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A Syrian Woman's Story: Her Journey from Damascus to the United States

By Jehan Sayed Issa¹

Abstract

This is a story of a Syrian woman who was compelled to leave her home in the disastrous wake of the war and to travel to the USA, pregnant and with her wounded son, leaving behind her husband and remaining children, to seek medical care. She describes her struggles, suffering and triumphs, amidst feelings of loneliness and despair.

Keywords: Syrian women, refugees, Syria

“Assalamu alaykum” followed by “how old is your daughter? May God protect her,” these are the questions through which I got to know her when I saw her in one of the mosques in Boston. The question was not strange as it has become the most commonly asked question among Syrians, just like the answer that follows it “the same age as my son or daughter,” and then drowning in fantasy for a few moments to match what the eyes can see, and so the beholder lives these moments with those who they miss and long for. She then sat down to tell her story as if she has been waiting for me for so long just so she can talk to me. In her estrangement, her tongue complied to its language but remained paralyzed in all her grief.

She is a woman in her late thirties from rural Damascus, married and has three daughters, two sons, and a fetus that is still growing inside of her. One winter night, and without knowing why or where to, she was forced along with the rest of the villagers to flee to a nearby village under heavy shelling. The reason behind attacking the village was because it was very close to one of the regime's military airports. In their nightgowns, and amid screaming and fear, she was carrying her child in her arms when her oldest son was shot. Unconsciously, she let go of the child in her arms and rushed to her thirteen-year-old son. Soon, she heard a hail of bullets, screaming and blood, and her younger son's leg was also injured. Amid her shock and wailing, among the bullets around her, and in a great flood of humans, they separated and her oldest son disappeared.

She reached the nearby village and she was still screaming her son's name hysterically, but no one responded. In one of the houses, which was turned into a field hospital, a doctor treated her younger son's injury while the oldest's whereabouts remained unknown. A month later she found out that he was in a refugee camp in Jordan where he was transferred for treatment. She moved with her family to Jordan and settled there along with poverty, hunger, and humiliation. Soon, the state of her younger son's injuries worsened and they were told by the camp's doctor that seeking better treatment abroad was their only hope to ensure the best results.

The family submitted their papers to every embassy, and four months later, they received happy news that was covered in sadness and pain, which has become their loyal friend since the

¹ Jehan Sayed Issa is a Syrian writer who aims to bring the voices of Syrian women's suffering to the world. Please be in contact with the editor at d1fox@bridgew.edu if you wish to contact Jehan. Author's Note: I know I have crossed the lines of freedom in this article according to the freedoms of my own country, but I am adamant of publishing it in accordance with the freedoms of another country whose pens do not know shackles.

first day they fled. The news was that only the mother and the son were approved to leave to the United States as a humanitarian case. The decision, much like many decisions regarding Syria, was devoid of any sense of humanity. A tough decision had to be made soon in order to make sure the child's health would not be jeopardized and that he would not lose his leg.

The mother said her goodbyes to her daughters and her older son who still suffered pain in his leg. She also said her goodbyes to her husband who stood feeling perplexed just like a wall, standing with no ceiling or floor. She carried her agonies and her fetus and her injured son, and climbed the steps of the airplane that was headed to the farthest end of the Earth, to a land where the sun never shines at the same time as it does on her family; a country that is separated from the rest of the world by the arctic ice and all the waves of the ocean. This was a journey that was a lot like that of Amerigo, everything was new, unknown and adventurous. It was her first time on a plane and her first time in an airport--strange faces and a foreign language of which she did not understand a thing. Everyone is in a hurry, and there were so many gates that she did not know which one to go through. She was overwhelmed with tears and a feeling of weakness, until she found a man holding a sign that carried her name, just as was agreed between her and the organisation that managed her immigration. She ran to him and as he started speaking to her in her language, and she realized he was Syrian too. So, she cried again, but this time it was out of joy similar to the joy of a little child finding his mother after having lost her in the crowd. He was one of the Syrian-Americans who devoted themselves to helping refugees; he took her to her new room which was rented by one of the organizations, and the following morning, he began working on her legal documents, healthcare papers and the rest of the legal procedures.

She went into her room during her first night. There was warmth, electric lights, running water and a wall that she leaned her back against, since in the camp, there are no walls for one to lean against. Her son could now take off his shoes in the room and his feet would not be drenched in mud. The seven months that she had spent in the tent now felt like an eternity. She felt as if she was in a heaven with its walls on fire, since this blissful comfort had intensified the hellfire that was growing within her chest, for each moment she spent in this room while the rest of her family still struggled back in the camp.

In the following days, the Syrian man continued working on her legal documents and the organization provided her with accommodations and a card with a stipend for her needs. Her child was also enrolled in school to catch up with what he had missed out on in the camp and he passed the language proficiency test, while the case of his injury was taken care of by one of the hospitals where it was decided that he would need many surgeries. The surgeries would take place over a time period of four years. That is when she realized that the path of anguish is long ahead and therefore, she needed to adapt to her new reality and overcome its obstacles, the first of which was the language barrier, since she found herself confined between walls of isolation that she could not overcome. So, she signed up for English language courses and studied with all her might along with the help of the people at the mosque.

The mosque had provided her and her son with comfort and ease. Every weekend, she got to know so many Muslims from different countries. She used to know their countries on the map, but now she identified these countries with the people that she met and exchanged her grief with, through her new language that was constantly improving. The attendants of the mosque did their part as well in comforting her however they could.

The greatest obstacle, however, was the lack of internet services at the camp and the fact that her husband did not own an electronic device through which they could contact one another. Her biggest concern was her husband and vice versa. Her husband felt as if he had thrown his wife

and child in the middle of the sea while they did not know how to swim. She shared his fears and sadness as she had left him with a responsibility that even mountains would not be able to bear. She worried constantly if something bad were to happen to him, and her children would be left behind with no one. She also needed to speak to her children, especially her daughters who had not gone a single night to sleep without her bedtime stories. What were they eating? Does she know that they go to sleep hungry most of the time? She wishes, every time she makes food, to send them some of it. Even her food overwhelmed her.

It was the middle of winter and she knew what it had meant for it to be winter in the camp. She knew what they had of clothes and covers. She also knew that their “do not worry mama, we are doing fine” had an opposite meaning. Every time they were able to speak to her through the camp’s supervisor’s computer, they repeated the same phrase after which they drown in silent cries that only she is able to hear until the early morning hours when she sees children heading to school while hers have been denied this luxury.

A month later, the mother went into labor and was taken to a hospital where she gave birth to a baby, away from his father and siblings. She did not feel happiness following the birth like she did the previous times. How was she to feel happy? The father kissed a photo of his newborn son that was displayed on the camp’s supervisor’s phone screen, who printed it out, and later the daughters pinned it on the cloth of the tent.

The agonies increased after having the baby. She intended to find a job so she could buy a mobile phone and send it to her husband, but now with the newborn baby, she could not. So, she waited until her child turned a year old, and that is when her Somali friend volunteered to babysit him as the mother looked for jobs. Looking for a job was not easy as she had no credentials except her secondary school diploma. Yet, she figured that in America, job opportunities are open for everybody. She finally found a job as a supermarket cashier. The job was not deemed appropriate according to her cultural background so she decided not to tell her husband or children about it. She was not worried her son’s tongue might slip and reveal her secret job, because he rarely spoke to his family, perhaps only when she forced him to, because despite crying during the first three months of being away from them, the long period of time he spent away had turned him indifferent. She would return home an hour before midnight as she had to take two trains to get home to her baby and injured child who was still going through treatment. This was exhausting for her as well as her children, but it was a challenge that she had to face, especially since at the end of every month, she would be able to send a few dollars to her family, which she told them were saved from her stipend. During this time, her husband had been making trips to Amman looking for jobs on a daily basis and had finally found a job working for a contractor. Using the money, he made along with the money his wife sent, he was able to move the children out of the camp and into a small room, a room that seemed like a palace to them. This meant that now, finally, the children were able to go back to school.

But, she faced problems with her neighbours, who noticed that her son returned home from school hours before she did. They notified the police, which therefore required her to be home before the child would get back home from school, since otherwise, she would be considered unfit to take care of him. After receiving two warnings, she was forced to quit her job and stay home. As a consequence, and despite her oldest son having passed the eighth grade with distinction (which allowed him to start envisioning going to university one day) he had to leave school and work with his father, carrying stones in order to make sure his sisters would be able to finish school.

According to the law of the United States, staying home made her a fit mother--even though it had meant her son had lost his opportunity of going to school because of her. She even told them that, but that did not concern the law enforcement people, since it was happening outside of American borders. These laws stirred up her emotions; the laws that deal with issues humanely, but in her case, only on the surface level. She was still unable to be reunited with her family and the social system was unable to address what five years mean to children who had fled war and are looking after their own battle wounds in the camp on their own, away from their mother. To her, it felt as if the officials do not understand her need as a human being to be with her family, to be with her husband and children. They also do not understand the need her children have to be with their siblings and father. But these are the rules and she had no other choice.

Four years had passed, and a lot had changed, including the way she thinks and sees things. There are now fewer details in the conversations she has with her husband which now mainly focuses on how the children are doing. The way she deals with things has changed and so with her husband, whose labor in Amman had changed him as well. The distance between them grew wider although their yearning to be together remained aflame. Every time they would Skype, their few words usually ended in silence, the same silence whose depth she has grown increasingly familiar with the longer she was away from her family. She was now able to handle grave adversities on her own; the news of the detainment of her brother and later his death under torture; the news of the detainment of her other brother and his disappearance; the news of the death of her father out of grief; and the news of her mother's sickness and her becoming paralyzed. She has built a cave in her heart where she keeps this silence, where it echoes against the walls. Her desolation reproduced more and more loneliness until eventually, became a rope that wrapped around her soul choking her life away from her.

As for her girls, the younger one is now in the fifth grade. Every night she goes to bed crying and dreaming of her mother's hand caressing her hair. She still never got over calling for her mother as soon as she returned home from school. She would sometimes feel jealous of her brother as she sees him sitting in her mother's lap over Skype, and she sometimes wishes the bullet had struck her leg and not his. She soon retracts and scolds herself and feels happy that she was the one who had to be away from her mother and not her brother. As for the middle daughter, the pearl in the middle of the necklace, as her mother calls her, is now in the eighth grade. Her teacher had told the class that since they are now teenagers, they must be close to their mothers to overcome any problems that they might have. Little did the teacher know that a mother is a touch and an embrace, not a voice from a mobile phone or a laptop, and so the daughter's agonies had to be buried inside of her because that is the only place that fully understands her sadness and despair. As for the oldest daughter, who is the same age as my daughter, she is now in the tenth grade. Somehow, she found herself filling in the place of her mother, carrying all the responsibilities of the house from cooking to cleaning and washing and managing the humble budget, which required her to sew and patch her siblings' clothes. She also found herself the heart that has to coddle everyone in the family. She buried her dreams and postponed her sadness until bedtime and let her troubles flounder, just like everyone else in the family. As a result, her performance at school was no longer as it used to be, when she was one of the top students in her class. How she wished to speak to her mother about her low grades, about her concerns and about her chaffed hands that have become so stiff from all the cleaning and washing. But again, she finds herself uttering the phrase "do not worry mama, we are fine," the same phrase their mother tells them. How beautiful it is to lie, especially when lying unifies us while reality could not do the same.

As for the son, he had become a young man, still working with his father carrying stones on his back from sunrise to sunset just like Sisyphus, in a never-ending journey of suffering. His dreams dwindled. They were once limitless; however, now his dreams had an abraded ceiling that looks like the ceiling of their own room that has been eaten by fungi and humidity. His language now consists of a lot of terms borrowed from his fellow workers. In three years, he had grown thirty years. Yet, his heart remained that of a child. At times, he would yearn for his mother, her smell would suddenly flood his surroundings, and he would drown in his tears.

As for the injured child, he too had grown three years and is now in the third grade. His leg gets closer to recovery with every surgery. He loves school and has many friends. He has also forgotten how to speak Arabic despite his mother's insistence. This meant that his communication with his father and siblings was limited to greetings. As for the little baby, he had obtained American citizenship and speaks English as his mother tongue. He does not recognize his father since his mother and brother are the world to him. He only knows of his mother's new, deceptive world, and nothing about her real world. The land from which she fled seeking freedom, but instead, lost the land forever. Freedom was her dream in Syria, but now, her dream is to let these five years pass so she can be reunited with her family by bringing them over.

The dream of freedom had turned into a dream of finding refuge and family reunification. This is not what she had wanted when she went out, along with her entire village facing a tyrant regime. But this is the fate of revolutions throughout history. The path of freedom is long and bloody and requires multiple generations, not just one. This is why she hates her asylum. She seeks and works for it but fears it because she knows that at the end, it requires her to integrate into the new society. If that happens, who is going to stay walking on the path of freedom? And who is going to return the land to its rightful owners?

Questions multiply and they increase her feelings of loneliness. The fate of her family, the fate of the revolution and all the news of death and loss that is coming from her country make it very difficult to enjoy her newly found freedom and comfort. On the contrary, the news makes her anguish greater and the questions keep hailing down on her: why, why, why? She keeps comparing incidents, why them and not us? Just like a parasite, her questioning keeps growing on her nerves and tears, the same tears which she shed while talking to me, and so I joined her.

Her agony is similar to mine, the one which I thought I would be relieved of, upon coming to the United States myself, only for it to besiege me everywhere I go, in stories with varying details that are connected through pain. Every Syrian woman here is a story of dispossession, suffering, and bravery that overcomes all the challenges. Every Syrian woman is a revolution; a revolution that is like a fetus whose heartbeats were heard throughout the world, but murderous bullets had struck the fetus and snatched life from it, and soon, the world and its human rights, offered hospitals for it to be aborted as well as lands for its burial.