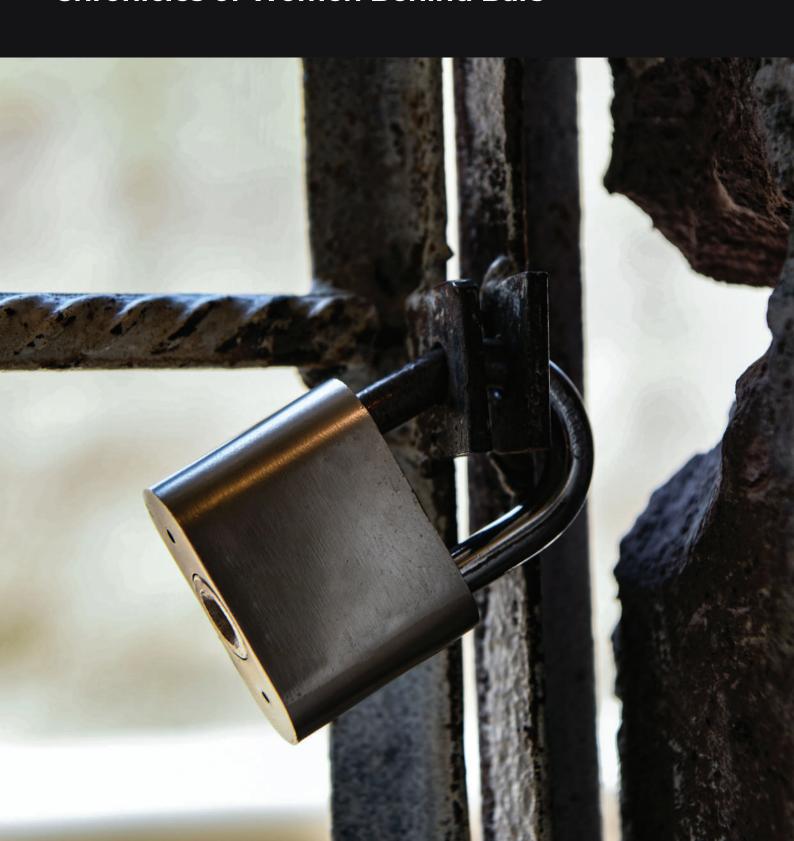
So, Mom... how does it feel in Paradise?

Chronicles of Women Behind Bars









This collection was produced under the grant project "Voices of Resistance: Chronicles of Women Behind Bars», implemented by the "Center for Legal Initiatives" non–governmental organization with financial support from the Transition Promotion Program of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.

The content of this collection is solely the responsibility of the "Center for Legal Initiatives" non–governmental organization and does not necessarily represent the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.

Edited by Nare Hovhannisyan

Translated by Anna Mekhakyan

The collection features photos taken at the "Abovyan" Penitentiary Institution, portraying the lives and daily routines of incarcerated women.

Yerevan, 2025



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INTRODUCTION

In 2025, the "Center for Legal Initiatives" non-governmental organization implemented the grant project "Voices of Resistance: Chronicles of Women Behind Bars" with the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic under its "Transition Promotion" program.

The project aimed to transform public perceptions of incarcerated women, ensure their voices are heard by both society and the criminal justice system, and foster an environment of empathy, sensitivity, and mutual understanding.

Within the framework of the project, the organization worked with 16 women, including 3 convicted prisoners and 13 remand detainees. Of the latter, 3 were released during the project period following changes to their preventive measures. In total, 13 women shared their personal narratives.

Before collecting these narratives, the organization conducted a series of individual and group sessions. These sessions were designed to promote self-development, strengthen emotional awareness and well-being, encourage personal growth, enhance positive self-perception, raise awareness, and improve written and oral communication skills. Alongside the theoretical knowledge, the sessions incorporated group discussions, role plays, and practical exercises.

Among women in detention, feelings of self-blame and shame are particularly prevalent, compounded by societal stigma and labeling. These factors often lead to reluctance in speaking about their past experiences. In addition, the regimented prison routine, hierarchical relationships, dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system, and other factors can gradually harden emotions, pushing them into the background. The daily struggle to survive behind bars frequently overshadows the value of personal experiences, while the closed environment exacerbates interpersonal tensions.

The sessions not only helped participants articulate their stories clearly and meaningfully but also had a therapeutic effect, alleviating the traumatic impact of revisiting the experience of incarceration. They contributed to improving the women's psychological well-being, giving them the confidence to move beyond shame and speak openly about their personal journeys. Through this process, many reassessed their past, arriving at a deeper sense of remorse, regret, and awareness of the loss of freedom. By sharing the lessons they had learned and the insights they had gained, the women also felt a renewed sense of self-worth, believing that their stories could help prevent others from making the same mistakes and ending up in prison.

These narratives are deeply personal, revealing what the women left behind in freedom, what they have lost or gained, the lessons they have learned, the changes they have undergone, how they have adapted to prison conditions, and the messages they wish to convey to society. Beyond providing a platform for self-expression, these stories have brought long-overlooked issues to light, highlighting the importance of human stories and lived experiences within the criminal justice system.

THE STRENGTH OF THE COLLECTION LIES IN ITS DIVERSITY OF VOICES, FORMS, AND STYLES

Dear readers,

The book you are holding in your hands is a unique collection of stories. Born from an extraordinary project supported with the Czech TRANSITION grant, it gave women living behind prison walls in Armenia a rare space to create, reflect, and express.

However, it is also much more than just a collection of literary works – as it represents a quiet testament to courage, imagination, and the enduring human need to be heard.

This collection rests on a simple yet powerful belief: that every woman, no matter her present circumstances, carries within her a voice worth listening to. That the act of creating – of writing – can heal, empower, and build bridges between lives lived in silence and the world beyond.

For many of the authors, this may be the first time they have shared something so deeply personal – their hopes, their fears, their longing. For others, storytelling became a therapy, a brief liberation, a way to rise above the weight of the everyday.

This book is, above all, an invitation – to read slowly, to listen deeply, and to approach each page with an open heart and mind.

Within its diversity of voices, forms, and styles lies its quiet strength. It reminds us that dignity, tenderness, and the spark of creativity can take root even in the most confined and unexpected places.

I am proud that the Czech Republic has supported this initiative.

May this book open space for deeper understanding and initiate the kind of dialogue that brings light to hidden stories – and dignity to the women who tell them.

> Petr Pirunčík Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Czech Republic to the Republic of Armenia

FROM SELF-DISCOVERY TO EMPOWERMENT AND UNVEILING CREATIVE POTENTIAL

Through its cooperation with the "Center for Legal Initiatives" non-governmental organization, and within the framework of the "Voices of Resistance: Chronicles of Women Behind Bars" project implemented at the "Abovyan" Penitentiary Institution, this collection has been established as a unique platform where incarcerated women have had the opportunity to share their thoughts, memories, hopes, and values. It has provided them with a space for creativity and storytelling - an avenue that may serve as a powerful means of self-discovery, inner transformation, and empowerment.

Such initiatives not only strengthen opportunities for self–expression among incarcerated individuals but also contribute to fostering mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect for human dignity across society.

The Penitentiary Service of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Armenia extends its profound appreciation to all partners who supported the implementation of this project and contributed to the realization of incarcerated women's creative potential.

Acknowledging the importance of such initiatives, the Penitentiary Service reaffirms its commitment to continued cooperation in the implementation of diverse programs and activities aimed at fostering the educational, cultural, and creative capacities of individuals held in Armenia's penitentiary institutions.

Penitentiary Service of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Armenia

A CALL TO REEVALUATE OUR PERCEPTIONS OF PERSONS DEPRIVED OF LIBERTY

When speaking about persons deprived of liberty, we must first and foremost bear in mind that they are human beings - capable of feeling, experiencing, and remembering. Nevertheless, their voices often remain unheard, and their lived experiences are left behind closed doors.

This collection provides an opportunity to hear their stories – of isolation, of loss, and of resilience in the face of life's hardships.

The deprivation of liberty must under no circumstances restrict a person's inherent right to live with dignity. In this context, ensuring access to employment opportunities and the preservation of social ties for persons deprived of liberty are of particular importance.

It is essential that they receive the necessary support – psychological, social, legal, and otherwise - that will enable their reintegration into society as full and equal members. At the same time, our society must revise its perceptions regarding the protection of the rights of persons deprived of liberty, as well as of deprivation of liberty itself, while the state must consistently improve the mechanisms and safeguards in this field.

Dear reader, may this work serve as an invitation to rethink and re-evaluate our attitudes toward persons deprived of liberty.

> **Anahit Manasyan** Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia

TOWARD EMPATHY AND ACTION

This collection of stories written by women from Armenia's "Abovyan" Penitentiary Institution is more than a glimpse behind prison walls – it is an unfiltered window into lives too often hidden behind bars, marked by pain, resilience, and the enduring hope for redemption. These voices, often silenced by stigma and isolation, speak with raw honesty about the emotional toll of imprisonment – the shame that shadows their past, the regret that haunts their present, and the longing for loved ones that shapes their every day. By amplifying these voices, we confront the realities of incarceration and challenge ourselves to move beyond judgment toward empathy and action.

Behind every account lies a tapestry of emotions – shame at past mistakes, regret for choices that altered life's course, and a profound longing for loved ones left on the outside. These women remind us that prison walls cannot contain the human heart. Their words urge us to acknowledge the pain of separation, to honor the bonds of family, and to recognize the resilience that blooms even in the harshest circumstances

Their narratives remind us that justice is not only about punishment – it must also be about understanding, healing, and transformation. International studies have long shown that women's pathways to incarceration are frequently paved with trauma – experiences of violence, abuse, and coercion that precede their contact with the justice system, illustrating how trauma and survival intersect with the criminal justice system. These stories echo that truth, urging us to look deeper and respond with compassion. In listening to these testimonies, we gain insight into the underlying causes of incarceration and the urgent need for a response rooted in healing rather than only punishment.

Many of these women are mothers, separated from their children and burdened by the ache of absence, yearning for the chance to rebuild relationships. Others are young women who have not yet known the joy of motherhood, yet all share a common longing for human connection, personal dignity, and the hope of a life beyond the confines of imprisonment.

These reflections underscore the urgent need for rehabilitation programs that offer more than confinement – initiatives that engage them in educational courses, vocational training, and meaningful activities that foster personal growth and social reintegration. Such holistic rehabilitation programs and efforts not only support the women themselves but also serve as a powerful deterrent against future re-offending. By investing in skills and support networks, we can help transform prisons from places of despair into environments where hope and purpose take root.

As you turn these pages, may you be moved to advocate for policies and practices that prioritize rehabilitation, dignity, and restorative justice. Let these stories guide our collective efforts to forge a system that sees beyond the crime and honors the potential for renewal in every woman.

This collection is a call to action for policymakers, practitioners, and the public. It invites us to listen, to learn, and to reimagine a justice system that sees humanity in every individual. May these stories inspire empathy, inform reform, and illuminate the path toward a more just and inclusive society.

> Tsira Chanturia Regional Director Penal Reform International South Caucasus Office

Don't Fall Victim to the Evil of Our Time



I am a 31-year-old woman whose life has been marked by countless trials. Did I unknowingly walk toward the abyss, or did fate simply play a cruel trick on me? I don't know...

I had a bright and carefree childhood, never questioning where I came from or where I was headed. I was the youngest in my family, loved and happy. But that colorful life ended far too soon. I lost the light of my life – my mother. It felt as though my own life stopped with her last breath. And although I was surrounded by caring people, nothing could bring me joy anymore.

Years later, I found new meaning in my life. I met the man I loved, who breathed life back into me. We got married and had three beautiful children. With every child born, it felt like we were beginning a new chapter together. We lived in our own little world, convinced nothing could ever come between us. But once again, fate played a cruel trick on me...

One day, my husband offered me drugs – something I had never seen or even heard of before. That single moment shattered my life. I lost everything. I lost myself. He forced me to use them. The first time, it felt like I had entered another world – a world without pain, without sorrow. The second time, I felt the same illusion. But after using it a few more times, I realized the truth – I had become addicted – an addiction I couldn't escape.

I was ashamed and terrified to tell anyone. Life had turned into a living hell, and I felt it every single day. To me, life itself had come to an end. I felt nothing but pain. I begged my husband's parents to help me. I could feel myself slipping. I asked them to take me away, to get me out of that life. But they didn't take me seriously. And so, I was left alone in my suffering.

Eventually, through my husband's carelessness – or perhaps cruelty – I ended up in prison.

I would have given my life for my husband, but instead of saving me, he sent me to another hell. I loved him blindly, selflessly. He was my entire world. People warned me he would destroy me, but I didn't believe them. My love for him was obsessive. That poisonous love felt like a curse, an addiction of its own - one that I am only now beginning to break free from. It hurts to realize I meant nothing to him. He destroyed my entire life.

Words cannot describe what I have been through or what I feel here in prison. Being separated from my children is the greatest pain I have ever endured – a pain no one should ever have to bear.

I have been here for nearly a year. The sentence for the charge I face starts at eight years. When I imagine the years ahead, I feel like I am going mad. So many times I have wanted to end my life... so many times.

When I first arrived, I was terrified. Everything here was strange – the prison itself, the words people used – "convoy,1" "volchok.2" I was scared of people's stares. I could not look anyone in the eye. My world was different. I didn't belong among these people.

In here, you forget there's life outside. You forget even what it feels like to walk into a store. No one needs to beat or humiliate you – just surviving these conditions feels like walking through hell-Even the dull colors of the walls make you feel like you are in a psychiatric ward. It eats away at your mind.

I avoid looking at the bars. I don't go out for walks. Above the yard is a net. The bars, the mesh – they get inside your head. You can't see the open sky. You look up and feel like you are losing your mind.

When I go to court hearings, I ask, "Please, just let me stop for one second... and look at the sky."

¹Convoy (Russian: конвой) – Refers to a group of security personnel tasked with the secure transportation of inmates. These personnel are organized to escort inmates to court hearings, medical appointments, and other designated locations, ensuring safety and order through coordinated movement.

²Volchok (Russian: волчок) – a small peephole in the prison cell door that allows staff to observe, communicate with, or deliver food to inmates without opening the door.

I have never liked waiting. I have been impatient since childhood. But here, you have no choice but to wait. Wait endlessly. There is no ray of light to grab and follow forward. The morning comes, and you survive that day. Then you drag yourself through the next. And the next. And the next... And you don't know how long you can go on. Detention is endless waiting.

Maybe some people have gotten used to this – adapted somehow. But I can't. I try to disconnect, to forget where I am. I keep myself busy. I make bead jewelry, I draw, I read. But how long can you keep doing the same things every day? Our years... our lives... are just slipping away.

I have made up my mind to treat prison like a rehabilitation center – something I need right now. That's what I tell myself. But maybe it's still possible to come out of here having achieved something. Maybe this isn't the end of the abyss. Or are we just stuck here, going in circles?

After this, out there, you can't talk to anyone. No one will understand the pain you've been through. Why don't people talk about their experiences after war? Because they can't describe that kind of pain. No one can imagine what it feels like to look at a door and know it will never open for you. That helplessness – it destroys you.

So much is lost on the way to prison. I gave so much of myself to people, and most of them just walked out of my life. Where are they now? They're gone.

All I have now are my children, my sister, and my aunt. No one else whose heart aches for me. No one who might suddenly show up for a visit because they missed me too much, because their heart couldn't bear my absence. Along this path to prison, you learn a lot. You see who is really there for you. The people you would have given your life for – they're no longer in your life.

After my mother's death, my aunt raised me and my sister. I can't forgive my father. It's been two years since I've spoken to him. After my mother passed away, all he did was drink and abandon us. I don't count him as a father. Why wasn't he there for me? Why wasn't he by my side when someone first raised a hand against me? Maybe I wouldn't be here now if he had been. I feel like an orphan.

I've suffered so much because of drugs. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. At first, you think you're in control, that you're the one holding the reins. But from the very first use, it owns you. It enslaves you. You stop thinking clearly. You hide from people. You shut yourself off. You feel fears. You start hallucinating. You live in an imaginary world.

Before I ended up in prison, I received treatment. It helped cleanse my body, but even now I still suffer. Just hearing the word "drugs" terrifies me. Even news reports about it affect me. I still see it in my dreams. When I lie down, I see myself walking, reaching for it... That memory is locked in my mind.

If they opened the door and told me I could go free, I'm not sure I'd be ready. Maybe I'm not strong enough yet to live in freedom. Maybe I still can't be among people. Maybe I still have a road to walk. Maybe I'm afraid that in freedom, I won't find myself. Maybe if I look someone in the eye, they'll see my past.

My life has been so shattered, I don't even know where to start picking up the pieces. My life was broken, destroyed. I was turned into nothing. I can't accept that reality. I can't believe this really happened to me. I want to erase that chapter from my memory. That's not me. That couldn't have happened to me. It's unbelievable.

But slowly, I'm finding myself again. And now, I want just one thing – to be with my children, to reclaim what I've lost.

I know the pain of losing a parent. My mother gave me that pain without wanting to. But I, while still alive, let my children feel the pain of losing a parent. And now, I want only this – to reach

³By "aunt," she is referring to her mother's sister.

them, to hold them tight, and never let go again.

I dedicate my story to those who may be walking the same path of confusion. I was someone who once had everything – and now has nothing.

My plea to everyone – Don't fall victim to the evil of our time.

A Detained Woman

Freedom is Priceless



On a gloomy, rainy spring day, life came to a halt.

March 2, 2019 – police officers, chaotic commotion, rumors, whispers, a holding facility for arrestees, then court, two months of pre-trial detention, and finally a verdict: 13 years and 9 months of imprisonment.

And my life turned dark. My last hope shattered... The harsh reality within these four walls began.

These conditions make me feel bitter. The closed door weighs on me. I sit with my back to it because if I look at it, I will go mad. I avoid looking so I don't see the locked door. But the cruel part is not that the door is closed – it is knowing that your family might be in trouble, knowing that if you could just cross this wall – this forbidden boundary – you could help them... but you can't.

I grew resentful toward my fate for bringing me here. When I first arrived, I didn't fully grasp what it meant. I told myself, "It's just years; they will pass." But they don't. Days roll by and turn into years. I can't even explain what these six years and four months have become for me.

Don't think I want to fill these pages only with pain. There have been good moments in my life, too. I have four children. My eldest son is 12, my second son is 10, my daughter is 8, and my youngest son is 4. It was within these four walls that I gave birth to my fourth little angel4, who, without understanding it, shared "imprisonment" with me-

I have faced many difficulties. Raising a child in a small cell was unimaginably hard. There were no proper facilities. They provided very little medication, saying medical institutions didn't allocate enough. Outdoor walks were allowed only at specific times, but my child was growing up – longing for the outdoors, wanting to play and run. But I couldn't give that to him.

For a parent, prison is pure misery. I can't describe how much I miss them. My soul is in turmoil. It's hard for my children, too. They are ashamed to say their mother is in prison. They call their grandmother "Mom." My mother once told me that my middle son woke up at night and said, "Ugh, hasn't Mom come home yet?" He waits for me every minute. My youngest asks, "Mom, haven't you come home yet?" I answer, "How can I get there?" I can't lie to them, can't keep them waiting.

It's unbearably cruel when you have a family – when you know someone is waiting for you outside. I can't handle it.

I wish I could be next to my husband. He is also imprisoned. I can't speak to him directly on the phone.⁵ I write letters. He calls and tells my family his replies, and when I call home, they tell me what he said. He keeps my letters. During long visits, he shows them to me and I get to hold them again. We have long visits once every three months, for three days, but the cruelest part begins right after the third day... separation again, more days crossed off the calendar, more words left hanging in the air.

Living away from my family is unbearably hard. I miss my husband, my children, and my mother... This longing suffocates me from inside; it kills my soul.

I have lost everything - my loved ones, my time, my smile, my sleep. After losing them, I lost the colors of my life. I wish I could turn back time and change everything that happened and unfolded around me. I wish I could get back what I lost.

I was always cheerful, always smiling. Life was vibrant for me. Now, whether I hear news of death, birth, or a wedding, I greet it with the same expression. For me, 2025 does not exist. It's still March 2, 2019 – the day everything stopped. Nothing has changed inside me. Time has stood still. I am still 23 years old, no matter that I have been in prison for six years.

I once knew foreign languages, but here I have forgotten them. I have lost the sense of time and life.

⁴In Armenia, it is allowed for an incarcerated parent to keep their child with them until the child reaches the age of 3.

⁵According to the Internal Regulations of Penitentiary Institutions in Armenia, direct phone and video communication between detainees and convicted individuals is prohibited. This measure is intended to ensure security within the facility.

If the goal is to change a person, you shouldn't do it through pain. Here, people don't change for the better – they harden. There are no conditions to learn, to grow. We regress. That's the real pain.

I have changed here. I have learnt to face all difficulties, to speak my mind directly. But I have never grown bitter toward people themselves. Not for a single moment have I felt hatred toward anyone. On the contrary, I always try to see the good, even in the worst.

But life here is dark. We see the world in shades of gray. Even our clothes have been turned black: no other colors are allowed. We wear black uniforms. Everything becomes monotonous. When you go to the hospital, everyone else is in their own clothes, but you are escorted by prison guards, wearing your "spetsofka". You feel constrained. Half—joking, half—serious, during childbirth, when people asked who they were, I said, "They are my guards." I turned it into a joke. But still, people whisper, pointing fingers, "She is a convict."

Once again, you are set apart from society, blackened in their eyes. But if you came inside the prison, you would see that every person here is someone's joy, someone's light – whether a young boy or a teenage girl.

Dear reader, the cruelest part is not that the door here is locked 24 hours a day, but that your hands and feet are tied, that you are deprived of so many things, that beyond these prison walls, life is bursting with color, while we – blackened in the society's eyes – reach our families only in our thoughts and return to this reality again.

Throughout my life, I have encountered many people and faced various hardships, but I have come to realize one truth: I should never have trusted others so easily. I should never have given myself so selflessly to anyone. There will always be someone ready to stab you in the back.

I pushed away my loved ones, hurt them, without realizing that the pain I caused left scars on their souls.

Now, every line I write carries an apology, regret, and a message to all those who have stumbled in life but for whom loyalty has always been the most important thing in friendship.

My dear ones, be loyal. Don't be discouraged if it's not appreciated. That's not about you – it's about having chosen the wrong people. Just let them go. Let them be free. Value your freedom.

And always remember: prison destroys destinies, separates families, and drives people apart. Live in a way that you never find yourself in this cruel reality, where people lose everything they have in life.

Value yourself. Cherish every moment. Don't despair. Keep moving forward. And remember, every bad moment is the beginning of something good – and freedom is priceless.

Nare Boyajyan
A Convicted Woman

⁶Spetsofka (Russian: спецовка) – refers to the standard uniform clothing issued to convicted persons in penitentiary institutions.





I Want My Family Back



I am happy. I remember and smile when I think about the things I dreamed of as a child to feel happy, never imagining that one day I would find happiness in a small two-room apartment, with my little dog and the man I love. I feel protected. I am loved. And I love him in return.

And then – bang! What was that? I woke up. Did my dream end halfway? What happened? The sound of iron bars? The girl next to me says, "Wake up, it's time for the shift." I don't understand. I can't grasp what's happening.

Am I... in a prison? Was that happiness I found after 28 years of searching only a dream? Will I now only see that joy in my sleep?

I am still in shock. Sitting on my bed, I look around in confusion. The girl next to me says, "We are in quarantine. They will transfer us soon. 8" My God... I don't understand what's happening. I look at the bare walls and realize they aren't bare at all – they're covered with scratched–in calendars, days crossed off with a pen. So many women have been here. So many stories. So much pain etched into these walls. How suffocating it feels.

I walk toward the window. Women are talking, greeting each other. They have heard there are newcomers. They ask if we need anything. It's strange how they welcome the newly arrived – they call out, ask questions...

At that moment, I wished there was someone I could talk to – yet I hesitated when I heard how they gossiped about others' private lives.

Ah, it drives me mad. I want to scream. I want my family. How did I lose them? Every single second, in my mind and in my thoughts, it's my family: my husband and my dog. I had the kind of family everyone dreams of – but I lost it because of my mistake.

I ended up in prison because of drugs. I have been here for 1 year and 2 months. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want people reading this to judge me. I want them to understand my state of mind – to feel what a woman feels when, for the first time, she finds herself inside these four walls.

It felt as if I had fallen into a deep pit, with no ladder and no rope to climb out. They say a human being is the only living creature that can adapt to anything in life. Is that really true?

I was transferred to prison from a holding facility for arrestees. I spent three days there without a shower, without brushing my hair. I remember my clothes still hadn't been brought to me. It was my first day in prison. I was in a quarantine cell with nothing but cold water. Nothing else. I wrapped myself in a sheet, took off my clothes, washed them, and hung them to dry. I rinsed myself with cold water. From the neighboring cell, I borrowed a kettle, heated some water, and washed my hair.

Now, we are taken to shower twice a week. But I heat water in the cell and rinse off several times a day. Cleanliness is important to me. If everything is not perfectly clean, I cannot sit down and peacefully enjoy a cup of coffee. But still, living in a small cell with three other people is very hard...

And the yard... such a tiny space, closed off by iron doors... Honestly, the cell feels more comfortable to walk around in.

I eat the food provided, although it's mostly the same dishes. I take it, modify it, and eat it. Some things are simply inedible – no salt, no butter. I suppose they count the calories so we won't gain weight. But healthy food can also be tasty.

And yet, I see things here... People hide their food to eat in secret, keep it under their beds... They measure a person's worth by the care package they receive – and "respect" them for it.

In a prison setting, a shift refers to a designated work period during which staff members – such as correctional officers – are responsible for supervising inmates, maintaining security, and managing the daily operations of the facility.

⁸Upon admission to a penitentiary facility, incarcerated individuals are placed in quarantine cells prior to assignment to their designated cells or dormitories, to facilitate adjustment to the institution's conditions and for other necessary purposes. The quarantine cells at "Abovyan" Penitentiary Institution were renovated in 2025.

Here, you lose faith in everything. You start trusting no one, believing no one, doubting everything. I can't even explain why – maybe it's just the state of mind. You have to live it to understand it. I can't describe it.

When I had just arrived, one of my friends was supposed to visit me, but it didn't work out. I knew that if they didn't come, it meant they truly couldn't. But others told me, "They are lying. They're not coming. You're new – you don't understand yet. When people end up here, others forget about them and wash their hands of them."

I told myself – don't poison your soul, don't cloud it. You have your own mind, your own judgment. If I had listened to them and fallen under their influence back then, today I would have no one by my side.

You have to understand that here, you are your own friend. You must not open up completely. You must not give yourself away. The most dangerous person is the one who has nothing left to lose. And here, most people have nothing to lose – what they could have lost, they already have.

Today, I still have my husband and my mother by my side. Knowing they are waiting for me outside fills me with optimism and the strength to endure. My relationship with my husband has become even stronger. He has cried for me... My father doesn't know I am here. My mother hides it from him. He has heart problems. They've told him I'm out of the country.

I will never forget the first time my mother came to visit me. She brought me a care package. But just the thought that my mother had to come to a prison because of her daughter – because of me – made me unable to touch anything she brought. From waiting to see me, my mother felt unwell, and the staff gave her water. And I... I have a brother, and because of him, my mother had never had to come to places like this. But because of me, she did. When I imagined someone telling her to lift her clothes for searches... I felt ashamed, like the worst person alive. I had missed her so much, I wanted so badly to see her, but I couldn't forgive myself for bringing my parent to such a place.

I am afraid for my parents. They are not in good health. I worry that my being here will make their condition worse. I will never forgive myself if... When I call and my mother doesn't answer, I can't explain what happens to me. I wait for the worst kind of news...

I am not someone who cries easily. My friends used to call me "the iron girl." But there are moments here when my heart overflows. I realize I will spend many years in prison. I don't know what mark those years will leave on my life.

I have heard that convicted women do community service work. For women awaiting trial, there is no work at all. I spend twenty-four hours in the cell. I watch TV, eat, lie down, sleep... My mind dulls from watching TV all day. There is a library, but the selection of books is so limited. I wonder – is imprisonment only the deprivation of freedom? And what is the actual punishment? Sleeping all day?

When you leave this place, you should close this chapter of your life – but never forget the cruel days you have spent here, so you never come back. If you forget your tears and the suffering you endured here, you will also forget the harsh reality of prison life.

The moment I walk out of these doors, I know exactly what my next steps will be: find a job, have a home. I want to hold my husband and my little dog again... I want to feel, once more, the happiness of my small but warm family.

H.M.

A Detained Woman





So, Mom... How Does It Feel in Paradise?



Dear reader, I am writing from "Abovyan" Penitentiary Institution. I am Armenian, but I used to live abroad with my children. I came to Armenia to complete a property transaction, and instead, I was detained on fraud charges. It's been 11 months now...

Although I lived abroad, I always thought of Armenia as an ideal place. I often told my children about the kindness of its people and the beauty of its traditions. I would say, "It's a paradise."

Now my children ask me, "So, Mom... how does it feel in Paradise?"

I am ashamed – ashamed of being in prison, ashamed that I can't interact with others as an equal-I know people don't look at me the same way they would if I were walking freely down the street. There's a wall between us. I can't explain to everyone why I'm here. They just see me as a criminal. When a woman ends up in prison, people assume she must have done something terrible. Courts are usually more lenient with women – they look at whether she has children, whether she's married. So if a woman still lands here, people think she must be dangerous. That thought fills me with shame.

My children are struggling deeply with my absence, especially my eldest son. My youngest is graduating this year. He says, "You're not here, so I'm not going to the graduation ceremony." He didn't even take his chemistry exam. Since I've been here, he hasn't studied at all. I was a devoted mother. My daughter said, "You weren't with us, so this year we didn't even go on the class trip."

It's very hard for them to come to Armenia. They're still in school – my daughter is in college, my youngest is graduating high school, and my eldest son is taking care of them. Their grandmother is a pensioner. They say they want to visit, but I tell them no. I don't want them to see me here. I feel awful when I'm searched or told to take off my clothes. How can I let my daughter witness that? I don't want her to see it or even imagine it. I don't want them to see me here or go through that themselves. It's humiliating when they say, "Take off your shoes. Squat."

Just recently, my sister visited. They made both of us undress – me, probably to make sure I wasn't taking anything out, and her, to make sure she wasn't bringing anything in. It's horribly unpleasant, especially when they say, "Take off your underwear. Squat."

When I first arrived, I tried to convince myself it was just a challenge. I told myself, "Pretend you're on a quest, and think about how you'll get out." But when they locked the door, I realized – there's no way out. Not that easily.

Sure, sometimes I joke, "I have better bodyguards than the president. They open and close doors for me, bring me food." But that's just me trying to comfort myself.

There's no real interaction here. No real conversations. Either there are fights or gossip. Sometimes people talk through the window, but if the guards hear, they yell, "Shut up."

You share a cell with the same person for months. Eventually, there's nothing left to talk about. All day long, I read, do crosswords, or leave the TV on – not really watching, just letting it play so there's at least a voice in the room.

We get one hour of outdoor walking. I don't even go out. I'm just counting down the days until I can get out of here.

My family sends me food. I get dry goods from home. Sometimes I eat the watery food they serve here. It would be a lie to say there's nothing to eat – you just add something: salt, herbs...

We are allowed to shower twice a week. If you want, you can manage your hygiene in the cell. We have a bucket and a kettle. I rinse off every morning and evening. But living with someone whose habits are completely different is horrible. Some don't wash dishes, they throw dirty clothes under the bed... The cell starts to stink. Some girls understand when you talk to them, others don't.

What's worse is you can't just get up and go outside whenever you want. You can't even undress freely. The "volchok" might open at any moment, and the guard could be watching. Most of the staff are men. Day or night, they can look through the "volchok" whenever they want. It would still be unpleasant if it were women, but not as disturbing.

Everyone is just doing their job. I treat the staff respectfully, use formal speech. I never insult anyone. I believe people treat you the way you treat them. But still, I think men should work in construction, not patrol a women's prison, opening and closing doors... And the way they speak to inmates sometimes it takes ten knocks just to get the laundry picked up. You ask, "Please, open the door so I can send my laundry," and someone yells from the end of the hall, "What? What do you want now?"

Then again, maybe some women here do get treated the way they act. Or maybe those men feel insecure, trying to assert themselves at women's expense?

I've never been confrontational. I don't lose my temper easily. It takes a lot to push me over the edge. I'm patient. And here, that's helped me a lot. But something inside me has changed.

I no longer believe in people. Or friendship. Right now, the only ones I have are my children and close family. No one else. Even though my relationship with my sister wasn't great before I ended up here, she's the only one who visits me now. I don't believe in human bonds anymore. God forbid you stumble and fall – no one will offer you a hand.

I've become indifferent. My cellmate might complain that the wardrobe is bad or uncomfortable. I, honestly, don't care if it's blue, brown, or broken. I've become numb to others' pain. Sometimes I hear someone crying through the window or hear that someone's in pain... but I feel nothing. I used to rush to help. Now I don't even feel the urge.

I'm not afraid that these changes will stay with me that I'll remain like this. Maybe if I'd been like this from the start, I wouldn't have ended up here. Then again, my daughter is very kind – maybe when I'm out, she'll help me find myself again.

When I'm released, I'll go straight to my children and return to a normal life. I'll try to forget this place, erase this time from my memory – a time when I wasn't even living, just surviving.

And prison will remain a nightmare I once had, just one that lasted too long.

A Detained Woman





What Have I Done with My Life? - I Don't Understand



In the summer of 2022, my mom sent me alone to Armenia to stay with my sister. My sister is married and lives here. After I finished my exams, I was sent on vacation. It turned out that I no longer wanted to return to Russia. I wanted to transfer my studies and continue my education in Armenia.

But my dad came to Armenia and took me back with him. They said I had only two years left until graduation, so I should finish, get my diploma, and then do whatever I wanted. But first, I needed to study and graduate. My dad and I went back to Russia on the condition that I would return after finishing school.

That same October, my dad came to Armenia again, and I came with him. And then, very unexpectedly, I met and fell in love with the man who would change my fate.

I told him I didn't want to leave Armenia. He told me to stay with him. I said I couldn't – I was 17, and my father was also here. I had to go back to Russia with him.

So I went back again. Because my Armenian passport had expired, I couldn't cross the border back to Armenia at 17. I had to wait until I turned 18 to get a Russian passport so I could travel. During that time, I saved money – my scholarship, food allowance – to buy a flight ticket and pay for a taxi-

Four days after my birthday, in the middle of the night, I secretly packed my belongings and hid them in the stairwell. That morning, I was supposed to go to college. I told my parents I had the second shift of classes. From my mom's phone, I messaged my teacher, saying I felt sick and wouldn't be coming. I deleted the message, ordered a taxi, and... came to Armenia.

I didn't say goodbye to anyone at home.

When I got to Armenia, I realized I'd been deceived. This man had said he'd help me, find me a job, and that everything would be fine. But instead... he argued with me, accused me of cheating on him, and wouldn't let me work. I started freelancing from home, but I didn't talk to my family, didn't answer their calls, had no contact at all. He wouldn't allow it. He said if I talked to them, they'd "brainwash" me, and I'd stop being the same. He was 19 years older than me.

From the very beginning, I told him I would never get involved with drugs. That was his business. I didn't want to – I was scared. For four months, I kept that promise. But the first time I tried marijuana became a turning point for me. He made me an addict. I used marijuana and other substances for six months. There were four of us involved in that business. And one day, we got caught...

I remember they said we were being taken to Abovyan. I didn't know there was a city called Abovyan in Armenia – I thought they meant Abovyan Street. Then I realized we were leaving the city. When I saw the walls, I froze...

They said we were entering the checkpoint. I remember they searched me, told me to undress and remove everything I had on me. They examined me, photographed my tattoos and other marks on my body. We left the checkpoint, went through the gates into a building, then into another room, and the door closed behind me. I was in shock... everything felt like ruins.

It was 2a.m., when they brought me in. They gave me a mattress. I asked if I would get clothes. I thought they would provide some. I went to lie down. There was another girl there, with her clothes hanging on the bars. I could tell she wanted to talk to me, but I didn't want to talk. I felt awful. I was furious.

I remember I wanted to go to the bathroom. I opened the door, but when I saw the terrible state it was in, I changed my mind, closed the door, and went back to bed. I didn't take anything off. I was both disgusted and cold. The heaters were off. I lay down, and I remember something rattling between the pipes... It was a rat. Somehow, I fell asleep.

At 8a.m., I barely lifted my head. The girl told me we had to get up and pack because we were going

for "obkhod." I stared at her, confused, "What's that?" We went, and what I saw... about 20 men – the head, the deputy, and others. We stood in a line. I stared at their faces in shock. They told me to introduce myself. I stayed silent. They repeated, "We are talking to you, introduce yourself." So I did.

Then I asked the girl next to me what they were doing. She said they were checking the walls to make sure we hadn't made any holes. They banged on the bars, checked everything. I was scared. I didn't know what was happening. Then they left.

I remember they came and told me to write a statement. I didn't know how to write one. Somehow, I did it. They took me back to the checkpoint. I was still in the clothes I'd been arrested in. I felt filthy, wanted to peel off my own skin and run away.

It turned out my family had come to see me. When they saw me, they were shocked. They said, "What have you become?" I cried and told them what had happened. They kept telling me, "It's okay, everything will be fine."

I remember one day they said we were going for a walk. I was happy. But when I saw four walls, a barred ceiling, and a door closing behind me... I thought, "How will I ever get out of here?" It felt like I was a prisoner of war.

I spent six days in quarantine like that. Before that, I was held in a facility for arrested persons. Oh God, that place was even worse. They kept me there for 7 to 8 days. It was horrible. There was no place to wash. I had to bang on the door for them to take me to the bathroom.

When I came to prison, I was scared. I didn't understand where I had ended up. I thought they would let me go soon, that it wasn't something serious – but no.

I couldn't speak Armenian well. They bullied me. I was under a lot of pressure from both the staff and other detainees. I was scared. I didn't know what to do. I cried in front of everyone.

The effects of the drugs slowly wore off. I was becoming sober, but I still didn't understand where I was. Coming back to reality was hard. I wanted to use again. But from the moment I ended up here, I haven't used anything – no psychotropics, no other drugs. Whatever they offered me, I said, "No, I don't need it. I will recover on my own."

Now I can think normally, sleep normally, eat normally. Back then, I couldn't even eat properly – whenever I ate, my stomach hurt. The first morning I woke up here, when I saw my hands, I was in shock. I remember everyone staring at me. Whenever I passed by someone, they'd say, "What a skinny girl, there's nothing left of her," like I was just a skeleton.

I used to have so much energy. I was so cheerful. Was there a problem? I'd look at it with optimism. Did someone cry? I'd say, "What happened? Why are you crying? Smile, a smile suits you." Now I am fine, but I do everything so slowly. That energy I once had is gone. Everything inside me is broken. Nothing of my old self remains. I'm starting to get to know myself again.

I don't want to communicate with anyone. I don't want to support anyone. I just want to stay in my own world, shut myself in. But the loneliness is suffocating. There is no one I can talk to about my feelings, my failed love, my life...

My family says I have changed a lot, both in my way of thinking and in my appearance.

All my life, I have studied. I dedicated 18 years of my life to education. I wasn't a straight-A student, but I did well – never failing a class. I entered a college for finance. Every semester, I tried to do well on my exams to get a scholarship.

When I came to Armenia, I thought I had found what I'd been missing for 18 years. I thought I had finally filled the emptiness in my soul with love. I never imagined that love would drag me into the

⁹Obkhod (Russian: обход) – refers to a routine inspection conducted by prison staff to systematically check inmates, their quarters, and the facility to ensure security, order, and compliance with regulations, prevent prohibited items, and maintain overall safety.

abyss.

My family came to Armenia for me. They forgave me. They talked to me, told me nothing was as terrible as it seemed, and they are waiting for me to be released. Now I have no one but my family.

Here, I have realized that nothing is more valuable than family and freedom. You can't let yourself fall under someone else's influence. You need to keep your head firmly on your own shoulders.

It's been almost two years since I have been here. I am still awaiting trial. If I am sentenced, I could get six or seven years. But I hope they will count these two years I have already served, and maybe give the rest – four years – as a suspended sentence. I was young, 18, when I was arrested... and it's my first time.

During court hearings, I feel a flicker of hope that maybe they'll let me go home. Deep down, I know they won't – but that tiny hope inside suffocates me. When they extend my detention, I go back to my cell, look at the walls, and ask myself, "What have I done with my life?"

Every day I go to sleep hoping that in the morning I will wake up and this nightmare will be over – that I will be home, next to my parents.

I just don't understand – what have I done with my life?

A Detained Young Woman

Fated to Be a Mother



It was a beautiful, radiant summer day. God's light had spread its wings over the earth, and everything and everyone had settled into their usual rhythm. Nature was in full bloom, moving through its eternal dance with energy and grace. Trees swayed, their leaves breathing life into the air, while little birds chirped and fluttered, making the scene even more enchanting.

I stood behind the bars, mesmerized by nature's beauty – even the tiny ants crawling tirelessly up tree trunks caught my attention. And suddenly, I felt a strange kind of envy toward those insects – because they were free.

Freedom... At first glance, it's just a beautiful word in classical Mesropian Armenian. But once you understand its true meaning, you realize it's one of the greatest wonders ever granted to humankind - a masterpiece of the natural world.

One of our great poets¹⁰ once wrote:

"Freedom!" I answered, "on my head Let fire descend and thunder burst; Let foes against my life conspire, Let all who hate thee do their worst: I will be true to thee till death; Yea, even upon the gallows tree, The last breath of a death of shame Shall shout thy name, O Liberty!"

We memorized these lines in school, expressing dissatisfaction without truly grasping their depth. We were eager to recite them quickly and rush outside to play – ironically, to run toward that very freedom we didn't yet understand.

Dear reader, if you've ever been in detention, there's no need to explain the meaning of freedom you already know. But if you haven't, believe me: it's something to be sanctified, something to keep in your prayers as a sacred value.

It's been 11 months since I lost my freedom. When I first arrived here, I felt the full bitterness of it in every form. The hardest part of incarceration is being separated from your family, especially from your children – the very beings you live and breathe for. Your time with them becomes painfully scarce, reduced to brief, carefully measured visits.

I've been married for 21 years, and I still love my husband with the same passion as a teenager in love for the first time. And I love my children deeply because they are a part of him. In a way, I brought them into this world to see more of him, to multiply him. Even when he's not home, I still see him – in their eyes, their movements, and their laughter.

And there's more. When I look at my children growing up, I see not only their father in them, but also glimpses of my saintly mother, my kind father, and my hardworking grandmothers. My heart overflows with color and joy.

Can you imagine? Through the invisible threads of genetics, I see my parents again – the ones I can no longer hug or kiss. And yet, by God's mercy, I have been blessed with three beautiful children, in whom I rediscover my lost loved ones. My heart feels like it might leap out of my chest. I want to scream with joy – hurrah, hurrah! This is nothing short of a divine miracle.

I love my children with a kind of mad devotion. So much so that sometimes I'm afraid to even hug

¹⁰Authored by the Armenian poet Mikael Nalbandyan in the late 1850s.

them. A voice inside me whispers – what if they disappear?

Dear reader, right now, I feel as if I am in an open grave. To me, there is hell, there is paradise, and there is purgatory – and this place is purgatory. Here, your instinct for self–preservation becomes your dominant trait. You're judged not just by the prosecutor and the court, but also by your codefendants, real or alleged victims, the prison staff – and worst of all, by the unresolved conflicts within yourself.

Some people here use the time to grow, to work on themselves. Others become bitter, adopting destructive habits, and return not long after they leave...

Is it a myth or is it reality? People believe prison is a place of violence, gambling, disrespect toward guards, harsh punishments, broken families, and widespread drug use... I don't know if all of that is true. But I do know this – everyone here is counting the days. Everyone is longing for freedom, desperate to go home even one day sooner.

Sometimes I wonder – have I already paid the price for what I did? Maybe it's time for me to go home.

Home... where my late parents once lived. Where I grew up. Where my children took their first steps. A home my husband rebuilt with his own hands.

H.T.

A Detained Woman





No Woman Ought to Face Such Harsh Punishment



The people who surround you can be a very harmful influence. In the moment, it feels like they're comforting you - but...

I had an apartment in Armenia. I had come from abroad to sell it. I was tired of the constant traveling, of renting it out – it was exhausting. I spent more on flights and temporary stays than the apartment was worth. The expenses were just too high. So I came and sold it.

Then suddenly, my son called and asked me to come welcome him – he had come to serve in the Armenian army. That's when the pandemic began. I had already sold the house, and we had to vacate it within a month. I couldn't find another place – no one was showing apartments at that time. It was awful. None of us were working.

My son went to the army, and just a few months later, the war started. His military unit was bombed – the dining hall, the motor pool... The boys were taken down to the basement separately. The others were blown up in groups. My son was lucky – he happened to be in the medical unit at the time. He told me later that one of his friends had asked to borrow his phone to call home. That boy died holding the phone. Because phones were labeled with names, my son ended up on the death list. I saw his name on TV – right near the top of the list of the deceased...

Before all that, my father – my biggest supporter – had passed away. Then I had surgery. And after that, I was in terrible pain.

Blow after blow...

I started drinking a lot.

Then I met some people who said, "Why don't you try a little cocaine? It'll make you feel better." I had tried it once before the surgery, but afterward, I began using it more regularly. In short, I fell in with the wrong crowd. They introduced me to this habit.

You know how it starts – they offer it to you. Then they start selling it. They say, "There's no such thing as free samples, but it would be better if you used one." You end up giving them money so they'll bring it to you.

When they made me that shady offer, I was at my weakest. That's how I ended up here. And now, I don't know how to get out. My son is suffering with me. I want to be with him every moment. I want to be by his side.

I'm facing 6 to 12 years. Every time I go to court, it's like my son dies and comes back to life again. During visits, he tells me, "It's okay, Mom. Just let me see you for 20 minutes." It's breaking my heart. Everything that used to be private is now exposed. My son found out – not just about my addiction, but about my relationship too. It's so humiliating. And still, after everything, he comes to visit me...

At the police station and during the investigation, I was treated terribly. During the first two months of detention, I wasn't scared – I was ashamed. Ashamed that this was happening to me. Ashamed that my name was being dragged through the mud. For those two months, I was deprived of everything - no visits, no phone calls. Maybe the officials wanted to break me down...

It's been one year and two months since I was detained – one year and two months of fighting for freedom...

You can never get used to the conditions here. I live under the lights day and night, constantly... If the light is off, I get nervous tremors and feel like I'm suffocating. I need the light to sleep. Maybe it's my inner fear – what if I suddenly open my eyes in darkness and don't know where I am? And then there's the fear of who I'm sharing the cell with. Some people smile at you just to get what they want – but in reality, they could be capable of anything. Maybe I'm still haunted by fears that haven't left me yet.

It doesn't matter what the charges are – we're all living the same way here. But what surprises me

is seeing women insult or envy each other. No one seems to care about their own cases, or their families. They've already adapted to life in here.

Sometimes they even argue with the prison staff. I don't like that. They left their own homes to work here, to oversee us for the things we did. They deserve respect – whether they're men or women.

Some of the women don't realize they're here because of their own actions. Whether it was a false accusation, a moment of weakness, or a mistake – they're here, that's the reality. They shouldn't be blaming anyone else. Is the whole world guilty except for them?

I love my son deeply. He's my only child. The mother in me has grown stronger every day. I was a good mother – I raised a good son – but now all that love inside me has doubled. I want to live only for him.

Maybe before all this, I had a private life that no one knew about. But now? I don't want to see anyone. I just want to be home, to open my eyes and see my son, to close them and still see him. He needs me now more than ever. He misses me more than anyone. That's what keeps me going knowing that someone is waiting for me outside. That's what reminds me that I still matter.

This whole experience has destroyed me. Even just seeing news reports about someone arrested for drugs makes me sick. I feel nothing but disgust. I hate drugs – they've ruined my life. At my age, I had no right to make such a mistake. I lived a lawful life for so long. I always lived with a deep fear of making a mistake that would cause me shame.

When they brought me here, I couldn't even accept that I was an addict. I'm only now beginning to feel clearheaded. I'm just now becoming myself again.

What I needed wasn't prison - I needed a rehabilitation center. I needed help, and a proper investigation into what really happened. If there had been solid evidence, then fine – punish me. That's how they could have helped me. But this? This is only destroying my body. I'm still sick. I live with constant pain – some days my legs hurt, other days my blood pressure spikes.

I'm still fighting this poison...

No woman ought to face such harsh punishment... I don't see a way out...

A Detained Woman





I Felt Like a Beggar – Reduced to Someone Pleading for Scraps



It was a cheerful spring morning. I was heading home from a relative's house. I had come to Yerevan to attend events organized for Women's Month. I woke up early and started getting ready to leave.

My mother and my son were waiting for me at home. They felt my absence deeply.

I said goodbye to my relatives and stepped outside. The car was waiting in the yard.

But as I walked toward it, a group of men suddenly surrounded me. They shouted from all directions, shoved me forcefully, and pushed me into their car.

For a moment, I thought I was being kidnapped. Panic gripped my chest. I had only ever seen scenes like this in movies or crime shows.

I barely managed to turn my head and glance at our driver – but I didn't even have a chance to explain what was happening.

It was 6:19a.m. I remember the exact time, burned into my memory. I also remember the unfamiliar two–story building they brought me to. I asked, "Who are you? What do you want from me?" They only said, "We'll explain everything at the right time."

I had no idea what they wanted. My life turned upside down in an instant. They questioned me for hours. And then... I saw my son arrive in Yerevan. He held me tightly, his eyes filled with tears, and asked, "Mom, why did they bring you here?" I couldn't give a clear answer. I didn't have one.

... I never would have imagined that the sealed box I was asked to deliver to the recipient as part of a business transaction contained drugs.

I was thrown into a living hell – something I could never have imagined. A strange city, a massive building, rooms with bars on the windows... Only days later did it begin to sink in: I was in prison. Why was I here? How long would I stay? All I knew was that I had lost my freedom, my home, and the chance to see my mother and my son.

Cold sweat broke out on my forehead. People in uniforms kept approaching me. I introduced myself. Then they gave me aluminum dishes, bedding, and showed me to a "room." It was exactly like the prison scenes I had seen in films.

Five days passed. All I could think about was getting to a phone, just to let my family know I was alive. Eventually, they gave me a phone card. When I saw the phone itself, I was reminded of the 1990s – those old rotary phones we used to dial with our fingers.

The cell door was made of metal with multiple locks. The sound of it opening and closing echoed in my head for hours. Whenever I needed something, I had to knock. From the other side, they would ask, "Who is it?" and I had to say my cell number. There's a small viewing window in the door where we speak to the staff.

The day after I arrived, a guard opened that peephole and asked, "Do you want to go for a walk?" I said yes – thinking I'd be walking around outside, maybe in the city. I was thrilled.

But then... I was led down some stairs into a small enclosed yard next to the building. It looked no different from the cell I had just left. That was the "walking area."

Inside the cell, a printed daily schedule hangs on the wall. It lists wake—up times, sleep, meals, grooming, and walks. And honestly, I just can't get used to this system.

Then came another knock at the door. This time, the food hatch opened. A woman's voice said, "Here's your meal. Enjoy," and left. Later, I found out she was an inmate, too – someone who had been living here for years. I felt ashamed walking up to that hatch for food. For a moment, I felt like a beggar, reduced to someone pleading for scraps.

Both women and men work here. Most are polite, caring, warm, and attentive. But there are moments when their shouting or behavior is deeply disappointing. And I remind myself – they hold the power. Our rights are in their hands.

Once, they opened the door and said, "Girls, we're bringing new furniture for all the cells. Please move your belongings off the old pieces." I was thrilled. For a second, I imagined I was at home, redecorating, excited about something simple again.

But then I saw four or five women carrying heavy furniture while the male staff nearby just stood and watched. I felt frustrated – but I understood: the men weren't allowed to do anything beyond their assigned duties. And the women were doing it voluntarily. It was a way to cope with incarceration. After all, they were paid by the state for their work.

There are conflicts, too – sometimes with cellmates, sometimes with staff. When you're right, no one remembers. When you're wrong, no one forgets. Even jokes carry hidden barbs. Over time, you start to get tired of all the fake smiles and faces. But getting used to it all? That would mean giving up on life.

I never thought I'd find myself in this kind of nightmare. No matter how much I talk with cellmates or staff, I still feel hollow inside – abandoned, cut off from life.

And now, all I can do is count the days and months until the doors of freedom open again, so I can return to my family.

L.Z.

A Detained Woman





Always Think before You Act – Think Carefully...



One day, my boyfriend and I bought a car and decided to take a long trip. When we reached a town in one of the distant provinces, we decided to rest. We rented a room at a hotel to spend the night. Then my boyfriend went out to shop. He left and didn't return for about two or three hours. I was getting worried, but I decided to wait. I waited until dawn.

The first call I made was to the hospital, because he had been driving. They told me he was there. I went, but they said he had been taken to the police station. I had no idea why they took him or why he had been beaten. I went to the police station voluntarily. I just wanted to know how he was and what had happened to him.

At the station, they began questioning me. Suddenly I remembered that I had marijuana hidden in my clothes – a lot of marijuana. Without thinking, I had walked straight into the police station. I hadn't considered that I could end up in this situation. I had simply gone there to see my boyfriend.

I panicked. I wanted to get away from the policemen as quickly as possible, so I obeyed their orders. They took my phone and started going through it. While searching, they found pictures. Based on that, they opened a criminal case and arrested both me and my boyfriend. Because of my thoughtless action, we were sentenced. It's been a year now that we've been in prison.

I am 19 years old. I was arrested when I was 18. By this time next year, I will be home.

I had known this guy since I was 17. He is the son of my mother's friend. Our families were very close. I had been with him for two years. I studied until the 12th grade. After that, I lived abroad with my mother. When I was 17, I returned to Armenia. Here, I worked in supermarkets, learned how to do eyelash extensions, eyebrows, nails... At school, I studied in the History stream for three years. I had plans to continue my education. But when this guy came into my life, he didn't let me. Without his permission, I couldn't go anywhere – not even to the store. I would stay hungry until he came home. When he came home, I would cook... I wasn't allowed to visit my mother's or my aunt's house. My whole day was spent at home, on my phone or doing housework.

I didn't keep in touch with my family. I didn't keep in touch with anyone. I thought it was better to be hungry than to be apart from him. The most important thing was to have the man I loved by my side.

My boyfriend started making money – a lot of money – from marijuana. Money silences a person's inner conscience. You stop seeing, stop hearing. Only money becomes important.

It's not like we lived well. He beat me, he did other bad things. But I always forgave... everything, everything...

All of this started for me at a very young age. There were guys in the neighborhood who smoked marijuana. I was young, 14-15 years old. They hid it, I would find it and smoke. They found out it was me. By the time I was 16, 18, I was already the one buying it. I would save up money and buy it. Nobody knew, no one at all... And because of that, I am here today.

I used it to gain energy. For example, if I had to think about a problem, if I didn't use it, I couldn't find the answer. I used to find answers to problems. Without it, I couldn't work. I had no energy. I'd wake up in the morning, have no energy, and couldn't even eat. For more than a month before I was caught, I hadn't eaten properly.

Because of that, I've been left with bone pain – very strong pain. When I came to prison, for a few days I was still under the influence of drugs. Here I stopped abruptly. Now I've gained a little weight. First of all, I have started eating. I have started to look at everything I have done in a negative light.

Though here, I suffer a lot. I am young, but age doesn't matter to anyone here. In the staff's mind, life ends in prison. We are inmates; they are free. That is something big for them.

Outside, everyone lives their own life, but here you can't. It's a big building with different doors, like neighbors. People gossip about each other... The worst thing here is that men work here. There is a "glaz"11 in the door they use to look inside. They could be watching while you are changing clothes, sleeping, uncovered... When you go from the cell to the yard for "progulka", 12 you get even sadder. It is only about 10 square meters. Only the top is open, everything else is barred. At least in the cell, you can walk. In the yard, you can walk too, but you don't know what else to do.

The bars on the cell windows are depressing, too. It is a big window, but with small bars. You feel trapped. You think, "What wrong step did I take?" When we go to court hearings, we see windows without bars, it feels strange. You are happy just to see a window without bars.

Sometimes, because of that suffocating feeling, I can't even talk to my family on the phone. I feel so bad. You have nothing to do in the cell. Only the TV, and that's it, nothing else. Yard time and TV. Nothing. And you start to lose your mind.

Prison changes a lot. Outside, I always had to speak up, say what was mine to say, but now I can't express myself. Three people live in one small cell. Three different people from different families... We live together for months, share our bread, but we can't really grow close or share secrets. You don't know who the other person is or how they will react in a given moment. People are different. If you open up, it can later become gossip among others. They can use it to break you, hurt you, and envy you. You just want to get out as soon as possible, cut all ties with this place and everyone in it, and forget that you were ever in "Abovyan" Penitentiary Institution.

Here, you learn to read people, not to listen to anyone, not to live by someone else's opinion. You start to know yourself better, appreciate yourself, and love yourself. If you don't love yourself, no one else will. You learn not to make impulsive decisions, but to think for a long time first. You have to hold yourself accountable before you speak. Here, you learn to wait. I don't like waiting – not for me to wait, and not for others to wait for me. But here, I have learned to be patient, to wait, to value what I have. And also, to be loved even if I don't love back.

Love itself has been broken now. I can't trust people. I know that whatever they say, they are lying. Everything is a lie. Inside, I have been broken badly. I can't trust anyone. Trust itself is broken. The feeling of love is broken.

The fear of loss has grown stronger. I think, if something happens to my mom, what will I do? I am alone – it's just me and my mom. Here, I have understood what a parent is, what love for a child really means. Yes, my mom says mistakes are part of being human, and even now she tells me, "Pray to God, things will be okay." She says, "Nothing will help except prayer." She tells me, "Let this be a lesson so you don't make the same mistake next time." She doesn't break me down. Here, you truly understand what a parent is, what family means.

I know in my heart that I will always have a scar from this in my life. My hope is that I have only one year left. One more year, and I will leave, done. I tell my mom, "When I am released, I will never come back to "Abovyan" Penitentiary Institution. I have to live differently, and most importantly, stay away from bad company." When I get out, I want to study, work... I want to study History.

And to the readers of my story, I can only say one thing: Always think before you act. Think carefully...

A Detained Young Woman

¹¹Glaz (Russian: глаз) – In penitentiary institutions, this term is used for the small peephole on cell doors through which staff monitor the inside of the cell without opening it.

¹²Progulka (Russian: прогулка) – outdoor walking.





Never End Up in the Hell Called "Prison"



To wait... It's the most painful, yet somehow the most sacred and comforting feeling ever granted to a human being to experience and understand.

Hell... a word so often associated with prison.

It was just the two of us. So close that it felt like even life and death were powerless against our love and loyalty. We loved each other like no one ever had before. Before prison, we shared a love I thought was unbreakable... or maybe, it was only me who truly loved. Don't get me wrong – this isn't meant to criticize him. The truth is, I never really learned how to keep people at a safe enough distance from my heart – to protect myself from breaking and losing my will to live when they leave.

Oh, sorry! I forgot to introduce myself. I'm just an ordinary girl – one whose life has been shaped more by loss and separation than by joy or laughter.

I was only ten when I was sent – without my consent – to Special Educational Complex No. 1 – an institution that hardly differed form a prison. Being sent there cost me the chance to spend my mother's final days with her. Less than two years later, she passed away. That pain still follows me all my life – a sense of absence no one has ever been able to fill.

We – meaning my loved ones and I – drifted apart. And with every passing year, we became more and more distant. There's a deep sorrow in knowing that none of us fought to preserve our family, our bonds.

Years went by – ten of them, to be precise. And then I met him – the one who changed everything. Though I still can't say whether he changed my life for the better or for the worse. We were inseparable, together every hour of the day, every minute, until the moment we made the biggest mistake of our lives: choosing what seemed like an easy way to earn money. A choice that ruined us. It tore us apart and stole the most precious thing of all – our freedom – eleven years of mine, and ten years of him.

Instead of spending the most youthful and beautiful years of our lives together, we are now forced to endure suffering and separation, cut off from each other – even unaware of how the other is doing. I lost him. And he, most likely, lost me. Maybe the distance pulled us apart. Or maybe I misunderstood what my mother once told me about friendship – that it should be selfless, wholehearted.

On January 16, 2023, everything collapsed – love, friendship – when the judge delivered the fateful sentence, "The court hereby sentences the defendant to 10 years, 11 months, and 27 days of imprisonment."

That verdict took away my freedom but also the color from my life, my loved ones, my friends. Although, it turned out, I never really had loved ones or friends. It felt like they had simply been holding their breath, waiting for me to fall so they could snatch away the last bit of faith I still had in humanity.

Unfortunately, that's exactly what happened. They vanished. As if they had never existed in my life. And in their place came someone new – someone who restored my faith in humanity and friendship. She arrived without warning and wrapped herself around my days like a grapevine climbing a wooden trellis. Despite my rough personality and her own pain, she gave me a smile – a smile that slowly brought colors back into my world. She asked for nothing in return. Nothing at all.

We became true friends – selfless, loyal. We tried to ease each other's pain and carry the burden of prison life together. She was unlike anyone else. Forgetting her own problems, she tried to turn each of my days into a celebration amidst this dark and bleak reality. And strangely enough, she succeeded. Within these four walls, the wait for freedom makes a person uncontrollable. Even silence starts to drive me mad. But she changed everything. She made me understand that I have to live, despite it all.

She understood me without words. She could read the unrest in my eyes. She knew when I needed silence and gave it, without question. But sadly, even that joy didn't last. They misunderstood our friendship – and they separated us.

We took it hard. We resisted. We went on a hunger strike. But after a week, still nothing changed. I even resorted to self-harm. Sadly, no one cared. They isolated us, claiming we were "too caring" toward each other and that others perceived it the wrong way.

I started to become angry again, more aggressive, the very things she had once helped keep at bay. It felt like those who once knew me now no longer recognized me because she was no longer there. That soul who had understood my pain and suffering without words, and who had tried, at all costs, to lift my spirits.

But despite everything, we promised to always remain friends. We have been left alone, each with our own pain and nightmares, yet we continue our friendship even across the distance of our cells, holding onto the hope that one day, someone might care about our suffering and allow us to "live" again in the same cell. Though... that seems unlikely.

No one cares about a prisoner. Kneeling prayers have lost their power. It feels as if the heavens no longer see us. These walls have mercilessly stripped us of the strength to feel compassion in pain, to feel joy in happiness, even to cry. The ache of longing – drowned in indifference – is poison. It numbs your nerves, and eventually, indifference takes over-

Every time I am alone, I look around me, take the mirror, and beyond my control I scream, "Dear God, have mercy on me, I am going mad!" I repeat it endlessly, looking to the sky.

And from that stormy chaos above, I seem to hear my mother's voice, "Don't break, my love. You'll get through this, too. You've already survived so much – even my death."

And then I beat my fists against my knees and sob uncontrollably, yet without tears, when I realize that I have lost everyone and everything. Even those who once swore to remain loyal to me until death.

You know, dear reader, if I keep writing about everything that's happening here, I will go insane. Hell above, and hell on earth... So where is that long-awaited paradise? In what corner of the world does it exist?

My advice and my plea to everyone is this – Try to live in such a way that you never end up in the hell called "prison."

It takes everything and everyone from you – even those who once swore eternal loyalty.

A.H.

A Convicted Woman



Because You're a Criminal- A Forced Way of Life



A letter to all women who are free... I am a woman prisoner. I committed a crime at the age of 24 and was sentenced to six years.

Even though I come from a good family – with good parents, sisters, and brothers – I stepped onto the wrong path and took a step into the world of crime. Yet, from the very first moment I was arrested, I regretted deeply, since prison is a brutally harsh place for a woman.

They arrest you right from your home. In front of your parents, they take you away to the police station, and you see with your own eyes how your parents and your family suffer emotionally. That was the most brutal scene of my entire life. Then came the preliminary investigation, the detention, and... the prison. And the even harsher days begin once they bring you inside the prison.

The state provides the bare essentials: a mattress, a blanket, a sheet, hygiene products, an aluminum spoon, a plate, a cup... They escort you to your cell, shut the thick iron door behind you – and something inside you dies. Mentally, spiritually, you are trapped between four cold walls. That is how you have to live, because you are a person who committed a crime. Then your daily prison life begins. You sleep by the clock, eat by the clock, take your walk by the clock, make your family phone calls by the clock, and meet your family by the clock. In short, your life becomes a rigid schedule.

For the first week, you are placed in a quarantine — completely alone. Then they move you to another cell, with other women prisoners like yourself, each with her own story, and all with different personalities and mentalities. Next comes the court stage: the hearings, the prosecution... Each time you go, you are transported from prison to the courtroom in a secure vehicle. Several guards put handcuffs on you... And you must endure all of that, because the mistake you made was yours alone, and you must carry that burden.

And so it goes during the trial. An entire courtroom discusses your actions. At that moment, from sheer shame, you wish the ground would open up and swallow you whole. But, unfortunately, things do not end that easily. You have to pass through this cruel reality. And when the judge reads the verdict, six years of imprisonment, you suddenly realize that for six years you will be in confinement, deprived of everything, and most painfully, of your family, your friends, your relatives, of walking in the park, or simply living your daily life peacefully at home. Mentally, you begin to lose your grip.

During the heavy and harsh years in prison, your parents come to visit you. And you say, "Mom, Dad, okay, our two—hour visit is over. Go home now so you can get there before it gets too late. You are tired, upset, and tearful. I will go home, too…" "Home" you say that, because you have been in prison so long that you start calling it "home." But right after using that word, in quotes, you realize that prison can never replace your real home. Still, painfully, you must continue to spend your entire six—year sentence there.

As the years go by, you begin to change. Your views on life shift. Sometimes you grow wiser. Sometimes you become harder. Sometimes you feel deeply sentimental. At times your heart softens. Other times, the longing for freedom suffocates you. So the long, heavy years pass. And when the time comes for your release, you stand by the prison walls – the ones that have enclosed your life for so long – and you make a promise to yourself and to the other women still inside, "I will never come back to this place."

You look back one last time at those walls, and the years they held you captive, and you understand, "Hell has nine circles, and you just spent six years in the worst one." Love your freedom. Love yourself. Love your life.

A. Manukyan A Convicted Woman

Alone in My Darkest Hour



As the saying goes, you must lose something to truly value it. Perhaps I should start from the beginning...

By profession, I am a pianist – a laureate of international competitions. In short, I am a person of art I love the stage, and the stage loves me. I have given many concerts and never once, in my daily life, did I feel emptiness. Music has always filled my life with the most beautiful colors.

And then, one day, I decided to see the other side of life – the thorny, difficult side. At that time, I was living with my grandmother. The same music that once gave me life and the strength to live each day suddenly began to feel like a prison. I started craving freedom. I left everything and everyone behind...

At the age of 13, I left home and ended up in an orphanage. I lived there for three years. All the things that are most precious to me today, the things that play the most important role in my once unlived life, seemed worthless and meaningless back then.

For seven years, I suffered in my search for freedom and pleasure. I lived alone and worked, but I never truly found anything in return. I longed for my loved ones, even for the chance to share a piece of dry bread with them. I was betrayed and deceived, and I also hurt many people myself. I lived like a puppet hanging by invisible strings, every movement controlled by its master. And who was the master...?

I walked without feeling the solid ground of my homeland beneath my feet. I loved without knowing where my heart truly belonged. I sympathized and comforted others, gave advice, helped anyone who came my way – without ever understanding the limits of my own soul.

And then, one day, everything pleasant and beautiful in my life narrowed down to drugs, alcohol, and empty desires. I noticed nothing around me. I no longer believed in people. Even among the caring friends who advised me to change my life and reclaim what I had lost, I saw enemies.

Then one day, God, seeing my inhumane suffering, put an end to my endless search... I was arrested on suspicion of possession, use, and sale of narcotics. I didn't comprehend anything...

I was transferred to the women's colony at the age of 21.

For seven years, I had been poisoning my life. It took a long time to rediscover myself and uproot the poison from my soul. But as they say, nothing is impossible if the will is there.

While in captivity, I began to understand the value of what I had lost.

I lost all of my loved ones. On workdays, from 10 in the morning until 5 in the evening, I wait for someone to visit. But no one comes. In the harshest period of my life, I was left completely alone.

I often sit on the windowsill, look out at the same unchanging view I've seen for two years, and wonder, "Was it worth it?" And every time, I find the same answer: no...

By all the unwritten laws, I plead guilty in every way – and I ask forgiveness from myself.

But this too shall pass...

I know I will be sentenced to several years of imprisonment, but life does not end here.

By rediscovering myself, I have also reassessed my ideas and principles.

I have a clear goal – to return to art, study at the conservatory, and become a good specialist, to tour the world with solo concerts.

To live in such a way that society never again labels me a criminal, but instead sees my name on the posters...

This situation won't last forever-

Shahane

A Detained Woman

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I Needed This to Change



I am 32 years old. I was imprisoned at 29. I had been using drugs since I was 16. They arrested me at 4a.m. Everything was laid out on the table. They came into the house and... I have been in a correctional facility for 3 years and 1 month now.

I lived with an addiction for 12 years – an addiction that cost me everything. I lost my education, my trust in people, my great love... and ended up in prison.

People think that prison is terrible. Of course, being locked up within four walls is very hard. But prison has also changed many things in my life for the better. That might surprise some people. After all, the words "prison" and "good" don't seem to belong in the same sentence. But in my life, they have somehow become synonyms.

For me, the good part is that I have freed myself from a 12-year addiction, returned to a normal life, and begun to love beauty – without bad habits.

Drugs took everything from me, and first of all, they took away my ability to be a good person. I didn't love life. I always felt like everything was over, that life was dead. I thought only about drugs. I paid no attention to my family. I valued nothing.

It might sound strange, but I am grateful that I was imprisoned. I had been in rehabilitation center six or seven times and never recovered. I needed this to change.

Looking back now, I realize there are so many more interesting things in life. The hardest part is that, while you're living it, you don't see how it's slowly destroying you. You believe you're right about everything and that the people around you are just talking nonsense. You think you're the smartest, the best. But that's only an illusion - one you only recognize clearly when there's nothing left to change. And drugs are simply not worth sacrificing years of your life for.

I was a student at Brusov University, but I dropped out because of excessive absences. Now I am trying to study on my own so that, when I finally gain that long-awaited freedom, I can live a decent life. In September, I plan to take the entrance exams. But here, you can't take private lessons – you have to study entirely on your own. And can you really get into university through self-study alone? Probably not. I'm not sure how it will work out. It would be wonderful if there were programs that allowed teachers to come even once a week to work with those of us who want to pursue higher education. Unfortunately, apart from Urartu University, no other university collaborates with correctional facilities.

In any case, prison has restored the things that revived me.

I don't want anyone to think I'm saying prison is a good place. It's just that here, I began to value things I never considered important when I was free. Within these four walls, you come to appreciate even the smallest things that remind you of life outside – and you regret so much. Inside these gray walls, you try to see colors.

There are many people who help me stay optimistic, but the most important of all is my father – the one to whom I am endlessly grateful. I have such a deep desire to tell him, "Dad, forgive me for causing you so much pain at your age, when I should have been by your side instead."

My father is my closest friend – the only one who never lost hope, who believed in me until the very end and stood by my side instead of turning away. When I stumbled, he was the first to reach out his hand and help me stand. He never judged me. On the contrary, he put aside a father's sternness and walked this thorny path with me like a true friend. After everything he has done, I simply have no right to make another mistake.

My parents are divorced. My mother has been living abroad for many years, and my oldest sister also lives abroad. My father is already 70 years old. At first, for about 10 to 11 months, my calls were restricted by the investigator. I thought my family had forgotten about me. But my father put everything aside and came to visit me – along with my middle sister.

No one else – no acquaintances, no friends – is around. Maybe that's for the best. I want to free myself from all of them. I don't want to know or communicate with anyone I knew before. If you're going to change your life, you have to change it completely and start fresh.

On the outside, if my father had called, I might not have answered. Now, he can only visit once a month. I wait with a pounding heart for that visit – for those 30 or 40 minutes we can spend together. The idea of "family" has regained its true meaning for me.

Here, I have learned to be happy with the smallest things and to appreciate everything. I read a lot. I used to read before, too, but I didn't understand things the way I do now. Now I see them with a healthy mind – because my body is healthy, and my thoughts are healthy. When I am released, I must visit Florence, Italy. I've read so much about that city. On the outside, under the influence of drugs, you don't think about things like that.

It makes me happy when my mother sees that I have changed. She says, "You've become a normal person. Once you're out, you will live like a normal person."

On the outside, my mind was consumed only with thoughts of drug money, drugs, and bad company. Now, all my worst traits have changed. I used to be very impatient; now I am more patient. Maybe it's because I have no other choice here and must be patient — and perhaps that forced patience has become part of my character. I've become a perfectionist, very demanding. My belongings must be in order. I've started organizing my days: I know that at this time I'll do one thing, and at that time, another. It feels a bit robotic, but maybe that's because I'm here. Outside, I probably won't be this robotic.

I used to be very selfish. Now, I try to understand people's situations more. I used to be quick—tempered and quarrelsome, but that's gone. I've become calmer. Before, even the smallest problem would make me think, "That's it, life is over." Now, I don't think that way. I know that after bad times, good times always come. I've become an optimist.

Maybe it's because I freed myself from drugs that all of this has changed – and prison has nothing to do with it. It just happened to coincide that I stopped using while I was here.

Here, you have no choice in anything, and that's suffocating. The yard for outdoor walking is a terrible place — it's impossible to truly walk there. Your contact with the outside world is limited. During that 20—minute phone call, you can't have a proper conversation with anyone, and that's what weighs on you. My sister works as a shop assistant, so sometimes she can't answer my calls. But you have to adapt and make the call before 8 p·m. Still, in those 20 minutes, it feels as if you are right next to your loved ones. You take the edge off your longing — just a little.

It's also hard when you have nothing to do. You spend 24 hours a day in the cell, with only one hour of outdoor walking and nothing else. Because I am a detainee, I can't participate in the classes or events here – only convicted women can. As a detainee, you are deprived of everything.

Meaningful activities help you focus on something other than gossip or people trying to harm each other. For example, when I'm studying, there are days I don't even have time to say good morning to anyone. If someone tries to talk, I tell them, "Don't bother me, I'm studying." When you're engaged in something meaningful, your mind is at peace.

I know I made a mistake. I'm guilty – what I did was wrong, inexcusable, and unacceptable. But I've already accepted that. What I want now is simply to feel human again. It's painful to know you're on the right path but still have years to spend in this place.

One thing I know for sure – I will never break the law again. Drugs are gone from my life forever. I will never be part of a bad crowd. Nothing in life is more precious than freedom. It's the one thing that, once lost, makes you truly understand its value.

The worst part is that I might still have three years and five months left here. You spend the best

years of your life behind bars - coming in at 29 and getting out at 37, without ever having had a child.

I never thought freedom could be so precious. You even miss the walls of your home, your own table in your own room. You think, "I just want to be outside, in my home – even if I never leave it – but to be in my home."

Now, I want to shout to the world that I have changed, that I am not who I was before. Nothing negative can consume me anymore.

I want to get out, continue my education, have a good job, build a beautiful family, have a child, and live a happy life. Freedom is priceless. It is never worth losing. Nothing can be more valuable than freedom.

I hear on the news that drugs are now even more widespread than a few years ago, especially among minors and in schools. I truly hope my message is heard from here – life is so much better without addictions.

Sh.M.

A Detained Woman

FOR NOTES

