



Omar Alshogre: "A Story of Love and War"

Talare

Omar Alshogre
Människorättsaktivist

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I received a very interesting question on my way here. The passenger next to me, after exchanging some good stories about our challenging childhoods, asked me: 'If you had the power to go back in time and relive the days that you already lived, would you live them in the same way you did before, or would you change something about them?' The answer was very clear, very easy. In my head, I knew exactly what to say, but first, give me the chance to tell you three brief stories to help you understand my answer. When I was 13 years old, I fell in love with a girl who was sitting in the school seat in front of me in the classroom. The most beautiful girl you could ever imagine. You know, the way she walks, the way she looks, the way she moves, the way she is—her eyes, her nose, her mouth. The collection of her was extremely beautiful. Every detail, every feeling, I see when I look at her. It was fabulous. But I was shy. I never dared to look any girl in the eye. You know, I didn't dare. I was so shy, but I wouldn't let that stop me from telling her that I loved her. So, one day, I was courageous enough to take a pen and paper and write her a letter. I wrote the first initial of my name, "O," and the first initial of her name, "H," with a heart in the middle. I thought that was the best thing I could ever do—the most romantic, the most beautiful thing. I believed she would fall in love the minute she opened that paper. I left it on her seat and went back to the corner to hide, to see when she came back from the break. She came in slowly, approached the seat, picked up the paper, and opened it. That was the moment where I was supposed to shine, the moment where she was supposed to smile, be happy, and fall in love with me. She opened that paper and tore it apart, throwing it in the trash. It's very funny to say today, but it was heartbreaking. At that moment, my heart was thrown in the trash. Every feeling I had for her was thrown in the trash. I didn't know what to do. When I got back home, I tried to think about anything but her, but I couldn't think about anything else. I sat there in my room. My mom called for me, but I couldn't answer. I told her I was studying, but I couldn't study. I couldn't do anything except think about the fact that she rejected me. But the next day, I couldn't give up. So, I wrote another letter. I

took the pen and paper, and I wrote my first initial, "O," and her first initial, "H," with a heart in the middle. But this time, I perfumed it. It smelled lovely. I hid in the same corner, and she came, took the paper, smelled it, and, despite the fantastic smell, tore it apart and threw it in the trash. The beauty of the smell didn't matter. I didn't know what to do. I got frustrated and went back home. I was hungry. I wanted to punch things. I didn't know what to do. How could I get the love that I wanted so badly? But I tried once, twice, and if that means something, it means that I can try three times, five times, ten times, a hundred times. I can try forever until I get what I want, until I get that love that I felt I deserved. One day, I decided this letter was going to be fabulous. So, I took the pen and paper, and I wrote my first initial, her first initial, and a heart in the middle, but this time I colored it very lovingly. I used a different perfume—a girl's perfume that smelled fantastic—and I left it on the seat. I knew she would take it and throw it in the trash, but it didn't matter. As long as I had some hope, I would keep going. She came back from the break, took the paper, and smelled it. In my head, the picture played faster than what she was actually doing, so I imagined her throwing it in the trash, but she didn't. She took the paper, smiled, and put it in her pocket. If that meant something, it meant that she loved me. Everything about her—the way she moved, the way she looked—she loved everything about me. That's what my brain was telling me at that moment. If she took that letter, she loved me so much. Two years passed since I sent the first letter, and it wasn't the first time. Eventually, she actually told me that she loved me in a letter she wrote to me. I received a phone call from my cousin, Bashir. He said, 'Omar, things are getting really wild downtown. You gotta come to the city.' If there's one thing I loved more than that girl, it was wildness—crazy things. I went to the city, and I was on the street with thousands of people, all jumping, shouting, 'Freedom, freedom, freedom.' I didn't know what freedom meant at that time. It didn't matter. The girl I wanted loved me—that was all that mattered, you know? Being in a protest with thousands of people wasn't about freedom for me, or politics, or democracy; it was about a collection of nice people enjoying their time, having a good party, you know, with good music and good food and so on. Flowers—everybody had a rose. When you came to the protest, they gave you a flower. I took this flower, and the best thought that came to my mind was, 'This is a nice, expensive flower. I'll take it with me to give it to her tomorrow.' That was among the most meaningful things about this protest for me when I was 15 years old. The only disturbing thing in this protest, though, was that on the other side of the protest were soldiers holding their guns. An officer was

walking in front of them slowly, step by step, and suddenly, while we were in the middle of the protest, the officers screamed, 'Load!' They started loading all these guns, aiming at the people. Then it got super, super quiet, and you didn't hear anything anymore. They started shooting people. I had never seen people dying before. I had never seen a friend die before. Suddenly, there was so much blood on the ground. I had never seen blood smoking before. It was the first time in my life. Everything was so scary. What was going to happen next? Everybody was screaming, 'Omar, run away, run away!' But I couldn't. I was frozen. I didn't know what to do. I had never seen that before. I had only seen it in movies. I didn't know how to react. People were shouting, 'Omar, run away!' I couldn't. The soldiers were coming towards me quickly, and I couldn't move. They came, put their hands on me, pushed me to the ground, and started jumping over my body, hurting me badly. They took me to prison, and they tortured me. I was 15 years old and never understood the word 'torture' until I experienced it myself. When I was in the most painful moments, I realized there was no more room for love. It seemed like I would die very soon. I thought I would die at that moment, but I survived. I was released, and I had the chance to go back to my habit of writing letters. I took the pen, I took the paper, I wrote my first initial, her first initial, and a heart in the middle, and a few words: "Hi, you know that I love you. I love everything about you, and I'll always love you, but I know that I will die. It's going to hurt. It's going to hurt me and you. So, I'd rather not talk anymore, not write letters anymore because I will dedicate my life to going to the streets to ask for freedom and dignity for democracy. I can't let monsters who can torture children gain power in my country. I have to do something about it. I have to dedicate my life to something meaningful. I can't spend all my time thinking about you day and night." And I sent that letter. Then she started to send me letters back, but I never opened them. I took them and burned them, sometimes crying, sometimes laughing, sometimes feeling nothing. One day, when I turned 17, the intelligence services of my country attacked my home and took me to prison again. This time was different. I didn't spend one month or two months in prison. I didn't spend one year—I spent three years, from 17 to 20. Those were painful moments when you see the ones you love dying slowly next to you. You can only hold them, touch them, and whisper comforting words to them as they die, talking to them about beautiful memories. When my beloved cousin Bashir, who called me to go to the protest, was dying in my arms, I could do nothing but remember the beautiful moments we had together, when we tamed our first bird together, built our first greenhouse together, and when I told him that the

girl loved me. But then he died. The guards came, laughing and enjoying their day, telling us, “Hey, we did a massacre in your town. We killed your family. You have nothing to live for.” They wanted to kill the hope that I had. They wanted to kill everything I had outside and everything I had inside so that I would have nothing to live for. When you’re in a place like that, when you see nothing but darkness, nothing but pain, you realize there is no place for love. Six months passed, and during those six months, I kept remembering her face, her nose, the way she moved, the way she walked, the way she smiled. But slowly, her image started to fade away from my mind. I couldn’t picture her anymore. I didn’t remember how her perfume smelled or how the first letter looked when I sent it. I started to lose my memory, slowly, slowly, slowly, believing that I would die. So, when the passenger next to me asked me this question: “If you had the power to go back in time and live your life again, would you live your days the same way you lived them before, or would you change something about them?” Of course, the answer was no. I would never change anything about what I went through. I would live my days exactly as they happened because if I hadn’t suffered until she loved me, the joy of writing the first letter and the second letter wouldn’t have been the same. The joy when she took the first letter and put it in her pocket wouldn’t have been the same joy. If I hadn’t gone to prison, been tortured, and suffered, I would have never had the chance to build the personality I have today, to become the person I am today. Life is not easy. Most of our life is not filled with beautiful moments. Most of what we go through is challenging, stressful, sometimes physically and mentally painful. Then there are the beautiful moments, but they are not the majority of your life. So, if you or I wish to be only a collection of the beautiful moments of our life, we would be half a person or less. We would be half of what we could become. We would be limiting ourselves. Life does not always offer a way out. Sometimes the only way is through—through pain, through suffering, through hardship and challenges. You become who you are today because of these experiences. So, if I am to summarize my entire speech in one sentence, it would be: If you want to be a person that you will be proud to present to the world, you have to learn one thing, and that’s embracing pain as much as you embrace joy. Thank you.

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