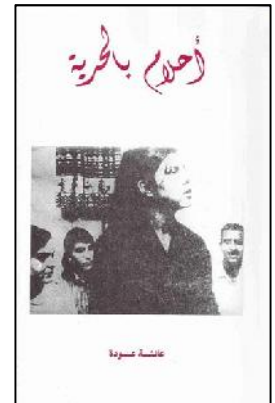


## The wall ruptures

(...)

Two men arrived that evening, one in military uniform and the other in civilian clothes. They took me to the interrogation building. I was looking forward to seeing their faces, in light of 'Aeda's bombings.

The interrogation building was empty. No sound or movement could be detected. Where did my torturers go? Did the spirit of 'Aeda chase them away? Or are they out arresting hundreds of innocent people? I playfully queried myself.



There was a large room on the ground floor with a table in the middle, at which there were lots of chairs. One person sat at the table. The soldier left the room while the man in civilian clothes spoke briefly to the one at the table and then left. The man at the table leaned forward, one hand on the table and the other at his waist. He scrutinized me from head to toe. I wondered what was going on in his mind: Is he taken aback by the young women of Palestine, is he afraid of us?

He straightened up and asked me to sit down, so I did. He approached me, leaned against the table and said: "You are a whore and you know that." I said: "No, I am not." He said: "That's what I say. You are an intellectual whore. A whore who sells her body is a 1,000 times more honorable than you." Poking me in the head as, if he wanted to shove his finger into my brain, he continued

- "This brain is a whore, and therefore you are a whore and I want you to repeat: 'I am a whore' ten times.
- "I will not."

I spoke emphatically, 'Aeda's spirit still empowering me.

- "I command you and you must obey!"
- "You can command all you wish, but you will not force me to obey you!"
- "Do you see how much of a whore your brain is?"

He climbed on top of the table, in front of me and sat down, putting each foot at either side of my chair, hemming me in with his knees and legs. He grabbed my ponytail, pulled my head back, and started slapping my face. Every now and then, he would stop and say that if I repeated "I am a whore" 10 times he would stop slapping me!

He had my face pointed up, which helped me concentrate on images of 'Aeda, soaring in the skies over Jerusalem, shining like the lights of prophets, singing like a swallow. I didn't hear a word he said and didn't feel a thing.

After a while, someone brought him a cup of tea. He let me be and climbed off the table. After a little break, he paced the room, drank his tea, got back on the table, and began slapping me again. In fact, his slaps weren't that hard this time, but they were uninterrupted and methodical. He stopped slapping me for a few seconds, while still pulling my head back, as if he weren't sure what to do next. I surprised him with a question.

- 'Is torturing people a hobby that makes you happy?'
- "No!"

He was visibly agitated. He climbed off the table and started pacing the room again. Then he approached me:

- "How many men have you slept with?"

He asked this matter-of-factly, as if he was asking me how many meals a day do I eat? Like it was a normal thing to ask of someone. Spontaneously, I said "None". He seemed very surprised, as if what I said was peculiar. His eyes widened and he exclaimed: "You mean to tell me you're still a virgin?" I could see a twinkle in his eyes and that scared me! I imagined he might attack me and rape me. I was terrified. I didn't recognize the terror I felt. In fact, I've never ever experienced that kind of fear before or again. It raged through me and seemed to come from some deep place, and from a source I didn't associate with other fears I've had. He looked menacing and almost elated, which gave me warning of something bad about to happen. Terror struck at my core, what mad thoughts I had!

Right at that moment, the soldier who brought me in came back. I felt relief and my anxiety subsided. I didn't want the soldier to leave me; I wished that I would be taken back to my dark corner. The other man seemed disappointed and somewhat less exhilarated when he continued:

- "This is not your night! We are taking you back to your cell. Tomorrow is your day, after all. We will skin you alive!"

I sighed with relief as the soldier took me away. The cold air was another slap in the face; I thought my face was on fire from the intense pain I felt. I was exhausted and just wanted to sleep. But the minute my face or head touched the pillow, I felt an intolerable pain. What could I do? I tried to sleep sitting up, but every time my head got heavy and fell to the side or on my chest, I was jolted awake. I would wake up with pain so bad in my neck that I didn't think it could carry the weight of my head anymore. I would try the pillow again but I couldn't take the pain and I would try again to sleep sitting up.

Is it conceivable that he slapped me the entire evening, just to get me to repeat his silly words? I couldn't understand his logic and thought: He must be mad, maybe they've all lost their minds because of what 'Aeda did and the significance of her actions. I had many questions: What business is it of theirs to ask such a personal question? Why did I even bother with his questions? I shouldn't have responded to him at all and should have somehow closed the door on that topic. I should have said: Whether or not I sleep with men is none of your business. Moreover, you have no right to ask me that.

At the time, I wouldn't have been able to articulate clear and incisive thoughts on this subject. I learned early on - it's been ingrained in my consciousness for as long as I can remember -

that this subject was categorically not up for discussion. For one thing, this matter wasn't a private one at all; in fact, it concerned everyone. Most importantly, in our society the only thing we can't accept is for a woman or girl to lose her virginity out of wedlock. Fear of a female bringing shame to the family – a shame that only her blood can wash away, spilled at the hands of a man in her family– is the reason why a girl's every move in society is scrutinized, and it is also why she is forbidden to participate in society at large. I understood this early on: If I preserve the values that my society holds so dear, not questioning them (meaning I shouldn't question society's values), and always keep my slate pure white and clean and spotless - at all times - I would in return gain my freedom. It was also understood, without question, that we would maintain this purity in the presence of our enemies. We believed that they are always searching for opportunities and scheming to eliminate women's participation in our resistance movement by, for example, starting rumors to terrify people, to cause them to tighten the restrictions for women even more.

Evening of the next day rolled in. One male and one female soldier came to take me away for interrogation. It was cold and stormy when we walked the short distance between the detention center and the interrogation building. It was even stormier inside the interrogation building! Screams of pain and cries for help were coming from everywhere, intermingled with the sounds of whips and the hurling of curses, insults, warnings and threats. There was a lot commotion, with people hurriedly coming and going. The interrogators had surly looks that warned of cruelty and anger that would have no limits. I imagined that this is how judgment day would be.

One of them gave orders to put me in the room he pointed to with his finger. His order had the effect on me of a volley from a machine gun. I was seized with terror and I trembled; chilled to the bone; I couldn't breathe. The air that had been sucked out of my surroundings was replaced with a fear and terror I inhaled with every breath. I was sure that life would depart from me that night, for sure, and that my name was already on a list of martyrs.

I thought about the martyr Shadya Abu Ghazaleh. I imagined her waiting to greet me in the world beyond. Will we be companions again, Shadya? I had an imaginary conversation with her, an attempt at rescuing my soul from this terrifyingly deadly situation that I found myself in.

I was pushed and almost fell to the floor in a big room where two men were waiting for me, each holding a whip. They came forward and pulled at me like wolves at their prey. One of them held me from the front, by my neck, and pressed hard while the other read out a list of the accusations against me. There were ten: 1) officer in the women's *Tantheem* of the PFLP, 2) directly involved in terrorist cells, 3) recruiting dozens of terrorists, 4) facilitating the training of recruits to carry out terrorist missions, 5) directly participating in terror actions, 6) possessing weapons, 7) providing other terrorists with weapons and explosives, 8) writing inflammatory publications, 9) distributing inflammatory publications to encourage civil disobedience, 10) communicating with and exchanging information with other terrorists.

When he finished reading this list of accusations against me, he demanded that I confess to all of them and provide all the details.

A red flag flashed in my mind: I will never be responsible for having anyone land in this hell hole. They won't get any details from me, ever again.

My decision was firm and it threw me off track; I slipped from fear into defiance. I felt courageous, my will absolute. My perseverance and Sumoud became more meaningful. I thought: This is my chance to cleanse myself of the sin of my earlier confession. No, they will not get any details from me, no matter how small.

It felt like I was stuck in sand as the whips lashed at every inch of my body. I thought: Let these whips cleanse my soul like fire cleanses a wound. I became unconsciousness. I could feel a bucket of cold water being poured on my face. It gushed through my nose; I almost choked. I coughed uncontrollably and they proceeded to whip me and once again I became unconscious. Again, a bucket of cold water, then the whippings, unconsciousness - over and over again. Like mad men they whipped me, there was nothing but madness in that room, nothing. Is it conceivable that a wave of madness would strike a particular place, at a certain time, and afflict all the people there, like it did that night? No words can really describe what that night was like.

The same madness inhabited me; I was screaming and squirming from the fiery pain. No use. Like wild beasts who attack, and are unmoved by the screaming and the pain they inflict on their prey, they came at me and ripped my flesh apart and there was no escaping it! Everything was brutal, savage, inhumane.

They decided to tie my feet and hold them up. One of them concentrated on whipping my feet while another stepped on my chest. They didn't just whip me; they snarled and bellowed with hatred. I could no longer scream. I didn't feel my feet anymore; it was as if they didn't belong to my body anymore.

Maybe they got tired!

They untied my feet and tried to make me stand up. I couldn't. My feet looked like two overripe tomatoes. They dragged me around as if I were their prey. They took me up a stairway and down a long hallway to the end. The sounds of the whippings and the blows, the calls for help, the cries of pain and the whimpering echoed everywhere and then converged in a flood of ruthlessness that could cover the entire Earth.

They threw me into a room at the end of the hallway. They slammed the door and left. I was unable to move. A young man, a little short and thin, with a dark complexion and frizzy hair, sat on a chair near the side door that leads into the next room. Beside him was another man with a whip. They pretended I wasn't there. The one sitting on the chair stood up and walked away from it. The other lashed at the chair with his whip. The first one screamed loudly in pain, as if that blow had landed on him and not the chair. This was all an act!!! They did this a few times. The one with the whip shouted: "Who recruited you? Confess!" They would quietly exchange a few words and then do it again, over and over, without letting on that they even noticed me!

The screams and shouts of torture came from everywhere. The man whose job it was to scream poked his head inside the room where I was, while pointing at me and saying over and over: "He did, he recruited me! It's him!" The one with the whip jumped into the other room that all the screaming and shouts were coming from, saying: "See, they told on you, dog! How long are you going to keep up this charade?"

In this ruthless and mad world, how can you tell whether what they say is truth and reality or lies and deceits they concoct?

Another door on the left of the room opened up; a man came out carrying something heavy. My heart raced! I touched the floor to make sure that I wasn't having a nightmare; I realized he was dragging a corpse. It was Ya'cub 'Odeh's. I saw his dead body. "They killed him!" I shouted, but no sound came out of my mouth.

They dragged the body out of the room, into the hallway. The one who was dragging the body came back, standing tall and looking exhilarated, as if he was about to start dancing. He was very tall, his face yellow like death, wearing rimless eyeglasses, behind which two black eyes had the sharp look of an eagle's claws. He approached me as might 'Uzrael,<sup>1</sup> the reaper of souls. He dragged me into the room from which he had just brought out Ya'cub's body.

It's my turn, I said to myself, realizing that I will be dead tonight, no doubt about it! If I have to die, then die with honor, Aisha, I will not say a word, I will not surrender to this madness; will not let them win!

I prepared myself for death.

The room was empty; a short man with a thick moustache stood in the middle. He had a big belly and ugly eyes. He looked to me like an animal that had just devoured its prey and was ready for his next one. Moments later, a very tall, young, blond woman walked in. She wore a military uniform.

'Uzrael gave his order: "Take off your clothes."

I cowered and I tried to cross my arms over my chest to protect myself. He didn't give me that chance and ordered the others in the room to forcibly remove my clothes. I resisted, but to no avail. In no time, I was as naked as a newborn baby. They pulled my hands behind me and tied them together. They threw me on the floor, where shackles dug into my spine. The pain that shot up my back was like a line of fire. The short man attacked me and planted his knees into my belly, almost breaking my back against the shackles. That made the pain intolerable. The tall one, 'Uzrael, grabbed a stick. He opened up my legs and kept them apart with his knees. The woman held my head with her foot.

The one kneeling on me used his big hands to put all his weight on my chest, crushing me. I felt soaring pain that shot through my chest and my back like lava out of a volcano, shooting out of the deepest part of the Earth, sweeping through me and carrying me off, up into the skies.

'Uzrael tried to penetrate my womb with his stick.

I resisted.

Every cell, every part of my being resisted. As if lightening had struck my consciousness, I knew right then that my will is an absolute, combined will of resistance of all of the oppressed human beings, throughout all corners of the world, throughout all epochs of time. All the pain

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<sup>1</sup> The Arabic word for the angel of death, ironically it sounds very similar to the word Israel

that people have endured - from the dawn of creation, throughout the ages - flowed together and poured into my body and soul, racing through my spine, and finally gushing into my heart to fortify my will to resist. The river overflows and paints the whole Earth red.

I shouted, "Noooooooooooo!"

I encompassed, too, Arab defeats in this mix of oppression, in full force. I saw them condensed in the situation I was in and in the torture I was enduring. The scream that said No signified my rejection of defeat and my rejection of everything defeat represents. I said it again and shouted it repeatedly, "No, No, No!"

The idea of absolute resistance and rejection of Arab defeat struck me like lightening, as if it were an incarnation: If Arabs will not fight this oppression then I will gather together all the power in the universe and launch it against the oppressors, rejecting defeat.

They continued to crush my chest, trying to penetrate me with the stick but they failed. I was resisting them with a will that erupted in me like a volcano.

They stopped.

Did I win? Are they defeated?

A cold bucket of water was poured on me, then a second and a third.

One took my arm and the other my leg and they wiped the floor with my body and then went out into the hallway. Young men were lined up against the wall. I closed my eyes. They dragged me up and down the hallway. One of the young men in line exploded - weeping and sobbing. I closed my eyes, not wanting us to have to acknowledge each other.

They took me back to the room I had been in. Someone was wiping up water off the floor. He went out, leaving the door ajar.

They threw me on the floor and they tried again to rape me. A face peeked through the door; it smiled and went away. Someone else giggled loudly and also went away.

"Nazis!" I shouted. I felt like an animal, the will to live fluttering through its body, before being slaughtered and the life forced out of it entirely. The long white boots of the female soldier moved from my head to my mouth. A man walked in with his arms out, up as if he were trying to protect me: "Shame, shame. Take your hands off of her." They all stopped. The boot came off of my mouth. He had a paper and pen in his hands.

- "I am here to rescue you from your shame, Aisha! Confess and save yourself. If you do, I will order them not to lay a hand on you. Just tell us who it was you recruited and trained. Why should you torture yourself for their sake?"
- "I don't know anyone."
- "And the weapons that you still have."
- "I have no weapons."
- "You have no one to blame but yourself. I just wanted to help you."

After he said that he left. They attacked me again. Another person walked in and asked them to stop. He asked me:

- "Who carried out the Mahane Yahuda operation?"
- "I did."

He beamed with delight and continued:

- "Give us the details."
- "Tell me what details you want me to confess and I'll do it."
- "We want the details from you."
- "I have no details."
- "Suite yourself then, I just wanted to help you but you don't want to help yourself."
- "Naziiiiiiiiiiiiis!"

I shouted from the depths of my being, and with all the strength I had left in me.

They attacked again. They stomped on my mouth with a boot. I could no longer scream. Screaming is a window to relief. Oh God, where are you God?! Help me God ... I said from the depths of my soul.

My body started to fade away... I was fully conscious but I could feel it separating from me.

'Uzrael realized that something had happened to me. He threw down his stick and gave the others some orders. Right away, the female soldier brought out a chair. They lifted me up by my shoulders and put me on it. I remember my body touching the chair and then I saw it fall off. I wasn't aware of it hitting the floor.

My soul left my body, away from this place and time!

*Aisha Odeh, Dreams of Freedom, Part one of a young Palestinian woman's experience of incarceration, translated by Salma Ayyash, pp. 107-118.*

*Ahlam bi-l-hurriyya, al-juz' al-awwal min tagribat 'tiqal fatat falastiniyya, issued by Mu'assasat Muwatin/Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy, Ramallah, 2004, pp. 144-157.*