

From My Story...

Alaa: “impulsive just like the revolution”

“Mom, what does homeland mean?”, asked my five and half-year-old son a few days ago. I got confused and stuttered, I didn’t know how to explain to him what homeland meant to his mother since I had lived my entire life displaced in my own country, even before I experienced displacement personally. When my father was young, he was displaced from Golan, he and his family had tasted the bitterness of displacement and prejudices. Despite that, I loved Golan as if I had spent my childhood among its farms, apple trees and cold waterfalls.

I used to imagine my father’s village the way he had always told us, with stories about the lands and properties, and I would wonder: what if we were still there, what would our lives be like? But at the same time, I loved Damascus and its old streets which were always filled with the smell of jasmine.

I used to feel love whenever I would escape lectures with my friends and run to the old city to walk in Souq Al-Hamidiyeh, Baramkeh Street, or the Yarmouk camp, I used to feel as if I owned the entire world just by walking in the crowded markets of Damascus.

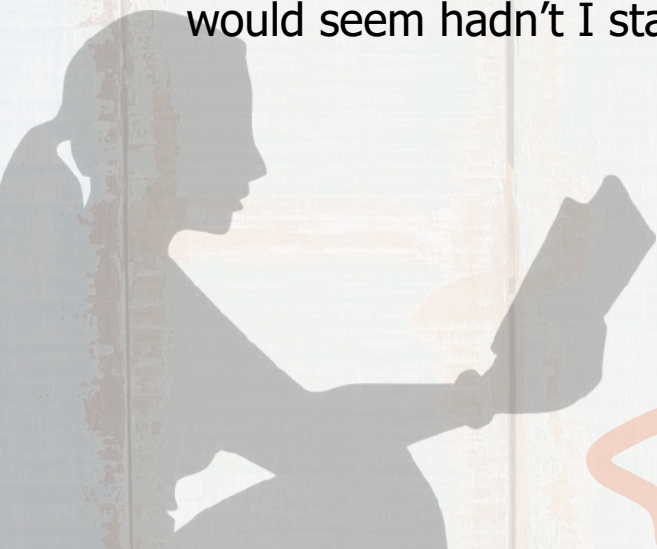


However, all these authentic/real feelings towards Damascus and Golan were a thin cover beneath which lay an identity crisis I'm still experiencing until now. I am a Damascene woman of Golan origins, I love the letter "K" in my accent, and now I have another nationality of a country that I try to belong to, but it keeps .rejecting me

What Does 2011 Mean to Me?

I tried a lot to write about myself and my life, about everything that I have been through during my past years, but as soon as I'd start to write a line or two, I'd find myself stopping after that.

You see, it's not easy to consider sharing crucial details with others, to write about places that you once left without looking back, people you once said goodbye to without a hug, a carry-on bag you couldn't pack, childhood photos you didn't have time to take with you. In this article, you shall read and see how hard I tried to complete it while remembering the stories for you to imagine how incomplete they would seem hadn't I started from there...



2011

Egypt!

I used to overhear the doctors in the emergency department in one of Damascus' private hospitals whispering while they talked about the revolutions taking place in some Arab countries. I was working as a nurse in the same department at the time, and I clearly remember that particular day, the day when Hosni Mubarak stepped down as a result of the Egyptian Revolution.

That day, I was taking some surgical instruments to the sterilization department, when I heard the news and relayed it to the doctor who was working with me at the time, "Mubarak stepped down, he stepped down, the revolution in Egypt Won" I said, and without realizing I continued: "I hope we're next, I hope ours steps down as well". I don't deny that I saw horror on the doctor's face when he said to me in a faint sound, "Amen". Then, he got up from his chair and came close to me whispering in my ear, "The one we have will not step down until he causes bloodbaths". The moment I heard Mubarak's resignation speech, I couldn't control myself and I started crying. I cried bitterly, I, a 20-year-old young woman at the time, didn't know much about politics, power, rights, and freedoms, but I knew very well what it meant to live under an oppressive dictatorial tyrant. I knew what it meant to live robbed of will, being lied to in the name of homeland and patriotism, Patriotism whose principles have been manipulated and distorted by the Syrian regime".



Egypt!

I used to live in the south of Damascus; That forgotten region, where displaced people, sons and daughters of the occupied Syrian Golan and Palestinian refugees made up more than 90% of the population. It was expected that these areas would be among the first to come out against the Syrian regime due to the neglect they had experienced for many years, and this was what exactly happened.

While commuting to work every day, I used to observe the revolution in people's faces in my neighborhoods, in bus stations, in the local markets and everywhere. It seemed that the atmosphere in Damascus had changed since the first spark of the Arab revolutions, and people had become more expectant and more cautious.



Al- Hajar al-Aswad

Monday, March 21, 2011, was not an ordinary day for the people of Al- Hajar al-Aswad. As usual, we were sitting at home after most of us had returned, whether from work, school, or university, but my oldest brother didn't look normal. He was anxious, afraid, and excited all at once. He was checking his phone every second as if he was waiting for an important phone call, and shortly before sunset, he quickly went out. There, I had a feeling that something was going to happen!

I quickly went out after him and as soon as I reached the beginning of the neighborhood I began to hear the sound of chants, "Oh Daraa, We Are With You Until Death". At that moment, I couldn't control myself, I cried bitterly as I joined them in chanting in a faint voice, and then my voice got louder and louder, and I raised it even louder that my throat began to hurt, I would cheer for Daraa and burst in tears at the same time... This was what we have wanted for years, at that moment I realized what we've always wanted, to raise our voices loudly in the face of injustice without fear.

I knew most of the young men participating in the demonstration, our neighbors from Daraa, my brothers, my cousins, my uncles from both sides, university students from our neighborhood, and many people who came from the rest of the neighborhoods in southern Damascus.



I Asked Myself: What Is My Role?

I began to receive information from some young men about the locations of the demonstrations in Al- Hajar al-Aswad and the surrounding neighborhoods. Every time my brother or any of my cousins would see me getting ready to go and join the demonstrations they would try to stop me, but I wouldn't listen. They were afraid for me, especially since I didn't hide my face in the beginning, I didn't understand what it meant for someone to rat on me, at that time, I didn't even care.

I began to participate in the "flying" demonstrations as we used to call them cause they were fast and rapid, I also participated in the demonstrations organized on Fridays, In those demonstrations, I was one of seven people or maybe less, but the number would increase on Fridays, as since the demonstrations started in my area and until mid-2012, the Friday demonstrations used to always come out in large numbers. I tried to help in other ways, I told my brother that I was able to help, but he ignored my request out of fear for me, but I didn't care about his opinion. I kept trying until I was able to communicate with the youth of the coordination one of whom was my cousin, (where the youth of each area used to organize a coordination group to organize the demonstrations).



I Asked Myself: What Is My Role?

We were three or four girls, sometimes more or less, and sometimes I was alone, we would print flags and go out to the streets with our hands full of red paint. I used to carry a bag loaded with banners and sprays with me, the entire 2011, I did not know fear, even when I faced a security or military officer, I would feel that I was stronger than them and that they were afraid of my will.

I was impulsive just like the revolution, seeing nothing but imminent victory. One time, we coordinated as a group of women to issue a video statement denouncing the massacres committed by the Syrian regime in the towns and cities of Homs. I coordinated to film the statement in my home without telling my family, and after we filmed and finished, I hid the flags in one of the closets' shelves. My mother was surprised when she saw it. She was proud of her daughter, but her fear for me started to increase.

Every time the regime increased its barbarism and oppression, the young men's need for us as women increased, and thus they became more flexible and more receptive to our participation. In fact, civilian voices were loud in the early stages of the revolution, while the voices of extremists were barely heard.



Organizing First Aid Points

On April 22, which was known as The Great Friday; Thirteen people from Golan were martyred in Al- Hajar al-Aswad. On this Friday, blood was shed for the first time in the area, one of the victims was standing on the balcony at that time, he was my cousin's husband, and his death was cruel to all of us.

There were dozens of wounded people and we couldn't take them to hospitals for fear that the security forces would follow them and kill them, similar to what happened in Daraa and other areas of Syria, so we decided to equip the area with emergency points.

Then, I began to put out feelers to some doctors that I knew at the time to see if anyone would help me in securing medical supplies. Now that I remember, I thank God that I met doctors who supported the revolutionary movement and the revolutionists, and even some who were neutral, some of the doctors helped me in securing emergency medical supplies, such as anesthesia materials, oxygen cylinders, surgical tools, and others.

With the help of some girls, we distributed them to some safe houses, some of which were open to each other, and which were easy to move and escape from when needed.



Organizing First Aid Points

There is one of the situations that I cannot forget, and if I went back in time, I would never repeat it, as I wasn't able to estimate the extent of danger that would have affected me if I had ever been arrested at the time, which goes as such, I was returning with a doctor named Ahmad in his car, carrying with us large bags filled with Saline serums as well as some antibiotics bills, anesthetics, and surgical sutures, etc. That was Salah's first time visiting Al- Hajar al-Aswad, and when we reached a school called "Ahmed Zael al-Fadel", some security buses passed in front of us. Salah was scared, he had never seen this much security officers all at once, he was living in an area that hadn't witnessed any demonstrations at that time, or even ever until now, so he wasn't accustomed to the scene. I remember that he told me, "Alaa, you're from the area, you can manage the situation, I cannot continue I'm afraid they would arrest me". I felt embarrassed by what he said and was afraid that something would happen to him, so I told him "Drop me off and don't worry about me".

Imagine the scene with me, I got off the car with big bags in my hands, some of which were transparent showing what was inside, I called some of the guys in the coordination and some of my cousins, as well as my brothers, but in that day, no one answered. Mammon, Ammar, Ahmed, nobody answered my calls, and said to myself with a blue face, "Where are you guys, am I calling just to chat for nothing?"



Organizing First Aid Points

I carried the bags and walked near the dumpster, and the security officers were just 300-400 meters away. Suddenly, a yellow taxi stopped next to me, it was our neighbor! I didn't know his opinions about the revolution before that moment, but I had to survive and save myself before the security officers noticed me.

Our neighbor picked the bags up and quickly put them in the car, and we directly set off, "Are you crazy" he turned to me and said halfway through, "The security officers are everywhere today, an officer was assassinated in our neighborhood, what the hell were you doing with these materials?"

Today, I go back in memory to those few meters that separated me from being arrested, and I thank God that I wasn't. Just imagining being held by the regime's intelligence was enough to draw a picture of one of the most horrific moments that would have happened in my life, which is the same feeling that makes me value the experiences of women who were indeed arrested, and who went through this horrific and cruel ordeal with all its exhausting details.

In general, this incident was not the only stupid thing I did at the beginning of the revolution, and I think I have a history full of attitudes that I now call "stupid and suicidal!" But I cannot mention all of them in this article, as I would like to keep some of them for myself.



The Guy with the Green Shirt

On the other hand, not all of my adventures in the revolution were dangerous and suicidal.

Rather, my memory is also filled with adventures full of love and passion, and I remember how some girls used to go out in the big demonstrations in our neighborhood for that gentle, determined young man, "the guy with the kiwi green shirt".

Even though I believe that he won't like it when I talk about this incident, I will make sure to send him this article so that he can remember these small details that added some colors to our days back then.

The guy with the kiwi green shirt didn't like to draw the girls' attention to him, he was a revolutionary guy full of hope and ambition, focusing most of his efforts and will on "Free Syria", therefore, he would postpone everything until Bashar al-Assad falls. He postponed his love, his smile, and his beautiful attractive laugh, he was cold towards all the feelings that were sent to him.

One time, I sent him, along with one of the young men, the flag of the revolution and drowned it with perfume! I didn't expect him to reply or say anything, I knew very well that he could not think of more than one issue. He could not combine two major issues at the same time, love and revolution, so I wasn't surprised that after he received his gift, he called me and said, "You embarrassed me in front of the guys!" I remember that I laughed a lot that day.



The Guy with the Green Shirt

His cold reactions did not bother me at all, on the contrary, loved this part of our time, to love without regret or remorse, to take the initiative and smile and then leave without pain. My only and true desire was for him to remain well always.

I know many love stories that were brought together by the revolution and continued despite the lack of security and the non-stop death surrounding us. I remember how we used to find words of love in the many news bulletins filled with the remains of Syrians, political falsehood, and fake battles.

Eventually, I left Syria on September 3, 2012, when the security forces started going after me. Since then, I have been watching my wounds grow like an old song, I close my eyes from time to time and play an audio clip of the Syrian revolution's songs in an Hourani or Homs voice (the accents of Daraa and Homs). I remember those whose hands held mine and the hands I held, I pray for the souls of those who died, and I hope to meet with those who remain.



The Guy with the Green Shirt

I remembered and wrote, but I didn't write much of what I remembered. I feel that I have lost a lot of faith, however, I still cling to the idea that dreams are not just thoughts or pictures that cannot be seen, but rather they are a reality for us, which we carry here in our deep memories, forever...

Forever is the love that cannot be seen, it ends with our attempts to escape from slavery, to the deceptive freedom that deceives us with the reassurance that relies on what remains alive in us after all these similar years and days!

Alaa Muhammad

