

The Extraordinary Life of a “Daughter of the Revolution”

LILY POURZAND

Voici une série d'instantanés de la vie hors de l'ordinaire d'une petite fille qui a connu la révolution islamique de 1979. C'est l'histoire d'une vie qui fut interrompue par une révolution, une guerre, une violence personnelle et publique et politique, le tout suivi par une émigration forcée. C'est l'histoire d'une jeune femme sans statut au Canada. C'est aussi une histoire de survivance, d'espoir, de résistance, de rêves, de passion et d'engagement

One chilly evening in October 1978, I heard my grandmother's strange and disconcerting warning: “Be careful! A revolution will hijack the ordinary life of a nation, generation after generation.” Although she lacked formal education, my grandmother was wise beyond her years. “A revolution will forever change everyone's life and destiny, even those of lovely little Lily. Do not underestimate the reality.” My grandmother was talking to a couple of young revolutionary relatives who were brimming with the excitement of their grandiose ideological fantasies, as were millions of other Iranian youth in those days. Though I was too little to digest or analyze the true meaning of her multilayered alarm, it is forever etched in my memory. Today, 35 years later and ten thousand kilometers away, I continue to feel the weight of her warning upon me. Somehow, I think, it will be with me so long as I am alive.

At that time, the young revolutionaries did not understand the message imbedded in my grandmother's advice. However, they did realize it a few years later when one of them was jailed and executed by the revolutionary guards because she was a leftist and the other had to flee the country illegally to save her life. I, on the other hand, lived the life my grandmother had predicted on that cold

evening. I lived the extraordinary life of a “daughter of the revolution.”

I had a flourishing childhood brimming with nourishing love. I grew up surrounded by vibrant colours, perfumes and melodies, and by a loving, hopeful, cheerful, and hardworking family. It all changed in the fall of 1978 when I turned three. I was the youngest member of an educated middle-class Iranian family who lived in the heart of Tehran. I loved my mother's feminine and colourful dresses and shoes and my father's elegant tie collection.

In those difficult pre-revolution days of fall 1978 and winter 1979, nobody had time to pay me any mind; the important political changes happening outside the house over-shadowed the life within. Everybody was busy either with pursuing their ideology or trying to seek shelter from the pre- and post-revolutionary storms. Overnight, I became an adult when the revolution became the most important subject of the family discussions at home. I was no longer the same spoiled, cheerful, talkative, emotional and sensitive little girl as the talk of the revolution crept into our home. In turn, I became a quiet, thoughtful, defensive, reserved and insecure child. I was a silent observer who was learning to understand the complicated political language of the adults. I tried to train myself to interpret their heavy talk as it applied to my little world. However, I was unable to develop the same ability to talk to them in their complicated political adult language. So I began to listen more and talk less.

I reacted to my internal fears, insecurity and anxiety by sinking deeper into silence, crying heavily but quietly, withdrawing from socializing or playing with other kids and also not showing interest in children's games, toys or

even books. I could understand that I was disappointing my parents with my sad and passive attitude but I could not help it. I remember that when my childhood mind could no longer overcome my anxiety, I would quietly crawl into my mother's arms covered in my cold sweat. My mom usually cuddled and kissed me until I fell asleep in her arms.

In February 1979 the Islamic regime took control of the country and a month after its victory, mandatory *hijab* for Iranian women was suggested on the anniversary of International Women's Day, March 8, 1979. When my grandmother heard the news from my mom, she sank into the corner of our kitchen and mourned for hours. "You young women do not understand how it feels when male members of the society decide for your body and tell you what you should wear!" She kept repeating: "You just don't understand what it means...." She was a 66-year-old woman who had practiced *hijab* all her life. Covered in her usual colourful scarf she mourned the call for mandatory *hijab*, wiping her tears with the corner of her scarf. "I do practice *hijab* and I respect anybody who chooses to practice it. But I have never told even my own daughter what to wear.... Now, a bunch of men who call themselves the leaders of the revolution dare to assume they can tell my daughter and granddaughter to cover up!" My grandmother repeated these words almost a hundred times that day and cried even harder. Finally, she yelled, "You educated, intellectual and modern women must do something before it is too late. Otherwise, tomorrow this little Lily will be mandated to cover her hair and body! I am telling you right now, that day is not far." My name had a way of creeping into the hot revolutionary debates.

No matter how hard I tried, I could not picture my mom or myself in *hijab*. So I ran to my grandmother's closet and grabbed a scarf that was very big for my tiny head and instead covered my whole body. I fixed it on my head and tied it tightly under my throat. I ran to the kitchen to show o my grandmother and mom and make them laugh. Instead, they both got very angry. My grandmother pulled the scarf from my head and said, "You will never do this again!" My mother said, "Darling, this is not a joking matter." I was shocked. My grandmother had never been that harsh with me. I ran to my room and quietly cried.

Two days later, the three women of my family, grandmother, mother and I, were on the streets of Tehran to demonstrate against mandatory *hijab* alongside thousands of other women and men. My grandmother was in her black veil *hijab* that covered her from head to toe, protesting against forcible *hijab*. My mother wore a wool skirt and a lemon yellow shirt. I was in my purple dress and white jacket. I was very excited to be in a demonstration. All of a sudden, I heard the loud screeching noise of motorcycles

approaching the crowd. Men on the motorcycles were yelling "*YaaRoosari, YaaToosari*," meaning "Either scarf on the head or a blow to the head." The demonstrators yelled back, "*NaRoosari, Na Toosari*," meaning "Neither scarf on the heads nor a blow to the head." The demonstration was not against *hijab* but rather against enforcing *hijab* on every woman of the society regardless of her choice. Iranian women, who played such an important role in the victory of the revolution, were now the first targets of the ideological regime. My grandmother was right!

The mandatory *hijab* was not enforced right away due to the social resistance but within two years women could no longer enter government buildings without *hijab*. Soon thereafter, women were prevented from presenting publically without *hijab*. "Death to women with no Hijab," became a common slogan written in bold letters on the walls throughout the city. I would no longer see my mother in her colourful dresses; her closet became a place of refuge for me from the darkness surrounding me. I sheltered myself in her closet and watched the symbols of her feminine expression gather dust in the darkness. Indeed, my grandmother was right! A few years later, in fall of 1982 when I started elementary school, her friend had to sew me a dark, thick uniform that covered me from head to toe, as regulations mandated. I was so small and it was very difficult for me to learn to maneuver while wearing that uniform.

On my first day, my grandmother took me to school. I was crying so hard that I could not keep my scarf properly tied on my head. I could see tears in my grandmother's eyes as she sneakily wiped her face with the corner of her colourful scarf. After we lined up to go to our respective classes, the school principal, who only had a small triangle of her face visible from behind her tightly held *chador*, gave us a long lecture that became a part of my nightmares for many years. She said, "You are six years old now and considered as women. For that reason, you are not allowed to take off your scarves inside the school or even inside your classes where only females are allowed. You will have your scarves properly tied all day long. Remember, if you expose your hair to any man except your immediate family members, you will be tortured in hell after your death for all of eternity. You will be hung from each strand of hair that you make visible while fire is set under your feet. You will burn to death, then you will be resurrected and the same story will repeat itself. So be careful!" I was so frightened that I could not stop the flow of tears. I begged to go back home but alas, I had to stay.

Later, not having *hijab* or not having proper *hijab* was identified as a criminal offense in the new Criminal Code and Iranian women were at risk of imprisonment, flogging or being fined for not observing proper *hijab*. My

grandmother died in the summer of 1984 still sporting her colorful scarf as she lay on the ICU bed of the Tehran Clinic. At the same time, two blocks away from that hospital, in the Moral Committee of Vozara, women were being sentenced to flogging, imprisonment or heavy fines for not observing proper *hijab*. And, as grandmother predicted, I was arrested and taken to the Moral Committee of Vozara for not having a proper *hijab* for the first time when I was only 16. The Moral Committee judge sentenced me to be flogged, which was finally replaced with a huge fine.

of pride. I still remember it well, all the many familiar or unfamiliar dead faces with one or two eyes opened, plastered on the front page of the newspaper for the world to see.

Things got even worse during the rest of the 1980s. The Iran-Iraq war started in 1980 and lasted eight years, taking millions of lives from both sides. As a child I was introduced to a new notion of life, death, and survival. Just like millions of other children of war, I learned to survive the air strikes, the rocket attacks and the missile launches. My family life was also tumultuous. In 1986, I

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A few weeks after the revolution in 1979, the Iranian nation saw the images of the perforated, bloody bodies of those who were executed due to their relation with the former regime. Everyone with a high level position in the previous administration was at risk. Even my father, a well-known journalist who also worked as the communication coordinator for the Education Minister, was at risk. Many family friends had disappeared. We later learned that they fled the country illegally and sought asylum somewhere in Europe, or, if they were lucky, in the United States. Desperate to continue his work, my father began an underground life. Every night, he anxiously waited for my mother to return home with that day's newspapers. It became a routine for my parents to skim the bloody pictures published in the newspaper so as to identify a friend, a family member, a co-worker or someone that they knew. If there was a familiar face among the many faces, then the night would turn into a private memorial service.

One such evening, my mother came home, clutching a newspaper in her hand and pale in the face. My father immediately realized something terrible had happened. He grabbed the paper from her and quickly glanced at the front page before he collapsed. Mrs. Farrokhroo Parsa had been executed. She was the Minister of Education, the first female cabinet member in Iran, the first woman in the senate, and my father's boss. She was the person who mandated that all K-12 students must receive free nutrition. She was the sort of secular person who would fast and wear a small colorful scarf on her head during the month of Ramadan. The picture of her dead body smeared in blood, with one of her eyes still open, was published on the front page of the national newspapers as a symbol

witnessed my father's arrest by three armed revolutionary guards who refused to give us any information about his charges. We lived with the constant threat of never seeing him again. In 1988, I turned 13 and the war came to an end. However, soon after, mass executions began in prisons across the country. The main targets of this round of executions were leftists who had helped the revolution a decade ago. Now the revolution was taking their lives. They survived the first wave of the executions in the early months following the revolution but re-mained in prison. Now, after many years of imprisonment, their turn had come. Their blood had to be spilled for the revolution to go on. In less than a month, thousands and thousands of leftist prisoners were hanged in Tehran and other cities. I was watching this spectacle in silence through my teenage eyes.

Later, during the '90s, people like my parents who survived the first 15 years of political violence following the revolution and yet did not flee the country, carefully volunteered to begin rebuilding the Civil Society. When I was admitted to law school in 1994, a new wave of threats began. However, this time they only targeted the activists, lawyers, writers and journalists, who were trying to use what minimal arena was available to voice their resistances. Both my parents' names were on this blacklist. We expected that either or both of them would be murdered randomly on the street, at home or office at any moment. I came of age at a time when my life and privacy were targeted by the Ministry of Intelligence because I was the daughter of two activists. I began voicing my resistances by publishing a controversial report about the dark colour of the mandatory *hijab* in Iran. I did not question the mandatory *hijab* but asked why it had to be so dark. Surely the lighter and

more cheerful colours would cover a woman's body just as well! When the report was published, I was called to the university's Moral Committee and received a written warning that I would be suspended if I continued my activity. They spied on my personal life and entered into the most private spheres of my life. I was used as a tool to put more pressure on my parents so as to stop their work. To me, the guards' invasion of my private life was like physical and emotional rape. That very day, I made up my mind to leave my country as soon as I could. From that moment on, I was no longer the silent observer, but rather a silenced but angry rebel.

I left my homeland just two months after my graduation in November of 1999. I came to Canada with a visitor visa and two thousand dollars in my pocket. I landed in my new home, Canada, where I had no friends or acquaintances or any plans in my head except that I would not go back to my homeland until I secured a life in a democratic country where my private life did not become a tool in some political game. I survived the hardships of living as a young non-status woman and was used as cheap labor for many months. Meanwhile, my mother was arrested six months after my departure due to her women's rights activities. While in prison, she developed an aggressive breast cancer. Overnight, while I had no roof over my head or life security in Canada, I became the voice of advocacy for her abroad. Finally, with the help of international pressure, my mother was permitted to leave Iran in September 2001 in order to receive better treatments in the United States. She has been living there in exile ever since. Soon after her departure, in November 2001, my 70-year-old father was kidnapped by the secret police and kept in secret and undisclosed prisons for months. He was tortured and forced to confess to crimes he had never committed. Later on, in spring of 2002, he appeared on the Iranian state television. He had lost over 40 kilograms and we barely recognized him. On the television, he confessed to whatever his interrogators had wanted him to. We never saw him again as he was not allowed to leave the country and we were not allowed to go back for safety reasons. Finally, in April 2011, he ended his life at the age of 80 by throwing himself off the sixth-floor balcony of his apartment in Tehran where he was under house arrest.

I, Lily, a "daughter of the revolution," lived and will be living the life my grandmother predicted for me 35 years ago. I survived a revolution, a war, political violence in public and private and a very difficult migration. I lived an extraordinary life just like thousands and millions of other children who lived and grew up amidst revolution, war or political conflicts around the world. Many of them do not have the ability to tell us about their lives and survival.

I will always remember my grandmother's words: "A

revolution will highjack the ordinary life of a nation, generation after generation."

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RENEE NORMAN

Dreaming Grandchildren

I look at those sweet faces
your granddaughters
a photo
I know how fortunate they are
your devotion lit
by the ways you support women
you shine more than a camera lens
on feminisms

and I remember my daughters
vibrant toddlers
joy and chaos
different now of course
still flashes of opalescent colors
some temporary darkness

I am dreaming my own grandchildren
into focus
hazy visions
small dear ghosts
in the space between
note to daughters: no pressure, understood?
I have dresses, little ponies, flaming room
in my mother's heart
ah, granddaughters!
gender is not an issue
I promise
my two miscarried babies
taught me patience
how to release plans
like so much gossamer

some day I will show photos too

Renee Norman's poetry appears earlier in this volume.