

“An Activist”

One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three.

I've been counting for so long I lost the count. Mum always said that counting helps you to calm down.

Pull yourself together. One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three.

Maybe it doesn't work when you count the drops of blood that fall from the ceiling on the Persian carpet of your basement. I loved that carpet; my grandma made it as a gift for my parents when I was born and it has been there with me my all life with its labyrinthine features. Red, white, black that melt one into the other in a neverending spiral, hypnotizing as a snake enchanter. Even after all these years, it has never lost its magic.

Shh, don't cry, they might hear you. You need to be quiet if you wanna get out of here alive.

This little voice in my head has always been there to protect me, they say it's an instinct we have as animals, some kind of self-preservation, but right now I just want to shout to it to shut up and run upstairs: I need to defend my home, I need to defend my family from these invaders but I would give them exactly what they crave. Me. I can't let that happen, not after all the sacrifices everyone has made for me in order to lead me where I am, not after all the sacrifices I have made to get this far. I will never surrender to the talibans. I will never let them silence my voice.

One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three.

My heartbeat is a racing horse definitely winning it's game. The noise of it is overwhelming, as if my ears were a stereo system amplifying the rithm of my funeral song as I race to meet death. I know what this is; they call it panic attack. They say it's an experience of near death but it's all in your head, exept for the fact that I've never been so close to dying right now. Death is a strange concept; every human being tries not to think about it, tries to hide the ageing of his body and to refuse to aknowledge that he has a limited period of time on this planet, even if no man can cheat death. If there is one thing you learn in Afghanistan is that life and death are two faces of the same coin and every day the coin is flipping. One day you live, the next day you die. And you're more likely to die if you go against the regime.

They call us political dissidents, but all we do is trying to transform the freedom of mind that lives insides us in actual freedom. Is it too much to ask? To leave the house

without being accompanied by a man, to listen to music, to laugh, to meet your friends, to love. The taliban say they brought light to our darkness but since 14 August 2021 our life has been colourless, odourless, tasteless. We don't live, we exist. They call me angel for what I do, they say I will become a martyr but I don't wanna be no martyre, I wanna be a 17 year-old girl and do what 17 year-olds do. But there's no life without facing death, there's no freedom without fighting.

My dad told me this phrase when the talibans took power, his eyes fired up by a youthful energy; I had never seen him so convinced of something, as we were trying to get some shelter from the anarchy of the streets. These words got tatoood in my brain, along with the images of our lives being emptied and turned into shreads. No more singing and dancing in the streets, no more gatherings to watch the television all together, no more billboards with smiling girls in their new brand clothes. No more school. No more education for women.

Iron, the taste of blood is stingy as iron. The blood on the carpet keeps on spreading, colouring of red the white jasmines of the pattern.

-Jasmine what do you think you are doing?

Never any statement had made me more angry. I just couldn't stay quiet and watch while everything our families had worked for and died to build was being teared apart. I couldn't let them play with our future.

-I will defend our human rights, I will become some sort of Greta Thunberg or Malala Yousafzai. I have to do something.

Everyone was laughing at me, no one believed I, a high school teenager, a girl, could make any difference and be of any relevance. But then I organized the first strike, and only my friends came, to support me and my, our fight, for basic human rights. The second strike came, we were 10 people but everyone got to speak their frustration and express their mind about the atrocities we were undergoing. At the third strike we were 30, the word was spreading; some people came because they believed in the cause, some came because they couldn't miss the show of the girl who thought she could face the talibans and make them accountable for their actions. I went on, one week at the time, one strike at the time, I couldn't give up and everytime the crowd in front of me was growing, until I couldn't distinguish the people's faces and I only heard their voices shouting with me:

There's no life without facing death, there's no freedom without fighting.

We created a student association, new profiles on the social media, we were surfing on the internet wave to reach places as far as we could. But we had never thought

that we could get that far. People started reposting the pictures and videos of our strikes, first in our city, then around Afghanistan, until our protest was embraced abroad. Globalization, Taliban's worst fear; that we could connect with the world, that we could build a bridge between us and all the other human beings on Earth, that we could find out that deep down we are brothers, that we could discover solidarity, that we could find someone who would fight with us, beside us, even thousands of kilometers of distance away. Messages started filling our private chat, in every language of the world, but they were all saying the same thing: Go Jasmine! We are with you Jasmine!

Finally someone was listening, finally it wasn't a voiceless scream. But that was when the Talibans started listening as well. They found out that some high school students had been organizing protests all over town and that they had become quite known and supported even out of town, and with a girl leader. They couldn't let that happen.

And then the nightmare started. Every strike we did was interrupted by Taliban supporters shooting at us, our social media profiles got canceled, we started receiving anonymous letters. Until one day I walked back home after school and I found a box in front of the frontdoor; inside of it the tongue of a cow and a note that said "yours will be next". I remember my body shivering like a leaf which falls from its tree and crushes on the ground.

Everyone around me started to move away, as if I had some contagious disease, they said "Jasmine you have to stop." "You're going to get yourself killed, don't you understand?" "I am sorry I can't protest anymore, it has become too dangerous." But I couldn't give up, I couldn't bend under the weight of their threats.

The pictures hanging on the wall seem like staring at me with a disappointed look, memory of all the strikes, of all that we have achieved as a protest movement. Even though right now everything appears to be useless, hopeless. So I look right back at them, showing my disappointment as well, while I hide under the basement desk as I did when I was a kid escaping the outside world.

The noises are over. You have to go upstairs, there is too much blood.

Talibans broke into the house for the first time on the night of the Nowruz, when the old year ends and with spring a new year begins; everyone was out for the celebration and the house was empty, except for me. I hadn't gone with my family because I wanted to work on my speech for an important protest we would have had the next week when suddenly I heard the sound of glass crashing as someone was breaking in through the window; then men shouting, breaking the wooden chairs my parents had bought with their savings, crashing everything they could find and repeating one thing

over and over again: “We’re coming for you, Jasmine.” I hid myself until my family came back home and found me in the basement, hiding under the desk, hugging my knees as the tears came down warm on my cheeks.

I was supposed to leave Afghanistan after that night’s attack. I had some connections abroad and my family was pushing to make me cross the border in any way possible to keep me safe even if far. The calendar with its red circles marking the days, shows three more days left before the departure. Before today.

Talibans attacked the house in the middle of the day, to make a show of their strength, to give an example of what happens to those who dare to go against them. They broke in interrupting our meal and as my father and brothers were trying to fight them, my mother helped me to hide in the basement. For 20 minutes I could only hear screams and noises when everything was interrupted by one gunshot; blood started flowing from the trap door leading to the basement, right on the carpet, one drop at the time. Then silence.

It is time to go upstairs Jasmine. You can’t hide forever. It is time you face the truth and find out what happened.

The mobile phone I was not supposed to have rang just one minute before the attack; the trembling voice of my friend Meriam repeating “I am sorry Jasmine, they know about your evacuation. Run.” Somehow word got to them that I was leaving the Country, someone had informed them. They have eyes and ears everywhere and they can get to anyone.

I force myself out of the protected hidden place to go upstairs. Growing up is going out of the comfort zone, taking risks, being brave enough to handle the difficulties of life without being submerged. I don’t feel ready to find out whose blood this is, I just feel like a child who needs to be comforted by her mother’s arms. I am a child, deep down. I am 17 years old and no one deserves to die at 17.

One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three. Let’s go.

I climb the stairs one by one, with feet heavy as rocks, towards the light of the sun and the dark of existence.

I open the trap door with the knowledge that I am not ready for anything that I will find behind it but that I can’t wait any longer to find out.

It looks like a tornado was here.

My mum, sitting on the ground and crying in silence, looks at her daughter emerging with her big brown eyes, but she doesn't seem to see me, she is looking through me, to something behind my back, with a void gaze, lost in her thoughts.

While I turn around I see the blood flowing towards the basement and one male figure laying face down on the floor.

Who is this? Maybe we managed to kill one of them.

But as I try to recognize the lifeless body in the living room with my blinded eyes I hear my mum saying:

-They were looking for you, your father and brothers tried to stop them but there was no way. They broke everything and they tried to push them to reveal where you were hiding but no one said anything. They said they were leaving but then, right on the doorstep, one of them turned around and fired his gun. Your brothers went to chase them but your father...there was nothing to do for him. I am sorry Jasmine, he is dead.

My head started spinning as if I were on a rollercoaster, my legs couldn't hold me up anymore and as I was falling on the floor right next to him I heard my lips saying one, single word:

-Baba.

Then everything turned black.