



LOVE LETTER TO A MOVEMENT

Yotam Marom

Eyal lies on his back and sweeps a strand of long, wavy hair from his forehead with thin, guitar-string-callused fingers.

He holds up a battered copy of Antoine Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* up, with hands directly above him and arms extended, as if he were trying to make the words fall out toward him. His feet dangle off the pale wooden frame of the bed, crossed at the ankles. We're twenty-one, and the fifteen-year-olds we're leading on a big educational trip are out in the darkening courtyard, playing and growing, falling in love and breaking each other's hearts. Eyal and I are in our room, him on the bottom bunk of the bed across from the door, me on the top bunk of the other bed. The door is open to the outside so we can hear the kids, and they can come to us if they want.

We're at the section about the Fox, our favorite, and which we have read to these young people and ourselves many times. The Little Prince, journeying around the universe, has left behind his rose, whom he loves with that mixture of awe and longing and care and fear that perhaps all worthy love is made of. Now, he encounters a Fox, who asks the Little Prince to tame him. If the Prince will tame him, the Fox explains, then they will cease to be strangers—no longer just one of many small boys and one of many foxes. They will be connected; they will need one another. "'I'm beginning to understand,' said the little prince. 'I know a flower . . . I think she must have tamed me . . .'"¹

Eyal lifts the top of his body up and I reach down from my bunk, the book going from his hand to mine, and I read the next few pages, in which the Fox teaches the Little Prince to tame him, and he does. But soon the Little Prince must continue on his travels, and the Fox is sad to see him go. They are no longer strangers to one another, after all. The Little Prince, now feeling the responsibility of the relationship, lashes out that it was a mistake to have tamed him in the first place, to have brought on this heartbreak for no reason. But the Fox rejects this, assures him that it has been worth it—that now he will get to remember him, and that is enough.

Knowing that the Little Prince has left his rose behind and longs for her, the Fox sends him to look at a big patch of roses nearby before he goes. These flowers will look like his back home, the Fox explains, but seeing them now in this new light will help him understand that his rose is unique. The Little Prince goes and sees, wiser now for having practiced this love with the Fox, that though these roses look like his, they don't mean anything to him, because they aren't the rose he has watered and loved and feared and worried for. They aren't his rose; he isn't their prince.

Central to this type of love, I think, is the requirement that we tell the truth and follow it where it takes us.

I read, in low, quiet tones, this final moment before departing, when the Little Prince returns for his secret, his blessing:

"Goodbye," said the fox. "Now here is my secret, very simply: you can only see things clearly with your heart. What is essential is invisible to the eye."

"What is essential is invisible to the eye," repeated the little prince, so as to remember.

"It is the time you have wasted on your rose that makes your rose so important."

"It is the time I have wasted on my rose . . ." repeated the little prince, so as to remember.

"People have forgotten this truth," said the fox. "But you must not forget. You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose."

"I am responsible for my rose," the little prince repeated, so as to remember.²

I murmur this phrase now myself, quietly under my breath, so as to remember, and perhaps Eyal does too: *I am responsible for my rose*. We look outside at the kids. We know they are ours and we are theirs; know the same is true about each other and our friendship and the many relationships of love and belonging we have made and collected along the way; know it is true, too, about the movements we hope to grow up inside of. I sigh in both the comfort of this, and the duty of it, before lifting my body off the bed, and heading out into the darkness to check on them.

I suppose it's possible that the Little Prince loves his rose because she is perfect—better than all the others, just the right rose for him. Maybe she's his soul-rose. This is, of course, how many of us are taught to think about love: as if it's a thing that happens to us; as if it's about the object of love rather than the space between. But I think it's more likely that the Fox is right. He is saying, *Sure, maybe your rose is great, but that's not the point. The point is she's yours, because of all you have poured into her; and you are hers, because of the same.*

On the surface, the rose belongs to the Little Prince. But the keener eye can see that it is at least as much the other way around: It is the Little Prince who belongs to the rose. Or perhaps they belong to each other in equal measure, without an order of who came first and who came second. And the belonging is made not by some crack in the universe, not by an arrow from Cupid, not merely a feeling, not a flutter of the heart. It is made from a commitment to struggling with and for one another, built on duty, and care, and work alongside the pleasures and transformations they make possible. We take responsibility for the things and the people we love, and become theirs, as they become ours.

This is how I think about the social movements I have been a part of for more than two decades now.

The first draft of my new book, *For Louder Days*, was called *Love Letters to a Movement*, and though I'm glad I was talked out of that title, that's what the book has been all along. Only the kind of love I mean is the one between the Little Prince and his rose, which he learned from the Fox, and which I learned from Saint-Exupéry, and Erich Fromm, and James Baldwin, and Emma Goldman, and Martin Buber, and Huey Newton, and Karl Marx, and Audre Lorde, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Arundhati Roy, and my wife, Bianca, and

my kids, Amí and Sela, and the fighters and dreamers in the groups I have had the honor of supporting and learning from, and every friend who has ever pushed me to the edge and held my hand once I was ready to jump—and even more of whom are impossible to name because the list is too long, longer even than this very long sentence. They are my rose, and I theirs. I don't think anyone does much of anything of value in this world without some very good roses, who push them forward when they need it; who give them shade in which to rest when they need that; who give them a reason to become their most powerful selves.

Central to this type of love, I think, is the requirement that we tell the truth and follow it where it takes us. We know this intuitively, see it in all of our healthiest relationships, and in the strongest groups we have been part of too. It is truth-telling, after all, that leads to transformation, to depth, to trust, to good strategy, to the structures and processes that protect it, and more; its absence, on the other hand, often leads to collapse or hovering forever on the surface.

In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates suggests: “The writer, and that was what I was becoming, must be wary of every Dream and every nation, even his own nation. Perhaps his own nation more than any other, precisely because it was his own.”³ I think part of what he's saying is that when we are part of something—when we belong to it—we have a responsibility to interrogate it, to push it, to tell the truth about it. Maybe we also need to tell it the truth about itself. This is how I want to be loved, how I've tried to love the people in my life, and how I've tried to love the movement I am a part of. It's what guides my new book. That's why every chapter ends more or less with this same advice—to tell the truth—and why the book, which is about the politics of powerlessness, and where I do my best to tell the truth myself, both begins and ends with love.

We are living in a time of massive upheaval—of grave crisis and also enormous opportunity. The world is transforming at a breakneck pace and will continue to change dramatically in our lifetime. The question is only in which directions, in what ways, in whose interests.

If we want life on this planet to become more just, more free, more equal—if we want all people to live full, safe, dignified lives; if we want an economy and political system that work for the many and not just the few; if we want to undo the core systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism that make up empire and shape the values and institutions that govern our lives—we will need movements. There is no path toward the world we all deserve without massive numbers of people taking serious, steady, long-term action in organizations, in the streets, in their neighborhoods, in their workplaces; contesting for power there, in the economy, at all levels of government. We will need to build movements capable of wresting power from a small handful of elites so that the many can use it to build systems that meet people's needs rather than make profit; that make the planet healthy and livable; that unlock all the human potential stolen by empire and buried under the wreckage it has left in its wake.

The world is transforming at a breakneck pace and will continue to change dramatically in our lifetime. The question is only in which directions, in what ways, in whose interests.

This is no small task, obviously. We face an opponent that is perhaps more powerful than in any other time in human history: a billionaire class that makes pharaohs and caesars look like peasants, a political system that is both sophisticated in its control and more than happy to use the oldest types of violence whenever necessary. We face all of this on a planet that is warming catastrophically, faster than most of us can really fathom. For those of us who are opposed to this order and the future it promises, these conditions are things we don't control, at least not outright. But we do control how we face them, what we do about them. We do control how we fight, how we build our movements. And if we are honest, our movements, and the different kinds of groups and organizations that make them up, are not in the shape they must be in if we hope to stand a chance. We have nowhere near the kind of power we need, and we have a lot of work to do if we hope to get it.

And so here is the hard truth: Part of the reason we are losing is that we are often, in our movements, deeply ambivalent about power. In the little corners where we harbor secrets that we don't quite know how to speak about, many of us have come to accept our powerlessness, grown accustomed to it in our movements, come to expect it for the future, become attached to it. Many of us have gotten used to being on the margins; taken up the behaviors and ideas that thrive there; gravitated toward the small pleasures of being right and being with people just like us over the danger and sacrifice of striving for something bigger; found safety in battles over the little things we can control in the face of a world so out of our control. We've created, perhaps even without knowing it, a set of ideas and behaviors that satisfy these inclinations, a politics of powerlessness. Maybe we've even come to like it this way.

I know the texture of this smallness because I too have liked my powerlessness at different times in my life. I have chosen the small wars and small groups and small pleasures over the big ones many times, made peace with life on the margins, even relished it at times. I have, more often than I like to admit, shrunk in fear of the task before us and let despair wrap its cold arms around me. I have been swallowed by my inability to change the world, rested comfortably in thin ideas that protected me from depth and challenge, adopted rules and maintained boundaries that ensured smallness, narrowed the capacity of my heart so as to avoid its breaking. I have exhibited all the tendencies that groups struggling with their powerlessness do: an ambivalence about leadership and rank; a version of identity politics that is reductive and painful to everyone involved; a type of belonging that keeps us small and separate; a way of wielding love and care that is marked by scarcity; a conflict avoidance and dishonesty that allows these kinds of tendencies to thrive and prevents good strategy. I have seen all this in my peers, even in my heroes, and certainly I have seen it in what we have produced: in groups and movements that are often smaller, weaker, and more insular than we want to admit. These politics come from somewhere truly and deeply understandable, meet a genuine need, and answer real questions. But they are blocking the big dreams we have and the grand project we have taken up to change the world. We are getting in our own way.

The politics of powerlessness is not the only thing that's true about our movements, though. There are many among us who practice something else—who understand that power is, despite all the dangers that come with it, the only way to rescue this world and ourselves and each other. I have been lucky in my life to walk alongside, support, and be pushed by these kinds of fighters, and to walk in the shadow of those great many who came before us.

These heroes have shown us that there is another path. It requires wanting power—for the multiracial working class, for our people, for our movements and the groups that make them up; requires unlearning the pathologies that keep us fleeing from it and deciding, instead, that it should be used to remake the world for the many and not just the few; requires good strategy and healthy organizations and the structures and processes that make them. And it requires, at least to start, telling the truth and following the road it takes us on—this small act that is not small at all but in fact one of the grandest embodiments of love, one of the central ways we take responsibility for the things and people we care about.

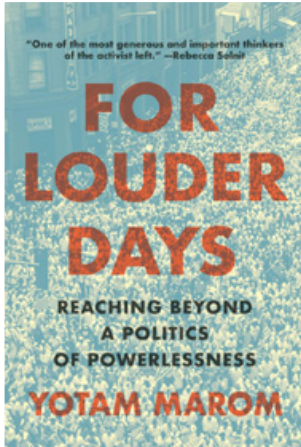
One of my heroes, Arundhati Roy, writes: “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. Maybe many of us won’t be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.”⁴ I have been lucky enough to be alive for some of those quiet days: in groups where people made or forced me to make the kinds of hard decisions that lead to transformation, and which challenged me to be the biggest version of myself; on streets swelling with thousands of people enough to contend for power, will come about only through great struggle, and be accompanied by great loss.

This, then, is a call for the louder days. It is a challenge to do better, and a reminder of the immense potential at our fingertips to become what we must become in order to win the world we all deserve. It is, then, a love letter in the truest sense.

See you out there. 📍



Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yotam Marom has been in movements since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. He has played leadership roles at Occupy Wall Street and other movements before and after, and co-founded IfNotNow and the Wildfire Project. Yotam has trained and facilitated many of the leading social justice organizations of these times, from Sunrise and the Dream Defenders to Uncommitted and Hands Off NYC, and more. He lives in Brooklyn, and this is his first book.

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Endnotes

1. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince and Letter to a Hostage*, trans. T.V.F. Cuffe (1943; repr., Penguin Books, 1995), 67.
2. *Ibid.*, 72.
3. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Random House, 2015), 53.
4. Arundhati Roy, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (Penguin Books, 2006), 44.