

Salamat Narges Hanem,

Last month they sentenced you again; another 18 months of your life they want, after you finish the 16 years which follow on from the 11 which follow on .. it becomes an absurdity. They clocked you when you were a student, some 30 years ago, and they've never taken their eyes off you since.

And what was it you did to earn all this attention? You campaigned, in Iran, for the basic rights of your fellow-Iranians and their dignity. You spoke against the death penalty. You insisted that respect for human rights was part of a correctly practiced Islam. Most importantly, you would not stop. Speaking, writing, organizing, campaigning - *you would not stop*. This latest punishment is for standing up for the rights of the women inside Evin prison.

People like you really irritate the authorities. People who just won't drop their bundle of human values and run, who cannot compromise on the sanctity of life, the integrity of the body; this person who speaks quietly, sometimes with passion, always with logic, who appeals to both reason and heart, to the best that is in us. And there's a sharper viciousness against this person if they're a woman or if they're young; they've overstepped their station, they need to be taught a lesson.

Dear comrade, I write to you while my nephew, Alaa Abdel Fattah, is in prison in Egypt, and on hunger strike. He is 40 now, and he's been in and out of prison for a decade; since the defeat of the revolution of 2011. Like you, he wrote a book. In it he writes: "I am in prison because the regime wants to make an example of us. So let us be an example, but of our own choosing." You have chosen, and you have dictated your terms again and again. And when they exacted the price, you dictated more terms.

The cost has been heavy; the persistent malign intervention in your life, the pain of your loved ones, the decimation of your health, the separations. You are not Superwoman. You never pretended to be. You wrote: "I am a human being, a mother, a wife. How much more of this pain and suffering must I go through?" Well, that was 11 years ago, and you are still going through it. Worse: you have chosen for others which pain they should suffer. Your children, whom you sent away from you, to safety in France. Your children whom the authorities won't allow to speak to you on the phone, forcing you to "affirm, through a hunger strike, my motherhood and my tenderness".

There's a photograph of you with your twins. You're all dressed up and there's a red velvet curtain behind you. They must be about 5 years old. Ali is in a green sweater, Kiana is more formal with a necklace and two pink flowers in her hair. Anyone who looks properly into your eyes will recognize - what shall I call it? A resigned

determination? You know something bad is coming. You don't know what it is. But you know you will face it, and face it down. Meanwhile an arm around each child holds them close.

I've gone back through your images, and back, to that round-faced bright-eyed young woman with the tumble of curly hair who registered at Imam Khomeini University in Qazvin to major in applied physics; the young woman who founded a student organization to "throw light on complex issues" and another to "climb the highest mountains in Iran". Oh Narges, they create better metaphors than we ever could: "due to your political activities", they ruled, you were forbidden to climb mountains! Well, look at the mountains you *have* climbed, my dear.

Alaa writes: "All that's asked of us is that we fight for what's right. We don't have to be winning while we fight for what's right, we don't have to be strong while we fight for what's right, we don't have to be prepared while we fight for what's right, or to have a good plan, or be well organized. All that's asked of us is that we don't stop fighting for what's right". But I write you this letter in the hope and belief that you *will* win in your struggle for "peace, tolerance for a plurality of views, and human rights" - and soon.

Ahdaf Soueif
Cairo