

The walls of my life

Dreaming can give you a reason to live and reality makes you realize that no matter how hard it is to achieve something, your dreams always deserve you giving them a chance.

Life's realities can throw barriers in the way of your dreams. So, I always felt that you should dream high and stay strong enough to face whatever reality brings.

Photography is not just a hobby for me it is an actual way of life. It's not just how you hold a camera and snap a picture. It's the way that you see life and everything around you. My passion is photography, but I am paying the price for my passion with my life. Without it, a part of me is missing.

Arrest

Wednesday 9 a.m. on the 14 August 2013 was the day that my life changed forever. Police locked down the streets around the camp I was photographing. They arrested thousands – not just Morsi supporters, but also dozens of residents and workers caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

It was like a Hollywood movie. It felt like we were in the middle of a war. Bullets, tear gas, fire and police, soldiers and tanks were everywhere. I saw all these police with guns, many of them took over the Square. After identifying myself as a photojournalist to police, I was arrested along with fellow freelance French photojournalist Louis Jammes and American Journalist Mike Giglio.

The Mokhbbers (a very low-ranking policeman without uniforms) tied our hands behind our backs using a plastic ligature that is used in wars. It is used by the Army; the three of us were standing in line like train carriages and the Mokhbbers surrounded us and beat us shamefully.

I was beaten by two men. They treated us like animals, punching and cursing us. They took all of our equipment from us. They just stole it. They stole my camera, my mobile phone, my watch and all of my personal belongings. When they finished, they took us and the protesters (Via blue Van) to Cairo Stadium.

Our group was then divided up, and Jammes and Giglio were released after just 2 hours. Those of us remaining were kept at the Cairo Stadium for the rest of the day and were transferred to a police station. My hands were still tied behind my back. My wrists were bleeding from the tightness of the plastic ligature that was digging into them. My wrists still carry the scars to this day.

Police Station

At the police station, I continued to be treated like a criminal. The police beat me again but this time the beating was very hard and even more shameful.

The police entered the cell and told me that I should face the wall. They took my shirt and threw water on my body. Then they started to beat me using another belt, closed fists and kicks with their boots on. They beat me over and over again. Five officers beat me at the same time. I dropped to the floor and they did not stop. They used the metal belt buckle to beat me on my face and back. I tried to close my eyes but was hit with the metal belt buckle on them. I lost the ability to see light and was almost blinded. Everything was dark.

All the prisoners were tightly packed into a cell that was only about 3 meters long. The cell was very hot with all forty of us in it. I had no place to sit and it was impossible to breathe. There was no ventilation. My eyes needed air to heal. I slept in a bath and was not given anything to eat or drink during the 3 days I was held. I did not receive any medical treatment for my injuries, only more beating and hurts. The police seemed to enjoy giving the beatings. They were telling each other how to beat and torture us to cause more pain and harm. I was very afraid and expected to die. Each hour they came and continued to beat me with all things. These were easily the worst days of my life. It pains me to remember.

Abu Za'bal Prison

After three long days, police officers packed the group of prisoners I was with into a small dark blue van. This time, we were handcuffed together in pairs and crammed into the back of the van. The van was already full by the time my turn came to get in.

Things worsened once we reached the forecourt of the prison. Driving there, breathing had been easy enough. A breeze blew through the van's four grilled windows, creating ventilation. But once the van stopped and parked at the prison, the airflow stopped and we struggled to breathe. The police locked the door of the van and abandoned us to the sweltering heat of the Egyptian sun without water, food or fresh air. They left us in there, in the full sun, for 7 hours.

Inside the van, in the midday heat, prisoners reached breaking point. Many were delirious and some were giving each other messages for their families in case they died. There were around 15 trucks waiting in the forecourt and each one took time to unload. We couldn't breathe. All of us were waiting to die. I felt like I had been kidnapped. I still live with this feeling today. Only, now it has become my reality.

Thirty seven prisoners died in the van behind ours. I heard their screaming. I heard their screams and saw the look on the faces of those around me in the van I was in. Many of us were lost, powerless to help. We laid down, unable to take breath. I felt like I was dying and as I listened to the prisoners around me praying and gasping for air. After 7 hours of torture, the police opened the iron door to go into the prison, we went into prison bare foot, and they took all our shoes.

When this happened, I felt life again. I stooped to take some fresh air and sat on my knees waiting to go inside. I didn't know then that I would never get to breathe freely again.

4 months later – Inside Tora Prison

Tora prison is like a cemetery. It is a place where dreams come to die. A five-star paradise by Egyptian prison standards, I sleep on a cold tiled floor, I hang my bags of belongings on nails over my thin mattress. There is a tiny “kitchenette” where we prepare our food. We have a single element electric cooker, which we also use for warmth in the winter months. The “kitchenette” is adjacent to a squat-down drop toilet, which is basically a hole in the concrete floor. Both areas are separated by a hanging blanket to try and provide an element of privacy. Our dignity was left at the prison gates.

I share a cell with twelve political prisoners. We live in a small cell just 3 meters x 4 meters, which is not even suitable to be a cage for animals. We have NO access to sun or fresh air for days or weeks at a time.

My feelings of frustration, disappointment and hopelessness often overwhelm me. I try to dream but my reality has become four cursed, ugly walls. My dreams feel wasted, choked by this reality.

I'm writing this letter under stress, sitting on the floor which my handwritten looks very bad and hard to read it.

My detention has been renewed every 45 days since arriving here almost 600 days ago. I have not been charged with a single crime. I have been imprisoned without any investigation into the fabricated charges of which I am accused. I am one of over 300 political prisoners in my case, We were almost 900, the prosecutor has been released more than half of us with no logic reason, even AlJazeera reporter Abdullah Al shamy who was been released after 310 days.

I am a photojournalist, not political, not a criminal. My indefinite detention is psychologically unbearable, even animals would not stay in such five-star paradise, but I have no choice.

The reality is that I am approaching 600 days detention. My dream is freedom, always freedom but the pain I feel is immense. I cannot describe it to you. I sleep for hours and hours and then suffer nights of insomnia. I find myself unable to speak with the other prisoners, even with my own family.

I want to protect them. The hardest thing about being here is the thought of losing anyone from my family. This thought scares me. I want to be with my parents. They need my help but I cannot be there for them. When they visit, we are all lost for words because of the deep sadness that we live with.

I am dying. No one knows what going inside me. My spirit fights to stay alive. I am not only trapped inside these four walls, but I'm trapped inside my mind. I vomit frequently. I find it hard to breathe. I feel pressure on my chest. I carry the weight of failure and it is heavy. I carry huge pain and grief that I am failing to realize the power of my dreams (sadly). For almost two years, this is my life, all because I was following my dream and doing my job as a photojournalist.

Life for me stands still in Tora prison whilst people outside live their lives normally. In the last 600 days I have missed many things including the marriages of my brother and that of a close

friend. Both were single when I was arrested. My friend even has a new baby that I haven't met and my sister is expecting a baby in 3 months.

My family has told me about friends of mine that are traveling around the world, following their dreams and accepting new jobs. Many of my colleagues are receiving prizes for their work and are also exploring new work opportunities. They continue to improve their skills, whilst I sit here and wait. I feel like a part of me is dying without having the same freedom to see the world through my camera lens. I don't find comfort in anything anymore. I am just waiting for one thing...my FREEDOM. MY FREEDOM. My outward silence masks my busy mind, which is filled with daily thoughts and questions such as:

Is humanity is just an illusion? What if we have forgotten the difference between dreams and reality? How do I ensure that I am not in a coma? When reality comes between me and my dreams, should I stop dreaming? I look around and I am left with the reality of four ugly windowless walls and a never ending dream of freedom.

Shawkan
5 March 2015
Tora Prison