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A Square Gone Famous
by Laila Afifi

I took a deep breath, gripped the handles of my shoulder bag a little tighter and crossed the street. Weaving my way through the Cairo's speeding traffic, I wasn't worried about the oncoming cars, instead I was too preoccupied trying to grasp and take in everything in sight. I was walking down a road, taking big steps to keep up with Hathem, my driver, which a mere month earlier would have been impossible to walk through with such ease.

Friday February 25th marked a revolutionary month in Egyptian history and I had finally decided that it was about time to get to *Tahrir* Square and pay a visit to the very place where my people had fought against corruption, injustice, and thugs calling for democracy and the end of Hosni Mubarak's thirty year rule. During the revolution, protestors had resiliently demonstrated in downtown in spite of police brutality, convicts, and anarchy. And while the nation and global community watched the events unfold in shock and horror, I was under strict house arrest as ordered by my parents who live abroad. Yet, now things had somewhat settled, Mubarak had stepped down, shops were up and running, and people were going back to work. Part of me was thrilled to go downtown and witness firsthand what I had only seen in footage from Al-Jazeera and BBC; however, another part of me was worried, what if I got mugged? And how would my parents react when they found out I had gone to the very place that a month earlier was completely off limits? So I decided I would ask Hathem to come along with me as a

bodyguard, a companion, and someone my parents would be reassured to know had accompanied me to *Tahrir*.

The museum was the first location we walked by and behind its metal-barred fence stood a soldier, holding a large rifle in hand as he adjusted his earpiece, something which reminded me of an undercover agent in a Hollywood movie. Walking closer to the museum's main gate, I saw a heavily barricaded entrance; army personal, smaller metal gates on wheels, and a lineup of three tanks, which seemed to have become one of the museum's "ancient" attractions as children and young teenagers stood on and around the tank posing for pictures. By the end of the road we had neared the renowned *Tahrir* Square, which by the way is not a square but actually a large roundabout. Clusters of people dotted the square and a large protest was taking place. I saw someone holding a poster while others marched in unison around him, yet it wasn't clear what they were protesting about. "Should we cross the street?" asked my driver. It took me a while to respond. I was torn between wanting to cross the street to get to the square and see more while a small voice inside my head preached my mother's words of advice, "That's enough, go back to the car now!" But it was too late I thought, I had already gotten this far and the area seemed safe. Women, children, and men were walking about, families carrying bags of food and waving flags moved around us, and people were smiling. I finally nodded to Hathem and following his lead quickly crossed the road. As I stepped up onto the square, my shoes surprisingly sunk into patches of sticky, muddy sand and I realized that the layer of green grass which had covered the square for years had been completely eroded. I quickly scanned the square, an elderly shoe shiner sipping tea, a group of men with markers and white paper in hand busy writing what I could only

assume were catchy slogans or the demands they wanted solved by the new government, a bicycle piled high with boxes of *koshary*, a tightly packed circle of men and women listening to someone playing the guitar, and a little boy selling laminated cards which read on one side, “The Youth’s Revolution” and on the other “Egypt.” I felt like a child who was experiencing something for the first time. I stared openly at people, my eyes darted from one thing to the next, and I asked my driver silly questions like, “Who are the men wearing olive green uniforms with red shoulder pads?” Who by the way turned out to be army personal of a lower rank.

Walking through the square we decide to pass by the old AUC campus. Inching closer to the Main Campus I realized that the building had been a victim of the violence as one broken window after the other indicated. Yet, the university hadn’t been the only target of the violence as Hardees and Pizza Hut seemed to have been so badly trashed as well that construction workers were already hard at work, literally rebuilding the restaurants one brick at a time. Surprisingly though, McDonald’s was spared as it was the only up and running fast food chain on the block and I wondered if the security guard standing at the entrance had been the reason why. Towards the end of the street, a dirty white wall was covered with spray painted phrases that read, “I love Egypt,” and “January 25th” as well as beautifully crafted murals. Drawn were the images of a large fist and another of a hand sporting the peace sign which was also used to represent the letter “V” as beside it a line of other letters spelled out the word “Victory.” It was during this moment that I felt a mixture of emotions rush through me. I was in awe with the talent I saw oozing from the wall, patriotism had a whole new meaning, and I was standing right before tangible proof

that the revolution had actually happened, that people had stood in the streets calling for freedom and that others had died for it.

When I was finished starting at the wall, Hathem told me that his brother, who had stood on this very street on Friday January 28th, one of the most violent days of the revolt, had seen this road turn into a battlefield as body after body of injured or killed protestors were carried out amongst the throngs of demonstrators. Out of all the events that I had seen on TV this was the hardest to picture actually happening. I looked down at the pavement scanning for traces of blood but of course there were none. No trace of the makeshift hospital center, no medical equipment, and no pools of blood. Heading out of the square on our way to the car a large, red poster caught my eye. Turning to focus on it I realized that it read, “My God have Mercy on the Martyrs” as equally shaped square portraits of the martyr’s faces outlined the edges of the poster. And so there it stood, a tribute to the martyrs. Though it was nothing grand like a statue or an expensive marble slab etched with their names on it, this simple poster was more than enough. It was a subtle yet important reminder that Egyptians from all walks of life had sacrificed their lives for a free and democratic Egypt, something I felt needed never be forgotten.

With a small smile drawn across my face, I walked behind Hathem towards the car, still looking from one thing to the next, my eyes darting quickly trying to mentally register everything I was seeing. Although I might have seen enough to inspire me to write, I yearned to stay longer, to explore other small alleyways, to analyze apartment buildings for the aftermath of bullet holes and Molotov cocktails, and to give myself more time to savor and save all the images in my mind.

The last thing that grabbed my attention as I walked out of *Tahrir* were two flags hanging from a balcony and fluttering lightly in the breeze. The first, the Egyptian flag and the second, which took me a minute to figure it out because it was wrapped up in itself, was the Tunisian. Ah, these people were truly the fuel that lit the fire, the inspiration that changed the fate of Egypt and paved the way for a rich chapter in its history. But, the January 25th revolution is just the beginning, the perfect hook to draw the readers in, how the rest of the chapter will be written however remains to be seen during the coming months and years.