

## Silences, Insecurities, and Broken Promises: Writing ‘Survival’

*A--Diba\**

In August 2013 my father in Iran went missing for three months. No one knew where he had gone or why, and we did not know whether he left through his own will or if someone took him. I recall the day my mom called to inform me about his disappearance. She was certain that the government had taken my father because of his reputation. My father is a survivor of the 1988 leftist massacre, and he says his survival was a pure miracle. The day that he was due for execution, the judge who was supposed to sign the execution list became ill and was replaced by a temporary judge who turned out to be my grandfather’s childhood friend. This judge recognized my father’s last name and my grandfather’s name on his ID. He removed his name from the list and inserted someone else’s name instead. My father used to say, ‘My survival cost me the death of another person, perhaps a friend.’ His life was absorbed by the ambiguities of his survival. He never came to understand why he survived that day and why he remained alive when all of his friends had been executed. He cursed the judge who had ‘saved’ his life, because according to my father, the judge saved his body but not his soul. His soul had already been murdered by the firing squads when he was forced to listen to the screams of his friends.

What was the judge thinking when he replaced the name? What made him save the son of his childhood friend to whom he had no connections other than his memories? It was the childhood memories of the judge and my grandfather in pre-revolutionary Iran that the Islamic government and the judges of the revolutionary court were trying to erase. How ironic is it that a memory saved my father’s life, a memory related to an era (pre-revolutionary Iran) that the government had tried so hard to dissolve? What did the judge remember when he saw the name? The face of my grandfather as a kid, perhaps. And maybe that face raised a responsibility in him; responsibility for the face of my young grandfather.

The judge’s decision that day didn’t only impact my father. It changed my mother’s life, my life, and my brother’s life as well. It affected the life of the person, ‘the friend,’ who died in order for my father to survive, and his family. I wonder sometimes if the friend had a child, and how his children are doing. I wonder what kinds of politics rule their lives. These are some of the questions that come to my mind. There is no answer to them, but they shake my being and they remind me that no one can offer a promise of security through the institutions whose foundation is based on violence. They show me the fragility of what it means to be ‘secure’.

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\* A—Diba is a pseudonym.

The experience that my father went through dictated his life afterward. Once he described his survival as emerging into a cold and dark world where everything seemed upside down and nothing made sense anymore.

I was two years old when all this happened. I don't have any memory of those days other than a letter that my father wrote to me when he was in prison, when he thought he would never see me again. The letter starts with the description of my name and the reason why he named me ----. *'To my daughter'* it says, *'whom I named A----, bright as moon, in order for her future to become bright.'*

When my mom called to inform me about my father's disappearance, I was taking the bus from York University to my apartment. There is an 8-hour difference between Canada and Iran, so when she called me at six o'clock in the evening, I already knew something was wrong. My mother was insisting that someone took him, but we both knew she was just trying to pretend that he had left against his will. The Islamic government had already taken away all his belongings seven years earlier, and he didn't have the right to possess anything, to have an ID to drive to work, or to do anything other than be alive. He had been reduced to a life without political protection, identity, voice, or space within the state. He no longer had a political life. My mom and I both knew this.

As a child growing up, I barely understood the reasons behind my father's shaky hands, angry eyes, and insomnia. I barely understood why he was so quiet all the time, why he couldn't talk about what he had experienced, why he was always angry at everyone, everything—until the day that I sat on the chair in front of a prison cell and looked through the glass, eye-to-eye with an eighteen-year-old boy named Yahya.

Yahya was a first-year university student. He had wide brown eyes, a round face, and a skinny body. I do not think he was skinny before he was arrested, though, because I had seen his pictures, the ones his mother brought to the human rights office and gave us to include in our documentation. He probably lost weight after being arrested due to psychological or physical torture. When I met Yahya, I was a newly graduated law student working in a human rights office. After the 2009 Green Movement<sup>1</sup>, our priority was to stop the execution of political prisoners who had been arrested during and after the protests. Yahya was a political prisoner who had been arrested at --- University while he was protesting against the government and had been sentenced to death.

Yahya is dead now. He was executed, like most of the political prisoners we were trying to help.

I heard about Yahya's death in the fall of 2010, after I came to Canada. My emotions and reactions to his death changed over time. At first, I was angry. But then my feelings turned into sadness, devastation, weakness, and hatred. I had promised Yahya that I wouldn't allow him to

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<sup>1</sup> The Iranian Green Movement refers to a political movement and protests that arose after the 2009 Iranian presidential election, in which protesters protested against the result of presidential election and demanded the removal of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from office.

be executed; I had told him, ‘we are applying for petitions and sending documents to NGOs, and they will help us to stop the execution.’ In fact, we promised this to all the prisoners we were helping, the ones who were on death row. What did that promise entail? What could it mean? A promise of security while our whole existence was full of insecurities. To promise means to create continuity from present instabilities to a sense of order in the future. The language of promise entails hope for a better and brighter future; like the letter my father wrote to me, like the name he chose for me, as if he was trying to promise me that what had happened to him would not happen to me. He named me A---- in the hope that my future would become bright, unlike his own. Perhaps he did not realize that the pain he went through would become a reason for me to pursue politics; that his pain would become my motivation to join a law office after the Green Movement to stop the execution of political prisoners who were arrested during and after the protests; that his shaky hands, angry eyes, and insomnia would dictate my goals for the future and inject politics into my veins, so that politics would circulate in my body forever. It was a failed promise, in fact. His promise to me was my promise to Yahya.

I couldn’t do anything other than to make promises when I encountered Yahya’s eyes, his fearful and tired eyes. His shaking voice is still in my ear, when he repeatedly asked, ‘Do you think they want to kill me?’ And my desperate promise to him ‘No they won’t; we won’t allow them.’

I promised to save Yahya as my father had promised to save me. But no one heard our voices; no one paid enough attention. The international press just considered us as part of a ‘population that was rising against its own government, mass protesters, a mass but nothing more. The media was filled with footage of people who were running in the streets screaming, chanting, and shouting, but what about those who were silent in prison? What about those whose faces didn’t appear in the media, whose names were buried in the documents? The ones who were sitting on death row filled with fear? What could be heard in their silence?

In the darkness of my mind, I search for the memory of the day that I came to visit Yahya in the prison. I pull out the pictures from my mind, try to find the successive order between the chaotic flashbacks and the dialogue; I remember that I arranged the black chador on my head. I had not worn a chador before, but it was mandatory in the prison. The lawyer put a pen and few blank pieces of paper in my bag and told me to walk with Yahya’s mother. The lawyer said that, if the guards ever asked me who I am, I should tell them that I am Yahya’s cousin and I came to support my aunt, who is not feeling well, through the meeting. The lawyer told me that if the guards let me in the first time, I should go in and, if not, I should not insist.

Yahya’s mother and I entered from the main door of the prison. It was a big, gray, iron door, and looked as though it was dividing these two worlds, the world of the ignorant and the world of the ignored. I was not comfortable walking. The black chador that was covering my cold body and shaking legs made me more uncomfortable, as I was not used to wearing it. I was wobbly and unsteady, and Yahya’s mother caught me once when I was about to fall. With each and every step toward the building, my heart beat faster; my hands were colder and sweatier. My vision became blurry. I squeezed my eyes a few times with my fingers to correct my vision as I looked at the long walls covered with wires. I felt my heart drop when I thought of the documents we had reviewed in the lawyer’s office—the documents we had gathered from victims and their

relatives about the torture, rape, and violence that was taking place within those walls. I was afraid. I wanted to run outside, but I looked at his mom and she was holding back all her emotions. She seemed so strong to me at that moment and I was ashamed of my own fear.

She was the one who was about to lose a son. Why the hell was I afraid? Yes, she was about to lose Yahya, her son, someone that she raised with hundreds of wishes for his future, hundreds of good acts towards his youth.

A guard came toward us as we arrived at the main building. He grabbed the visitor permission papers from his mother's hands and went through them carefully. 'Only family members can visit. You know that don't you?' he said. Yahya's mom nodded her head and said, 'I am his mom.' The guard turned his face towards me. 'And you?' he asked suspiciously. I waited for a few seconds. Thousands of thoughts came to my mind. Who was I? What I was doing there? Why had I been asked to help Yahya, and why had I agreed? I had no idea! There had been no rationale in my mind when I told the lawyer that I could help him if they were not allowing him to see his lawyer. *Why?! Probably it was because of my dad, maybe what I saw in Yahya was my own young father. As if I could time travel to heal us both.*

I swallowed the saliva in my mouth and whispered, 'I am his cousin; I came to be with my aunt.' The guards pointed to a women's security checkpoint and asked us to enter from there. Beads of sweat dripped down my back; I felt a sense of relief that he had believed me. Yahya's mother walked and I followed her. After a thorough inspection, we walked into the cabin meeting room. He was there waiting for us behind the glass. He was skinnier than his pictures and his face was covered in a beard. He stood up and tapped his hands on the window.

It is beyond expression. Thinking about that moment is beyond the possibilities of translation. The expression in his face; the fear, pain, and desperation, a look that manifested the unimaginability of his situation.

I sat in front of him on the chair. We looked at each other through the glass, eye to eye. The knot in my throat. The tears in his eyes. Who were we? Why we were in that situation? Why? Why should we have experienced the things we did? What was the punishment for? Who had given the government the legitimacy to practice such a power? Was it we people? We wanted to take that legitimacy back. Why wasn't it possible to do so? If we were the ones who had legitimated that entity in the first place, why we couldn't take it back?

'Hello, Yahya,' I said. He whispered, 'My mom told me you are here to help.' Then he waited for few seconds while tears flowed out of his eyes, 'Do you think they will kill me? Are you going to complain to the international courts? Could they do something?' His questions pinned in my heart as with a knife. I opened my mouth to tell him, 'We will try our best,' but I looked at his fearful eyes and I could not stop myself from promising. 'Yes, we will save you. Do not worry. We won't let them execute you.' Yes, I did promise him. I made a promise. I am very sorry for my failed promise.

Our office was attacked and closed two months after my encounter with Yahya. Most of my colleagues, who were in the office on the day of the attack, including the lawyer himself,

were arrested. So I ran away. I ran away from the threat of being arrested, from my past memories, from the future, from Yahya, from all the others who had died and were dying. I ran away from my father. I ran away from myself, just as my father had run away from us and disappeared.

I ran away from accepting that Yahya is dead now and that I am wounded and alone. But this is the reality that I should live with, like the reality of my father's survival while all his friends were executed.

There is no language for what is inside me. There are no words that can explain what I saw, what I felt. There is no language for Yahya, for me, or for my father. We are hidden. We are hidden in gaps in discussions and quantitative data. We are hidden in 'it's too terrible, I can't even imagine!' and 'it's too dramatic, I can't even listen!' We are hidden in sighs and in gazes that run away. We are hidden in the silences between words and texts.

My father was found three months later. He was found by a guy near a road in northern Iran. He wasn't in good shape. He had lost 20 kilograms and some of his teeth, but there was no sign of torture. My father gave his brother's phone number to the guy, and he brought him home. When he came back he was completely silent. He didn't respond to anyone: 'Why did you suddenly leave? Did anyone take you? Have you been tortured? Where have you been for three months?'

Silence was his response. Silence has become his language ever since.