

With My Child In Jail *

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I come from an extended family in a small city in Iran. My family was very poor, but culturally and politically rich. My father was an old man, extremely wise and knowledgeable. He was illiterate but well aware of what was happening in the world. From childhood I became socially aware, particularly about women's oppression, especially when I looked at the lives of my older sisters, who were suffering in unsuccessful marriages.

In the course of growing up, I developed an aspiration to work for the emancipation of humankind, specifically from poverty and patriarchal oppression. Soon I found myself in a circle of likeminded women. We used to visit different groups of women and young girls to discuss with them their lives and the state of their society.

While Iranian society went through political turmoil and a full-fledged revolutionary movement in 1978, we intensified our activities in our city and soon we became a small, active group, well known to everybody. When the oppression came it not only affected me but it affected my entire family. The Guardians of Revolution started invading houses and arresting on a massive scale. They stopped suspected political activists in the streets and killed them on the spot. They used their techniques of terror and intimidation. Many of my family members escaped and lived underground while the rest were harassed on a continuous basis. I escaped to the capital of my province.

During these years of living in the capital, I developed a friendship with a gentleman who was politically active and well respected in the community. Eventually we married. We loved each other and cherished the hope that by furthering our human rights activities we would establish a fruitful and affectionate family life. We lived together for only fifteen months and the fruit of this relationship was a baby boy. Everything seemed to be going well. We had a warm house, a handsome baby and hope for a bright future.

Our house was invaded on a cold, dark winter night in late 1982. Around 4:30 a.m. I awoke to the cry of my baby. He was hungry and I began breastfeeding him. Suddenly the silence was broken with the horrible sound of boots in the hall and on the roof. The door was kicked open by *pasdars* (paramilitary guards). Everybody was asleep except for me and my baby. A *pasdar* took a veil from a hanger, threw it over me and ordered: "Wear this! Get up! Stand in front of the wall!"

They then awoke my husband by kicking him with their boots. They sent us to different corners of the room, and began conducting body

searches. A group of *pasdars* searched our closets and the rest of the room. They called my husband by his organizational nickname. This was how we came to know that somebody had betrayed us.

All of the guards were armed. They blindfolded us and did not even allow me to change my baby's diaper. We were guided outside. I looked through the blindfold to see a blind alley, a cul-de-sac with many cars and several armed *pasdars*. I saw a person blindfolded getting out of a car. I recognized him by his stature; he was the person who had betrayed us and had guided the guards to our home. They forced us into a car. At this point my husband told me: "We have reached the end of the line. Forgive me if I ever did anything bad to you". I responded with affection, comforting him and saying that he had provided me a sweet and pleasant life, and that there was no need for forgiveness. The *pasdars* separated us immediately and took him to another car. I would not see my husband again for a long time.

We were separated in jail; they threw me in a small, dirty cell with no heating system. There was a blanket stained with blood, urine and dried excrement. I even saw parts of a human body there. The walls of the cell were stained with blood and the handwriting of ex-prisoners. Some of them highlighted the need for courage, fortitude and resistance.

It was not long before they took me for interrogation. I had to take my child with me. They began by stating that if I did not provide them with the necessary information they would kill me. The interrogator began looking over the file he had received about me from my home town. I saw a paper about my elder brother. He was a teacher of philosophy in a high school. The paper was a petition signed by the school principal and many others proclaiming my brother to be an infidel. They had testified that my brother had called Imam Hossein – the third Imam of the Shia sect of Islam who is considered the martyr of all martyrs – a reactionary person. I knew that this could lead to my brother's execution and I was in a state of shock. At that moment someone called the interrogator on his walkie-talkie. The interrogator put down the file to move to the other side of the room in order to answer the person on the line. It was a rare opportunity. I grabbed the paper from the file and in a moment I chewed and swallowed it.

The interrogator resumed his work.

The blindfold played a big role in his interrogation. He used to put it on and then take it off. Although my child was only four months old, whenever they put the blindfold over my eyes he started to cry. They would tie my hands and feet to the bar of a stretcher beating the soles of my feet and sometimes my back. This was all done while my baby was left in the corner of the torture chamber on the bare, dirty floor. My son

would cry as they tortured me. Initially I tried to tolerate the pain and not scream. I was tortured by two people who quickly became furious with my resistance. One of the torturers told his friend, "You aren't beating her hard enough; if you beat her harder you will have a greater reward from God Almighty".

I pleaded with them to take the baby outside of the room. They then started to insult me, beating me harder and threatening:

The baby is not yours; it belongs to the Islamic Republic of Iran. If you don't give us information we will take the baby from you forever. These days are the best days of your life. We know what to do with you next.

When one of the torturers got tired he would hand his whip to the other man, who, before starting, would bless his friend: "May God reward you for your holy work".

After delivering blows to the soles of my feet they would stop and call in a female *pasdar* who would force me to walk. The males were not supposed to touch me. Before the torture began, a female *pasdar* used to strip me down leaving only my underwear, removing even my bra. Then she covered me with linen bed sheets and started flogging me. Sometimes when they flogged my back the linen would tear. I used to faint after severe torture; they would then bring me back to consciousness by pouring very hot or very cold water over my body. Then they let me go back to the cell. I could barely pick up my child, but they forced me to do so. With injuries to many parts of my body, I used to carry my baby in my arms to my cell. They degraded me by making comments about not adhering to the dress codes of the Islamic Republic: "Be careful! Your veil has slipped from your head! You should be ashamed of yourself".

I was alone with my four-month-old baby and did not know what they were doing to my husband. They put me through all kinds of torture, degrading treatment and punishment in an attempt to extract information about my husband and his activities. My worst experience was when they tortured my husband in a neighbouring cell so that I could hear his screams. They mentioned my name and insulted me, threatening to rape and kill me if he did not confess. They brought him to such a point that during his screams he sounded like a dying beast. I was ready to be tortured ten times more to stop my husband's torture by those butchers of humankind.

Three days after my arrest, they took me to be interrogated again. They demanded that I provide them with all the information I had. I withstood their threats and insisted that I had no information whatsoever.

This made both of my interrogators furious. They tortured me to the point of death and then raped me, one after the other. Each offered my body to the other before their sordid action: “You go first”. “No, brother, please. You go first”. I cannot describe the details here, as it is too traumatic. Suffice it to say that I suffered from bleeding and menstruation problems for a long time afterwards.

I would like to mention here that the religious Puritanism of the interrogators was perversely hypocritical. It was un-Islamic for men to touch a woman. Female guards, were not supposed to touch us as we were leftist, non-believers, and therefore untouchable. It frequently happened that a male or female guard, with a stick in his or her hand, opened the cell door and asked me to put on the blindfold.

They asked us to hold one end of the stick and follow them while they held the other end. Their religious Puritanism did not allow them to hold the hand of prisoners whom they regarded as “belligerent to God and corrupted on earth”. In their torture chamber, however, there was no sign of piety. Male guards, assisted by their female colleagues, had no shame and did not spare women political prisoners from sexual abuse, rape or even gang rape. They legitimized their hateful crimes by reciting verses from the Qur’an or other religious texts: “You are non-believers; you cannot enjoy Islamic rules; we can do anything we like with infidels”.

Living with the baby in jail while resisting torture was not an easy task. I had no diapers, only two old ragged pieces of cloth. A stench permeated my cell. I could only go to the bathroom three times a day for the duration of twenty minutes. I had to very quickly wash the cloth I used as a diaper, the baby and myself in order to return to the cell on time. The baby had to wear his diapers, drenched with urine and stool, for hours. His skin was burning and covered with bruises. The wounds were bleeding. Anytime I knocked on the door, there was no answer. The guards hated to open our cell unless they were taking us to be tortured.

The food was poor and very soon, as a result of torture and poor nutrition, my breast milk dried up. I begged the guards for milk or powdered milk. They answered me with insults and beatings. They told me that there was a ration of food for one prisoner and that the baby was not counted as a prisoner. As an “incommunicado” prisoner, I was not allowed to ask my family to bring us food. I could not bear my baby’s starvation. I was left with no choice but to feed him my own meagre food. As it was too hard for the little baby, I chewed the food first, made it as soft as possible and put it into his mouth. But the food had no nutritional value. The baby was always hungry and so was I. This, along with the burning pain in his thighs and buttocks, made him restless. He cried all the time.

My darling child became so weak that I thought it would be difficult for him to survive. A male guard sympathized with me. There was a hole in the door with a flap that could only be opened from the outside. From time to time the guard used to open the flap and speak with me through the hole. "I am sorry that I cannot save you from this damned place, but at least I can bring milk and diapers for the baby". This was a glimpse of hope amidst the darkness. I thanked him and begged him to do it before it was too late. My hope turned to despair when he told me that he loved me and wanted sexual intercourse with me. Alas! He wanted to make a deal with me.

I rejected the deal and told him that an extra-marital relationship, specifically with a helpless captive mother, is considered an unforgivable sin according to his Islamic belief. I even threatened to bring the issue to the attention of his superiors. He backed off momentarily. However, he again tried to take advantage of me, when he saw my baby's deteriorating condition. Nothing is more painful for a mother than to see her child dying gradually before her eyes.

I was facing one of the most difficult dilemmas of my life. On the one hand, there was no doubt in my mind that I must not submit to his will. On the other hand, I found it selfish to reject the deal and to allow my child to die. I frequently challenged myself, "What's more important: your integrity or the life of your poor, innocent, starving child?" At last I decided to surrender, telling myself, "I have to save my child. They have already raped me. Let this be another torture on top of that".

I received small concessions. The guard brought me milk, diapers and cookies. However, he gradually discontinued his help on the pretext that it would enrage prison authorities. This intensified my hate tenfold. More than twenty-two years have passed since this incident in my life and I have not been able to forgive myself. I shared the story with my psychiatrist twenty years later and I am still under her care. She has assured me that I made the right decision. She might be correct, but I am not capable of overcoming my emotional obsession. I had a choice and could have rejected the dirty deal. The baby is now a young man. I have never told him the price I paid for his survival. What will his reaction be if he comes to know about it? Will he forgive me? These questions haunt my mind constantly.

Two months later, they transferred me to a new cell and I never saw the guard again. The cell had no window. I did not know whether it was day or night. I could only guess the time of day when they brought my food. We had not had a bath for a month and a half; both my child and I were stinking. One day a government delegation visited the jail. They entered my cell and asked if I had been tortured. "Don't you see my

injured feet?”, I asked. I also showed them the baby’s infected thighs, buttocks and armpits. I told them about my back that was injured as a result of being tortured and added: “Obviously, I can’t show you, because you would then subject me to the Law of *Taazir* (divine punishment) that would result in many more lashes”. According to the Law of *Taazir*, a woman was strictly forbidden to show any part of her body to a man (except her husband).

When my child was about six months old I noticed some sores on his head; he had long hair and I had not noticed them earlier. When I looked carefully I found many infected sores and worms coming out of the wounds. This was because of the lack of sanitation and the fact that we had not been allowed to wash for more than two months.

I used to miss my husband all the time, but I saw my husband only twice in jail. The first time was three months after our arrest. As a part of an inter-prison visiting program, they allowed me to see my husband behind a glass barrier for a few minutes. The second meeting happened by sheer chance in the course of a transfer.

It did not take long until they detected and arrested whoever was connected to us. In their terms I became “information depleted” and was no longer an interesting subject for interrogation. It was the right time for them to transfer me to the public jail and send me for trial. They told me:

We are now sending you to a new facility. It is upsetting that you didn’t collaborate with us. You must reform yourself, if not for your own sake, at least for the sake of this baby. We hope that you will feel pity for your child and behave yourself.

This time, instead of a blindfold, they put a cap on my head and pushed it down to cover my eyes. My body was stinking to the point that I could not even tolerate myself.

They pushed us into a car. After some time I found myself in the corridor of the police court. I could hear the voices of many other prisoners. They started exchanging information. Someone, who had seen my child in the torture chamber, recognized him, and informed me that my husband was among the prisoners. After some time, I heard a quiet voice: “Don’t talk; don’t trust anyone”. I recognized my husband’s voice. I felt great emotion. I was happy to know that he was still alive. I longed to see him and tell him that we too had survived all their tortures.

They took us to another room and permitted us to uncover our eyes. I pulled the cap away from my eyes and head and looked around. I recognized my husband.

His face was pale and he looked fatigued. He smiled and told me to remain calm and relaxed. He was taking advantage of every moment to see our six-month-old son. During the time we were together, he kept staring at the baby.

Unfortunately, living in the cells had created such a devastating impact on the child that he did not react well to anybody; he was afraid of the many seated men with beards and moustaches. The baby would not even look at his father. When I tried to persuade him to go to his father, he hid his face in my bosom. This meeting with my husband was too short. It was our second and last meeting since our arrest.

They separated us and transferred me, along with my baby, to a public ward that was run by the police. There, I encountered many prisoners including a few from my own town. They welcomed us with joy. But when they stepped forward to embrace us, they immediately stepped back due to the rotten smell coming from our bodies. We had to wait to shower until the next day.

There were thirty small cubicles in the showering area, each with one shower inside. The cubicles were dark and without any ventilation. They pushed three or more prisoners inside each cubicle to shower together. Twenty minutes after closing the gate of the shower site, we were expected to have finished everything. Altogether we had ten minutes to bathe. The water was either freezing-cold or boiling-hot. Sometimes, we had to stop with soap still on our bodies.

One day they took me for fingerprinting. Upon seeing my name the officer got confused. He asked me, with astonishment, why I was being fingerprinted twice. I assured him that it was my first fingerprinting. He checked his list carefully and accepted my explanation. "That was somebody else with the same surname". He mentioned the first name spontaneously. It was shocking news for me. My younger brother was among the prisoners.

We had to adapt ourselves to the new environment. Life would have been more miserable without the generous assistance of other prisoners. They used to help me with everything related to the baby – especially his clothing. There were four rooms in our ward, each with a total area of 24 square metres. Rooms were overcrowded, each with 100 prisoners. We could not sleep at the same time due to the lack of space. We had divided ourselves into three groups: sitting, standing and sleeping prisoners. In an attempt to get more space, we slept in reverse directions. To obtain extra space for babies, prisoners who were shorter slept in the same area. There were four other babies in jail with their mothers. No child could sleep with their mother due to the lack of space. The smell emanating from the babies' diapers was a source of annoyance for all prisoners. I wrapped

my baby's dirty diapers inside my own dresses to save other prisoners from the smell.

We had to sleep at 10:00 p.m. sharp. We were not allowed to feed the babies during sleeping hours. Babies were strictly forbidden from crying. If they did, the guards would punish their mothers severely. One night, the baby had diarrhea and I had to remain awake and change his diapers frequently. I used all possible precautions, but a guard noticed. She woke everyone up. I showed her the diapers and told her about the exceptional situation. She did not believe me and shouted: "You are lying to me. You are using this as an excuse to organize a nightly discussion circle. You are conspiring against Islam. Tomorrow I will tell the brothers (male guards) about your conspiracy". I could not control my anger. I showed her my baby's diapers and told her, "Then tell the brother guards that I used my baby's diapers as a tool of my conspiracy". She ordered me to shut up and left. The next day they called me for interrogation and gave me 60 lashes for my remarks.

I had to take the baby when they interrogated me. He was afraid of people. Sometimes they called me before 9:00 a.m. and returned us to the cell in the evening, during which time we had no food or water and were not permitted to go to the washroom. Interrogators were annoyed by the presence of my baby. Many times, they threatened that if I brought the baby again they would separate us forever. I could not comply with their orders because the child would not stay with anybody else.

With the passage of time, the baby became bigger. He soon started hating the blindfold. One day the torturers prolonged the interrogation to the extent that both of us fainted. They brought me back to consciousness and sent one of the jail mates to carry the baby to the ward.

Food was poor in terms of both quality and quantity. Prisoners had no food during the course of their interrogation. It happened many times that the baby was hungry for many hours when I was going through the ordeal of interrogation.

The baby eventually developed affection for my fellow prisoners. He enjoyed having many "aunties". When he was nine months old, he spoke all three languages spoken in the ward: Azari, Farsi and Kurdish. His "aunties" had taught him. It was interesting that he spoke with each "auntie" in her native tongue. If a Kurdish girl, for instance, tried to speak Farsi with him, he would respond in Kurdish. No one could play a trick upon him.

He was ten months old when he got an infection that blocked his urinary tract. He stopped urinating. It took a painful effort to convince the guards to take the child to the clinic in prison. The doctor, a political prisoner himself, prescribed an antibiotic ointment. He told me, in the

presence of two guards, that the ointment should be applied deep inside the child's penis; otherwise, he would die. He gave me a thin barometer and advised me to smear it with the ointment and insert it inside. It was a painful practice. He would lose consciousness during the process and I used to cry because I had no choice but to inflict pain on my child. All the other prisoners used to cry with me. The doctor told me that outside the jail doctors used anaesthesia prior to implementing this treatment.

The child's health was deteriorating. He was crying all the time and making life miserable for everyone in the ward. This prompted all my jail mates to write a joint petition to the jail authorities and request to have my child transferred to the hospital immediately. The authorities were reluctant to transfer him because I was in limbo and they usually did not transfer any prisoners to outside hospitals before their conviction. I pleaded with them for three days; my child was slowly dying. They finally transferred us, escorted with two *pasdars* and two policemen.

Upon arrival at the hospital's premises, I remained handcuffed and the guards escorted me until we reached the special ward in the hospital. They did not want to enter the actual hospital unit because they were afraid of people's reactions that were generally against prison guards. They left and stayed on guard outside. It was in the hospital ward that the police officers finally took off my handcuffs. They had been ordered to take us to the hospital in such a way that no one would know that we had come from jail. They behaved as if we were friends who needed help. Despite these attempts, the doctors and nurses immediately sensed that they had brought us from a political prison.

It was unbelievable! I could feel kind and compassionate glances everywhere. There was a high level of cooperation and collaboration among medical personnel to save my child. I received friendly messages both directly and indirectly from all corners. One of the doctors began having a friendly chat with the police officers in an attempt to distract their attention. In the meantime, another doctor took us inside a room and asked me about the conditions in jail. I informed him that I did not feel secure. He assured me that everybody in that ward was a friend.

They undressed my child and put new clothing on him. They then put the old clothing on top of the new in order to hide the new dress from the guards and police officers. They fed my baby with chocolate which he had never tasted before. They filled his pockets with chocolates to take with him. They attempted to prolong the process of treatment to give me some time to rest. The medical staff told me that they would prepare any type of food I liked. Their kindness was like refreshing water in a parched desert. These were people who did not know me. They were only driven by their altruism and good will. One of the nurses gave me one hundred

toomans, which was a lot of money. Since she knew that they would search me in the jail she hid the money inside the baby's diapers.

It did not take long for almost everyone in the ward to come to know about the helpless political prisoner and her little baby. I felt empathy from the many nurses and medical personnel who came and visited us; they pretended that they were there to check the baby. They gave us whatever they could gather, including everything they had in their own pockets. The staff did everything for the baby.

In an attempt to give us another day of rest and comfort the doctor made up an excuse, telling the guards and officers that he needed to take a blood sample from my child the following day before he had eaten his breakfast. He wrote a very persuasive letter to the authorities in jail and told them the child's health was in danger. After a few hours they took me back to my jail. The next day there was general reluctance from the guards and the jail manager to let us out. I also came to know from their conversation that the doctors had made frequent calls warning them about the health risks facing the baby. Finally, they let us go to the hospital.

When we reached the hospital I felt that I had been moved from hell to paradise. The abundance of food and drink gave me the feeling that we were invited to a banquet. They said, "This is all for you and your baby". They had brought many pairs of shoes and socks. It was not possible to take all of them back to the prison. I had to dress him in many pairs of socks, one on top of the other. They asked officers to wait outside and they took us to a nursing room – a place where no patient was permitted to enter. There, the most pleasant and unexpected event was waiting for me: I found a woman who was standing with her back to us. "Who is she?", I asked myself. The lady turned around. I could not believe my eyes. She was my sister-in-law, my husband's sister. She embraced me and started kissing her nephew. As a nurse in the hospital, her colleagues had informed her of our coming and had taken the risk of arranging a private visit between us. She gave us money and gifts. This visit did not last for more than a few minutes due to the life-threatening risk we were all taking.

They kept us there until late afternoon. Food and beverages were so attractive that everybody joined the banquet – even the police officers. The most delectable fruit on the table were grapes and watermelon. These were not allowed in jail due to the guards' suspicion that we might make wine from them.

The doctor asked me if I had experienced torture and unusual or degrading treatment. I politely apologized and told him that as a prisoner I was not able to speak about those issues. The doctor appreciated my honesty and told me: "But, I am sure something terrible has happened to you. Your baby is afraid of men, including myself".

A nurse brought the test result. I saw the doctor's hands shaking. He remained silent for a moment and in his silence started wiping away his tears: "I have bad news for you. The level of sugar in your baby's blood is extremely low; he should drink lots of fruit juice and eat things that are rich in protein". I told him that in jail there was no food quota for the baby. He wrote a letter to the doctor in jail and explained the life-threatening danger of low glucose in the baby's blood. It was with the help of that letter that the jail doctor was able to get fresh and canned fruits for the baby after that.

The guards hated to see us happy in jail even for a moment. Spontaneous manifestations of happiness such as singing, dancing and even tapping rhythms on the wall were strictly prohibited. The guards considered the actions un-Islamic and punished "perpetrators" with lashes. One day, along with two prisoners and my child, we decided to go to a room that was used both as a library and a place of worship. One of the girls started tapping on the door in a rhythmic manner. My baby started laughing and dancing with joy. A guard observed the scene and reported it. It did not take long before we were called by loudspeaker to report to the jail's office.

In our jail, guards used two different terms when they called a prisoner to report to the office: *Ezaam* (expedition) or *Edaam* (execution). Often, they purposefully pronounced "z" like "d" to create panic among the prisoners. Children hated these terms and anytime authorities called a prisoner to the office they stopped and pleaded with her not to go. They had instinctually come to know that those who go for *Edaam* (execution) would never return. The moment we heard the word "*Edaam*" from the loudspeaker, we were all electrified. A female guard was sent to take us to the office. On the way, my child started begging the guard to forgive us, repeatedly mentioning that it was his fault that he danced.

They hastened us to a room called "Chamber No. 15" where we found a man other than the interrogators who were known to us. He blamed us by saying: "Shame on you! You performed a wedding ceremony in a holy place of worship. You have ridiculed the sacred traditions of Islam". Both girls were terrified. In an attempt to boost their morale, I took a risk and responded angrily: "I have made frequent verbal and written requests in vain for food and clothes for my baby. Ignoring these requests has nothing to do with your Islamic tradition, but you find knocking on the door against the sacred traditions of Islam".

I paused for a moment and continued: "We have frequently asked authorities not to use the term *Ezaam*, that has the same sound as *Edaam* (execution), but no one has paid any attention. Don't you notice that this child is on the verge of having a stroke because he heard this word a few minutes earlier?" My words softened the heart of the man who lowered

his voice and said: "Go back to your jail. Whatever mistakes you have committed so far I forgive you. Don't do it again".

Children in prison used to show a great deal of empathy for tortured prisoners, but in their own ways. There was a girl in our room whose intestines had been twisted under torture. With the intensification of her pain she used to have convulsions and lose consciousness. At these times, we wrapped her in a blanket. Four prisoners held four sides of the blanket, and we delivered her to the guards to send her to the hospital.

One day her condition deteriorated and we all insisted that she be taken immediately to the jail's hospital. Amidst general anxiety, my child stopped everybody and told us in his childish language: "Don't take auntie to the hospital; I know what her problem is". For a moment all the weeping inmates stopped and turned back to my child:

"Tell us the problem with auntie?" He raised both his hands and said with great self-confidence: "She has urine and cannot urinate the way I couldn't urinate. Take her to the toilet". For a few seconds our weeping turned to laughter. It was astonishing that such a small baby had his own diagnosis and acted like an experienced doctor.

In an attempt to pass the time and make the tedious life of the prison tolerable, prisoners used the most elementary materials to make interesting handicrafts. The handmade crafts were so valued in our prison cell that we took the utmost care to keep them away from the children. We felt lucky that after a long time we had acquired needle and thread. We had got thread by pulling it out of our towels. We got needles from our families. They hid them inside fruits that they sent to us in jail. During visiting hours they gave us hints about which fruits had needles inside.

We used colourful thread to make art and do embroidery. A talented Kurdish girl made such a beautiful piece of embroidery that it brought a sense of pride to all of us. Everybody praised her work. The children were enthusiastic to see her work but they were not allowed to touch it.

One day prisoners were showing the Kurdish girl's embroidery to each other and exchanging words of praise. This made my child so enthusiastic and joyful that he went ahead with full confidence and in a plausible tone ordered in Kurdish: "Give way! Give way!" He took the embroidery and said, "I am tired of getting orders all the time not to touch. I want to touch. I want to see what it is". We tried to explain to him that preventing him from touching her work was necessary to protect his hands from the needle. "If you teach me how to stitch", he said, "I won't injure my hands".

There were so many mice in our jail that sometimes we found a dead mouse in our food. Catching mice had become one of our frequent entertainments. Except for a human being, the first prisoner that my son

saw in his prison life was a mouse. With much difficulty we tied a thread to the tail of the mouse. My child took the other end of the thread and played with the tiny animal.

My husband was extremely enthusiastic and anxious to see his son. I found out that he was constantly trying to visit the baby. I was not permitted to see my husband and the baby would not go with anyone else. I repeatedly asked the authorities why I should not be allowed to visit my legal and legitimate spouse. They used to reply all the time with a ready-made answer: “You are non-believers, therefore your marriage is illegitimate; not only your touch, but even your glance at each other is considered an unforgivable sin”.

One day they allowed the baby to see his father, but they were suspicious of political prisoners taking him. They brought non-political prisoners to carry the baby to his father. The visit did not take more than half an hour. The child cried until he almost fainted. He did not like to be carried by a strange woman on the one hand and he was not used to seeing a man on the other. He was terribly afraid of seeing his father.

The father visited his child once more. As I was not allowed to see my husband, I asked one of my closest friends to take him to his father. This time he also started crying and screaming. The visit was too short. A few days later, the guards gave me a letter from my husband, in which he referred to the visit:

It was an unpleasant visit; whenever he visits me, he starts crying. I can't stand my child weeping. Therefore, it is better for both of us not to visit each other anymore.

And that was the last visit.

Fifteen months after the initial arrest, they executed my husband without permitting me to see him before his death. He was twenty-eight years old. He was a human rights activist, a man of letters, a poet, a writer and a master of the arts. He had great passion for life and a hope for the ultimate salvation of humankind. I still have twelve letters he wrote to me in prison, each full of love, hope and passion for life.

I came to know about my husband's execution two months after his death. When I met the Shariah judge – the judge of Islamic jurisprudence – who was the hanging judge as well, I asked him why they killed my husband. Neither one of us believed in violence, nor had we been involved in any kind of violent activities. He smiled and told me that he ordered the execution of my husband because he was intelligent, resisted all tortures, refused to give them any information and his spirit could not be broken.

Here I felt the triple burdens of victimization: as a political activist, as a woman and as a mother of a little baby. Those of us who were imprisoned with our babies had an especially difficult life. My child had no idea of the outside world; his world was limited to a small cell and the most vivid events in his life were when I was brought back to the cell, my body covered in wounds. The child, however, loved listening to stories and I had plenty of time to narrate different tales to him. This was not without difficulty. He had no idea about many things in the story, such as animals and people. I had to explain these through drawings and pictures in the newspapers. The child used to ask intelligent questions.

After many months of languishing in jail, a small change brightened our monotonous life. We were transferred to a room from where it was possible to see a glimpse of the outside world. There was a window close to the ceiling far from the prisoners' access. We were lucky as the screen that covered the window had been torn apart. We could see the light and a tiny portion of the sky. Another fortunate incident happened: they brought us three-storied beds. My child used to climb the ladder to the bed on top that was close to the window. He was eager to look outside and discover things that he observed. He used to ask with astonishment: "What is this in the sky?" "It is a bird", I would reply. "Something is moving; what's that?" "It is called a car". "I am seeing a pile of something green. What's that?" "It's a tree".

The child was very happy during the visiting day of the week. That was a different day. People used to come and go and laugh. Children were not allowed to go for a visit. My child and I were "incommunicado" prisoners and therefore had no visitors. They imposed this sinister technique against steadfast prisoners who resisted their torture and intimidations. Prison authorities were afraid of the exchange of information between the prisoner and her family. They hoped that by depriving me from visits by the family, they could break my morale. Unaware of these ominous techniques, my child was overjoyed when others visited their loved ones. Visitors brought lots of food and fruits and the prisoners left the best items for the children.

Finally the day came when the prospect of our freedom could be seen on the horizon. When the child reached the age of four, I heard rumours about "amnesty". I had been sentenced to eight years of imprisonment, but they commuted it to four. Besides, the child had reached the age of four and according to the guards he was a mature person and was not allowed to see his mother's body. I could no longer take him with me for bathing: "We are going to release you because of your child". Everybody was happy about our imminent release and congratulated us on our upcoming freedom. Although my child had no idea of freedom, he was happy as a

result of the general happiness. He used to confuse the term “freedom” with “free” and declare repeatedly: “I want to go for free; I love free”.

It did not take long before the child found himself in a strange world. He was unbelievably panicky with men. At home, when he saw me sitting without a scarf, he used to come to me shaking with fear and warning me: “Hide your hair mom; cover it with a scarf; there is a man here”. I tried to calm him down: “Don’t be afraid son; he is my brother and that one is my father”. I could not, however, convince him and he responded with fear: “No mom, these men will eat your head”.

He was panicky at the sound of the wind and music. He used to get angry upon hearing the sound of electric appliances and moving vehicles, and I had to pay for that. After hearing such sounds, he used to come to me and bite me. I was covered with bruises from his bites. He missed his “aunties” a lot. He had become so attached that it was difficult for him to live without them. Here was something surprising: he never made a remark about going back to prison and seeing them. He used to say all the time: “Mom, we are very lonely; let’s bring all my aunts here”. Then he would name them one by one.

Outside jail, the child behaved in an abnormal way. He was curious to know about many things and had lots of questions. I had to live in my late husband’s house under the strict supervision of my father-in-law. This left a negative impact on his upbringing. He had become lonelier. One day we went to the market place. I was holding his hand. I saw an apple in his other hand. I asked him where he got it. He pointed to a fruit shop’s basket. When I told him not to do it again, he told me with surprise: “Why not? They have put it there for us to take”. He had no idea about private property or about buying and selling. He took everything from anywhere and used it immediately. When he saw shoes he took them and immediately put them on and threw his old shoes away. If it was food, he ate it immediately. Although he was a grown-up child, we had to carry him in our arms or on our shoulders to prevent him from his pilfering habit.

I remained out of jail for one year. My father had put up his property and his life as a guarantee for my release. I had to report to the prison authorities every month. On one of these occasions, they re-arrested me because they did not like the “fast-paced manner” with which I was climbing the stairs, and the apparent “aggressive” way that I signed my name in the reporting book. They did not allow me to take my child with me; he was left with very little protection. When they released me after six months, I found my child in a desperate situation. He had been passed around, sometimes taken care of by my relatives, sometimes by neighbours and at other times, by no one at all. He was not initially ready

to accept me as his mother because of the tremendous hardship he had gone through.

It took my child two years to adapt to the new environment outside jail. However, for many years when he saw a guard or someone in a paramilitary uniform, he avoided him and refused to speak with him. Soon, much before I was expecting it, he asked me who his father was. We had made a family decision not to tell him. We had made a joint decision to present his grandfather as his dad, but he did not believe me: "No mom, I do not believe it. You are young and my father should be much younger than this gentleman". He was not yet six.

One day he came to me with a disturbing question. His cousin had told him that the guards had decapitated his father. I felt that I could no longer hide the story from him. I asked him to be patient. I thought for a couple of days and developed a method based on the stories told by Shahrzad in the book of the Arabian Nights. Every day, I narrated a part of the story, beginning with the formation of history, establishment of governments, and development of empires. Gradually, I made him understand concepts like tyranny, injustice, freedom and struggle. Then I told him about the Iranian society, the lack of freedom and his father's campaigns as a freedom fighter. He learned about the fear his father had caused in the hearts of his oppressors and why they had killed him. The young fellow accepted the reality of his life quietly and rationally. He never showed any negative reaction. He did, however, remain silent. When I would ask him why, he would nod and say: "Mom, I'm thinking of why this happened." He was seven at the time.

He was a good and intelligent student but he preferred to be by himself and live in isolation. He did not like to socialize with other people or argue with them. He wanted to be with me all the time but this did not happen and he grudgingly accepted that.

When he reached fourteen, he was no longer the same person. His silence turned to anger, as if a big bang had happened in his life. He was reluctant to tell me the reason. When I insisted repeatedly, he burst into tears and told me: "I'm very unhappy because my destiny was determined before my birth and I'm now facing a *fait accompli*. I have no freedom of action or thought".

With the passage of time my life, as a woman, became more and more difficult. I reached a point when I felt living outside of jail was not much better. I had been left with no job, no money and no accommodation. A shadow was following me all the time. My father-in-law blamed me for everything and began harassing me. I was left with no choice but to accept a traditional arranged marriage in an attempt to protect my child and myself. A year later, I became pregnant and delivered another baby boy.

Unfortunately, my second marriage turned out to be an abusive one; it was a kind of slavery. At home, I was constantly abused and harassed by my husband. Outside of my home, I was harassed by security forces that were suspicious of me. Life was becoming harder and harder every day. I reached a point where internal and external forces of evil put my very survival at risk. I do not want to enter into this entirely different story here. My son was approaching his eighteenth birthday – the age of military service – and was not allowed to leave Iran before completing his compulsory service in the army. Life has taught him to withstand hardship and he has acquired a premature maturity. I was not worried about his safety because, unlike his father and myself, he was politically innocent, and therefore not at immediate risk.

When he came to know about my predicament, he insisted that I escape to a safe haven along with his vulnerable brother. He was so worried about our safety that he offered his support by saying that he would work hard to save money in order to save our lives. He comforted me by saying that he would join us when we were established in our new home. I was left with no other option but to leave him in Iran and come to Canada with my youngest son. I was so sad to have to leave my son and face an unknown destiny.

I have been in Canada for around eight-and-a-half years. I am very thankful to all of the people in Canada who understood my torture and trauma, and helped me with my refugee claim and permanent resident status. That includes my lawyers, physicians, psychiatrists, nurses, friends, counsellors from the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT), and many other people.

I am presently a proud citizen of Canada. I remained separated from my eldest son for more than six and a half years. His file was closed twice by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. His file for family unification was opened with great difficulty by the intervention of the CCVT and my then Member of Parliament, the honourable Bill Graham. He finally arrived in Canada on February 22, 2007. He is now going to school with the hope of joining a useful university program. Unfortunately, he still suffers from the traumas of his childhood. He is, however, strong enough to cope with his trauma and act as a great support for me and his brother.

I am proud of myself as a woman, a political prisoner and a loving mother. More often than not I sit with both my children and discuss about justice. We are enthusiastically looking into the future and cherish the hope that justice and freedom will prevail across the globe.

ENDNOTES

- * Part of this article previously appeared as a chapter in Mossallanejed, Ezat (2005) *Torture in the Age of Fear*, Hamilton: Seraphim Editions, pp. 113-132. These portions have been reprinted and edited with permission from the author and publisher.

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