

NAZLI ARTEMIA

The Unicorn Story without an Ending

There was a time in my life that I hugged a TV set. Not for picking it up and not because I wanted to show how much I loved it. I hugged it because I wanted to continue watching a cartoon, *The Last Unicorn*.

I was eight. My family, my grandparents, and my aunt and uncle, we all left our houses in the city and lived in my grandparents' adobe house at their vineyard. It was 1984, the bloodiest year of Iran-Iraq war. The cold, serious voice of the man, announcing the Red Alarm followed by a long siren, still rings in my ears, *"Attention! Attention! This is a red alert! This means that an airstrike is impending. Leave your workplace and seek refuge in a shelter."*

For my cousins and me, however, the war was like a year-round vacation in the vineyard. We were living together and we didn't have to beg our parents to take us to each other's homes. The schools were closed and we had the permission to play all day long, as long as we didn't disturb our parents.

But watching TV in that adobe house without electricity wasn't easy at all. Grandma kept her fourteen inch black and white TV set on a brown side table. The TV could be turned on for short intervals using a car battery. During that time, the car's engine had to be on too, so that the battery wouldn't die quickly. My father owned a red Peykaan and my Uncle Javaad had a light blue Toyota. The main news program was on the air at nine pm. Every night at nine, the battery of one of the cars was connected to the long wire of the TV on the second floor. The only other time the TV was hooked up was on Friday afternoons for a special program for

kids: episodes of *Bolek-Lolek* (a Polish animated TV series), *Pat and Mat*, a Czech animated series, or a kids' sitcom that had been recorded in Tehran.

A year before, the war hadn't found its way to my hometown, Urmia. The Iraqi jets would cross the city's sky, heading toward Tehran. But every time the jets were approaching, the Red Alarm siren would be played on the radio and on TV. People raced to basements or to the underground concrete shelters whose entrances could be found on almost every main street.

Regardless of the airstrike threats, a few movie theatres in the city remained open. Even though most movies starred the masculine Jamshid Aria fighting for honor, or portrayed devastating Iranian family movies, *The Last Unicorn* had been shown in one of the theaters. One afternoon, my mother took me to watch it.

The unicorn, with a long blue mane and two big blue shiny eyes, was the last of her kind. But as long as she existed, trees could leaf and flowers could bloom. A cruel, skinny king with a funnel-shaped nose kept the rest of the unicorns imprisoned inside a dark sea so that their beauty would belong to him alone. The last unicorn wanted to free all the unicorns. In her way to the king's castle, a young, kind magician accompanied her. He warned the last unicorn about the Red Bull, the hunter of unicorns who was the king's warden of the dark sea.

It was almost the middle of the movie when the Red Alarm siren played loudly. People ran toward the exits, screaming and pushing each other. I didn't want to leave. I wanted to see if the last unicorn would rescue the others. My mother pulled my hand and rushed me to the exit. At the last glimpse, I saw a giant Red Bull engulfed in flames chasing after the last unicorn.

After that day, we didn't go to movies again. Seeing women and children pushing each other, scrambling to get out the exit door made my mother claustrophobic. Besides, a month later, the Iraqis began bombing Urmia. People died. They lost legs and arms. They lost their houses in explosions. That was when my family left the city to shelter at the vineyard house.

The adults were unpredictable those days. Whenever there was a Red Alarm, they rushed the kids along, grabbing them by the waist, pulling their hands. Grownups were scary.

But one time I overheard my mother whisper to my aunt, "Pari! If I die or something happens to me, promise me you'll take care of my kids as if they were your own." By that, I realized it wasn't grownups that were scary: it was the Red Alarm and the explosions that had the power of taking away anybody, including my mother. I started clenching my teeth in sleep and when I was awake, thinking about

The Last Unicorn was the best distraction. *What if there's a real unicorn somewhere who could save the world? Maybe she exists, but she doesn't know she's a saviour.*

I checked my forehead in the mirror for a horn. I thought of Urmia Lake as the dark sea in the movie, and Saddam Hussein as that cruel king. When my parents' conversations confused me, I replaced Khomeini with Saddam Hussein to be the cruel king. Somehow, anytime I heard the Red Alarm siren, the flaming Red Bull crossed my mind.

The only person with whom I could talk about *The Last Unicorn* was Uncle Javaad, Aunt Pari's husband. He was a thin man with a thick black mustache and black framed eyeglasses in his early thirties. He was the only grownup that played with us. At nights we asked him to tell us folklore Azeri stories over and over again.

Whenever we heard the Red Alarm siren, we all gathered in the ground floor of the adobe house of the vineyard in darkness, unable to breathe out of fear. Uncle Javaad played Twenty Questions, distracting us from hearing the distant sound of explosions and the roar of the attacking jets.

Uncle Javaad and my father had to drive to the city every weekday. My father was a librarian. Not many people came to the library those days, but the library was open and he had to go to work. Uncle Javaad was an electrical engineer at the city's phone company. He earned more than my father. My father's Peykaan was way cheaper than Uncle Javaad's Toyota.

"So, there's a unicorn out there, somewhere, who would save the world?" Uncle Javaad asked me one day as he was covering his car with mud in front of the house. The Iraqi jets flew low enough that they could detect any brightly colored object. Even in the vineyard, when the Red Alarm siren blasted on Grandpa's portable radio, we had to grab everything from outside -the blue rug we played on, my brother's little truck, the red scarf Grandma spread on the branches of an apple tree to dry, and the yellow salad bowl shining next to the sink. If it was twilight, we had to turn off the lights too.

"Well, I'm not sure anymore," I answered Uncle Javaad.

"Why not?"

"Because she was supposed to show up long time ago. Don't you agree?"

Two days before my birthday in April, one of my father's colleagues was blinded during the last bombing. The bomb fell right in the middle of the street in front of his car while he was driving home, turning the windshield to powdered glass. A thousand tiny pieces hit his face. That night, my father smoked cigarette after cigarette. "It could have been me or you, you know? Then what? How could we survive with a pair of blind eyes? And eyes are the least you could lose," Said my

father quietly to Uncle Javaad at the back of the adobe house. I was returning from peeing when I overheard them.

My father forgot to buy me a birthday gift. He was still upset about his colleague. At my birthday night, Uncle Javaad decorated one of the rooms of the second floor of the vineyard house by balloons and colorful party decorations. We ate my mother's homemade cake and took pictures. In one of the pictures, Uncle Javaad had a big smile visible even behind his bushy mustache: he had leaned toward me and held his fisted hand over my forehead with his index finger pointing to the camera. No one understood why he did it, but I knew it was supposed to be my horn.

On one of the Friday afternoons, my mother, Aunt Pari, and Grandma were knitting in the room where the TV set was. My cousins were in the other room playing. My father was outside, examining the budding grape vines. Uncle Javaad had left in the morning for an unusual weekend work shift. The TV was on, running off of power from my father's Peykaan. No one had noticed that I was the only child watching TV. If they had, they would have probably turned it off. It was too expensive to waste the gas for just one kid to watch the children's program.

Then it happened. The smiling kids' show host announced that instead of *Bolek-Lolek*, they were going to show *The Last Unicorn*. Crawling slowly toward the TV, I tried to raise its volume. When the English letters showed up on the forest-like background, a voice said "The Last Unicorn" in Persian. I crawled farther and pulled my head up.

I was one year older so I could understand the story of the movie better. Only witches and magicians could see the unicorn's horn. In her journey to find the other unicorns, the last unicorn got captured by an old witch. Later, when the unicorn escaped, she set the rest of the caged animals free. One of them was Celaeno, an immortal harpy. After coming out of her cage, the harpy fled toward the last unicorn to attack her. The unicorn didn't move. The harpy circled over the unicorn's head and then fled away. When the magician asked the unicorn why she didn't run away she said, "You must never run from anything immortal. It attracts their attention." I thought of our situation at the time of Red Alarms. *What if we didn't run to a shelter when there was an airstrike attack? The jets might go away without dropping a bomb. I should tell that to everyone.*

The last unicorn was close to the king's castle. At night she rested in a forest. It was then that a sphere of fire glowed in the dark sky. It took the shape of that angry Red Bull. At that moment, my father rushed into the room, "Pari! Get ready! We have to go to the city."

“What happened?” Aunt Pari said. “Is it- is it Javaad? Did something happen to him?”

My father hesitated. He sat on the rug and put both his hands on his face. Aunt Pari cried,

“No! What happened? Tell me! Tell me if you know something! Please! *Ey khodaa. .*”

The Red Bull stepped into the dark forest. The unicorn squealed. I peeped at my mother running toward my father, asking him what had happened. I turned toward the screen again. The last unicorn was running and the Red Bull, burning in flames, was behind her. Slowly I crawled toward the TV. My mother screamed. I turned. My father said, “Pari! We don’t know anything yet. This morning, the bomb fell directly on your house. Javaad’s car was parked at the door. They haven’t found any body there yet.”

I turned toward the screen again. The last unicorn gave up. She was walking slowly in front of the Red Bull, toward the dark sea. Aunt Pari collapsed where she was. Grandma shook her. The young magician was with the last unicorn in the forest. He chanted a spell and it started a thunder. The spell turned the unicorn into a young girl. The Red Bull wandered around but he couldn’t recognize the unicorn. The girl lay down in a dark corner, pale and exhausted.

There was so much noise behind me that I had to get closer to the TV. I was determined to watch the whole movie this time. Grandma and my mother were dressing Aunt Pari. No one was paying attention to me. Slowly I stood up, turned down the volume, and then put my arms around the TV set and hugged it. I thought this way they wouldn’t notice that the TV was on.

Aunt Pari was unconscious. My mother wailed. Grandma was getting ready. And my father was going down the stairs. I knew that in a few seconds he would disconnect the TV cable from his car battery. Hugging the TV, I looked down at the last scenes of the movie before the screen turned black: the Red Bull was gone and the last unicorn, in the shape of a girl, was waking up.

I didn’t see Uncle Javaad ever again. He was killed in the backyard of his house before reaching the basement stairs. My parents didn’t take me to his funeral. They were less talkative than before. A week after that Friday, I suspected that my parents and Aunt Pari had already known that I was watching a cartoon when they were worried for Uncle Javaad. I thought they were punishing me for it by not talking to me.

One Thursday, when my parents and Aunt Pari came back from *Baagh-e Rezvan*, Urmia's graveyard, I went to Aunt Pari and hugged her knees, "I'm sorry, Auntie. I'm so sorry."

"Why? What's the matter, Tina jaan?" she kneeled in front of me.

"I'm a stupid! Please forgive me. I didn't even like that cartoon. I'm so sorry." I was in tears.

"What cartoon?"

I told her about *The Last Unicorn* and how I hugged the TV that day. She listened quietly. Then she pressed me to her chest, "We'll watch it together this time. You don't have to apologize. Hush now, hush my sweetie. It's fine."

We stayed at the vineyard for a few more months. The schools reopened in the fall and it was time to go back home. Aunt Pari and my cousins stayed with us until Aunt Pari found a teaching position and she was able to rent an apartment.

I never watched *The Last Unicorn* again. I don't know how the movie ends.



NAZLI ARTEMIA is originally from Iran and immigrated to the United States less than a decade ago. She holds an MFA in creative writing and has worked as a fiction editor and Persian translator with several local magazines in the United States. She currently works on her first novel.