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A Family of Resistance

by Christiane Hoffmann

Resistance has taken a female form. She is quiet, persistent and patient; she has the staying power of those who raise children and know that everything will progress and that some things just take their time. She is not rebellious, she just doesn't want to give way. Resistance is not combat. The fighters are dead. Resistance lives in a house in Tehran's Baharestan district near to the old Parliament, in a neighbourhood with narrow streets and two-storey houses in which teachers, taxi drivers and minor officials live. The house is separated from the street by a high iron gate. It is Parastou Forouhar's parents' house. It is the house in which her parents were murdered.

On a November evening ten years ago, the murderers rang the bell down at the gate. Her parents were alone in the house, two people who had committed themselves to the political struggle for a democratic Iran, who had first fought against the Shah and then against the Islamic Republic. In the short, hope-filled time after the revolution, Dariush Forouhar was Minister for Labour. Before this, and afterwards, he sat in prison for many years and only survived the purges of the eighties because Khomenei liked him personally.

Once in the house, your eye is drawn to the end of the entrance hall and a huge portrait of her father. It was displayed at his funeral procession. “It’s not really that good”, says Parastou, “but it’s captured his stare: it follows you everywhere. Sometimes I talk to the picture and try to find out what my father is thinking. I look for his expression to know if my parents are happy.”

Parastou left Iran at the beginning of the nineties and lives in Germany as an artist. However she comes back to Iran every year on the anniversary of her parents’ death. This is to hold a memorial for the deceased – and in Iran commemoration is a form of resistance. This is a tradition that everyone understands and therefore it is dangerous: the Revolution of 1979 began with the commemoration of the dead who had been murdered by the Shah’s soldiers.

So many people came to the memorial in the year after Dariush and Parvaneh Forouhar were murdered that the local mosque didn’t have enough space for everyone. Back then, Parastou made a speech and then everyone moved in a funeral procession back to the house. They talked and sang. Every possible opposition group was represented: students and old men from the secular parties, the leader of the movement for independent trade unions and the women from the women’s movement. “Ever since then the space we are given has been getting smaller”, says Parastou. “They want to ensure that the anniversary loses its power.” The event was first banned from the mosque, then in every other public place. The private memorial service has now been prohibited for a third time. Security forces are cordoning off the neighbourhood and not even the closest friends are able to get into the house.

It is 6 in the morning on Friday the 21st of November, the 10th anniversary of the deaths.

Parastou and her brother have come from Germany. They have spent the night in the house along with their relatives, three sisters, the brother and mother of the murder victims, on mattresses on the floor and on sofas. The last to be able to enter the house at the break of dawn is a Kurd. He is wearing the traditional garb of baggy grey trousers. Dariush Forouhar learned Kurdish whilst incarcerated and, after the Revolution, tried to liaise between Tehran and the Kurds who were striving for autonomy. This is why they still revere him to this day. Before the Kurd bids his farewells, he goes once again into the study, where Forouhar was stabbed to death. They stabbed him eleven times before the seventy-year old stopped moving. Then they pointed the body towards Mecca.

The small street has now been barricaded on both sides, ready for a siege of a very different kind: nobody is allowed in. The security forces call this quarantine. Parastou was at two neighbourhood bakeries the day before and bought bread for today, so that it could be given out to people for free. Whoever receives free bread would then be praying for the deceased. She also bought flowers at the bazaar: white gladioli, yellow lilies and highly fragrant daffodils. She placed candles around the house: in her father’s study and upstairs on the carpet on the spot where her mother was stabbed. These little acts are what signify resistance. It is all about doing something rather than standing by.

Ten days before, as Parastou had just arrived in Tehran, her first task was to place an advert in the newspaper for the memorial service. She was filled with hope because the advert actually appeared in print. But the day after she was summoned before the secret service. The service was prohibited. She had to sign a protocol that stated there were concerns "due to increased traffic." She knows these citations. She isn't always treated in an unfriendly manner. Some agents have let on to her that they also condemn the murders. Other times though they threaten her again: "You had better watch out, we are watching you, also when you're abroad."

After the murders there was an outcry across the country. The political assassinations were discussed publicly. The Reformers led by President Mohammed Chatami promised investigation. At first this investigation was actually carried out. The trail led to the secret service. The Minister responsible had to step down. Eighteen secret service agents were arrested and charged. But nobody followed the clues up to the commissioners – much further up in the system. The file was officially closed after two years. Parastou filed appeals, intervened in Parliament and was given the message that during the investigation they had "come across people who we don't have the power to summon." The officials said then that in their opinion the case was solved. For Parastou the trial was a sham. The Minister that left office back then is now the Attorney General. "It's not a matter of personal revenge", says Parastou, "but if I were to put up with this, then I would be accepting the injustice of a system that plans political assassinations." The officials accuse her of challenging the workings of the system.

It is eleven o' clock. An aunt is sitting at the dining table doing a crossword puzzle. The others are sitting upstairs in front of a tiny television watching a film about pirates. They are all over sixty yet have remained girlishly young, Iranian citizens with pretty faces and dyed blonde hair. None of the aunts have taken part in their sister's political engagements. Why do they come back here every year? "It is the only thing that we can do for them", they say. It is also completely normal for them to move with their 89-year-old mother into Parastou's parents' house every time she comes to Tehran. This is so it doesn't become a haunted house; rather it remains as a sign of familial togetherness that has also become a form of resistance. The grandmother is the only one who doesn't unquestioningly comply with the fate of the survivors. She is not proud, instead she is almost a bit angry at the daughter who sacrificed herself for politics and not for her family. She is also bitter towards a regime that killed her daughter in the name of Allah. The old woman has not been able to pray since the murders – and will not be able to die in peace.

It is twelve o' clock. They find out that the Kurd has been arrested. He was brought to the police station, interrogated and forced to take off his Kurdish clothes. Arash, the brother, is sitting in the living room. A portrait of Mohammed Mossadegh, the Prime Minister who wrested control of the Iranian oil reserves from the British at the beginning of the fifties and was subsequently overthrown by the CIA, is hanging over the fireplace. He has become an icon of all democratic and nationalistic movements in Iran. Parastou has transformed the living room into a museum with pictures of her parents' political appearances. The house, a childhood home and then a site of terror, is slowly becoming a place of commemoration. "My parents achieved what they wanted", says the brother. "They didn't want to die in bed. And now we have to come to terms with that." He himself had left Iran with his family a year before the murders. "I was the best means for

the secret service to put pressure on my parents." He had had a dissident childhood, which meant: adventures and secrets. His father lived in prison. This meant that Arash was not able to go to university, not able to get his pilot's qualification.

Murder threats were a regular occurrence. Once, whilst the Shah was still in power, a bomb exploded in the flat. Later, as a grown man, Arash would sleep with a pistol under his pillow. "I always thought that I would open the door and would see blood behind", he says. After his parents' assassination he fought for the investigation and solution of the crime for three years. He lost his job and blames himself. Then he gave up. Now it is President Khatami's time and the image of the Islamic Republic has changed in western eyes. "Why didn't you do anything?", asks his now fifteen-year-old son. He also has to live with this.

Time has moved on and it is now one in the afternoon. Silence reigns inside the house. The hustle and bustle of the city seeps in to the house, car horns can be heard. Parastou is lying on the bed in her parents' bedroom.

Her mother had been politically active ever since she was a young woman, long before she met the father of her children. As a twelve-year-old she was already sticking flyers up on the walls of houses. She was 15 when Mossadegh lost power in the coup and was excited by the idea of nationalism. She cut her hair off and sold it to raise money to support him. She got to know her husband through political work. He was a lawyer, a rationalist and political strategist. She was emotional and softer. The couple complimented each other, but quarrelled too, especially after the Revolution as the religious seized power. The husband wanted to co-operate with the Islamists; had believed that he could influence them. The mother was sceptical from the beginning. Then the executions began. Six girls from Parastou's school class didn't survive the first wave of executions. Parastou was sure back then that she didn't want to follow in her parents' political footsteps.

It is two o' clock. Everyone is sitting around the round table in front of the kitchen and eating lunch: chicken and saffron rice with pine nuts and barberries. The telephone keeps ringing with friends or other people calling. They don't give their names but do say that they will be coming in the afternoon. They have set the Kurd free.

The memorial service should have started by now. Parastou is sitting on the steps in the yard smoking a cigarette. She has also placed candles in front of the two cypresses in the garden. She planted the cypresses in the first year as a symbol of unyieldingness but they keep on dying. She has re-planted them seven times. A visitor's jacket is hanging on a garden chair; the only one who has been coming and going unhindered today. He has been bringing them news from outside and vice versa. They have known him for a long time. On whose side is he? "There are so many grey areas", says Parastou.

It is four o' clock. The telephone is now ringing incessantly. It is either the BBC or Voice of America, or it is acquaintances that are standing outside behind the barricades. The security forces are not allowing people to remain standing there. Crowds of people are not permitted to form. They are filming all of the faces, threatening, "We will teach you how to forget this day and this place."

Maybe resistance really is combat: against the destruction of memory, against their extinction, which represents another murder. The death of her parents has forced Parastou to take on a role that she hadn't previously wanted to have and one she perhaps fled to Germany to avoid. This is how resistance originates: when you have to become political in order to stay true to yourself. "I don't know if what I'm doing is personal or political", she says. "Everything is political in Iran. It is all about investigating and solving murders, about truthfulness, about resisting lies."

Parastou sees that the shock has subsided after ten years. A friend calls saying that she has gone to an art opening instead of going to barricades today. Before, artists would not have opened exhibitions on the anniversary of the Forouhars' deaths. The memory has, however, not lost its power yet: when Parastou comes to Tehran, the house becomes a meeting point for opposition forces. The whole living room had been full the weekend before with students of the Amir-Kabir University where Ahmadinejad was greeted with the cry "Down with the dictator!"

As it is now dark, Parastou, together with her brother, lights tea candles everywhere in the yard. The murderers came after eleven o' clock on that night ten years ago. Parastou still doesn't know exactly what happened. It is possible that there was an argument with her father first. What is certain is that everything was recorded on tape. The physical extermination of political opposition was one of the official duties of the secret service. This is clear from the interrogations. The statements of those arrested show that they didn't understand why the murders became such a scandal that time. They had gotten their overtime bonus, as usual.