

As a young child from a Russian Orthodox family growing up in Tehran, Iran, for me, Christmas meant going to a very long mass and getting terribly bored -- but it was all worth it, because after the mass, my grandma would rush me home and allow me to take a star-shaped cookie from the Christmas tree. My parents were not religious at all and never attended mass with Grandma and me. The Russian Orthodox were a very small minority in Tehran, and most of the people attending mass at our church were old women. Even though Grandma, or *Baboo* as I called her, couldn't carry a tune, she was a member of the church choir. I remember her clearly, standing next to the other singers, who were all at least as old as she was, her gray hair gathered in a tight bun behind her head, her white blouse and black skirt perfectly ironed, and a little red scarf tied around her slim neck. I watched her as she smiled singing the joyful hymns, which had found their way out of her heart and were now floating over the little flickering flames of candles, images of the Virgin and the Child, and the congregation. I saw my grandmother smile almost only at Christmas and Easter. She was a very kind and generous woman who had lived a very difficult life, and, as she had explained to me, had forgotten how to smile. So Christmas became a miracle to me at a very young age because it was one of the two very special days of the year when I could see happiness in my grandmother's eyes.

Many years before I was born, the Russian Revolution of 1917 had driven *Baboo* and her Persian husband, who had lived in St. Petersburg since he had been a child, out of their home. Her husband, my grandfather, was robbed and then murdered shortly after they arrived in Tehran, after which *Baboo* struggled but managed to raise her two children on her own in a very strange country that she couldn't understand.

*Baboo* died when I was seven, and with her death, Christmas changed for me. There were no more Christmas trees and star-shaped cookies. However, my only sibling, my brother, who was 14 years older than I, saved the day a couple of times by giving me a gift. One year, it was a doll with black curly hair and blue eyes, and another time, it was a toy train set. I had never received gifts for Christmas, because *Baboo* believed that toys spoiled children, so my brother's kindness delighted me, but I still missed the Christmas tree and the cookies.

Iran is a Muslim country, and Christmas was never a holiday, so I had to go to school on Christmas Day, but this didn't bother me, as I was used to it. Finally, after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, when I turned 14, I felt a terrible need to resurrect Christmas and have it back in my life. Christians were an accepted minority in Iran, and even after the revolution, going to church and celebrating Christmas wouldn't get us in trouble as long as we abided by the Islamic rules that governed the country, didn't try to convert Muslims to Christianity, and didn't criticize the government. In summer of 1980, I began saving my money to buy a Christmas tree, and when the time came, I told my mother that I needed her to go with me to help me carry it home, and she didn't mind it. Buying a tree in Tehran wasn't at all as easy as here in Canada, as only a handful of vendors sold them across the city, but luckily there was one within walking distance from my home. Once the tree was in its stand, I pulled the old, dust-covered boxes of the ornaments out of our basement and was disappointed to see that they had faded and looked rather ugly, but I went to the store and bought some ribbons and decorated them until they looked almost brand new.

I was arrested on January 15, 1982, for speaking out against the government at my school and was taken to the notorious Evin Prison north of Tehran. I was 16. I was tortured and was condemned to death, but one of my interrogators, Ali, intervened and reduced my sentence to life in prison. Along with 60-70 other girls, most of whom were about my age, I spent months in a cell that was made for 5-6 prisoners. Every night, we listened to gunshots that ended the lives of our friends and other prisoners. Every day, a few of us would be called for interrogation and would come back bloody and swollen. This was life in Evin, and we kept up hope by talking to each other about our lives before Evin, about our mothers and fathers, brother and sisters, and about books, music, birthday parties, shopping, cooking, baking, and everything and anything that had ever made us happy -- and by doing this we created a collective memory that became our beacon of hope and told us that our nightmare would end and that we would go home one day. After I had been in Evin for about 5 months, Ali forced me to marry him. But this didn't mean that I would be released. I spent my days in solitary confinement and my nights with him. It was rape under the name of marriage. Ali was assassinated 15 months after we got married, and I was finally released in March 1984, 2 years, two months, and 12 days after I had been arrested.

As you might imagine, Christmas changed for me in prison. Before he forced me to marry him, Ali also made me convert to Islam. I never meant it, but, nevertheless, I felt like a traitor. I had betrayed myself, my family, my church, but above all, I felt that I had betrayed God. In solitary confinement, one has a lot of time to think, and I talked to God for hours at a time, and I apologized to him over and over, explaining that I didn't have a choice, that if I didn't do what Ali wanted me to do, he would arrest my mother, father,

and boyfriend, and I just couldn't live with that. This was not bravery in any way on my part, but I have simply realized that if they arrested my family, I would not have a home to go back to one day. I expected God to say something to me, but He never said a word, and, many times, I wondered if He had abandoned me. But there were moments in the night, somewhere between sleep and consciousness when I could feel the darkness of the cell wrap itself around me like a grave -- and then I would feel a presence. It wasn't a voice or something I could see or touch, but it was there and it was warm and it was kind and it refused to let go of me.

On Christmas day of 1983, it snowed. I had been moved out of solitary and was again in a cell with many other girls. Early in the morning, through the barred window of our cell, I watched feathery flakes glide back and forth on the wind. Soon, the clotheslines in the courtyard, which was surrounded by the prison building, and all the clothes hanging on them were frosted with white. When our time to use the yard came, most of the girls came back in immediately after collecting their laundry because it was too cold. Our rubber slippers didn't offer much protection against the elements. I volunteered to bring in the clothes of a couple of my friends. It was colder than I had thought, but I liked the touch of snowflakes on my face. There was no one outside. I took off my socks and slippers and stood as motionless as possible. The white curves of winter took me in, covering me, filling the small spaces between my toes. Christmas day. The day Christ was born. A day of joy and celebration, of singing carols, eating big meals, and opening gifts. How could the world go on as if nothing had happened, as if so many lost lives had never existed?

After a while, my feet began to hurt, and then they went numb. Evin had taken me away from home, from who I had been; it had taken me to a realm beyond fear; it had shown me more pain than any human being should ever endure. I had experienced loss before; I had grieved. But here, grief became a never-ending, raging body of darkness that kept its victims in a perpetual state of suffocation. How was one supposed to live after here?

In 1991, my husband, Andre, who had been my boyfriend before I was arrested, our two-and-a-half-year-old son, and I came to Canada, and when the Christmas season approached, I was thrilled to see that Christmas was actually a holiday here! It delighted me to go to the mall and look at the decorations and watch the shoppers. The last Christmas before my arrest, I had knitted scarves for my friends and loved ones, but in Canada, even though we didn't have much money, I could go to the store and buy them something much nicer than scarves.

We have been in Canada for 17 years now, and we have become Canadians, but for the last couple of years, I have been thinking more and more about my Christmases in Iran, and I have decided that I want Christmas to be as simple as it can be. The tree is essential for me, but I don't want new ornaments. I want to sing carols even though I know I can't sing. I want to remember the loneliness I felt in the prison and the presence that kept me alive when all light had been drained from my world. I want to remember my friends who suffered in Evin and those who lost their lives. And I want to remember the baby who was born more than 2000 years ago and told people to love one another.

If it were up to me, from now on, I would ban Christmas gifts at my house, but I know that if I do this, I will have a rebellion on my hands, so I allow only one small gift per person living in my household. I will not get useless knickknacks to give to the mailperson, coworkers, teachers, etc. Instead, I encourage everyone to donate time or money to charity if they can. What I want for Christmas is star-shaped cookies, a Christmas tree, and my family to be around me, because I know how unpredictable life is and that this might very well be our last Christmas together.