferred to not have to think about the martyrs that might be lying under my shop where I am every day. Wondering whether the sound of children coming in and out of the place is bothering them or comforting them. I would have preferred to be in your place, listening to the spirits whispering in my ear.

In short, my name is Abu Khalid. I'm not going to tell you my full name, nor give you information that would reveal my identity. I still have four children in Hama. The eldest is ten years of old. If Bashar's people know that I'm telling you my story, they will disappear them and their mother. Not even a genie could find them then. You think those who die under oppression rest in peace? The tyranny follows you even to your grave.

I'm not addressing you as my child because I'm old. I'm forty years only. But this is what I call everyone. I don't know, it's what shopkeepers do where I come from.

I'm not an activist, nor a revolutionary, nor do I even know how to talk politics. I didn't even pass the sixth grade.

My whole life, I've tried to avoid confrontation and hope that God will help us. But to see your country's children dying in front of you is something that would make a stone speak.

Like others, I was quite afraid at first. What our city has seen since the day that damned father took power cannot be comprehended. What you are seeing today, our families saw much worse in their days. Today, the Internet and phone cameras are letting you see what is happening. But what happened to us during the 1980s wasn't talked about except in whispers.

Nobody really knows how it all started in Hama. But it certainly didn't start in the 1980s. Long before, since 1963—when the Ba'th Party came to power—nobody accepted the party and its domination. Syrians, my child, were not used to being silent in the face of oppression. Nor were they used to someone silencing them. Those before us would come out every few years and say they rejected what was happening. In the 1980s, that damned father said that all of Hama was Muslim Brotherhood even though his jails were filled with communists and Christians. The blood that soaked the ground was not only of Muslims. There isn't a home in Hama that doesn't have a prisoner or a martyr.

After that damned one, the father of the current damned one, was able to get control of the city, and kill whoever stood up to him at the time, he demolished the city and built it as he pleased. He built entire new neighbourhoods on top of mass graves as if nothing ever happened. It felt like the walls of homes were the only witnesses. But what happened lives inside of all of us my child, everyday, and every hour. Those who were orphaned don't suddenly forget that they are parentless, nor they forget who orphaned them.

Residents of Hama are the only ones who knew what this regime was capable of. That's why we thought about it a hundred times before we went out into the streets. But even with all our fears, memories, and dripping blood, we could not remain silent.

We went out my child, and we protested. When we saw Assad's soldiers far away and not approaching us, we thought that maybe this time it would be different. Our hearts trembled inside as we wondered whether it was possible that we could finally get rid of this nightmare and no longer be afraid. In the end, it turned out the damned one was letting us all come together, protest and sing in the streets, so he could squash us all together at once.

But from today until doomsday, the million-man rallies of Hama and their videos will remain, to show the world what Syria could have looked like when it belongs to us, not to Assad. All of Hama participated in the protests. Some would go out and chant, others would organize the protests, and others would distribute food and drink to protesters. After the protests, we all get together to clean the streets. During Ramadan, we would even distribute food and sweets to Assad's soldiers during the time of breaking the fast. We felt like we were all united.

But the joy did not last. The army came in, and set up checkpoints inside of Hama. You could no longer reach a nearby neighbourhood. Even with this my child, the protests did not stop. Instead of all of us gathering in the al-Assi Square, we started going out to protest in our individual neighbourhoods. We

chanted as loud as we could so that we would warm the heart of our Hama brothers in the nearby neighbourhood, so that they would know that—despite everything—the revolution is still there. I never once asked my neighbours why they were going out to protests. But I knew deep down inside that they, like me, were dreaming that Assad would leave and that our children would have the life that we were all deprived of. In response to our protests, the shelling started. Artillery, tanks, and airplanes were shocking and awing the neighbourhoods. But the protests continued. And I kept going to my store to sell potato chips and cola to the kids. I kept drinking tea with Abu Ahmad and Abu Adnan before we go to prayers or to protests. Then, one time, at seven in the evening on a Wednesday, I closed the glass door of the store and placed a sign that read: Will return after evening prayers. I tightened my belt, dusted off my white shirt, and headed out to the mosque with our neighbour Abu Adnan.

Every Syrian expects death at any moment. But it didn't occur to me at the time, not for a second, that my turn was coming that day. Thank God I died quickly. Shrapnel from a mortar shell went straight to my heart. Without feeling any pain, it sent me to where my father is.

My child, if you knew what my neighbours told me as they stood by my grave, you would know that the lucky ones amongst us are the dead. The day of my burial, I was searching for my kids. But I didn't hear any of them. I heard the voices of my four brothers. There were also a few voices I recognized as my neighbours. There were other voices I heard for the first time.

I wish my kids had the chance that I didn't have—to attend their father's funeral and say farewell. But the shelling was shaking the ground that day. They wouldn't let the kids come. When they took me out of the coffin to bury me, I could tell from the smell that I was in the neighbourhood garden. I could also tell from the bird that I found lying next to me. My kids buried it there after it died, like me, under the shelling. I remember how my kids cried over the bird that day. I wonder what they did when I died. I wonder if they will always remember that their father died a martyr. Or maybe they won't know anything at all while they live under the rule of Hafez the son of Bashar al-Assad—I fear that they might be told what was registered in the government documents: that I was killed at the hands of some terrorist gang.

Bassel Shehadeh

Did no one die but myself?

Or is it being young artists from a minority group what makes me a shining star everyone would love to talk about?

It's not that I don't like myself. But I, myself, am not important. What is important is the story of the revolution I was trying to live, the one I was trying to film, so the world may see it as it is. This revolution that started with a cry of freedom in Souq-Al-Harika. Which before, all our talks about freedom were merely hypothesizing.

Back before the revolution, I used to be an IT engineer with the United Nations. But maybe because of my diabetes, I had always felt that my life was too short to be spent behind a desk. And even though I wouldn't miss a hiking trip, a concert or a film screening alongside with my job, I felt it wasn't enough. My soul needed more; it needed to thrive in the world of arts and freedom, this need that drove me eventually, at the age of twenty-eight, to take a final decision: I will not reach the age of thirty without doing everything I dreamed of.

The first thing I did, was establishing a cinema club with my friends. It was a cosy little club in a I in old Damascus. It was a place for other young people like us, to watch independent films and discuss them. I remember fighting with my friends about who was going to introduce the film. They were shy, and I was even shyer. I hated being in the spotlight. I liked working in the quiet. For me, freedom is not just about following that internal voice in us. Freedom, in its simplicity, does not go with love of fame. But even our little club could not escape the eyes of Assad intelligence. They'd pop in every few days to ask all sort of questions: why, how, and what agenda does this club serve. Eventually, the owner got tired and asked us to go find some other place. Then, I decided to start a project I had been thinking about for a long time: a motorcycle trip all the way down to India. And for that purpose I bought myself a bike that was filthy and old, fixed it and cleaned it, and for some reason I don't know, I named it Lenin.

Now I'm not going to take you with me in this trip, nor will I tell you about my first short film. And I will not talk to you about my hopes that were all suspended on my scholarship application to study filmmaking in the US, nor about the mixed up feelings when I was accepted, after coming back from India. Because, like I said before, what's important here is not my story—what really matters is the story that melted us all together in it, *The Syrian Revolution Story*.

I only needed to talk about my decision, because without it you wouldn't understand how the revolution in Syria changed us, and challenged all our understanding for what the word "freedom" really means. For a moment, I thought I found freedom during my road trip, but when I returned to my country looking for my friends to tell them my story, I realized they were the ones with stories to tell. They told me about the protest they held at the Libyan embassy in solidarity with the Libyan revolution, how it turned into a protest demanding freedom, and how security forces attacked them and beat them back then. They told me about their protest in front of the Ministry of Justice demanding the release of detainees. About the funeral of Omar Amirly, the Syrian director who made the most beautiful Syrian films banned in this country because they were critical of the regime. They told me about Dar'a, and how the children of Dar'a had their fingernails pulled out because they wrote, "The people want the fall of the regime" on their school walls.

At the time, my friends had started meeting up, where each one identifying someone they trusted, so they could organize civil protests. They let me in, and we started protesting, filming, and distributing leaflets. I remember the first time I went out to distribute fliers with my friends. It was the first time I saw her: A free young woman, crazy like me, with long black hair and eyes as brown as coffee beans. Her name was Rand. She was laughing the entire time, as if there were no security forces, no soldiers, no anything. It was just as if we were on our first date and the leaflets we were throwing were rose petals I was offering her, dropping from our hands as we were walking. Rand was like the hope that sprang up inside us. The hope that made us all free, after we had been dead inside, without knowing. It was the first time love tasted like freedom. It was the first time freedom tasted like love.

The demonstrations in Syria kept going. But the bigger they got, the more beatings and shootings there were. It seemed as if the word freedom alone could shake the throne of the Ba'th regime. And demonstrations would put the entire army on alert, as if the country was going to war, or the protesters were an opposing army.

Every thing was turned upside down in Homs, Banyas, Dar'a, and Rif Dimashq. My friends and I were trying to get Damascus to come out with the same force. It wasn't long before it happened in Damascus. Demonstrators in Midan, Barza, al-Qaboun, and Rukn al-Deen started chanting: "Freedom forever whether you like it or not, Assad!"

They arrested me at one of the protests. The thug that detained me asked me if I wanted freedom. I couldn't lie, and so I shook my head in a movement that implied a yes, what made him beat me and stomp on me as if I had cursed his mother, or killed his loved ones. I reached the security branch prison cell with my clothes all torn up and feeling like shit. And while my friends were outside trying everything to get us out, I was staring at a guy named Ahmad, known as the Spray Man. He was a young man from Barza that used to graffiti the word "freedom" on the walls. He got beaten so much that he lost the hearing in his left ear, and who, contrary to myself who didn't stay imprisoned for long, might still be in there today. People like Ahmad made me feel so small, and created in me a weird sense of disgust towards the word "intellectual". Because thanks to this "intellectual" label put on us, we got out, while people like Ahmad are still rotting in the prison cells, unheard from. And for this label, the media attacked the regime for imprisoning us, and for it we were not tortured, nor kept imprisoned for long. They didn't want the headache, especially since state media was claiming that all the detainees were foreign agents, Islamists, and terrorists.

After I got out of prison, and in the middle of this mess, I got my scholarship to study filmmaking in the US that I had worked so much for. And after a long struggle with myself, I decided to go. Before leaving, I took Rand to Saint Moussa Monastery in the mountains. I used to go there and visit Father Paulo to cleanse my soul a bit. On the first step of the long staircase that lead up to the monastery, I told Rand that I loved her. And on the last step on our way back down, I carried her to Hama so we could go celebrate our love over there, where million protesters were filling the streets. I wanted us to live some of the best moments of the revolution together before I would leave. And it turned out that it was our last chance to live the beauty of Hama's protests, because on our way back, the tanks were on their way to level the city.

Afterwards I left Syria, and made my first film in the US about the revolution. But there was very little to do other than download clips from YouTube and interview well known activists and intellectuals in the US to record their solidarity with the revolution. But this wasn't the filmmaking I wanted to do. The place for filmmaking and revolution was in Syria. That's why I decided to leave everything and return back home.

When I got back to Damascus, Rand was working with her friend on "Freedom Christmas." They wanted to bring Santa Claus to the demonstrations and give kids in Damascus, Rif al-Sham, and Homs some Christmas presents. At the time, half our friends were either detained, just getting out of prison, or missing. It wasn't just protesters that were dying. Entire cities and villages were being raised and shelled, and civilians were dying out of the regime's fear of freedom. But even with all of this, the Syrian people were willing to pay any price for their freedom. The revolution in Homs would enchant me, as did its people. They could laugh in the face of pain, even under the constant shelling, they could find a joke in everything. With every joke they came up with, Assad's anger towards them would grow and their homes would be destroyed. I just wanted to go there, because for me, I couldn't envision filming except in Homs, the capital of the revolution. At that time, a brave girlfriend of mine that I will call X for her own safety, a young woman who would put me to shame with her strength and sensitivity, wanted to go to Homs and train some youth in filming. She asked me to come with her if I wanted. And I, of course, was waiting for such a chance.

We went to old Homs together. The revolution had taken up arms by then. Some armed groups would protect the demonstrations from security forces. Other armed groups would protect the area from incursions by Assad's army. We met a young man named Abu-Ibrahim on the front lines. He was a computer-engineering student before the revolution. But now he was a photographer. He would stand with the Free Syrian Army on the front lines to film what was happening. He showed me some of his footage. It had a lot of talent. So I convinced him to come to the workshop we were organizing.

The training took place in a simple house, a place where nothing was available but two chairs, and we were sitting on the floor most of the time. But the excitement of the participants and their faith in what they were doing made it the most amazing place on earth. I started going back and forth to Homs to both film and train other people in filming. I'd organize my material in Damascus, and if I had time I'd do some editing. I made three short films, and collected material for two other feature films. One of the short films was about the first year anniversary of the revolution, which my activist friends asked me to help with. I decided to film in more than one city that joined the revolution. So camera in hand, my brave friend "X" and I went out to film in Dar'a, Homs, Hama, Sallamiyya, and Damascus. We were collecting stories from the start of the revolution. We had another girl friend helping us as well, she filmed women in Douma, where they played a much more important role than the men. While I was editing the film, the computer crashed and I lost all my material. That day, the world shut its doors in my face. I wasn't too upset about the work that I had put in, but more upset about the work of my friends, and the voice of the people that won't reach anyone, those people I promised that the entire world would hear them on March 15th, 2012.

My friends were like the dead that day. My insulin was so low that I was about to faint. So I gave myself a shot and tried to loosen them up. I showed them some funny videos, and we started to talk about different things. With time, we got over it.

I wanted to go back to Homs even though my worst enemy, diabetes, was getting worse. I was afraid I was going to go blind or become paralyzed. But I didn't let the fear overwhelm me, I treated it as I treated the sound of bullets and shelling, with strong will and faith. Also, my love, Rand, and I had started talking about getting married and we were naming our children. She didn't want me to go back to Homs. I was scared just like her. But there were people waiting to complete their training. The only thing I could do to ease my troubled soul was visiting Father Paulo on Holy Thursday before heading from there to Homs, not knowing it was going to be my last trip. It was five days after the Houla¹ massacre; I was in old Homs with Ali, Muhammad, Imad, and Abu-Ibrahim filming when a mortar shell dropped on us. I don't know why, but this time it didn't miss us as it usually does. It came right down on top of us. All of a sudden, those four young men whose freedom, faith, and love for the country I respected, died all together, and I died with them.

At our funeral, even with all the shelling coming down, the people of Homs insisted on taking me to the Umm al-Zinnar church so that my body would be prayed over before I was buried. My friends came to my funeral. With them came my ex-girlfriend and my Rand. They covered my white coffin with pomegranate flower petals, held hands and sang for me. They cried so much that day, and I only wish I would have held hands with them, to be able to sing and cry with them.

Even though I was already buried in Homs, my friends in Damascus decided to organize a funeral prayer at a church in Damascus. Every time they hung an announcement on the wall, the security agents would tear it down. The regime also sent instructions to the priest forbidding the church from holding any funeral ceremonies, forbidding people from praying for my soul and crying for me. But my friends were brave and free. They didn't let this stop them. They stood in the street in front of the church, and recited both the Christian and Muslim prayers: The Lord prayer, and Al Fatiha². They also sang the Syrian anthem for me. But the regime thugs couldn't stand the sight of that, so they attacked with sticks and shot four bullets into the air to disperse everyone before it turned into a demonstration.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Houla_massacre

² The first chapter of the Quran. Its seven *ayat* (verses) are a prayer for God's guidance, and to stress His Lordship and Mercy. This chapter has an essential role in *salaat* (daily prayer) and is usually recited for eternal mercy for the soul of the dead.

I died when the revolution was in its height. And my story was in its beginning. I didn't get a chance to see the lost materials of my film that my friends could retrieve; they aired my film on TV without any further editing, exactly one year later on March 15th, 2013. And there is other footage I left behind, which my friends are working to bring to life, as I would have wanted. I died before the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria appeared, and did not see them hijack the revolution and detain its activists in the name of Islam. Nor was I there when they kidnapped Father Paulo, whose support for the revolution was clear from day one. I wish I could be standing with my friends today, chanting against both the regime and ISIS.

Maybe I died too early. But I can't complain, because in reality I lived and died exactly the way I wanted.

[...]