Story of fear… of the corners of rooms and of her memories

Eve's story

Trigger warning: this story contains graphic descriptions of torture

* Eve is a pseudonym for security reasons

2016 was a pivotal year in my life. In a single moment, everything was turned upside down. It was the moment I was arrested by the Syrian regime's security services.

Nothing was the same after that. Before 2016, I was a strong, happy girl and I was proud of my accomplishments. I got married while I was still at university, then I got a job and gave birth to my first son. By the time I graduated from university, the revolution had already begun in Syria. My husband, his brothers and his relatives all participated directly in the demonstrations and sit-ins, even though we lived in an area that was almost completely pro-regime. When Bashar al-Assad delivered his first speech after the start of the revolution, tensions arose and the streets and alleys in our area were surrounded by armed people affiliated with the regime. We didn't know at the time whether they were police, security officers, or Shabiha thugs. It was the first frightening warning we had of the danger that was coming to us.

Terrifying things soon followed. Checkpoints were set up where civilians were arrested. The Shabiha ambushed our protests and sit-ins, and left behind piles of dead bodies in the streets. Then bulldozers would come and collect them as if they were garbage.

My husband was labeled by the regime forces as a "terrorist" and became a wanted man. And I became the "terrorist's wife" in the regime's view, then "the wife of a fugitive terrorist" when he traveled to Turkey. I couldn't even go with him to Turkey, because a travel ban was imposed on me. Then my husband came back and I got my first label back: "The wife of a terrorist".

A few weeks after my husband returned, he was ambushed and arrested. After an agonising wait, we got news that someone had seen him in Sednaya prison – where we were only allowed to visit him once every three months. My husband had never even met our daughter, who was born six days after he was detained, so I took her with me for the visitation. However I did not want my son to see his father in prison. Sednaya prison was like a camp isolated from the outside world. As soon as we were inside, insults were thrown at us and we had to ride a worn-out bus that took 20 minutes to reach the compounds. Then we had to stand in a long queue waiting impatiently for our loved one's name to be called.

I heard someone calling my name and looked around searchingly for my husband, but I couldn't see him. At first, I didn't even recognise him in between the two soldiers at his sides, he looked so similar to them: skinny, shaven, small in stature with defeated and miserable features. The only difference was the prison uniform he wore.

We were only given three minutes for the visit, so I didn't waste a second

crying. We were just a meter apart, but the cruel looks from the soldiers pushed me to step backward and shut my mouth. I didn't know what to say, but I feared right then that he was facing the same fate as his cousin, who was detained in the 1980s and never came back.

There were detainees there from almost all the governorates of Syria. Some of them had bleeding faces, while others had to be carried out on stretchers to the visitation area. I found out that detainees in Sednaya prison were beaten up before and after visitations, so that detainees would beg their families never to come and visit them again. We had heard rumors about this, but I didn't believe it until I saw it that day. My husband spent about a year in Sednaya, then he was transferred to Adra prison, and then on to Sweida prison.

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I went back to live in my parents' apartment with my kids after my husband was detained. The house lay within the frontline between Jabhat al-Nusra fighters and the regime forces, and the street was filled with Shabiha thugs, snipers, and destroyed houses.

I still went to work every day, but walking home was becoming riskier and riskier. Sometimes the roads I had to take were closed, or I had to risk walking down a road that might have a sniper hunting any living thing within range of his rifle. I risked being killed by a shell that might land on or near me on those walks.

In our neighborhood, shells would often land on the rooftops of buildings where people keep tanks of diesel stored for winter. The tanks would explode and set fire to the rooftops, and we would have to break open the water tanks, that are also put on the rooftops, to extinguish the fires.

After that we'd be out of both water and fuel for heating.

Staying home was no less of an adventure. A split second would separate calm from the sound of a car bomb exploding, breaking glass onto our beds and causing our wardrobes to topple over our heads. But as time went on, we became accustomed to these rituals of war. We set up curtains in the street that hid us from the snipers' sight, and we learned how to run to avoid their bullets. We even lived with the bombing, which could rage throughout the night.

A new sunrise meant that we did not die at night. We still went out to work, and our children still went to school. Even the birds would forget the terrifying sounds of the night and chirp again in the morning, announcing the beginning of a new day and a very short truce with death. We had to live as much as we could!

At that point, my brother had already been arrested three times. Every time he was released, he would tell me in detail about the methods of torture he was put under during investigations at security branches. I learned enough from him to understand how to get through the interrogation stage without confessing to anything, or them being able to prove any charges against me. I learned creative ways to protect my body from beatings. What I learned came in handy, because then I was arrested too.

At exactly eight o›clock one evening, there was a knock on our door. It was security personnel.
"Where is your brother?" they demanded. "He is away in Turkey."
"Where is your father?" they shouted.

My father put on comfortable shoes and dark clothes. They said they

were taking him to answer a few questions and that he would be back shortly. Then the officer remembered,
"Where is your husband? Give me the family book!"
My father went with them and we closed the door. My mother sat on the floor crying and said to me, "I never expected this."
Ten minutes later, they came back to take me too. They also said I would be back in no time and my mother collapsed and begged them to take her instead of me.

I remember it was very dark outside. I looked back to see my children watching me from the balcony as I was taken away by the soldiers. I was brittle with fear that they would rape me, or steal my organs, would I ever see my children again?
When we entered the Air Force Intelligence building, my father was handcuffed near a wall. His face was so red that they must have started beating him as soon as he arrived. My brother had been there earlier. He came out of that place with a face blue and green with bruises from the beating. They burned his back with cigarettes and pulled out his nails, then they put him in a vehicle tyre and beat him, and left him suspended from his wrists by a rope for hours.

They took me to the officer's room and asked about my husband and his family, and about my brother. They opened my phone, but found nothing, then hit me in the face and immediately handed me my first charge: a spy.

My father and I were thrown on the ground next to each other in a long corridor. They hit us with a 'falanga', a foot torture method, on the soles of our feet. Then they then suspended me up on the wall and tied my hands. My father collapsed when they tried to suspend him, then as one of the soldiers beat him on his head, the soldier said: "he's dead". The

other soldier remarked that they should throw him out with the other dead bodies.
I was stunned at what was happening, I couldn't speak. I tried to recall the methods I learned from my brother while he was in detention, then I too fainted.
When I opened my eyes they were swollen from the beating. I couldn't see my father. I heard birds chirping outside and I guessed it was about five or six o'clock in the morning. Birds chirping became my new way of determining the time, marking the beginning of another day and more torture.

For three whole days, I was in hell. I was seated on the ground blindfolded, while they tried to extract any piece of information from me using the most abusive language, but I didn't know anything or have information that might be of interest to them.

I couldn't see who was beating me during the interrogation, I only saw his military boots from underneath the blindfold as he kicked my head and back. I also saw the toilet shoes he put in my mouth.
I spent hours in the 'tyre' room where they beat me in front of my father. The pain was unbearable, but I resolved to be strong, and I remembered my brother›s words about ways to avoid the most painful blows while on the tyre.

After every round of torture, a feeling of numbness permeated my body. I would lose control of everything, including the ability to walk. But they still couldn't extract any confession from me, whether real or fake. They called me "the educated little girl with elegant answers," because I knew exactly how to answer their questions without validating any charges against me.

They asked me about my cousin, but I didn't know anything about his alleged activity against the regime, although I privately remembered he was bold on social media. They asked me to take them to his house. We left the branch and I was held-firm by two soldiers on my left and right. They had to drag me on the ground because I was unable to walk. Then they put me in a car and drove the car out of the branch.
We arrived at my cousin's neighborhood and I saw him coming towards us from afar with his wife. They seized him and shoved him into the car next to me. My face was so distorted by the torture that my cousin didn't even recognize me to begin with. When I told him who I was, the soldiers told us both to shut up, and we returned to the security branch.

They suspended me against the wall, but my cousin was too tall.

"Sir, he is about two meters tall, no matter how we suspend him his legs keep touching the floor," one of the soldiers said to his superior.

We laughed at the absurdity of the comment. Then they started beating us.

At night, they would take me back to a cramped and dirty room with three other girls. In the center of the ceiling there was an ominous yellow light that made my eyes tired and showed up the blue and green colors that developed on my skin. The dim light meant the room never became fully dark.

I started to remember my daughter who couldn't sleep without curling my hair locks onto her fingers. I remembered my mother's anxiety and the long hours she cried for my brother when he was detained. I couldn't imagine how she felt now that my father and I had also been arrested. I couldn't decide whose position was harder, ours or hers.

I sat in the corner of the room, curled up like a baby in the womb of her mother, and cried, afraid of what they would do to me tomorrow. In this way, my daytime hours were terrorised by physical torture, and my night by psychological torment.
One time, my headscarf fell off my head during an interrogation. They brought it back to me, but they had soaked it in the dirty toilet water.
I was subjected to electrocution sessions.

"Don't you want to speak?" the interrogator threatened me. "I will make you see stars in daylight."
I swore to him that I didn't know anything, and that beating me would be of no use, even if he tortured me indefinitely. He spat back,
"Where is that God that you swear to and seek for help? If he existed, I wouldn›t be able to electrocute you."
His first attempts failed. He connected the cables to my hands and feet, but every time he flicked the switch to try to electrocute me it would shut down the power for the entire branch. He went crazy, then called someone else in to hold the electric switch, and he succeeded in electrocuting me. My nails were burning and turned black and I passed out. When I woke up, they promised me they were going to apply even more severe forms of torture.

When they sent me back to my cell and I told the girls I had been electrocuted they didn›t believe me at first. Then I showed them my burned nails and they looked at me with shock in their eyes, both at the horror I've been subjected to and because of the determination I radiated despite the torture. I tried to make it lighter for them, and joked that electrocution would increase their IQs, and together us girls laughed shakily with tears in our eyes.

On the eighth day, I was transferred out of the branch, starting a long

journey through other security branches and prisons. We got on the bus, and my heart leapt when I caught sight of my father sitting in the far corner of the bus. I couldn›t speak to him, but it was enough for me to know that he was still alive.
I started to cry when I saw my father was moaning in pain. The officer commanded him to shut up, then he came and shoved my head against the bus window, sneering "Your answers will not benefit you, educated woman!"

In the security branches, cells were narrow and dirty. The lights were yellow, and there was a small metal window where I could see the daylight and the white clouds outside. The jailers treated us with disgust, called us names and used filthy language against us. We could hear crying babies from adjacent cells, and on the walls we read notes written by women who had also been there since 2012, some who were still in the same branch. A bad omen hung over us that we would never be able to leave.

After twenty-five days of my arrest, I was transported to Adra Women›s Prison. In Adra, I had mixed feelings. I cried hysterically as soon as I entered the new dormitory. I didn't know if I should be happy, because I had finally arrived at a civilian prison with wider windows that allowed the white daylight to enter, away from the torture in the security branches, or if should I be sad for the situation I was in – in a prison that I didn›t know if I would ever be released from.

In Adra, I met women from different governorates of Syria, including women who had been raped in the security branches and were now pregnant. I didn't have a bed to sleep in, and I was living with strangers. I called my sister and she told me that our father was fine, and that our mother was on her way to visit him in Adra men›s prison, and that

she would definitely visit me as well. I called my husband in his prison and he encouraged and supported me, and said that we had become partners in our prison experiences as well.

The next day, I woke up to the sounds of women quarrelling in the dormitory. They were accusing each other of stealing, demanding "Where is my hair spray? Where is the cheese? Where is the makeup?!" I sat in the corner of the dormitory, huddling myself and waiting for my mother.

They called out the names of detainees who had visitors that day. The day ended and my mom had not shown up, then all of a sudden, they called my name.

The walk from my dormitory to the visitation area felt longer than the entire time I had spent away from my family. I hurried, limping from my hurting foot, looking out with my swollen eyes for my mother›s face. When I ran to her, she held me and we weeped a lot.

Although visits were allowed for detainees between the mens and womens prisons in Adra, I couldn't bring myself to file a request to visit my father. I had seen him in the security branch, and on the bus, and we were beaten together. Perhaps I preferred to keep the image of him before any of this had happened in my head. I did not want to see any sign of defeat in his eyes, or perhaps my feelings were just dead because of the anaphrodisiac (the camphor substance) that they laced our food with in the branches and prisons. Even my children became distant images in my head, and I couldn't remember how they moved, the sound of their voices, or any of the details of our old times together.

In Adra we were always waiting for something. Waiting for a meal, waiting for a visitation, waiting for our turn to use the phone, and waiting

for a moment of calm away from the noise, a moment that might let me hear the sound of a bird outside the dorm. Fifteen days later, I signed the release paper.

As I walked out of the prison building, the officer at the gate said to me, “go ahead, Ma’am.” The same officer who had called me ‘a bitch’ on my first day there. I didn›t know what now made me human in his eyes, but only then did I believe that I was really out of prison.

On the way back to my home, I was haunted with fears. I was paranoid about anything that might prevent me from seeing my children. The voices of the women in prison went round and round in my head.

When I got out of the car everyone was waiting for me; my children, my mother, my sister, my friends, and even my colleagues from work. When my manager saw me, his eyes welled up with tears. Their looks at the sight of me were full of pain, but it was even more painful for me.

My father got out of prison too and we went back to our previous lives. We decided to stay in Syria, with a lot of caution and fear that we would be wanted again by other security branches. I tried hard to overcome everything that had happened to me, but my father›s face had changed and he was no longer the same father I had known before.

He once asked me and my sister, “Who are you?!” He became amnesiac and lost his ability to walk or even raise his hand. Doctors said he had received a heavy blow to his head that had caused a brain haemorrhage. They performed surgery on his head and he began to return to normal.
On the bus to work, I used to get off before reaching the checkpoint, fearing that the soldiers there would ask for my ID. I would cross the checkpoint on foot, then take another bus. I did that for about five months

until I was on a bus one day with my son, and a soldier got on and asked for my ID. My son›s face turned white with fear and he kept on shivering even after we got off the bus. Seeing that fear in his eyes was enough to make me decide to flee Syria for good.
We spent three months at the northern Syrian border and made six unsuccessful attempts before we were smuggled into Turkey. My children and I slept in strangers' houses. We climbed mountains in the dark hours of the night, got rid of our belongings, walked kilometers on foot, and we were locked up by the Turkish gendarmerie. We stayed in tents without food or drink, we moved from one village to another, we got sores on our faces, and our skin tanned under the sun.

Throughout the three months of this journey, I was repeatedly surprised by the strength of my own children and by the patience they showed. But when we finally succeeded in entering Turkey, on our seventh attempt, and we faced the fact that we may never return to our Syria, which was behind us now, the three of us cried like we have never done before.
About a year ago, my husband was finally released from prison. He asked me to return to Syria and to him, but I refused. So he married another woman there.

I am like an orphan here in Turkey. I have no one to take care of me if I get sick, and I feel that I am rejected and that people see me as a lesser human. I am afraid of emptiness, of thinking, of the painful memories – of the likelihood that a family member may die before I see them. Of the fact that the landlord of my rented house may evict me, and of becoming a burden on someone.

Over the past years, despite all the pain I faced, I used to feel that every single cell in my body rebuilt itself, but in Turkey, I only feel comfortable when I watch the rain from my window. I sit in the corner of my room and

embrace myself with my hands like a foetus in her mother›s womb and I remember the rain and its smell in Syria. I imagine that I am still there, and only then can I feel my fear lift and get a few moments of peace.


رابطة معتقلي ومفقودي سجن صيدنايا
Association of Detainees & The Missing in Sednaya Prison