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Golazin Ardestani on Exile, Freedom and Finding Her Voice

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"Freedom exists in every cell of your body. " Golazin Ardestani has been called the Lioness of Iran and the voice of Iranian women, titles she accepts with gratitude and very little personal ownership, redirecting both toward the women who made them.

"I see myself first as someone who loves art," she says. "I am a girl who wanted to sing and was told she couldn't sing. I am someone who loves acting, storytelling and creativity. I simply followed those passions wherever they led me." Her work became political, she's quick to clarify, because her life did, not the other way around. "My work became political because my life became political. If tomorrow I were offered a role in a completely non-political film, I would still be excited because I genuinely love acting."

That distinction matters to her because the language of resistance, however accurate, tends to flatten what leaving Iran actually costs. Exile, for Ardestani, was never just a change of address. "Our past becomes part of us, our families, our friends, the places we grew up, the country that shaped us," she says. "There will always be a part of me that remains in Iran." What exile gave her in return was a version of herself she couldn't have built at home. "My voice became stronger, my writing became sharper, and I became less afraid to speak honestly because I now live in a place where I have the freedom to choose who I want to be."

She's careful not to frame the work that followed as nostalgia for return. "I do not do what I do because I hope to go back one day. I do it because I believe change matters, even when it comes in small steps. I do it for future generations, because I don't want another girl to have to leave her country simply to sing, act or make her own choices."
Crossing a border, she's found, doesn't switch freedom on like a light. The fear lingers in places harder to see.

"Freedom doesn't arrive overnight," she says. "Years of repression don't disappear simply because you've crossed a border." She describes catching herself mid reaction, responding to ordinary situations through habits formed under years of inequality, and having to consciously talk herself out of them. "There are moments when I recognize old fears or old ways of thinking, and I have to consciously reject them. Healing from repression is work. Learning how to trust yourself again is work." For Ardestani, freedom was never really about the hijab or the passport. "Freedom exists in every part of your being. It is freedom of thought,

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freedom of action, freedom of choice and freedom of self expression."

She's blunt about how little patience she has for the argument, sometimes made from outside Iran, that conditions there aren't as restrictive as described. "When people say there are no limitations in Iran, I honestly believe they are choosing not to see reality," she says, citing the continued arrest of women in the streets and the censorship faced by female performers, journalists and filmmakers. Having grown up without basic freedoms most people take for granted, she's arrived at a relationship with the concept that resists abstraction entirely. "Freedom feels incredibly tangible to me now. It is not an abstract idea. It is the ability to make choices about your own life without asking permission."

Ardestani plays Jana in "Mortician," a role she describes as initially resistant to her own instincts, specifically around the character's decision to sacrifice herself for a cause. "What fascinated me about Jana was that she is not a character driven by a desire to die. In fact, she loves life," Ardestani says. "The tragedy is that she reaches a point where she believes something extreme must happen before the world will pay attention to what is happening in Iran." It's a logic Ardestani doesn't personally share, "I believe I can do more by remaining alive, creating art, speaking out and continuing to contribute," but one she came to understand was not fictional.

During filming, a journalist in Iran took his own life as an act of protest. "It reminded us that the emotions we were exploring were not fictional. They were real." What stayed with her after the film wrapped wasn't really a question about Jana at all. "It is about the world around her. Why do people feel they must go to such extremes before anyone listens? Why must suffering become so visible before it is acknowledged?"

She resists, just as firmly, being positioned as a spokesperson for women whose voices, she insists, were never actually missing. "I do not want to be the voice of Iranian women because Iranian women already have voices," she says. "The problem is that those voices are being suppressed. My role is not to speak for them but to help amplify what they are already saying." Her songwriting follows a similarly unforced logic, emerging from memory rather than message. "I don't sit down and decide that I am going to write a song about freedom or resistance," she says. "Usually, it begins with a memory or an emotion."

"What turns something personal into something collective, she's found, is recognition."My songs are personal, but they become collective when listeners recognize parts of their own lives within them." Asked whether a decade of leaving and rebuilding has brought her closer to some earlier version of herself or further from it, Ardestani rejects the premise outright. "I don't think we ever truly return to who we once were because every experience changes us," she says. "The person I was ten years ago no longer exists."

What she's working on now is, by her own account, gentler than what came before, a project centered on

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love, unity and healing rather than confrontation. She doesn't see that as a retreat from the work that made her name. "Sometimes choosing love and peace can be just as powerful as confronting oppression directly," she says. "Ultimately, I hope people recognize something universal in the work, something that reminds them of their own humanity."

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