
 JESSE SHORT

PART OF THE REVOLUTION IN THE ARABIC WORLD



February 2011

The moon waxed full, perfect-round. A pale fine, sand found its way all around the city and blew along the footpath in gusts, contaminating the air I breathed.

A friend accompanied me as we headed towards the Medina of Tripoli, keeping on the furthest side of the bitumen to avoid the traffic which was growing wilder by the minute. Young men waving green flags, half postulated out of car windows – sometime hollering from their unconventional seats on car rooves and bonnets. They were shouting their support of the Leader.

We had gone to explore the Medina – even perhaps find a coffee to warm us from the twelve degree winds that blast-froze through long trouser and shirt alike – and fix a broken DVD player I had acquired from a colleague for the meagre sum of forty dinars. One might ask why we would take such a trek for the sake of DVD players and coffee? Well, what with a good salary from my teaching job, spending money on coffee, pirated DVDs, food and clothes were among the only things that could occupy your social time. The only other things to keep you sane was to meet with your friends, go to the gym or bang your head against the cracked walls of your apartment while stamping your feet in tune to the rustic cords of San Quentin.

The closer we ventured towards the Medina, the more riotous the scene became. Tens of cars were blaring their horns and the sound of pro-Libya cheering, screeching tyres and the odd occasional deafening pop from firecrackers smuggled from old Napoli filled the cold air with fight, with charge, with something to believe in. Only the object of this belief doesn't appear so deserving. Back in '69 when he led a coup to gain control of the country from the ruling monarchy, people supported him, because in some people's eyes, their Leader still, even now, represents revolution and liberation.

Many people thronged in and around the Medina as if drawn by magnetism. They filled themselves with large amounts of heart-altering caffeine, cigarettes, and arguments. Because of the exclusion of certain freedoms and forbidden vices, the chance to show support or protest became a call for mass celebration for the younger men. They enthusiastically crowded around a chance to celebrate in public. No one had allowed them this before. Until now.

Before I saw news coverage of Muammar Gaddafi rallying supporters from his car in the street not far from the Green Square, my friend and I realised that an hour later, we would have been a raised arm away from the big man himself. We had decided to leave early before the chances of receiving that honour could be fulfilled, however. But, every taxi had vanished by that time. The few that remained were filled with protesting drivers – honking car horns with their headlights switched on, with all windows wound down, and their car stereos blaring Arabic music.

April 2011

I evacuated from Libya. One of the things I will never forget is that one of my company bosses sent us email confirmation that everything was safe in Tripoli centre. Perhaps while she was sipping tea at some random place not far from the Green Square, it was 'normal'.

On Sunday, we went to the school for the day. It was decided the school would 'run as normal' (there's that word again) so as to continue students' education and give the children a sense of 'normality'. The company I worked for didn't seem to have a contingency plan. If they did, my superiors didn't have a donkey's scrotum of a clue what it was. Our bosses said to be prepare for a standfast, and to make sure we had lots of food and water in case we needed to 'wait it out.' The bosses declared they hold meetings everyday to see who is still there and update us on what was happening. They were like the Colonels and the Generals reminding us of rules and respect codes while the enemy advances on the bunkers and the seats of their own trousers smoulder with the small fires of near misses. I think that this is what was truly traumatising for me to witness. That the people I thought were in charge were not in charge.

Another memory I have is of the second day of our unofficial 'standfast'. I met a colleague of mine when I returned from an afternoon meeting. We organised to stay together in one flat. At least if I fainted in fright while some fellow battered through the wooden door, my colleague could be ready to greet them with her slicked up frying pan. We had arranged that I was to come around when it was dark. I returned home to watch the news coverage on Al Jazeera.

My flat was so big that even with all the windows open you couldn't hear the sounds coming from outside. So, at around 6.30 pm, I happened to pass by an open window in my bedroom and heard a crescendo of noises coming from outside. There were cars beeping, sirens wailing, tyres screeching, and massive, eardrum-popping firecrackers shaking the air. Then, I heard the unmistakable sound of machinegun fire randomly discharged into the waiting, empty sky. I decided to get all my bags and go to my colleague's flat. Weighed down with my luggage, I left my house and braved the quiet alleys. I arrived at her house. No lights shone from the windows. Not a sound could be heard. Just the jangling of my keys as I try to get through the main gate and the soft, scraping shovel-shuffle of my shoes on the sand-coated tomb stairs.

Not a soul disturbed the eerie harmonious quietude. Then I found a message only half sticking in the door and addressed to me. I can't remember the exact words. But their impact

hit me in the guts. She wasn't there. She had gone to a friend's house. She had obviously heard the sounds of cavorting protesters long before me. I chewed my lip for a few seconds, then resolving that moving around at that time of night was neither smart or wise, I returned home, locked up, and killed the lights. I put the television on, moved food and water close by the foot of the couch in the living room, and lay down in the hush of my vacant villa.

The second most traumatic thing for me after this episode in my life was thinking of those left behind, those who live in Libya, who call it home and have done so for generations. My last memory that I will take with me was a Libyan woman arguing with a passport clerk. Like me she had a passport and like me she wanted to escape to a place of safety with her family. However he wasn't having it and he refused to let her through. She was screaming and crying at the top of her voice, crying, begging, shouting at the man in an effort to convince him to allow her to pass through. Some two or three hundred must have been witness to this spectacle. Compared to her lot and to those Libyans, Tunisians, Egyptians, Ghanaian, and other foreigners who still live there, waiting for peace, my experience is only a hesitation in the road of my life. For her, the others and their families their life will never be the same again.

Before I left my hometown to undertake my teaching post in Libya, I was struck by such vivid dreams that I was encouraged to capture the atmosphere. I wrote the following after taking a walk down the empty street by my parent's house in Bowen, North Queensland, in the middle of the night. Now when I reflect upon it, I realise how much it was about my future experiences...

The sea roars as if it is awakening.
The rush of breaking waves is like
some sky storm, briny water bodied.
The apocalyptic silence of the street moves me –
there is no one there to call.
Day renews by the count of each self revelation,
and when it occurs people are changed.
Their being stands in the midst of a mirage
on the horizon of collective consciousness and
only their bodies are near, their selves housing
remnants of forgotten ways.
They move with faint smiles and incomplete memories.
They drown in the material world.

Blame another.

The world is full of lessons,
but who will teach it to every child
to end the cycle of horror
that makes a fallen people?