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Liberation Day

by Marion Umney

I had been feeling the pressure of her wings and her beak for years, I realised. Every time I left the house it would rise in me, the flutter in my stomach which would not calm itself, and the dryness in my mouth, like sandpaper. It had been so much a part of my life that I could almost ignore it. I took time to make sure I was properly dressed, checking over and over, and once outside, my eyes would dart everywhere, constantly looking for danger, looking for safety.

That day started out like so many others. I checked myself twice in the mirror before leaving. Was everything secure? Yes, I looked fine. I took a breath opened the door and stepped outside.

There was a stillness in the air; a feeling of anticipation, the quiet false peace before a bomb explodes. I shivered, in spite of the warm September air. The streets were surprisingly quiet. There were definitely fewer people than normal hurrying to work, and those who were around seemed to be huddled together around the coffee stalls, their eyes or their ears glued to their phones. There was definitely something going on and, my heart lurched as I realised I hadn't even heard the news that morning. Never mind. I was late already so it would have to wait until I got to the office.

When I arrived, I saw the other women huddled together, whispering, their faces white with concern. Sarina pulled me towards them.

“Hey, Yasaman. It's awful isn't it. What are we going to do?”

Her eyes were wide as she grabbed my arm

“What...?”

“Mahsa Amini’s death. You mean you haven’t heard? It’s all over social media.”

“I...I...”

Before I could gather my thoughts, Sarina, always the ringleader, was tugging me towards the door.

“Come on, let’s go. We need to find out what’s going on.”

I cast an imploring look at the other women behind us, but their faces were grim as they picked up their bags and followed Sarina out of the door and down the steps.

In the short time since I’d arrived at the office Tehran had come alive. The streets were full of women and men, shouting, their faces distorted with pain and rage. Beyond them I could see the authorities, the ever-present morality police on the edge of the crowd, the government snakes waiting to strike. In spite of the insistent fluttering in my stomach I followed Sarina. It seemed I had no choice.

Then something extraordinary happened. I found myself surrounded by women who, as if of one accord, started tearing off their headscarves and, as the light September breeze played with the suddenly liberated hair, I realised how much beauty was hidden from the world. It wasn’t just the hair it was the joy on the women’s faces as they experienced a surge of power which slowly spread, like wildfire through the crowd.

Without thinking I reached for my own head covering, but then the habitual fluttering of anxiety gave way to terror. Panic was a vulture inside my body, trying to get out, pecking and flapping wildly at me. I wanted to run, to hide, anything to stop this, but at the same time I was gripped by excitement and a sense of power I had never experienced before. I grasped at Sarina.

“I’m scared.”

“Me too, but I think I’ll feel worse if I don’t do this than if I do.”

She was right of course. I thought of Vida Mowahed and the girls of Enghelab Street; of White Wednesday and all those who had gone before and slowly I unwrapped my head. The vulture inside my body raised her beautiful long white neck. She nodded in approval, then slowly and calmly spread her wings and flew away from me forever.