

When We Turned into Black-Clad Corpses

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"We were women brilliant and bright with colour."

The change began at a junction on the road between Aleppo and Raqqa on July 3, 2014. We were women brilliant and bright with colour, with enough self-confidence to rival any man. On that day, however, we began to transform into corpses, wrapped in black shrouds, granted the right only to nod our heads and say, "Yes, whatever you say."

Despite the tyranny of our oppressors, despite our contempt for them, and despite us flouting their foul rules – rules that betrayed the depth of their own deeply depraved mentality – on that day they managed to shake me to my core, to brand my very soul.

They managed to terrify me and turn me into a stone statue when one of their militants entered the bus we were on to search us. This only added to my fears stemming from rumours we had heard that we would be sent back to Aleppo for travelling without a "mahram", a male chaperone.

Our trip was a dangerous adventure, but we were desperate to return to our home in Raqqa, regardless of the consequences.

We arrived at their first checkpoint, and I tried to cover my hands with the ends of my abaya (cloak), mindful of my mother's warnings that some mujahidin fighter might be smitten with my hand – the only part of my body that was showing – and snatch me away from her warm embrace in accordance with the laws of God and His Messenger.

By this time, one of the mujahidin had reached the back of the bus where we women were all sitting in compliance with sharia law, which decreed that we should be separate from the men in the front.

He put the same question to each of the girls, "Who is accompanying you?"

Each answered with the name of her mahram, and the mujahid yelled it out until the man in question answered. I whispered to my sister that we should just give them the name of one of the men we knew on the bus, and they would surely go along with it, but my sister answered that we shouldn't lie, because if we were found out we'd be punished severely.

Our turn came. "Who is your mahram?" asked the mujahid.

I answered him immediately, "We are travelling alone."

Shocked, he repeated his question, "Where is your mahram?"

"Our mahram is with you," I answered.

He was dumbstruck for a moment, and then said, "We always stand accused. Why do you reproach us so?"

I said nothing in return. He asked for my ID, and of course berated me when he saw I was unveiled in the photo. I told him I had been much younger when the picture was taken. He left us in peace and got off the bus, and I heaved a deep sigh of relief as though I had barely escaped with my life from a fierce and terrible battle. I knew this was just the beginning and that what was coming would be worse.

As we approached Raqqa's outer limits, I was almost choking with dread. I tried repeatedly to hold back my tears but still they spilled onto the black cloth covering my face. Perhaps that was its only useful quality, the way it hid our pain and agony from prying eyes.

I cried even harder when I remembered that my father, who had been abducted by Islamic State, would not be waiting for us as usual at the city bus terminal. I cried because I wouldn't be able to throw my arms around him and seek consolation for what had happened, for what I had suffered in exile and the difficulties I'd faced in Aleppo, and because the joy at my returning home would remain incomplete without him. My heart was boiling over with a strange mix of emotions – joy, yearning, pain and terror.

As we approached the Muqas checkpoint, its infamous reputation struck panic within me. We had heard many reports of the terrible way women were treated and the humiliations they were subjected to at that checkpoint.

A mujahid got on the bus and asked the driver to turn on the interior lights. It was almost nine in the evening and he couldn't inspect us as closely as he wanted to. He completely ignored the men in the front,

and did not bother to ask them any questions or demand to see their IDs. Instead he strode straight toward us women in the back. My heart beat faster, and I tugged at my abaya, trying to calm down.

He looked utterly terrifying, with a long beard and long curly hair falling to his shoulders, wearing shalwar kameez, the Pakistani costume we had never seen before apart from on television. Just as his colleague had done before him, he asked each of the girls in the rows ahead of us about their mahram, while my sister and I argued hotly about whether to tell the truth or to lie. As we had done earlier, we chose to accept our fate and admit to the offence we'd committed, so as not to be charged with two crimes if they found us out.

Then he was in front of us.

"Who is your mahram?"

"We are students and have no mahram," I replied.

A barrage of questions hit us like bullets, leaving us no space to answer or explain our position, our reason for travelling alone.

"How can you travel without a mahram? Where are you staying in Aleppo? How can you study while mujahedin die? What is this non-compliant niqab you're wearing? What sort of an abaya is this to be wearing, you blasphemer?"

Of course I was wearing a long, loose abaya that revealed nothing of my body, and my face was entirely veiled. Even my eyes were barely visible. Disaster struck when he hit us with an impossible choice – either we hand over our university IDs or he would call the "hisbah", the "morality police" to come and flog us.

A vision of my mother, sick with worry at why we were delayed, suddenly flashed into my mind. Images of my mother crying intercut with visions of what I imagine a hisbah flogger looked like – everything became mixed up in my head and I no longer knew what to do or say.

"Let's give him the IDs," whispered my sister, "it's better than being taken by the hisbah."

My words stumbled over one another as I replied, "I won't give it to him, it's mine. I won't."

He screamed at us again until I gave up and gave him my ID. He took hold of it and grabbed the edge, preparing to tear it up.

"Give it back!" I shouted. "Give it back and let the hisbah come take me!"

With calculated coldness, he replied, "That isn't up to you and your whims."

He took our IDs and strode away. My sister ran after him, trying to reason with him

"For the mercy and love of God, sheikh," she begged.

He bellowed at her like a madman. "Who gave you permission to come after me? I didn't ask you to follow me!"

In the midst of all this hysteria, which I was barely in a state to take in, my little brother suddenly appeared in the aisle of the bus. I ran to him and hugged him.

Calmly, he asked me to get off the bus because our mother had come with a family friend to the checkpoint to pick us up. Of course, she had no idea what had happened to us. I quickly stumbled off the bus and saw my mother in front of me.

The exhaustion and terror of the journey made me fling myself into her arms, and I burst into uncontrolled tears. She immediately began crying as well, without even knowing why I was.

"What's wrong?" she asked, "What did they do to you?"

"They took our IDs!" I wailed.

The mujahid was still screaming in our faces. "Why are you crying? There's no reason to cry!"

My mother began begging him to return our IDs. She explained why we were travelling without a mahram and promised him that she would never send us back to Aleppo again.

I couldn't stand seeing my mother beg. She had always been full of dignity, refusing to submit even during the hard days under the regime.

"Mama, don't beg him for anything!" I screamed. "We'll make new IDs!"

But my mother wouldn't give up until he handed the IDs back.

Faced with our tears, our crying, our pleading and our humiliation, which seemed to shame him and shame the Islam he claimed to uphold, the mujahid began trying to justify himself, telling us that we were like sisters to him, that he felt responsible for us and that was why he'd been so hard on us.

He began kissing my sister's small head, though she was terrified of him and trying to get away, but he persisted in raining down kisses on it before he finally allowed us to leave.

We later learned that the mujahid was Tunisian. He had come to our country and had succeeded in humiliating us by putting us in a position that even the previous regime did not dare to do. That foreigner had no idea that once upon a time we'd stood in defiance of the regime, shouting at the top of our lungs, unveiled and shoulder to shoulder with the young men of the revolution.

He had no idea that it was we who had called for liberty, or that he had come from some dark corner to darken our lives, to humiliate us in the name of religion, and to steal our dignity after we'd launched a whole revolution to save it.

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