

The Survivor's Tale

Around the world, the stories people tell -- whether of their own lives or the distant past -- seem to operate on one of two patterns. The first kind of story is that of adventure, where the young person sets out to find something that has been lost, to search for meaning and help, and a sense of themselves. Often, the adventurer finds magical help in the form of friendly animals, magical beings, or an ancient object which guides them. Eventually, they slay the dragon, marry the princess, change social status, and become the next leader. Naturally, women's stories from the past will vary because in centuries gone by, the only roles that women played were related to their roles as wife and mother. So a woman has her adventures in the home of her new husband and lives in an uncertain limbo until she has given birth to a male heir. Many things can go wrong in the stories of adventurers, but the whole form of "quest" is essential, say psychologists and folklorists, to a young person's ability to move into adulthood and find their own place in society.

The second kind of story features a hero who is also a victim. If adventurers seek solutions, or that which was lost, victims seek to rectify the villainy that was done to them, their family members, or their community. Victim heroes are driven out violently ^(from) of their home setting, and not willingly. Part of their quest is that of the eternal return: somehow, they seek to right the wrong that was done, thereby healing their own brokenness. Their goal is to return to normalcy.

The stories told here bear eerie similarities to ^{one or} each other because they are all stories of the same type following the pattern of the victim hero who must struggle against evil, and those heroes prevail precisely in correlation to the number of helpers and support that they are able to craft together to meet the challenge of overcoming evil. The stories told by our informants consist primarily of the victim hero pattern -- but these stories, in our case, should more properly be called "Survivor Tales".

The Survivor Tale is the victim hero's narrative told after the initial villainy has taken place. In the case of the women and men of the McK, the villainy that overtook their normal lives was not some personal brush with crime but a national theft of a political process that yearned for change. Almost all of our survivors were taken unaware by the explosion of violence that was imposed by Khomeini's regime as it usurped the powers of the Shah. People in Iran had been unfamiliar with Khomeini's writings; their protests against the Shah had made use of religious symbolism and cultural practice, but it was not essentially a revolt that wanted to form an Islamic state of the sort we currently have in Tehran. The almost unthinkable discovery that Khomeini's army would turn devastating weapons on their own citizens engaged in peaceful political protest was a shock to most of the citizens in Iran. It was at this time that our survivors made the decision that they would give themselves wholly, body and soul, to the struggle to undo the great evil that had befallen Iran during the time after the Shah's ousting. Like any folktale hero, they were driven out of their comfortable lives, and tossed into a world of extravagant terror, personal injury, and the strong possibility of loss and hope and meaning in the midst of their new world.

The stories here are not just valuable to human rights tribunals or political partisans. They are meaningful for us all because they show us what happens when women are called upon to move into wholly unfamiliar roles as leaders, soldiers, and activists. In the scheme of community

survival, the experiences of the women of the McK allow us all to be in solidarity with these women who have endured so much. Our public acknowledgement by hearing their stories of the evils done to them and their people is essential both to their healing and ours. By collecting some of their stories and bringing them to the West, people everywhere can solidify their commitment to justice worldwide for both genders, for Muslims and secularists, and everyone in between. These stories can tell us something about what we might find in ourselves to keep us going in similar circumstances, and our commitment to keeping these stories alive is our gift as humans to the future of the Iranian people and all who struggle for political change and justice.

^
ot