

# One



**T**here is an ancient Persian proverb that says, “The sky is the same colour wherever you go.” But the Canadian sky was different from the one I remembered from Iran; it was a deeper shade of blue and seemed endless, as if challenging the horizon.

We arrived at Pearson Airport in Toronto on August 28, 1991, a beautiful, sunny day. My brother was waiting for us. My husband, our two-and-a-half-year-old son, and I were to stay at his house until we could find an apartment. Although I had not seen my brother in twelve years—I was fourteen when he left for Canada—I immediately spotted him. His hair had greyed and thinned a little, but he was six foot seven and his head bobbed over the enthusiastic chaos of the waiting crowd.

As we drove away from Pearson, I looked out the window, and the vastness of the landscape astonished me. The past was gone, and it was in everyone’s best interest that I put it behind me. We had to build a new life in this strange country that had offered us refuge when we had nowhere to go. I had to concentrate all my energy on survival. I had to do this for my husband and my son.

And we did build a new life. My husband found a good job, we had another son, and I learned how to drive. In July 2000, nine years after our arrival in Canada, we finally bought a four-bedroom house in the

suburbs of Toronto and became proud, middle-class Canadians, tending our backyard, driving the boys to swimming, soccer, and piano lessons, and having friends over for barbecues.

This was when I lost the ability to sleep.

It began with snapshots of memories that flashed in my mind as soon as I went to bed. I tried to push them away, but they rushed at me, invading my daytime hours as well as the night. The past was gaining on me, and I couldn't keep it at bay; I had to face it or it would completely destroy my sanity. If I couldn't forget, perhaps the solution was to remember. I began writing about my days in Evin—Tehran's notorious political prison—about the torture, pain, death, and all the suffering I had never been able to talk about. My memories became words and broke free from their induced hibernation. I believed that once I put them on paper, I would feel better—but I didn't. I needed more. I couldn't keep my manuscript buried in a bedroom drawer. I was a witness and had to tell my story.

My first reader was my husband. He, too, didn't know the details of my time in prison. Once I gave him my manuscript, he put it under his side of our bed, where it remained untouched for three days. I was anguished. When would he read it? Would he understand? Would he forgive me for keeping such secrets?

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?" he asked when he finally read it.

We had been married for seventeen years.

"I tried, but I couldn't ... will you forgive me?" I said.

"There's nothing to forgive. Will *you* forgive *me*?"

"For what?"

"For not asking."

IF I HAD DOUBTS about speaking out, they vanished in the summer of 2005, when I met an Iranian couple at a dinner party. We enjoyed each other's company and talked about everyday things: our jobs, the real estate market, and our children's education. When the evening

air became too cool to sit outdoors, we moved inside for dessert. As the hostess served coffee, she asked me how my book was coming along, and the Iranian woman, Parisa, wanted to know what it was about.

“When I was sixteen, I was arrested and spent two years as a political prisoner in Evin. I’m writing about that,” I said.

All colour left her face.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

She paused a little and said she herself had spent a few months in Evin.

Everyone in the room fell silent, staring at us.

Parisa and I discovered we had been prisoners at the same time in different areas of the same building. I mentioned the names of a few of my cellmates, but they weren’t familiar to her, and she told me about her prison friends, but I didn’t know them. However, we shared memories of certain events which were well known to most Evin inmates. She said this was the first time she had talked to anyone about her prison experiences.

“People just don’t talk about it,” she said.

This was the very silence that had held me captive for more than twenty years.

When I was released from Evin, my family pretended that everything was all right. No one mentioned the prison. No one asked, “What happened to you?” I ached to tell them about my life in Evin, but I didn’t know where to start. I waited for them to ask me something, anything that would give me a place to begin, but life went on as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. I guessed that my family wanted me to be the innocent girl I had been before prison. They were terrified of the pain and horror of my past, so they ignored it.

I encouraged Parisa to phone me, and we spoke a few times. Her voice always trembled as we shared our memories of our cellmates, recalling friendships that had helped us survive.

A few weeks later, she told me she didn't want to talk to me anymore; she didn't want to remember.

"I can't do it. It's too hard. It's too painful," she said, her voice choked by tears.

I understood and didn't argue. She had made her choice—and I had made mine.