

THE AUTHOR

Nila Praan is a collective dedicated to providing a voice to the everyday stories of individuals in the context of an uncertain, unstable, and often starkly unjust system. By publishing under this shared pen name, the writer(s) behind Nila Praan seek to centre the narrative, allowing the stories and their critical themes to take the deserved spotlight.



“They tried to bury us, not knowing we were seeds...”

First published in 2026 by Nila Praan via Bookmundo

ISBN 9789 403 877 754

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Cover design and illustrations by Nila Praan

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Letters from the Square

Nila Praan

(01) Prologue

(09) Introduction

(19) Revolution

letter #6

It was the 25th, and I spoke up,
Fighting for bread, justice and for fair
wage.

(48) Curfew

I walked, I chanted, I angered in peace,
Voicing many generations of rage.

(60) Hope

letter #14

They came at me, on camels and horses,
I resisted with a strength they could not
gauge.

(83) Change

Feverish, I went on for days, sitting.
Until "I resign," he said, and opened the
cage.

(96) Blood

letter #15

Free at first, then conflicted; I saw them
shoot
At man, woman and child of every age.

(126) Darkness

letter #22

Then they came home and took my child
away.
Now it's dark, and I have fallen from my
stage.

(148) Epilogue

PROLOGUE

Teta was almost always in the kitchen, preparing our meals and cleaning up. If not the kitchen, she would be in her bedroom, repairing the family's or a neighbour's clothing and usually minding her business. Gedo had passed away a decade before I was born, leaving behind echoes of an energetic, fervent soul deeply devoted to Teta, as relayed by Abi through tales of his parents. Teta, in essence, embodied the entirety of 'grandparents' in my life. Despite her general quietness, she had a full and comforting presence. I never saw Mumma quarrelling with her either, a rarity in families where women share the household responsibilities, a commonality in Egypt. Teta possessed an eternal tranquillity about her, unassailable and impervious to the chaos of the world around her.

But that day, her demeanour was different. I was eleven at the time, and the blistering heat of a mid-Ramadan day had left me feeling bored and famished. The others had ventured out with Mumma to the market, leaving me to wander aimlessly through the house. I had ended up in Teta's bedroom, which did not happen very often. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, bending over a shirt sleeve, frowning at a stitch, needle in hand. As I glanced around the room, my eyes fell upon a rather hefty book nestled high on her shelf, tantalisingly within my grasp. Without much thought, I reached for it.

“Ra’is, wait! What are you doing? You will drop that-it’s heavy-”

THUD.

It slipped from the shelf and hit the floor. The book lay open, its pages revealing a tapestry of notes and paragraphs, some meticulously penned, others hastily scrawled. She stood next to me, stooping over the book, holding onto my arm for support.

“Is this yours, Teta?” I bent down and picked it up slowly so it would not fall apart.

“Yes, my omri, it is mine.”

“You have written all this... wow, Teta, I didn’t know you write, what is all this?”

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“Yes, my omri, I used to read and write a lot more when I was younger, but now my eyesight is failing, and I get tired more easily...”

“But what have you written in this fat book? Did you write everything in this?”

“Most of it, yes, but your Gedo also wrote some things in there... shall we look at it together, then? Now that it has caught your attention, I don’t see how I cannot tell you what is in it.”

She knew me all too well. I settled onto the edge of the bed with the book in hand, and Teta joined me on the other side. “Gedo taught me how to read and write,” she began, her voice carrying the weight of memories long held. “We were married when I was not yet fourteen. Everything was arranged by our parents—no questions asked, no consideration for my desires, or even if I liked your Gedo!” She chuckled softly. “My schooling was cut short by my parents, despite my aptitude in class. But Gedo, he was my saving grace. Back then, women were seen as fit only for domesticity, but Gedo defied those condescending and belittling conventions. His aspirations for Egypt transcended the confines of gender and religion that plagued our society then and now. He was devout in his faith and prayed every day. Yet he was progressive, concerned with humanity above all else. And I absorbed his teachings eagerly, like a sponge,” she drifted on dreamily.

“But so, let’s see what is in this book... there are a lot of scribbles and random notes... but look here at this sketch - do you see what it is?” she said, gesturing with a wrinkled index finger.

“Looks like Egypt here. And the Mediterranean Sea... and the Red Sea? What are these other lines?” It was sketched with a fountain pen with black ink, now faded into a darkish grey-brown, contrasting with the dirty beige of the old paper.

“This here is the Suez Canal,” Teta explained with a hint of pride. “It looks tiny, but do you see what it connects? Exactly, these two seas. If you are sailing from Europe and want to go to South Asia, this is your only route - unless you want to go all around Africa, adding many more months to your journey. And, crossing the tropics would destroy your food and kill off all your crew too fast,” she added with a laugh. “So, this canal is perhaps Egypt’s biggest asset, but it also means that everyone else also wants control of it.”

“Who is everyone?”

“These days everyone is everyone I suppose... but initially it was one of the biggest empires in the world that wanted their capital in the North to be connected better with the great jewel of their empire in the East, further East from here, yes. This is just one example, but you get the point. Our little country here in what they call the Middle East has always been directly linked to the interests of these other empires. Did you know Gedo’s Baba

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fought in the Egyptian Army in the First World War on the side of the British? Makes no sense, no? But it was only after the Second World War that we finally had Egyptian leadership here. It took some years after that for us to find a promising leader. But even he made some mistakes later on..."

"Who was the leader, Teta?"

"Nasser! Look, I've written a whole page here about him. Gedo talked about him a lot; he found him fascinating but with mixed feelings. Nasser was Naguib's right-hand man until Nasser later accused him of being corrupt and placed him under house-arrest, and he was held there until 1971! For some reasons, Nasser was respected in our time for how he improved and modernised Egypt. He built the High Dam in the South - maybe Abi will take you there one day. The best thing he did was to place the Suez fully under our country's control, away from the hands of those faraway rulers who just wanted to use it for their economic gains. But his popularity went downhill after the Nakbat when we lost Sinai to Israel," Teta's face grew cloudy with emotion. "He also laid the basis for the military rule we have today. Nasser continued to rule us with an iron hand until he died in 1970. It slowly became normal to imprison civilians and overlook elections. Gedo was even imprisoned and tortured during Nasser's ruling. There was a lot less support for him after Nakbat. He seemed promising, but also dishonest, a double-edged dictator. He dreamed of uniting all the Arab countries into one major Arab power that could then use our biggest asset to our advantage - you know what that was?"

“The Suez Canal?”

“No, look at the drawing. These black circles all over here are oil fields,” she continued, pointing at the first sketch again. I had never seen her so excited. “Oil - the precious treasure they all want to dip their fingers into. How else would they fuel a war of that scale with all its machinery and weapons?” I stared at her in silence; she was looking out of the window as if she was not in the room anymore. Lost in thought, she continued, “Imagine if Nasser’s dream of Arab nationalism had come true. We would have full control of our oil reserves and strategic position between Europe and Asia. But our situation has always been complex, never easy, never straightforward even for our leaders.” Teta looked sad as she said this. “Gedo used to say it’s like a big puppet show staged in the heart of the world. And, of course, in a good puppet show, the puppet master remains unseen.”

“What happened after Nasser died? Who was the president?”

“We had Sadat, a very different ruler from Nasser. He brought Sinai back to us, which was the highlight of his reign. That was in 1973, just three years after he came to power. But he also signed an agreement with Israel and made Egypt the first Arab country to recognize Israel as a nation,” she said looking at me ominously. “This caused Egypt to lose all its popularity and reputation among all the Arab countries and also its own people. It was like a reliable older brother betraying his younger siblings.

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‘There was a lot of anger in that period. Sadat was assassinated by an army officer in 1981 during an annual celebration of the Harb, the war that gave us Sinai back. He was ruling around the same time as Hafez in Syria.’ Teta’s voice softened into a higher pitch as she said this.

“We were lucky that we did not have the military terror here in Egypt like they did in Syria. I will never forget the newspapers from that time, it was some years before you were born...” Her voice drifted as her eyes glistened with tears. I looked down at my feet, my toes barely scraping the cool, tiled floor. “Sadat was hailed as an international hero for extending a helping hand to Israel, but his leadership brought more pain than promise within Egypt. Just like Nasser, he also ruled with an iron hand. Your uncle was also in prison for some time, like many others we knew then. But Sadat did not share Nasser’s vision of Arab unity, and he left us feeling fragmented and drifted away from our neighbours. It was the price we paid for being on good terms with the dominant powers of the West.”

“And since then, we have had Mubarak, right?” I said, wanting to bring her back to the present.

“Yes, Mubarak, you know very well,” she said teasingly. “They are already teaching you about him in school, I guess. He has been in power so long that Sadat is ancient history for us!” Teta laughed bitterly. “My omri, I’m tired now, shall we continue

another day? It's almost dinner time, maybe Mumma is back too," she said, closing the book and placing it next to her on the bed.

"Gedo and I have filled this entire book with the richness of what we knew then and our dreams for our children," she laughed, tears filling her eyes again. "Another day, my omri."

*

INTRODUCTION

‘Tomorrow, I am going to bring justice to my previously imprisoned Abi, Gedo, my great grandfather and my uncle.’

I wrote this on my Facebook profile on the 24th of January 2011. I was seventeen. The chain of imprisoned members of my family that I referred to, generation after generation, was a result of our continuous political opinion aligned in favour of some form of democracy and mostly in disagreement with the respective reigning government. My family was my first teacher in the practice of people’s movement. It is the most important lesson I have learnt from them. The act of a collective uprising. Collective. Rise. Up. Because we are down below in the megalomaniac power