



ARC EN XELLES



I am a mariner

I believe that a calm sea does not train a sailor to be a skillful mariner. All my life, I've sailed through difficult times and good times. I left my homeland of Sudan, not only to escape death but to achieve my dreams of escaping social boundaries and critical judgments. I could not bear those social barriers that impeded my personal growth in life at that point. I realized that the worst thing is to live in fear of judgment and to be unable to respond adequately as one self due to social rules of thinking. Instead, I want to start anew in a land of many possibilities where people have values that are aligned with their imagination, their abilities, and their skill sets.

So, I filled my bags with my dreams and hopes, with a collage of memories in tow that also held an important part of my future life as well. I was not completely ready or equipped to change my life. I needed to pay closer attention to the rules. "If you want to restart, you have to start from the beginning." Understanding that rule helped put me in a healing environment once I arrived and I found, for the first time, plenty of time to spend with myself. I would reminisce about life in Sudan with family and friends, nieces and nephews with all the memories that we did share. The successes that we have worked hard for and the pains that we have endured have all contributed towards our collective healing.

The tragedies that we have witnessed along with the comedies that we have invented out of those dark moments helped us all. The told and untold feelings, and dreams that we did not get the opportunity to express to one another led me to indulge in deep thoughts while in my room, with my neighbors, traveling in my car or working at the office. Yes, I left all that behind for "my land" of new opportunities. Sudan, my native land, will always be a part of me.

When I arrived in Tio'tia:ke (Montreal), I felt I could make my personal peace here. I could live how I wanted while applying my own values and exercising my real spirit. Discovery has always been an expression of pleasure for me. It feeds my mind with many thoughts and ideas, but I have to be mindful of how much my boat could hold so as to maintain its buoyancy.

I'm learning to throw out some expired ideologies to make room for new ideologies and values. During my first winter, when I was trying to break the boredom and slow rhythm of the cold days, I joined a workshop at Concordia University with the help of my friend Duha Elmardi who works there. The course I enrolled in was "Organizing Sustainability." I was really surprised by the many simple things that we can do to have a sustainable society and environment. Since that workshop I implemented a lot of those newly learned ideas.

I was inspired by the professionalism of friends like Lucie Chackal, Corinne, and Ivan Delentementa. My passion is script-writing and film-making. When I meet people, I consider myself fortunate to hear their stories which inspire me and give me a feeling of gratitude. They are heroes in their own right. They are the light in someone's life.

I did not come to Tio'tia:ke (Montreal) with a specific plan. All happened very quickly because of dramatic events played out in my country and in my life. So, I took a long period of time to adapt to my new environment here. I did not have enough information to make plans. All was unknown when I arrived. Since my arrival last summer, and for almost a year, I've been looking for jobs that interest me and I've been looking for an employer who would respect me as a person and would not take advantage of me. It is unfortunate that some employers assume that refugees are not capable of working in challenging positions. Refugees are capable, strong, brave, and have gone through many difficult circumstances in order to leave behind dictatorships, conflicts, wars, poverty and violence to make it all the way here.

Establishing a new life in a different country is not a simple task. Refugees have to stay on top of all the bureaucratic procedures while also taking care of themselves and their families and maintaining their mental and physical health with usually too little support. Refugees find themselves having to manage their immediate needs and the needs of their families at the same time. I imagine how different things would be, for refugees, if they had better opportunities, if more employers would trust their skills and knowledge, and help them in starting a new life!

Fortunately for me, all that changed when I got the opportunity to work for SINGA Quebec as a chef in the "Dream in your Plate" project. It was the first time I worked as a chef, but it was a challenge I wanted. With this project, I finally got the chance to work in a very diverse environment that included many people, mostly refugees. It was an environment that encouraged skill improvement and respect for human value. The most important thing for me was the fact that they believed in us, and had given us the opportunity to be creative, to be heard. It exposed us to new things. When I spoke with my family about my work, they were all surprised that I worked as a chef in a kitchen. Back home, in Sudan, being in a kitchen was something I was often forced to do, as a woman, and never enjoyed. My experience here has changed that perspective and has empowered me in many ways while giving me new skills in my personal and professional life.

Life through my Bike

When I moved from Sudan to Canada everything seemed to be in contrast to what I was accustomed to. I had to learn an entirely unique new skill set. One of my big achievements, in Montreal, is that I learned how to ride a bike. It's something I have dreamed of doing for a long time. I was not able to do it as a girl in Sudan where it was considered to be taboo. It was very difficult to bike in Sudan where the practice could expose me to different types of harassment, and possibly violence. Moreover, the streets are not safe due to the poor design and condition that they are in.

The biking experience in Montreal has connected me to my idea of independence. It has helped me find balance in my life through facing my challenges. It restored a lot of confidence in my own strengths. I feel that even with my little experience of riding a bike, I blend right in with everybody else who bikes here in Montreal. Biking carries with it a responsibility for safety, not only for me but also for pedestrians, which can weigh heavily on my shoulders at times.

I went to Atelier Vélo Culture to take their free biking classes. Taught by volunteers driven by their belief in biking. They also helped people learn bike self-maintenance in order to maintain the bikes, and do repairs at a very low cost. There, I saw Magali Bebronne repairing some bikes. It was so inspiring to me to see her doing mechanical repairs on bikes with passion and professionalism. She taught with patience and a lot of love. I quote a lot of her lessons. For example, she once said to me "Don't ever look down, always look straight forward, and focus on where you want to go."

Leila Marshy who went with me to my first biking lesson told me that "You always have to keep pedaling to move forward, and you need to keep moving when the wind hits you. To keep your balance, you will need to put a bit more extra effort to be able to pass the wind". These are lessons that relate so much to my situation in life now, working hard to balance and pass through all these current changes in life.

When I took a lesson with Rachel Shugart, I learned that in every sharp turn that you do, you have to lean into the turn, where you get a little closer to the ground. You feel like you are about to fall but the momentum of the bike carries you through the turn thus building your confidence with every turn practiced. You re-establish your proper balance once your turn is completed. That's how I feel presently with the new changes in my life. I felt a great loss after I left Sudan. I lost my good job, my social position within my family and

with my friends including my work experience. By biking, I learned that it is just a sharp turn in my life, it will take a little bit. Just lean into the turn and the momentum will carry me back into the proper position again. I just need to keep moving forward, to maintain my confidence and resilience.

Everything in life is working according to a certain rhythm. Learning how to bike made me learn to have a rhythm in my life. How to be quick or slow when you need to be. In both ways I need to be calm and focused.

In another way, biking helped my health a lot, physically and mentally. Before, I did not practice sports often but would walk a lot. Now I have an exciting sport that I can practice. I feel more at peace with my body with less stress and anxiety.

It's giving me a lot of hope seeing the Sudanese Female Cyclists Initiative growing in Sudan. Women are fighting for their independence and dignity. This initiative aims to empower young women and to encourage them to use bicycles for health, the environment, and as a means of transportation. Everyday, I think about them when I see people cycle here with a lot of young girls and women of all ages. It's very normal here while Sudanese women are still calling for this basic, simple right in Sudan.

The Sudanese community wasn't like this in the past. The situation changed three decades ago when the Islamic government took over and limited many women sports and activities. Before, women used to bike on a daily basis. They used to go to work and schools by bike and until a few years ago it was normal to see a woman with a bike in Sudan.

The Sudanese Female Cyclists Initiative is trying to bring back this practice again. By learning how to bike in the twenty-ninth year of my life, I am sending a message to all the girls in Sudan and around the world who wish to do so. I am telling them that it is possible and that it is totally worth the effort. We all need to break down the fear that lived with us for so long, to break the social barriers and stereotyping, and to be able to live as we love. If you are doing that in Sudan or anywhere else where it is restricted then you are way stronger than me. I learned to bike in Montreal where city ordinances and societal structures are in place. I was only fighting my inner fears. And I am sure you have many more fights to wage - so always be strong.

Since last year I have lived alone and I am learning how to deal with some things for the first time. Sometimes, I feel it is challenging to face all these changes at one time. It forces me to experience many new things while healing from old ones. So far, I am managing my life with the help of many amazing people I have met here. I now know many families who have become like my family with their love and care, and friends who have shown me support in many ways. I am glad that I am living in a community where we can share life together without judgment or discrimination, and each person feels safe to be one's self.

Razan Elkhatib, Sudanese (Tio'tia: ke, Canada)

Razan is a copywriter, filmmaker and creative director, she used to prepare and present a radio program for high school students since her teens for five years, in 2012 she earned her Bachelor's of Communication Science in Multimedia from Sudan University for Science and Technology. She worked on producing video clips, documentaries, TV shows and commercials as well as her work with several advertising agencies to write concepts and content of a handful of commercials that successfully made an impact on the society and also improved her way of brainstorming ideas and producing them for various mediums.

She started her filmmaking career in 2010 working as scriptwriter, production manager and director. In 2012 she produced her first short film "Amal" about female genital mutilation (FGM), as her graduation project. growing up, she participated in many professional filmmaking workshops in and out Sudan where she wrote and directed her own short films.

Previously, Razan volunteered with different non-governmental organizations and Civil organizations in leadership, family health, FGM, persons with disabilities, environmental issues, peace and gender, what helped her to get better knowledge of different society segments and to understand the language forms they needs to hear.

She is interested in joining programs that will add to her a degree of knowledge to help her complete what she started to do in the best way. She is also aiming to build a network with expert and talented people who will surely be inspiring for her in future projects