A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS:
THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON

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Yolgezer, a former imprisoned artist, invites the world to see the dire human rights violations in Turkey. Through an anonymous activist perspective, the artist specifically depicts Turkey’s jails where hundreds of thousands of political prisoners are kept. The audience witnesses not only how the life is like there, but also why those prisoners of conscience are incarcerated and how they feel behind bars.
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WHO AM I?

I was born in 1983, in the city of Zonguldak, Turkey. My mother was a housewife; my father was a retired teacher. We were four siblings, and I was the only male child in the house. Due to my father’s profession, we lived in many different cities and towns and had the opportunity to experience various geographies, places, and people. Though I was never very good at my studies, ever since I was little I always had an interest in the arts, particularly drawing. I don’t remember when I first began to be interested in drawing. When I couldn’t find any paper to draw on, I would go ahead and draw my pictures on the walls of our house. Needless to say, I received a fair share of scolding from my mom on that account. During my high school years, through the encouragement of my art teacher, I enrolled in a painting (drawing) course in the city we lived in.

Enrolling in this course naturally paved my way into a great university. After completing my [extended] university education, through the reference from the private school where I completed my internship, I was offered a job in a very nice district/city. (This is, in fact, the place where I hope to settle down one day once I reach my retirement, God-willing.) After working in that position for a year, I had to leave in order to fulfill my mandatory military service. Upon completing my military service, I came back and started prepping for the public employee selection exams. When I couldn’t score enough points to be appointed to a public school, I started working at another private school. Unfortunately, due to some unpleasant situations I came across, I had to leave my job there. I spent the next year preparing for the exams one more time. When I could not again score enough points the second time around, my brother-in-law encouraged me to go to Mardin, a city in southeastern Turkey, where there was a shortage of teachers at a private school there. After working at that school for two years, I met my future wife and we got married. Shortly after I heard about an opening for a teaching position in the city which I had loved dearly but had had to leave years ago. Without wasting any time, I applied for the position. I spent four wonderful years teaching in that city, four wonderful years... after which dark clouds started falling upon us.

WHAT I EXPERIENCED DURING THIS WHOLE ORDEAL

I imagine you are somewhat familiar with what comes next.

First of all, our work permits were canceled. When I saw the news on television and learned that a state of emergency had been declared, I did my best to keep calm. I asked my mother-in-law to make us some tea so we could sit and enjoy ourselves and not let this bring our spirits down. My wife ended up crying that evening. I tried to reassure her and told her, “Don’t worry. Even if Allah has blocked one path, He will surely open up another.” Sure enough, after that we worked in many different places, in many different cities. There were times when we were even laughed at and mocked. But never did we ever resort to any embarrassing acts or engage in any disgraceful activities. To this day, I can proudly say that we can hold our heads high and walk with dignity.

In any case, the government had already started arbitrarily firing people from their jobs, and some opportunist business owners used that opening to hire these unfortunate victims, paying them less than half the amount of what the job should have paid, not to mention the fact that they were denied any benefits or insurance. I’m talking about people who were just like us. I heard of a teacher that had begun working at a gas station. Some friends of the business owner--who were pro-government--were constantly pressuring him, saying, “What?!! How come he is still working for you? Just fire him!” His answer to their objections was quite meaningful; he had replied, “Find me a guy who is
As trustworthy and honest as this one and I will fire this one right away.”
As far as I know, that person is still working at that gas station...

Before having been taken to prison, I had started working at a publishing house. Since I hadn’t been particularly happy with their work policy, I had left that job. And now after my time in prison, I am working at another publishing house. Thanks and praise be to my dear God, I am among the ones who actually has a job to go to. In a country where more than half of the young population is out looking for work, this is truly a blessing.

As I head out to work each morning, I catch myself thinking back to the days I spent locked behind bars. Judging by the surprised looks of the people walking past me on the sidewalk, I’m guessing I probably have a huge smile on my face as my thoughts wander back.

I used to be a teacher before all this happened. And not just any teacher... I was a teacher who for nine whole years had gone to every class, every day with the same excitement and enthusiasm as the last!. Thus, I will use a teacher example to explain the next part of my story.

You know when you ask a parent about a teacher-- if they happen to know the teacher you are asking about--the first thought to cross their mind will probably be, ”Let’s see, was there anything negative about this teacher?” (Of course, they’ll probably be keeping this thought to themselves.) If they can’t think of anything bad, then they’ll say the teacher was ok and kind of brush that off as an answer. The reason? If you ask me, it’s just how people naturally react, that’s all. The first thought to enter our minds about a person is the bad memories they left us with (if any). When you think back about a previous teacher, the things you remember are whether you experienced anything negative with that teacher or not. Now, coming back to my own story, when people ask me how it was on the “inside,” first of all, a great big smile spreads across my face. Then I remember the jokes, the pranks, the fooling around and the sweet mischief, the chitchats around a pot of tea, our excitement for the “snack bar” day, and our deep conversations that extended well into the night. In all honesty, the bad memories are the ones that I remember the last. Now you ask me, is this normal? I should probably start off with telling you that I, myself, am not your typical, normal guy.

I can say that I had already somewhat driven myself out of my mind years ago with all the doodling and drawing and the shaping clay into statues and sculptures and crushing them into tiny bits after taking them from the mold, and whatnot... Or maybe it was because I had no bad memories from the “inside.” The people I was in prison with were all educated people, well-mannered and people of good character. The couple of months I spent with them was not wasted with problems like having to learn to adapt to a new environment or wait until we “clicked” with the others. It felt as though I was staying with childhood buddies that I had known my whole life, arm in arm, hand in hand, lighthearted fun and ruckus all around.

There was hardship, though, I cannot deny that. And I try to portray that in my drawings. In fact, you’ll see later on that I had a special wish regarding this matter, during the time I was in prison (which may surprise you a bit). The coup attempt that took place in the country was a kind of revolution that had completely different effects on the people going about their lives outside and on those of us who were locked “inside.” We had now become “the other.” People who knew us, who knew who and what we were would not even walk on the same side of the street with us anymore, they would change their paths once they saw us coming. I didn’t let this become a concern of mine.

My own father was among the first to be taken into custody during the initial operations carried out in the city of Konya. I cannot forget the day he was taken away. They just showed up at our house early one morning and took him away before we even had a chance to understand what was going on. God bless them, at least they were considerate about it; they did not shout about or throw insults like the stories we had heard of others.

I spent some time looking for work here and there. Naturally, al-
most every door I went to closed upon me. In fact, during one of my interviews, the man who would be hiring me openly said it to my face: “Brother, I’ll be honest with you, you are just the guy I am looking for, but if I go ahead and hire you I’ll be getting myself into trouble.”

We had to go back to the town where I last worked so we could gather up our belongings and leave, and while we were there, one of our neighbors decided to report us to the police. They came straight away, and I spent that evening in custody. I cannot erase the image I have in my mind of my mother with her teary eyes. First my father, and now me...

The next day I was released under judicial control. A couple of days later we changed our official address and settled down in our second hometown. Meanwhile, both my father-in-law and brother-in-law were also arrested. They needed someone to look after their business and take care of things on their farm. And so, even though I knew nothing about working the soil, I found myself atop a tractor harvesting carrots on thousands of acres of land just so I could help them out somehow. Though it was difficult at first, I found that in time I grew to like it. After my brother-in-law was released and he could take over and the workload eased up a bit, I could look for jobs in my own field of work. Upon returning to Konya, after doing some odd jobs here and there, I finally started working at a printing center. Meanwhile, my father was transferred to the Alanya prison. Every once in a while I would go and visit during open visitation, but it was my mother who mostly went to the visits because of the distance and expenses involved. Someone I used to work for, and who I loved and respected dearly, vouched for me and I started working at a publishing house after the Ramadan Eid festival were over.

Yes, I was working now, but only a month into it and it was time for the court hearings. The hearings took three days. I went in all three days, and I sat and listened. On the second day, before the court adjourned for the day’s lunch break, the judge turned to me and said, “Yes, let’s listen to what you have to say also.” He had the SEGBIS (Sound and Video Information System) closed down. I spoke about my work history. There was no record regarding a report filed in my name, or my name being mentioned anywhere specific, etc... Everything was running smoothly, then the judge spoke again, “Look, our own children were educated in these institutions as well,” and the prosecutor’s head bobbed slowly up and down as if affirming what the judge had just said. Then he asked me the question, “Do you think they were the ones to carry out this coup?” I knew this was a trick question, but still I fell into their trap. Rather, I should say, there were some possible answers I could have given, but I just couldn’t. (It was like Allah did not allow me to say it, I’m guessing that there is some kind of divine wisdom behind my being taken in.) My answer was (as recorded in the official report), “I do not believe that the individuals I worked with in these institutions were members of a [terrorist] organization. In fact, I do not believe they had any relations with either the December 17/25 operations or the coup attempt which took place on July 15, 2016. I am among those individuals who believe that the members of this [social] structure have not committed the act of staging a coup. I see Fethullah Gulen as a leader with a specific religious vision/perspective. I do not believe that he has engaged in any activities which aim to disintegrate any government or state. I have never been a witness to any testimonies delivered by himself to that effect. I believe that the events which took place on July 15, 2016 were forged and were false actions. I am among those who believe that such a coup was merely a stage act.” The court room was dead silent-- no sound, no movement at all. The judge spoke to me, “You do understand that this is the high criminal court, you may very well be arrested.” I do not remember anything I said from that point onward. For the first time in my life, my blood sugar levels plummeted, and I felt a dizziness in my head. I held on to the railing in front of me to keep my balance. As I was about to collapse onto the floor, I lowered myself down and just sat on the floor. I asked for some water. The court clerk
looked at me, eyes wide open as if to say, “What on earth did you just do!” The judge ordered the clerk to take a record of what I had said, the most significant parts at least, and said to me, “You will come back for the hearings this afternoon, and the ones tomorrow. If you fail to come on your own, I will see to it that the police make sure you come here.” “I understand your honor,” I replied. My mind was telling me right then and there that I would be arrested for sure. When I made it home at the end of the day, I told my wife all that had happened throughout the day. The next day’s hearing was a very short one. The interim decision was announced right away. I was under arrest.

My first encounter was with the handcuffs. What we saw only in movies and on television had become the reality of our own lives now. As I was being taken to the hospital for the routine check-up, with permission from the police I called up my wife to inform her of what was going on. She couldn’t say anything except shed tears on the other end of the line. I don’t know whether it was from the shock of it all or just me trying to keep my calm, but there were no tears or any sense of sorrow on my end.

I was finally taken to the prison. After taking my information down, the guardians casually conversed on which ward to send me to, displaying such levity as if they were playing the lottery or some other game. When I heard B11, I was all ears since my father had also been kept in that same ward. I entered the ward and looked around hoping to see a familiar face when right before me stood the general director of the institution that I had been working for. “What are you doing here?” he asked me. I told him the whole story. I admit, I did cry a little bit then. “Are you hungry, let’s fix you something to eat,” they offered right away. As I ate, all my fellow “inmates” came over to say sorry for what had happened, asked my name and started up conversations to welcome me in. I stayed in that ward for about two weeks. Even the district governor from our hometown was there. From professors in the university to former police officers, people were there from all walks of life. I don’t remember the exact date, but on one of the weekends we even had a “çiğ köfte” (traditional dish made with crushed wheat, tomato paste, herbs and spices, usually eaten as comfort food) party. We bought the supplies from the snack bar. One of our friends in the ward “kneaded” the delicacy. We prepared the “ayran” (traditional yogurt drink) and spread out our blankets in the courtyard. We ate and had a good time, we even enjoyed our tea afterwards. It was a truly extraordinary day spent in an extraordinary location. Towards the end, some friends grew so enthusiastic that they even started singing marches from Ottoman times (the Plevne march). I guess the prison guards were listening to us from the top floor because the guards immediately rushed over and shut the doors. The next day we received a written notice. Because of the march sung the day before, an investigation file was being opened on our ward. It was obvious that things were going to turn sour. A few days later the whole ward was dispersed, and everyone was sent somewhere else. We gathered in the courtyard and said our goodbyes. I cried a lot, it was a heartbreaking separation.

I was sent to ward C7 with two other retired police officers. I stayed there for six weeks. It was about a quarter the size of the previous ward—a small, tiny ward-- but it was all the more sincere and warm. Like all the other wards, it was filled with educated gentlemen. From the morning until the afternoon, prayers books were read and conversations circled around the material that was read. When the afternoon prayer time rolled around, those of us who felt young gathered up and played some volleyball in the courtyard. I spent the Eid al-Adha (Festival of the Sacrifice) in that ward. It was an Eid that I will never forget and will always cherish. Among my fellow inmates was a former student’s parent and a doctor who had previously stayed in the same ward with my father. A project being drawn up by the Ministry of Justice was revealed. They were planning to mix inmates like us together with criminals of petty offenses. They had chosen Konya to be the pilot prison to try out this new plan, but their plan did not operate like they had intended. So,
one Tuesday morning, I was taken back to my old ward once again. This time around, the number of inmates had increased, the faces had changed, even the atmosphere felt a bit different. It didn’t feel as comfortable as it used to be. Because it was more crowded now, everything from sleeping arrangements to the long bathroom lines, felt like a big issue now. Thank God, though, despite everything, days were going by quickly, with no fights or any uproars.

A couple weeks later, the Konya “Çatı” file (in which many individuals were being tried for the same crime) hearings started. Some of the inmates in our ward were also being taken to the court as part of these hearings. One day, as we were waiting for our friends to come back from the hearings, someone had slid open the window opening on the ward door, asking for me. I had been outside in the courtyard while this was happening, and I rushed to the door when they said my father was calling for me. I was in shock. I couldn’t believe my eyes. It had been months since I had last seen my father, and now he was standing right across from me. I held his hand so tightly, and we talked for a bit. He looked around at my ward and greeted some of the familiar faces he saw, and then all of a sudden they shut the window. It turns out they had secretly opened the window when waiting in the corridor. His friends had kept watch and covered for him. (I tried to illustrate this in the drawing No.24)

This was bound to happen when his petition to have us stay in the same ward was turned down. When his petitions were left unanswered, he asked to meet in person with the director, and at last they were able to come to an agreement. One Friday, shortly after the noontime prayers (by the way, because our activities were always centered around the prayer times, when speaking about the time, the vocabulary naturally turned to expressions such as “after this prayer,” “before that prayer,” etc.) as I was reading from the Qur’an, the doors opened. There, standing at the door was my father, holding his belongings. I yelled out, “Father!” and reached towards him as he stepped inside. I learned later that when I cried out like that, one of my fellow inmates started crying because he hadn’t seen his own father for months. It was heartbreaking to hear. Yet, happily for us, we had been united, father and son in the same ward. The last month passed by very quickly.

Meanwhile, on the one hand, I was drawing my sketches of what life was like behind bars. On the other hand, I was getting ready for my court hearing. There was an inmate friend who had been a court clerk. I would consult with him, and we would exchange ideas on how I should go about my defense. All the while, my inmate friends would bring over pictures of their spouses, children, mothers and fathers, asking me to transform the pictures into a drawing for them. I did not want to break any of their hearts, so I would take them and work on them as well. On one of those days, I remember I had worked on five different pictures, one after the other, no break. Why they all waited until my last week there beats me! On Saturday, my group was on night duty; on Sunday, I was part of the cleaning crew. I was so beat that the “big brother” of the ward (when I say “big brother” don’t imagine the kind you see in the movies who racketeers money from the other inmates; he was truly a guy who looked out for us and took care of our needs.) felt sorry for me and backed me up saying, “Why are you guys working this poor kid so much, ease up on him. He’s being released tomorrow!”

Monday afternoon I appeared at the court hearing and returned back to the ward towards the evening, a little after the nightly roll-call. Everyone's eyes were wide open, staring at me with questioning eyes. “RELEASE!” I yelled out and an excited uproar broke out. We celebrated with whistles and applause and congratulations all around. I told everyone how it all went down. After the nightly prayer, I said my goodbyes and left for home. I must have been the only inmate who found it so hard to leave their prison ward, because it also meant I was being separated from my father--again. As I stepped out, I turned and said, “See you Wednesday.” Some of them looked at me with a puzzled expression, but then it hit them that it was open visitation on Wednesday! I would be coming to see my father, as a visitor this time!
WHY I DREW THESE PICTURES

The year I started my university education, I considered dropping out, and on not just one, but three separate occasions. In fact, on my third attempt, I even made it as far as the door of the Student Affairs office (and turned back around, of course). It was an environment that I just couldn’t get used to. I felt like I was in a completely different world. People were so relaxed, so occupied with themselves, not stopping to look around at other people and just going about their own (selfish) lives. As for the professors, they were on a whole different planet, so to speak. I felt like I was a foreign student from a faraway land. As I was about to open the door of the Student Affairs office, a thought hit me, just like that, “If I came all the way here, somehow, some way, then there must be a reason for it.” And at that moment, I decided against leaving. If I had dropped out of school, I would never have become a teacher; if I hadn’t become a teacher, my work permit would never have been canceled for such an arbitrary reason, I would never have had a criminal case opened in my name, I would never have been locked up behind bars, I would never have had the opportunity to meet so many amazing people in prison, never have had the memories which I portray in my drawings to share with you...

The first thought that came to my mind after I was put in prison was, “Well, I finally get to have a vacation.” One of my inmate friends who was an assistant professor in the field of physics (I keep referring back to the people I met in prison. I can’t help it, because they are all such special and precious individuals whom I cherish. I had always heard about how the friendships formed in the military and in prison were unforgettable, now I know by experience.) said to me, “Brother, I never had a chance to get a tattoo when I was outside, would you draw a dragon tattoo on my shoulder?” I couldn’t say no to such a wish, so I drew one, using a pen. A few days later, a group of friends chatting in the courtyard caught my attention, and I was moved to make a drawing of them (note picture No.18). In fact, one of my friends in the prison wanted to keep the drawing as a memory, so I gifted it to him. A colleague of mine, who had also been my director and who had first welcomed me into the ward, saw the work I did and said to me, “If you ask me, you should draw all that you can to portray what it is like in here, show them in your drawings. A day will come when justice will be sought in the courts. Just as there was a way into all of this, there will be a way out. When that day comes, everyone should be able to see what we went through.” Upon his advice, I started observing all the activities going on about me more intently, such as the roll-call in the ward, the bathroom line, the “snack bar” day, open visitations, what the ward looked like on a regular day, etc...and I stored everything in my memory. I even felt the need to apologize to my wife one evening. “What are you apologizing for?” she asked me. “I didn’t pay much attention to you during visitation,” I replied. “I was busy observing all that was going on around us so I could store them in my memory and get it down in my drawings.”

I drew all that I could find time for while I was still “inside” and the rest of the drawings, I completed after my release. Whenever some friends ask me whether there’s anything new, I give a vague answer and say, “I’m working on it...” Months ago, when I did share a couple of my drawings, they somehow got passed back and forth among friends wanting to share with their close ones, and all of a sudden I had become an anonymous artist on social media. Whenever I started working on anything new, my inmate friends would joke around, saying, “Don’t forget to draw me too bro!” and would always support me. One of my friends in ward C7 said to me, “Brother, whatever you see here, try and carry it all as best you can onto
your drawings. We try and do the best we can to pour out our hearts, to write down our memories, our poems, our homesickness and our experiences as best we can, but what you can express through your drawings can only be expressed through pages and pages of writing and still not be as effective.” (The person saying this to me was a professor who had authored the only book written in his own specific field of study.)

When I had returned to my previous ward and got to meet new people and form new friendships, I had the opportunity to get to know them and listen to their stories as well. When I told them about my interest in drawing, the first thing they would ask me would be, “Brother, have you drawn pictures about our life here?” and I would rush and bring my drawings to show them. They would admire the drawings and grow emotional. One of them even said, “I keep telling my wife about how we even wash dishes and do laundry and clean and mop, but she blows me off telling me not to exaggerate. If I showed her this, she certainly wouldn’t be so cynical anymore.”

The smile that would appear on the faces of those looking at the drawings, it was truly something invaluable, priceless; it meant more to me than the wealth of the worlds. A brother who looked at the pictures said, “Brother, you truly have found your calling here.” I was walking on clouds that day. I was so filled with joy-- it felt like I was literally flying.

I went to bed late that night. I stayed up, working on my drawings. I thought to myself, “I wish I could change wards every week and be able to draw the uniqueness being experienced in each one of them.” With these thoughts running through my head, I have tried to take notes of all the moments and memories I stored in my heart and mind. Unfortunately, there were some drawings that I could not finish to include in this book. I hope and pray that I have been able to duly portray the atmosphere we all experienced on the “inside.” I thank God that He put me in there. I got to experience unforgettable memories, and I got to know unforgettable people while I was in there. And I was blessed to experience some of the most delicious food I have ever tasted in my life, like the menemen (traditional breakfast dish made with eggs, tomatoes, and peppers) our friends had prepared for us on the semaver (traditional tea pot) during our Eid al-Adha (Festival of the Sacrifice) celebratory breakfast.
If I were a swallow flapping 
his winds at the setting sun,

If I ripped out the pages 
of my life and started anew

If swung my prayer beads through every 
inch of the concrete courtyard I walked 
on, while saying a prayer for each new 
day hoping this would end one day

If I raised my hands a bit higher each day 
for you, and my family and your children

If I begged and pleaded as 
my hands touched the ceiling of 
the ward, would you, o brother, give me 
a handful of your freedom?

I raise my hands up 
to my Lord, and I pray

Please don’t silence this 
melody before its day

These tribulations 
shall surely be no more,

As the whole world 
will witness one day.
This captures one of those moments when the wards would be subject to a routine count once in the morning and once in the evening. In summer days, the morning counts were done out in the courtyard, and if the weather was rainy or snowy the counts would be done in front of the door. Evening counts would be inside because the courtyard door was already closed off by that time. The warden would walk through the door and his aides would look around to see if there were any mishaps. Glasses in hand, he would start counting. When it was over, they would say a little prayer, “God save you.” Done with the “duty” of the day, the hustle and bustle inside would resume once again.

Generally speaking, our days could be described as being pretty calm and ordinary. After a period of getting used to the regular drill, as the door opened for the count, we would start calling out our numbers when it was our turn, without even bothering to look at the face of the person entering the ward. I remember once one of my inmate friends was wearing only an undershirt during the morning count. After the count was over, the chief warden turned to him and said, “Don’t go out dressed like that again.” “What?!” I thought to myself. They were treating us like we were in some formal business environment or something. As if that pressure were not enough, to make it even more unbearable, they wanted to increase our numbers day by day. But there was one thing they were missing: the more we grew in number, the stronger we grew in spirit!
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
FIGURE 2
Describing the Prison in Pictures

I stayed in this ward for about eight weeks. Words cannot adequately describe the place I stayed in. We lived in a duplex with a total of fifty-eight people. We used the upper floor to sleep. The courtyard closed before dark, and we couldn't go outside. I spent most of my time there literally on the floor. Some people who had to sleep lying directly on the ground could not get a full night's sleep or a restful one and felt the need to ask some of their friends if they could sleep in their beds during the daytime for a little bit. On the downstairs level, life continued pretty much according to routine. This included prayer, reading the Qur'an or books, doing laundry, waiting in the restroom line, playing chess, etc...
FIGURE 3

The Beds

There were soldiers coming. They had been in custody for a few days. When they first arrived in the ward, we took the soldiers upstairs so that soldiers would not be too disturbed and would get used to being there. When two or three newcomers arrived, the guards would now ask if we needed a bed for newcomers to sleep on. But there were plenty of beds, thank God. Because it was the autumn months, the downstairs was pretty cold to stay in. But we didn't have the option to stay anywhere else, so we stayed downstairs for about a week. But thank God we didn't hear any complaints from anyone such as, "My neck is stiff," or, "I was cold," or, "I couldn't sleep," etc. Finally, after some time, we held a vote, and it was decided that everyone should stay upstairs. This meant that if there were three people in a bed already, it now became four. I realize that this is quite hard to imagine, but, believe me, when the opportunities and conditions around you are so limited, anything is possible.
FIGURE 4
Prayer Time, My Favorite Time of Day

The evening and night prayers were one thing that I looked forward to every day while in prison. I felt very much at peace during that time. Of course, the space allotted to prayer and the blankets and prayer rugs to be used were very limited. If anyone had taken their ablution already, they were allowed to go ahead and start praying. Everyone kept an open eye to their right and left and called up the person waiting behind them for a prayer spot if there was a slight opening anywhere. Those who were waiting in line to take their ablution, if they missed their spot in line, they had to wait for space to open up on the blanket afterwards. What brought me so much peace during this time was the amazing brotherhood I sensed around me. Everyone was equal. I mean, whether you're a soldier, or you're elderly, whether you're an officer or not, it does not matter. In the end, everyone is merely a servant of Allah the Almighty.
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
FIGURE 5
The Ward

We were split into different groups and sent to different wards. When leaving the first ward I cried a lot because I had to leave my dear friends/brothers there, brothers whom I will never forget. I and two retired police officers were sent to ward C7. C7 was about a one third of the size of the ward we came from. There were 20 inmates in C7, including us, the newcomers. There was always hot tea available. As long as the courtyard remained open, we would play a game of volleyball every week. We even played a game on Eid al-Adha, the Festival of the Sacrifice, our second most important religious festival as Muslims. I was very happy there. Like in most wards, our basic needs were purchased jointly. Since the number was low here, biscuits, soda, chocolate and nuts were purchased together too. I felt very comfortable there. I had six beautiful weeks. Because our living area was so small, we had to stand jammed side-by-side for the evening counts. When we brought one of the tables inside from the courtyard, to read, write, or draw our already tight space grew even tighter. On the other hand, the ritualistic daily counts were short because we were so few in number.
FIGURE 6

Prayer Time

Because the C7 ward was a tight space, the layout of our living quarters was problematic when trying to gather into a congregation for prayer. Only some of our friends were able to join the congregation at one time, and prayers were held with some people joining from above and others from below. In fact, when some of us were out playing volleyball, we would have another group gather inside to do their prayers. The imam would be leading from upstairs, and because the ward was so small, we would have no trouble hearing his voice. I would cry tears of joy during some of the evening prayers. One person who used to lead the prayers in the morning was my cardiologist, Huseyin. In the mornings, he would lean against the window railings and recite the call to prayer. I will never forget that beautiful house of worship!
FIGURE 7
Using the Card System for the Toilet

We had to develop some kind of card system to figure out an efficient way to use the restroom. As the number of inmates increased, the time allotted for each one of us to take care of our basic personal needs decreased. And when people had very limited opportunities to take care of their most basic needs, this naturally became a problem. As a person who has personally witnessed the “inside,” I am telling you this with utmost sincerity. If there was no tolerance or mutual respect and love for each other, fights would be inevitable. For some, the long wait was not a problem. However, for others, especially for those with high sensitivity towards hygiene and others who suffered from conditions like prostate, it was a whole other issue. It was an issue that could not just be disregarded. Given the circumstances, we did the best we could; for example, if there was an elderly man waiting for a turn, we would give him priority.
FIGURE 8
Sleeping in the Dorm

Even though it was very tight, twenty of us stayed together in the dormitory in the C7 ward. I stayed a total of six beautiful weeks in that dormitory. It was a ward that housed six double-decker bunk beds. The only problem was that we either had to be in bed at the agreed time, or else we had to stand guard below. Standing guard meant you had to keep yourself busy with some kind of activity/chore below. And so, we learned to keep ourselves busy in our beds, keeping busy with any activity that we could think of. We read from the Qur'an, we read the Jawshan (a special compilation of prayers through the Beautiful Names of Allah) prayers, we read, we wrote, we drew... When we woke up in the morning, we stayed quiet and tried not to disturb anyone around us.

We had a rule in our ward that was different from the other wards. If you were age 50 or over, you were automatically exempt from taking on any chores like preparing meals, cleaning tables, wiping floors, etc. Also, the bunk beds were first allocated to those people as a sign of respect for their age. I slept on the floor during my whole stay in the ward. We gathered on our beds during morning prayer. Since we were congregating on both the upper and lower floors, we were used to the prayer times. We would try to fill the remaining time reading the Qur'an and the Jawshan prayers, until the morning count. Every Sunday there would be a routine general cleaning. We couldn't have anything left out after 10:00, or it would go into the trash. Every evening the floor of the downstairs ward was cleaned and mopped before the courtyard door closed for the day. My favorite thing to do in the ward was to read the newspapers out in the courtyard in the mornings. I cried on many occasions after I had been released as I remembered my time there.
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
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FIGURE 10
Prison Ward during Hot Weather
FIGURE 11
Activities in the Ward

I drew pictures of ward B11 in the first weeks after I had been arrested. It was the month of July. The weather was hot, and everyone just lay down on their beds without a blanket. The first ward that my father entered was B11 also. I remember what my father told me on our first visiting days. There were so many people in the ward that they wrote a petition to the administration telling them of their need for more beds. The solution they found was bunk beds. Some bunk beds were three levels high. The traces of welding on the third levels were very clear.

When I first arrived, there were thirty-eight of us. There wasn't much congestion. The only thing was that if we ran into someone while coming up and down the narrow stairs, we would get stuck. The courtyard was large enough though. We had a TV. The prison TV had one channel, and sometimes they put on some nice movies. The same movie would play again and again for two or three days. I remember the first day I came in to the ward, there was a sink under the stairs that had been built that same day.

When I came in, Brother Celalettin—the person who encouraged me to draw these pictures—was surprised to see me there. “What would a young man like you be doing in here, tiger?” he asked. “Are you hungry?” he continued without wasting any time. I will never forget him and the way he welcomed me. Gradually, as I got acquainted with the friends there, questions came up, such as, “What had we all been busy with before being thrown in here?” and “How long had it been since teachers had started getting arrested as well?” and so forth. When I told one of them that I had been an art teacher, he said to me, “Oh! God, what on earth is a painter doing here, my brother?” One of the guys prayed before going to bed, “Oh! God, at least send us a musician as well.” We laughed and joked about it, but in my heart it also felt as if my profession didn't get any respect, even in prison. However, now when I look back at it all, I see that we were able to immortalize some beautiful memories.
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
FIGURE 12
The Kitchen in Ward C7

The kitchen area of ward C7 was very small. Even studio apartments have a larger kitchen. There was a mini-fridge placed under the stairs on the right side. On a long shelf near the fridge was a stash of snacks, chocolate, nuts, tea, sugar, salt, and spices. Our tea samovars were placed on the counter. The samovars were cleaned once a week. We used a large bowl to make salads; stored in a cabinet on the wall were jugs, food containers, tea cups, spoons, forks, etc. The bread bucket and trash were placed under the counter. There were about twenty people using this small kitchen. We were allowed to bring soda into the ward. Thanks be to God, I never remembering feeling any hunger while staying there. After the evening prayers, we used to sit down on the floor with our blankets for a lesson on the principles and teachings of our religion, Islam, until it was time for bed. During that time of conversation and learning, we would sip our sodas with some squeezed lemon for refreshment.
FIGURE 13
The Eid (Bayram) Prayer

I will never forget the Eid (religious festival) prayer we performed together while in prison. On that day, I was crying tears of happiness. Yes, indeed, tears flowed from my eyes from the warmth and sincerity inside. I did not cry from sadness. Even though we were locked inside four walls, there was an enthusiasm and excitement inside me because of the warmth of our conversations and our friendship. A friend named Mustafa, who had been a student of theology in the university, read us a sermon, standing on a stool that served as a makeshift mimbar, or pulpit. Our Eid prayer had been as good and complete as any other. The prison had a late count that morning. On regular days it was at seven o'clock, but that morning they came at nine o'clock. The guards congratulated our Eid, or Bayram as we call it in our mother tongue. During the three days of celebration, we were served mainly meat dishes. May Allah be pleased with the guards for treating us well on that very special day for us! It was also the time I had the most delicious menemen (a traditional breakfast dish consisting of sautéed tomatoes and peppers topped with eggs) I have ever tasted in my entire life. The guys used one of our samovars as the stove. We had a wonderful and memorable breakfast together.
FIGURE 14
The Eid (Bayram) Festival

At long last it was time for our Bayram (Eid) festival. Everyone celebrated as if they were going out to visit their relatives, so happy and full of excitement. We hugged each other long and tight. Someone cried; someone started up a halay (a folk dance in which dancers form a long line, joining by the arms or shoulders and moving in rhythmic steps). Everyone shaved and shampooed, shoes were polished and hair was combed. We had a grand breakfast, feasting on food that was laid out on the chairs brought out to the courtyard. Everyone chatted. We had a delicious feast accompanied by laughter. It was as if the courtyard were the courtyard of the village. We chatted until lunch. After having lunch and performing our prayers, in the afternoon, the tables were joined and the conversation started around the study of our religion and principles. We played volleyball and enjoyed the outside for three days straight. I was very happy. When I was little, we used to go door to door in the village collecting candy and sweets from the neighbors in celebration of Bayram, and I would feel so happy. I had the same feelings and felt that same happiness here.
FIGURE 15
Watching Television in the Ward

One of the most cherished moments in the B11 ward was watching television after the evening prayers. It didn't matter if you were young or old. We'd stand in front of the high-mounted television and watch a nice movie or a fun show. In the later hours, when the elderly among us went upstairs, the sound of the television was muted. Those who stayed behind to chat talked in a whisper. Sometimes we even played a game, like charades, etc. As you can perhaps imagine, though time was flying very quickly on the outside, every single minute inside was felt deeply, and we tried to make the most of it.
FIGURE 16
Doing the Laundry

Because there was no laundry service for the inmates in the prison, we had to wait in anticipation for the “hot water hours,” which would come at certain intervals and periods of time, to wash our dirty laundry. The white and the coloreds would be washed in the same basins with only the limited amount of detergent that we were able to acquire from the canteen. The reason I’m saying “a limited amount” is because the basins and detergent we received had to be purchased with our own money. Over time, as if to add to the torment we were already under, the amount of water made available was reduced and as much as seven people would gather by a basin to collect each other’s “excess” water. Even though we were paying for it with our own money, there was only one brush allotted to each ward, and the rest were broken. The prison administration had to give special permission for the use of the brush.

We were allowed only a certain period of time to wash our clothes. There was not a formal line for the washing process; however we did have to finish up as fast as we could so everybody who needed to would get a chance to take care of their laundry. The number of basins were limited, and the water temperature in the basins was not always consistent. Especially in the cold winter days, we needed to be even quicker. After the washing, there was the spinning and then hanging the clothes on the hanger that we had made with weaving thread. Then there was the issue of, would there be room on the rope or not? Most importantly, would the wet laundry even dry? Bleaching for the whites was, of course, a necessity. Some friends developed a method for that. They took the old, empty five-liter water bottles, stuffed their laundry in the bottle through the hole and then added some bleach and water. Every so often, they would give the bottle a good shake and then rinse the clothes out once they were done with the process. It was an exhausting process that required great attention.
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
FIGURE 17
Breakfast in Ward C7

Because the guards had to be up very early in the morning for the ritual morning count, breakfast was always ready by that time. We would wait for the count and then it was breakfast time. The space inside was too tight, so lunch and dinner would always be served out in the garden. If the day was sunny and if the table was full of delicious food, everything was great. Tea service started with breakfast in the morning. A samovar was installed right next to the staircase. Tea would be served all day until the door was closed for the evening. We could drink our hot drinks and sip our coffee out in the garden.
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
FIGURE 18
No Time was Wasted

As was the same in the other wards, no time was wasted in ward B11. Some would study; some would read the Holy Qur'an; some would recite prayers and supplication—in other words, do dhikr, using the prayer beads they made from olive seeds. If there happened to be anyone suffering from a backache, surely there was someone giving them a nice massage. Everyone was busy with something or other. Instead of killing time, we were busy using that time to the last minute. There were even some friends who taught lessons from their own fields of expertise. For example, some of the “classes” you could encounter in ward C7 included English lessons, Arabic lessons, lessons on daily practices centered around religious principles, and subjects like math, physics, chemistry, and even medicine. There were so many teachers in that tiny workshop of ours. Even I gave art lessons while in there. I would help others learn to draw by placing objects such as cups and utensils I picked up from the kitchen in front of them and help them in preparing a composition, etc. Truly, no one in there was there in vain. Thanks be to God, I was awakened to my mission in there. These pictures that you are looking at would never have come about if I had not been arrested. (In this picture, you will see a water bottle hanging on a rope. The ropes were used to make more use of space and protect clothes from having direct contact with the wall.)
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
FIGURE 19

Conversations in the Ward

In ward C7, following the ritual breakfast and morning classes, the books were stacked up and the conversations started. These conversations would last until the late afternoon. If we did not say we would play volleyball, these conversations would even last until dinner time. This was not just an hour or two; I mean, they would last hours on end. Although the people gathered around the table were from many different professions and backgrounds, the books we read together at the table and the teachings we learned were based on the Qur'an. Everyone would comment on what they had understood from the readings, share their own knowledge, and ask about what they had just learned, thus turning it all into a rich conversation. Some gave examples from their own professions, which in a sense gave life to the theoretical teachings we were learning in the books.
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
THE VOLLEYBALL GAMES

The volleyball games were my favorite time in Ward C7. These games would last about an hour during the late afternoon. When I was transferred from ward B11 to ward C7, I was very sad. I had left my ward friends behind. So, to bring up the morale of the ward, the friends in my new ward suggested, “Let’s play volleyball.” Thus, I relieved the stress on me. We used to play one or two days a week. There was a line on the wall to mark the ball as out of bounds because the courtyard was so narrow. There wasn’t even a real net in the side ward. We used a rope we had wrapped with a garbage bag to thicken it to make it clear to both teams. I was so bad at playing sports that my team always needed one extra player. On one occasion, the ball hit my right middle finger so hard that I couldn’t play for a whole week. That was when I understood the reason everyone was so reluctant to complain about anything. If, let’s say, we happened to get sick or injured, we wouldn’t be able to go to the infirmary right away as we had on the outside.
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
FIGURE 21
The Count in the Summer Days

As you can tell from the way my friends are dressed in this picture, it was summer. We were doing our ritual morning count. As I mentioned previously, some friends had received warnings just for having come out wearing only an undershirt. The warning was delivered either by making direct eye contact or directly by word.
While in prison, there were some vitamins that we couldn't get from food. One of these essential vitamins was vitamin D. In the morning, we used to pace up and down while exercising, and also warming up and standing out in the sunlight for a certain period of time. Because we couldn't go beyond the limits of the ward, we had no place to sunbathe for very long. And so, we would stretch out our feet on a stool in front of us and just sit still under the sun for a while, as if we were sunbathing by the sea. Because the angle with which the sunlight reached our little courtyard changed every hour, it was sometimes difficult to sunbathe, especially in the winter months. I remember how in ward B11, my friends would stand up against the wall and raise their arms up high, with their palms facing towards the sun as they basked in the sunshine for a while.
I stayed in custody for just one night. Thank God, it didn't take long. The worst part of it all was the suspenseful waiting. There were other detainees, like my father, who had been kept in the detention room, just waiting, for ten days. He was in the first arrested party. Maybe the guards were waiting for them to confess somehow, who knows. Later, as time passed, some apparently would decide to “confess.” Regardless of any health problems one might be suffering from, people were kept under custody for many days straight. My father told me that they had taken him to two separate custody rooms without even thinking about whether there was enough room for people to sleep in there. There wasn't even a common area for everyone to get out and relax a little bit.

A friend who was also being kept under custody described this picture. I tried to draw a picture exactly like the one he described to me. When I finished it, he said to me, “Yes, it was exactly like this.” Those who had something like cardboard or some other thick substance to lie on were the lucky ones. Otherwise, when morning came around, the people were freezing cold because the ground was so cold. And no one had any chance of being treated for illness in the infirmary.

When my father had been in custody, one of the cops spoke to him. “How's it going?” the policeman had asked him. “You know I can save you from this, right? Give me a few names and you can get out of here and go have dinner with your family.” My father replied, “Are you asking me to ruin someone else's life just to save my own?!"
Every single minute, every single second in the wards was so important and so valuable for us. In this picture, one of my friends is trying to read while he is doing his laundry at the same time. This is not a made-up story; it's not some imaginary drawing. It is a scene that I witnessed with my own two eyes. When the time was so cherished, we would end up doing multiple things at once.
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
FIGURE 25
Detained with my Father
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
My father was transferred to the Konya prison from the Alanya prison. He had first been sent to Alanya because each prison had a quota, and when that quota was met, the prisoners were sent to other prisons in the neighboring cities. Naturally, the wards were full because they were also filled with regular/real criminals. My father spoke about the Alanya prison being like heaven for them. This was a funny, really funny thing to hear! How could a man see prison as paradise? He described the atmosphere and the physical conditions of the wards as being very nice indeed. When brought back to Konya, my father had said to the administration, “My son is here, too,” and he wanted to be assigned to the same ward. The guards had said that was impossible. Yet, after speaking to the warden one last time, he was finally able to come and join us in our ward that day.

I was walking in the courtyard on a Tuesday. People said that a friend had heard my father calling from the peephole. I ran. I looked and saw my father waving through the opening. My father told me that we could have a little chat without getting caught while his friends stood guard at the beginning and end of the corridor. He even greeted those he recognized who were staying in our ward. When my former director (who was also an inmate now) asked me who this was, I said, this is my father, and he hugged me so tight. We cried together. A week later on a Friday afternoon, my father was standing in the door of our ward, with his belongings.
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
A piece of cardboard box packaging that teacups came in was taken from the canteen and torn up into cards. Everyone was given a number and card, and when that person's number came up on the card, that person could now use the bathroom. In the conditions we were in, we had to set up such a system so there would be no waiting for minutes on end at the restroom door. Of course, like in any system, there were rules that had to be put in place. For example, no one could use another person's cue card. No cards were used in the minutes before bedtime. The elderly members of our ward, those with years of experience behind them, chose to lie down in the evenings without drinking any tea or coffee. On the other hand, there were other friends who joked around saying they would exchange chocolate or coffee for a number card.

FIGURE 27
Waiting to Use the Restroom
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
Canteen days were seen as days to be celebrated when in prison. On those days, all kinds of snacks, drinks, razors, soap, toothpaste, and just about anything else imaginable would be available for us. There would be excitement and uproar throughout the ward and everyone’s faces would shine with happiness. It felt like we had just been paid a visit by an uncle who was giving out gifts to us all. Our turn for the canteen would come around after the Wednesday noon prayers. Everyone would finish their prayers quickly and wait patiently for the bags to be opened. When a person’s name was called out, he would come forward and take his items. This might seem completely ordinary for someone from the outside, but I see it in a much different light. People living in that atmosphere were under a much different psychology; someone could very well be crushed, completely disappointed, if the process was conducted in a disorderly fashion. Thanks be to God, I never experienced such disrespect while there. Every person had their own needs and wants as well as the common needs for everyone in the ward; for example, we would need cheese, tea, detergent, and toilet paper to be used by everyone in the ward. Since these were common use items, the money owed would be written on the ward board on a list, and everyone would pay at the end of the month for their share, from their own money. Also, expenses like electricity were shared too.
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
FIGURE 29
Cleaning Days
Each week, one group cleaned the upstairs, and another group cleaned the courtyard. The cleaning routine included cleaning the bathroom and toilet, cleaning the blankets and prayer rugs, cleaning the refrigerator and the samovars. The floors were washed also. It would take a long time to wash and clean the floors. Luckily, we didn't experience any water shortages.
When I look at this picture, The Last Supper of Leonardo da Vinci comes to mind. After the morning count, especially if the weather was cold, everyone went back inside and sat right away at the table where they wanted. Whoever was on breakfast duty would wipe down the table once it filled up, and another friend--also on breakfast duty--would arrange the bread, tahini, and molasses. If a table--designed to hold six people--was
already full, then we would rush to find a seat at another table. If there was no room left, we would just watch the morning news on the TV standing up.

For some, breakfast was not much of a worry. They would just sit near the door and pick up their newspapers and start reading. Someone would buy the simit, the traditional breakfast bagel, and we would pay them back from our weekly share. Another friend on duty would wander around the tables and hand fill the glasses, holding the tea kettle with one hand and the hot water container with the other. Because everyone was a tea drinker, there often wasn't enough tea for a second round. The ones on breakfast duty for the day ended up eating their breakfast after everyone else was done. The same goes for lunch and dinner.
One of my friends told me that in one of the wards, one of the inmates had gotten sick in the evening and pushed the emergency button many times. In the end, his friends had to carry him in a blanket and take him out of the ward and to the infirmary without any help from the guards. I can't say I know much about people's health problems, but, as a human being, I can't help but think, "Shouldn't an officer offer some kind of help in such situations?"
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
Visiting days were held every two months in our prison. We waited for two months but then were only allowed to meet our loved ones for one hour, and that was it. And the process was made into such an ordeal and was so painful. Everyone had to pass through the X-ray machine. Newly married couples, fiancées, young people, elderly parents, children yelling and screaming, holding on tightly to their fathers, desperate not to leave each other, tears flowing... There was an incredible flood of emotion going on... It is virtually indescribable. Children did not want to leave, they were shouting, "Daddy, Daaaadddddyyyy..." Mothers with tears flowing down their cheeks, innocent children waving goodbye. For those coming from distant towns and cities, the whole tiresome process would start once again when they left. The visitors had to rush out right away so as not to miss their bus back home. And then there were those coming back into the ward, entering their prison separated from their family once again; those already back in the ward tried to hug each new arrival to help them forget the bitterness they felt at that moment. Afterwards, most of the inmates would just curl up on their beds, pull a blanket on top of them, and, if they had a picture of their child or spouse with them, they would lie down beside it. That's where I discovered the art of crying inwardly.
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF A TEACHER IN PRISON
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