

June 29th

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On June 29th, my friend Emily got up at 07.30 in the morning because she had to be at Goldman Sachs at 09.30. She does her practical training there. At the same time my brother took the train from Paris to go back to the Netherlands. He does his postgraduate studies there. On that same morning on June 29th, I was in downtown Athens. I live there – and on that very day I thought I would die of suffocation or joy.

When people hear that I am from Greece they are likely to tell me that they have visited one of our hundreds of magnificent islands, have drunk huge quantities of ouzo and have enjoyed a summer love under the infinite sun. As I was born 22 summers ago, I have lived through these stereotypes to a great extent. So, you could say that I have lived through nice things – and if you do, you will be 100% right. What I can say is that on June 29th my conception of Greek society changed completely.

I assume that you get your information from the mass media and especially the internet. I also assume that you are aware of the fact that since May we have been living through a peculiar revolt. It is a revolt not because each afternoon people of all ages gather in squares where they discuss, make suggestions and adopt resolutions. Nor because there is an unprecedented mass movement against the harsh economic measures taken against Greek citizens. It is about a Human Revolt. A re-determination of the citizen-society relationship and mainly of the citizen-citizen relationship. A relationship that is soundly founded on solidarity and active participation, but not on pillars of playing cards that are adjusted by personal interest.

The Greek citizen I knew died on June 28th. The very next day a Social Revolt took place in the most central square of my country, Constitution Square, in front of the Greek Parliament. Between massive amounts of tear gas fired shamelessly by police forces and a final vote for austerity measures I was short of breath at least twice. For a moment I thought it was due to the suffocating atmosphere caused by the tear gas. Then I realized that this happened so that my breath could tune into and be strengthened by the breath of the other protesters in the square.

People of almost all ages, political beliefs and all income brackets were there. There were heroic doctors and nurses, all of them volunteers, who carried hundreds of injured people inside the metro station. Every five minutes, the time lapse between trains, people suffocating from gas and pale due to Maa-lox applauded these heroes, who carried the stretchers with the injured people in this odd war. Oxygen tanks and masks were also taken by metro, because the police did not allow the ambulances to approach. Each second of these minutes, a level above, at the metro entrances, the security personnel equipped with specially filtered masks looking like urban divers guided us, encouraged us and protected us, shielding us with their bodies against police arbitrariness. The blows they suffered cannot be compared but all of us who were there are so thankful. I am personally thankful to that woman, almost 65 years old, who seeing that I could not keep my tearful and burning eyes open, took a spotlessly clean towel out of her purse and wiped them softly. So softly like a mother who loves her child.

After a while, when my friend lost his hearing for a few minutes as a firecracker went off near him, I thought that nothing more surreal could ever happen. But in two minutes, after I had seen my dear friend going mad because of hearing loss, being panicked and puzzled and trying to find a safe place, I saw a well-dressed lady. She was around 35 and her clothes were worth her age multiplied by 10. God knows how, she was inside the metro station. She was upset and was trying to find a way out. A way out of the chemicals but also of the hundreds of people who were pale and drawn from the chemicals but at the same time angry – very angry. Angry about the lack of fundamental economic and social rights, angry about the bad reputation all over Europe, angry about mistakes for which they were not responsible.

Just a few metres from there, having taken a wrong turn – usual in a panic –, we found ourselves in the centre of Constitution square. Among policemen armed to the teeth and anarchists resistant to tear gas thanks to all their years of experience, we were standing and looking abashed. The neckerchiefs and glasses that we wore could not protect us. My friend F. and I were about to faint. The tears and the agitation hindered us from seeing and we could hardly breathe. I do not know how and from where two pairs of hands grasped us and held us tight. None of us could resist, or see where they were taking us. They could be policemen. But they were not. They were two guys dressed in black who were taking us to two burning waste bins. The carbon dioxide released from the fire was

greedily sucking up the tear gas. Little by little, we began to breathe normally and were looking for a safe shelter as we made our way down to the metro station.

Through all this perturbation, breathlessness and helping hands, the human revolt had changed. We were attending a snapshot which would be downloaded massively on YouTube. Half a dozen anarchists, those you probably do not know personally but you always meet in rallies, those who your parents and your family consider responsible for the civil disasters, entered the metro station with ice-creams and juices. They still wore masks and were dressed in black, although some of them were bare-chested from the fever of the battle, and began to treat all of us to strawberry ice-cream and apricot juice.

Even during the tough moments, life can be sweet like during those summers when you were eight years old and suntanned almost like the night, and you would eat chocolate ice-cream breathlessly. After you were smeared from face to toe, you would smile so sweetly that you deserved to be kissed! And you almost always were kissed!

Now, 14 years later, you are still tanned, because you are mourning for the economic and social disaster of your country, but fortunately you still have the sweetness of the ice-cream on your lips, and the sweetness of the sun and of hope: a hope that emerges from the ashes of a worn-out nation that will be united by grasping the hands of other people, holding them tightly and moving towards the future with laughing loudly.