



A MEMOIR

# Classified Woman

THE SIBEL EDMONDS STORY

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Published by Sibel Edmonds, Alexandria, Virginia  
ISBN-13: 978-0615602226  
ISBN-10: 0615602223

## *On Sibel Edmonds*

“We have been doing national security litigation for more than 30 years, and in our view, this is the most egregious misuse of the classification authority we’ve seen.”

—Michael Kirkpatrick, *Washington Times*

“Having lived under tyranny in Iran and elsewhere, Edmonds knows what it looks like. In her case and in many other recent cases, tyranny comes in the form of the state secrets privilege, a foolproof mechanism of the federal government to hide executive branch corruption, incompetence, and illegal activity. This is a practice more at home with czars and nabobs, and should have no place in the United States. But Edmonds gave the government something it never expected—a no-holds-barred battle. She hoisted the black flag and went on the attack by forming the National Security Whistleblowers Coalition, an organization dedicated to changing the law, exposing government misdeeds, and giving hell to those who richly deserve it.”

—Professor William Weaver, University of Texas

“She’s a First Amendment cannonball. She speaks up for what she believes in. She’s a leader. The fact that she, not only, was a strong advocate for her own case, but she became a strong advocate for the public policy, for the greater good.”

—Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney (D-New York)

“She had the intuition, the courage, and the backbone to stand up and do it. And we are very grateful for her. And the PEN Award is significant in that regard. Tell the public what happened—Sibel Edmonds was a heroine in this.”

—Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-New Jersey)

“Sibel Edmonds is certainly one of my heroes and I’m glad to have heard of her effort. I admire what she is doing very much. I think she’s serving the country very well.”

—Daniel Ellsberg, “Democracy Now!”

“Sibel Edmonds’ Kafkaesque ordeal underscores how easily government powers, especially powers wielded in the name of national security, can be abused to keep the public in the dark about official failings. PEN is deeply troubled by Sibel Edmonds’ story and by the growing number of reports of efforts by the administration to silence government employees.”

—Larry Siems, PEN American Center

“Sibel Edmonds is an American Patriot. She has a classic story to tell—which is the story of an immigrant, who came here seeking more freedom, and seeking a real democracy—and w

unfortunately shut down when she tried to exercise her rights under the First Amendment.”

—Ann Beeson, American Civil Liberties Union

“For nearly a decade, Sibel Edmonds has fought against excessive government secrecy, built up an organization of more than one hundred national security whistleblowers, and exposed government attempts to cover up abuses.”

—James Bamford, bestselling author and award-winning journalist

“The silencing of Edmonds has been remarkably silent. Which is probably just what the FBI was counting on in the first place.”

—Clay Risen, *The New Republic*

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*To Ela & F.R. Den*

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## Introduction

Some say life is a journey. I agree. My life has been three major journeys, each marked by a distinctive set of events that defined and shaped who and where I am today.

The first journey of my life took me to Iran. It was marked by witnessing my father subjected to arrest, interrogation and, of course, torture, a common practice in the reign of Shah Reza Pahlavi, Iran's king. My father—a doctor, a surgeon—believed in democracy and liberal values; he advocated collective bargaining for the working class to achieve health care benefits and wages that would enable them to survive. For this he was marked as a Communist and imprisoned. For doing right by others he was tortured. In spite of it all, and against ardent protestations of his family, he continued to fight for his country's freedoms; to help where he could, to ease suffering. His were deeply held beliefs. His journey became mine, at a very early age. We were bonded.

That first journey too was marked by revolution: I watched it unfold and witnessed oppression, persecution, and merciless injustice. Overnight, fundamental values were forced on me: how I should be dressed, how I should cover every strand of hair, how precisely and how many times I must pray. I had no choice in the matter of where I lived; we don't get to choose where we are born or taken by our parents. While this bumpy road ended as tumultuously as it started, I carry its scars with me. They are permanent. My disdain for any form of religious fundamentalism, aversion to even the worst *monarchy*, and hatred for any despotic practice, all were acquired during this time and will stay with me forever.

The second journey began on my return to Turkey. This one was marked by censorship: my fellow Turks and I were forced to swallow words and black out any sentence forbidden by those who ruled. Punishment for violators was cruel and severe, as happened to many authors and reporters I admired: all of them locked up for expressing opinions that many shared but few dared even to acknowledge. Here it was in black and white: when freedom of the press and expression are taken away, the suffering and ill consequences are not limited to only those few who write and report. All of my father's resolve, for instance, all his hard work and support, were not adequate to prevent censorship from affecting what I was taught in school, what I yearned to learn and what I longed to express. These were forbidden.

The iron force of the Turkish state marked my second journey with its mass killing of its minorities, mass detention of its dissidents, and mass corruption among its ruling parties. This journey too was one by default; I played no role in starting it. I did, however, conclude it by making the decision to leave it behind and choosing the next path myself. These experiences too, for as long as I live, are engraved in my conscience and soul. My passionate love for freedom of speech and of the press, my dedication to the protection of due process, and my endless quest for government held accountable—gained in the void of their absence—always will remain an inseparable part of me.

The most important of my three journeys is the third. This is the one chosen freely: coming to the United States of America. This journey started as love at first sight. Its beginning was marked by

living with the kind of freedom and rights that had existed only in books and my fantasies. This road became a highway as I began to know the Constitution my new country theoretically upheld, the separation of powers it said it exercised, and a fairly new concept of equality it tried to nurture. I chose this country, and I wanted to immerse myself in its culture; to meld with it, blend into it, become inseparable, so that all those things I admired and longed for would apply to me; would envelop me. I rushed through its steps until I reached the top, where I would declare my oath to my newfound land, and dedicate myself not only to cherish but also to protect it for as long as I chose to live in it. The strength and fidelity of this union didn't lessen over time. Each passing year, of education in its laws and history, of visits to any of the diverse cultures it contained, left a lovely mark in me to hold on to, show, and treasure.

Until, that is, the chosen road changed shape and took me in a blind direction, leading me into dark, cold places I never thought existed. Just like the dark side of the moon, here was the dark side of my precious third journey—a side not many talked of or wrote about; an ugly side that may have shown up here and there, once in a while, throughout its history, like a child's "bad monster" popping up in the night, then retreating into shadows, never lingering long enough to be seen or figured out, never exposed in the light.

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## Prologue

I threw my carry-on into the backseat. Once behind the wheel, I paused to take a mental inventory of what I would need: passport, *check*; traveler's checks, *check*; cash in dollars and Turkish lira, *check*.

I looked at my watch: half past three. I gazed on our townhouse, reflecting; the third Christmas in a row with no jolly wreath on our door or festive lights decorating the trim. I had a little less than two and a half hours to get to the airport, which was less than fifteen minutes away, to purchase my ticket to JFK with a continuing flight to Istanbul, get on the plane, and take off. I couldn't procrastinate any longer, so I started the engine, pulled out of our driveway, and headed north toward Reagan National Airport.

The gray, windy December day promised a heavy downpour, precisely mirroring my mood. I tightened my grip on the wheel to steady my shaking hands. I'd left a short note for my husband telling him it was time for me to go and face whatever awaited me there. I was not going to miss the chance to see my grandmother one last time. I would not let them erase me from my family's map.

Until a few years earlier, before the dark journey began, we frequented the country at least once a year, and my family paid us annual visits. Then came the nightmare; changing everything, turning our life upside down.

I had plotted the trip in secrecy, something I had never done in all our years of marriage. I knew he would do everything he could to stop me from taking this trip. It was, after all, a matter of life and death.

I turned right at the airport entrance and squinted to make out the signs to long-term parking. My vision blurred, and I knew at once it was not poor visibility but tears. My determination, my will began to melt with each passing second. I drove past the parking entrance and continued on. I made two more turns around the airport, tears still falling, before I took the exit. Now I was crying out loud sobbing. The pangs, pain, fear, rage and everything else I had bottled up in me for the past four years began to pour out; a floodtide of grief.

Yes, this was true acceptance, full acknowledgment. I could never ever go back. I would never see my extended family again. My past, my ties, my bonds and heritage all had been wiped out—completely and forever.

In my country of origin I have been branded as a spy for the United States of America. There have been characterized as a “traitor against the country” and named as “the enemy of the state.”

According to Turkish government insiders, there exists an outstanding warrant for my arrest and incarceration. The moment I set foot in that country, I'll be arrested and jailed under its so-called State Treason Laws, and be prosecuted in a military tribunal without access to outside representation. This is only if I'm lucky, since the likely fate that awaits me is to be taken—disappeared—and added to the list of tens of thousands of “unexplained” missing persons.

I am no longer able to visit Turkey or any of my family there, including my beloved grandmother. The ties that connect me to my past have been permanently severed. My family

members have been warned and threatened to cease all contacts with me. The bonds that connect me to my friends as well, even those from childhood, no longer exist.

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Instead of driving directly back home, I exited left, to the quiet Potowmack Landing, a sailboat marina in a quaint little harbor on the Potomac River facing the airport's runways. The place seemed deserted. Considering the now steady rain, I wasn't surprised.

I parked in an isolated, gravelly space, pulled up the zipper on my gray fleece jacket and tucked it in my knitted scarf before stepping out. I walked to the pier, ignoring the razorlike wind and rain striking me in the face.

The view was beautiful, soft and melancholy. The masts on many of the boats were strung with multicolored lights, but the cheery decorations only darkened my mood.

Across the river, despite the poor visibility and encroaching night, I could make out the famous landmarks of Washington, DC; of its past, its government. The Jefferson Memorial, Washington Monument, the Capitol ... I smiled bleak and bitterly, for once upon a time I'd seen them with different eyes and marveled at all they represented. They served as reminders of our democracy, the Bill of Rights and a government of the people, by the people, for the people. They used to fill me with a sense of pride and contentment. Now they carried an awful, different meaning; one that evoked in me fear, disappointment, distrust, rage and sadness. These feelings were mingled with futility, a sense of desperation that things would never be fixed, and pessimism too—about the chances of ever recovering what was lost, or even if that were possible.

I felt deep pangs when I thought about this government, this monstrous new entity, taking over. I felt all the wounds, inflicted on me directly; they began to ooze and bleed. I couldn't go back to where I came from, but I didn't want to stay here either. I was too tired to fight. I had battled for four long years nonstop and been defeated in every single one. They had taken nearly everything from me, everything I was. Here I was now, a woman excluded from her nation's laws, protections and rights; a woman whose very existence has been attacked; a woman who has been shut up by the government she so once admired.

By the media and the public, I'm commonly referred to as the State Secrets Case, the Gagged Woman or the Classified Whistleblower.

Among legal experts I'm cited as "the most egregious case of unjustified secrecy and classification"; "the most gagged woman in the known history of the States"; and "the unprecedented case in application of State Secrets Privilege."

Many of my old friends and associates consider me "too dangerous to associate with," "too risky to get close to," and "a reason to land us on a government watch list."

The United States government has declared me "a woman who knows too many sensitive secrets," "a woman who should remain gagged," and "a person who should be classified at every level and in every aspect."

The United States government has officially declared my birthplace, my heritage, as Top Secret Classified Information containing State Secrets.

My birth date has been designated classified, and its divulgence a serious threat to the United States' sensitive diplomatic relations. The United States judicial system has agreed with the designation and ruled for its enforcement.

I am forbidden to reveal my mother tongue; all languages I speak have been banned from being officially stated. Per the government's demand, the federal courts have ruled against those who tried to ask me what languages in which I'm fluent.

My employment history has been classified as top secret. Those who have requested this information have been prevented by court orders.

My education background, including college degrees and areas of study, are designated

classified and covered by the State Secrets Privilege. The government has claimed that divulgence of my education pedigree would jeopardize our nation's security and sensitive secrets.

The First Amendment right has been officially and formally taken away from me. I am excluded from the protection of freedom of speech guaranteed by the Constitution.

The Fourth Amendment does not apply to me. My right to due process and access to the courts has been officially taken away. In 2002, the Department of Justice invoked the State Secrets Privilege, barring my cases from moving forward in the courts. The United States federal courts have obliged.

The U.S. Congress is forbidden to discuss my case or refer to me. The Justice Department has issued a formal gag order to Congress with regard to my case. My right to petition Congress has been taken away.

I looked up at another plane that had just taken off, blinking away raindrops as I followed it across the sky. I wondered if it was the plane I had planned to be on, now taking off without me as I sat there in the rain, pondering how I'd come to this point. With my family taken from me, my past erased, my voice gagged, and most of my identity classified, I felt incapable of taking charge of my life or whatever was left of it. What had gotten me here was a set of turning points imposed on me, all beyond my control. For four years I'd been gripping a steering wheel that simply was not connected to the car. I knew what I wanted: an untraveled road, a different car, a brand-new start; but I didn't know how. All I knew at this time was that I had to step out of this person I'd become—no, actually *been molded into*—during those past four years: the whistleblower and the gagged woman; the Classified Woman.

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I

CALL TO DUTY

## How It All Began

The beautiful sunny Friday afternoon on September 14, 2001, did not reflect our grim mood, as my husband and I sat across from each other in a deserted restaurant in Eden Center, often referred to as Little Vietnam, in Arlington, Virginia.

The small technology business we had started two years earlier had come under a tremendous amount of pressure due to the recently collapsed Dot Com industry. We had to let go of several employees and were in the midst of turning the company into a small consulting firm with less than a handful of people. I had switched from part-time to full-time status at George Washington University where I was pursuing double majors in criminal justice and psychology, registered for a fifteen-credit course load, and determined to wrap up all my graduation requirements in less than fifteen months.

The clear, pleasant day certainly did not reflect the country's mood either. Only three days past the United States was attacked within its borders—not by a nation or government but supposedly by stateless invisible enemies scattered around the globe. Without any prior warnings from our own government or from any national or international entities—including the media—we all were caught off guard.

As we sat on 9/11 watching footage of buildings getting hit and collapsing, I could scarcely believe that the carnage, bloodbaths and wars I had witnessed as a child, when I lived thousands of miles from here, had found their way into my chosen country, the United States of America.

I remembered the period of anarchy in Turkey in the 1970s. My early childhood there was marked by bomb explosions and shootings in unexpected public places. Whether densely populated universities or overcrowded bazaars, all were considered highly probable targets; no place was considered safe.

I recalled an incident in Iran I had witnessed a few years later, when I was eight years old. I was in a minivan with six other girls, on my way home from school. We'd heard an explosion. Traffic stopped and we saw thick smoke rising in a column only a few yards away. Our driver got out and started talking with other drivers. I rolled down the window to hear one man explain, "... either a building fire or a bomb explosion in a building, probably the movie theater on the circle. I heard there were many people trapped inside ..." As we passed the building, I leaned out the window and looked. The rescue teams, together with civilian volunteers, were removing charred bodies and stumps, dropping them on the sidewalk in front of the building. The driver, recovering as though from a trance, turned around and yelled, "Get down on the floor! You shouldn't be looking at this!"

It was too late. That scene—the smell and horror of what I witnessed then—remains with me forever.

I had seen it too in hospitals during the Iran-Iraq war, where my father spent most of his time tending to badly burned bodies, amputating arms and limbs. I remember him showing me holes drilled in the molten faces of babies to act as air conduits so they could breathe. While certainly traumatic for a child, such a lesson was, in my father's eyes, needed for life to teach what war is and what it does

its victims. My conscience thus was molded at an early age.

~~The 9/11 attack had brought back viscerally all that horror and trauma. Another casualty of the day was my newly shattered sense of security and optimism about a country I believed would never experience such horrors.~~

As depressing as things felt, we knew that together we would make it in the end. Our marriage, our true partnership for the past ten years, had made it through other difficult times and crises, the last being my father's sudden death a year earlier; it would also make it through this one, I was sure.

After finishing our comfort soup and ordering our customary Vietnamese coffee, Matthew used his cell to check voice mail at home, jotting down the messages on a napkin. He slid it toward me and pointed to one. Someone from FBI Headquarters had left his number, urging me to call him back as soon as possible.

I wondered what this was about. The only connection I had with the FBI had to do with my application for a temporary part-time intern position I had sent them four years earlier, in 1997. I was interested in their department that dealt with crimes against children, having worked as a trained and certified advocate for the Alexandria Juvenile Court, where I investigated and represented child abuse cases for over two years. I had sent them my application for an internship (summer or a part-time position) relevant to the degree I was pursuing in criminal justice.

After reviewing my application, someone at the bureau evidently found my linguistic abilities of interest and asked me to take proficiency tests in those languages and in English. At first I was put off by the prospect of working as a translator but on second thought decided it could be a stepping-stone to where I wanted to be until I completed my degrees. I went ahead and took the intense and excruciating proficiency tests in the summer of 1997. Afterwards they said that all language specialists, whether full-time or contract, were required to obtain top-secret clearance (TSC), since they would be dealing with sensitive and classified intelligence and documents. The process of background checks and issuance of TSC could take anywhere from nine to fifteen months, I was told. They would then notify me and offer me options, such as contract or full-time employment.

Nine months passed; then another nine, and another. In 2000, I called FBI Headquarters to inquire about the status of the position I had applied for nearly four years earlier. Toward the end of that year I finally received a call from a woman from FBI Headquarters who told me with much sincerity and apologies that in 1999 the bureau had lost my entire information package and test results, together with those of over 150 other applicants. That package contained my bank account information, tax records, Social Security and private medical and family-related information. "What?!" I asked, incredulous. "... Do you realize what people can do with that information?"

She apologized again and said the bureau would conduct expedited background investigation and have the position ready for me in a year. "If you change your mind and decide to go ahead with it," she told me, "the position will be ready and available for you." That was the last I'd heard from the FBI—until then.

I grabbed the napkin and stepped outside to make the call. The HQ man came on and thanked me profusely for returning his call. He then went on to explain how badly the bureau was in need of translators in Middle Eastern and certain Asian languages: Farsi, Turkish, Arabic, Pashtun, Urdu, Uzbek, and so on. The bureau had tens of thousands of leads and evidence waiting to be translated into English before the agents could take any further action. They had thousands of pieces of raw intelligence pouring in daily, but they all were in foreign languages and could not be processed or assessed until translated. "Ms. Edmonds," he concluded his pitch, "we need your skills badly. Your TSC clearance came in last week and we would like you to start working for us immediately."

I told him about my course load at school, our business, and that circumstances had changed.

"We are willing to accommodate your schedule and workload," he appealed. "You can work for

us as a contract linguist; determine the hours you can contribute each week ... as much as you want, as little as you can. Even if you could spare ten hours a week ... We are at war, Ms. Edmonds; the FE needs your skills badly.... You can serve your country ...”

I remembered images, of young children not even six, hurling stones at monstrous tanks in the street. Tiny kids, against powerful war machines, but instead of running away they chose to stand the ground and fight, however insignificant their weapon—however small the force of their skinny arms.

I felt like those kids. I didn't want to run and hide. I had to stand and fight, but I couldn't find much as a rock, and I couldn't see the enemy. I hated feeling helpless. Now, only three days after the attack, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was imploring me that I in fact possessed a rock, several in fact: my language skills. Our country could use my help. How could I say no?

“All right,” I said, one hundred percent confident. “I will. When can I start?”

I was told to stand by for another call in a minute or so. He would have an administrative supervisor at the FBI's Washington field office call immediately and give me instructions. The supervisor's name was Mike Feghali, and I would be assigned to his unit in that Washington office. I jotted down the name and waited for the call.

In less than two minutes, as promised, Mike Feghali called and briefly introduced himself as an administrative supervisor in charge of Farsi and a few other Language units. From his accent I could tell he was Middle Eastern, most likely Lebanese. He congratulated me on my decision to join and asked how soon I could start.

“How soon *can* I start?”

“Immediately; early next week,” he replied. I would first be briefed by a security agent on security and classification issues, asked to sign certain papers, and receive my entry and identification badge. I was told to come down Saturday; that time is of the essence. I could start the following week.

I wrote down his information and told him I would be there on Tuesday. Then we hung up.

I realized I had been out of the restaurant for at least twenty minutes. Matthew was curious. I told him I would be working for the FBI starting Tuesday, as a contract language specialist.

He looked concerned. I was only just recovering from the major blow of my father's death, and with the school load and our business he didn't believe I could handle that much at once. I tried—unsuccessfully—to assure him I could; he suggested I choose between school and the bureau, that was not too late to drop some of my courses. I shook my head and told him I could handle it.

That night I lay awake thinking about the call: to duty. I spent hours unable to sleep; my mind wandering through twists and turns in my life.

The course of one's life is shaped by turning points: many for some, a few for others—mine being a nonstop roller coaster ride. The arrest and torture of my father, for instance, for advocating and fighting for human rights and civil liberties, was a blow to my family and an early one for me three years old. Our life turned upside down. Within months, my family packed up and returned to Turkey, where they had to rebuild from scratch. That was a turning point.

Within three years, when I was six, we found ourselves in the midst of daily terrorist attacks and the start of a period of anarchy in Turkey. There was an attack on a passenger bus in which innocent riders were senselessly gunned down—another turning point. We packed our bags and left the country this time to Iran, where followed further hardships.

Four years later, we found ourselves in the middle of what came to be known as the Islamic Revolution that initially started with people from different backgrounds and political views coming together to depose the Shah and bring in a democratically elected government. The goal was to end monarchy. Yet within two years, fanatic Islamist dictators took over the country and began to implement fundamentalist laws that dictated not only how we were to dress and speak but what v

were permitted to talk about. Ultimately, methods of harsh repression and certainty of punishment ~~their rules and restrictions were not obeyed~~ came to govern how we were to think and act toward one another. Where control is total, we are told how to feel and what to believe.

The last straw for me, the turning point that led me to a life-changing decision, involved an essay I wrote for an inter-high school competition. My chosen subject was Turkey's censorship laws, and why it was wrong to ban books and jail dissident writers. The school principal was outraged and asked my father to get me to write something else. He believed the essay would land me in jail and subject me to the torture reserved for political activists. My father refused, but the incident caused a crisis in my family; he was the only one who supported what I had done. For nearly eighteen years I had been subjected to constant upheavals that threatened my family's survival; I was affected by the decisions. Now, for the first time, I would be the sole decision maker based on an experience that targeted me directly. This was to be my own turning point. A few months later, I was on a plane on my way to the United States.

As I lay awake that night, less than twelve hours from officially becoming a contract language specialist with the FBI, thinking on these pivotal points in my life, I could sense another one nearing some major change, a turning point. I just didn't know how, in what way, or what direction.

The next day, at ten on Saturday morning, I arrived at the Washington field office, where I was met by a female agent, very pregnant and blond, who then escorted me to a small meeting room on the entry floor. She seemed hassled and had a cool, dry attitude. She spent almost an hour going over Top Secret (TS) classification rules. She then placed a stack of papers in front of me and asked me to read and sign each document; I could ask for clarification if needed. They were filled with references to byzantine laws indicated only by their numbers, all in fine print and hard to read.

I asked whether we were expected to know these laws by heart, and wondered why they were cited without descriptions. "If we included the actual laws," she said, "you'd have hundreds of boxes of documents to read and sign; as you see, the stack is already large enough." Then she crisply added, "No, nobody knows these laws; people just sign them. This is the FBI, after all!"

I shrugged and went back to reading, doing my best to try to understand what I was being asked to sign. (I was taught never to sign anything I didn't first read or fully understand.) Then again, as the agent said, this is the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I signed all the papers.

My badge and ID would be ready in a few days. I could start on Tuesday. In the meantime, other employees could escort me to and from the unit and the building's security gates. With that said, she escorted me out.

As soon as I got to my car, I called Matthew to let him know I was on my way home. He asked me how it went. "I think I signed away my entire life to the Federal Bureau of Investigation; but he if you have to sign your life over to someone or some organization, wouldn't you rather it be them?"

## Washington Field Office

On Tuesday morning, a few days after I received the call to duty, I showed up for my first workday at the FBI's Washington field office, located on Fourth Street between E and F Street in Washington DC. Since my badge and identification card had not yet been issued, I had to check in at security and wait for my unit supervisor, Mike Feghali, to send someone down to escort me upstairs.

That morning I had taken extra time to prepare. I was going to work for the Federal Bureau of Investigation and my attire had to reflect that—an assumption proven wrong within the first few days. I had chosen a black light wool pantsuit with a long-sleeved parliament blue shirt, black pumps, and a black suede briefcase; classic.

A few minutes later, I noticed a short man bustling toward me. He was bald and overweight by at least fifty pounds and clad in a shiny-gray polyester suit. His dark olive complexion glistened with oil and perspiration. He greeted me with a big forced smile and introduced himself as Mike Feghali. After checking the status of my entry card and ID badge (another two days for both), we took the elevator to the fourth floor, which housed the FBI's largest and most important Language unit.

Here were dozens of cubicles and over one hundred agents. Feghali pointed out different areas, identifying the Counterterrorism division, private offices of Supervisory Special Agents (SSAs) and their bosses, Special Agents in Charge (SACs), then he turned right toward a set of wide double glass doors. He touched his entry card to the black square reader. "We are entering one of the most sensitive, most secured units in the entire building ... we, and everyone else in the unit, can walk over to any of those Counterterrorism, Criminal, or Counterintelligence units. But those guys, all those agents, cannot enter this unit—the Language unit. If they want to see us or meet with us, they have to call in advance and have someone from our unit escort them inside ... their entry cards won't work over here; ours work everywhere." This evidently pleased him.

As we entered this "most sensitive, most secured unit," I found myself in the middle of a square open area filled with over a dozen cubicles only barely separated by chest-high dividers. There were a dozen or more people, each behind a computer screen. Some wore headphones, others were typing, and three were gathered around one cubicle deep in discussion, in Arabic.

Feghali pointed. "This is our Arabic unit, now considered the most important language unit within our division. In a few weeks we expect it to double in size and in less than a year it will be quadrupled." He pointed to the group of three. "That woman on the right is my wife. She works for NSA as a translator, but I arranged for her to be transferred here for a few months on loan. I'll introduce you to all these people later." He led and I followed.

The Arabic unit section narrowed into a dark hallway. On the left was a small conference room and next to it was reception, where sat the administrative secretary, Liz. On the right were three small offices. In the last, the third, someone had squeezed in a tiny round table with three chairs. Feghali pointed to the rooms. "These are LS supervisors' offices. I am one of the supervisors; the third office is mine. We have three more supervisors. Each supervisor has several language units under him or her

depending on the size of the unit. For example, I have Farsi, Turkish, Pashtun, Urdu, and Vietnamese. Stephanie has Spanish, Russian, and a few others. Same with the other two supervisors; we all used to be Language Specialists.” He turned again and walked forward.

The hallway opened to a huge L-shaped room. Here were a hundred or more cubicles (or rather modular desks, since they had no real dividers) clustered around the room. Translators sat shoulder to shoulder in front of their monitors, some dressed in jeans and sweatshirts, others with headscarves and saris; almost no one wore a suit.

Back in his office, Feghali explained the difference between three types of people I would report to and have ongoing working relationships with. He was one: an administrative supervisor who handled paperwork, scheduling and assignments; he would not know anything about the content of what I would translate or any other related information. The second group consisted of special agents from the Washington field office (WFO) involved in my long-term and ongoing counterintelligence projects in Turkish, Farsi, or both. The third category was comprised of special agents from FBI field offices all over the country, who would send our unit (since it was the largest) their documents and audio related to their investigations—mainly counterterrorism, with some counterintelligence and occasional criminal operations.

I was to provide translation and interpretation in both Turkish and Farsi. Feghali asked if I had a preference. “Turkish,” I answered, “that’s my primary language.” He nodded. “We don’t have a single Turkish language specialist ... In the past, we assigned Turkish tasks to some Persian, Iranian translators who claimed they understood the language; we later found out that they didn’t.”

I was surprised. Considering Turkey’s geopolitical significance, its well-known involvement in narcotics, money laundering, and illegal arms sales—including the nuclear black market—I found it hard to believe that the FBI did not have a Turkish unit, or even a single translator, for its counterintelligence and counterterrorism operations.

Surprising too was that this would be on-the-job training, or “learn as you go,” as Feghali explained it.

“Are there any documents, manuals, or booklets I can read for training purposes in addition to ‘following’ the translators and watching them translate?”

No. I found that interesting too. He took me out again to introduce me to those I would “follow” and those with whom I’d be working.

First I was introduced to Muala, an Iranian translator in her late forties who had been with the Farsi unit for over twelve years. A few years back, she had secured positions in the same department for her two younger sisters, Ayla and Suheyla. The three worked side by side as Farsi translators, somewhat removed from the other Iranian translators clustered a few feet away. By way of introduction, Feghali mentioned that these three also translated Turkish intelligence as extra assignments for overtime pay. I paid a compliment to Muala in Turkish; she made a sour face and didn’t acknowledge what I’d said. At the time, I shrugged it off.

Afterwards, Feghali walked me over to another Iranian group and introduced me to a delicate built man in his mid-to-late sixties, Behrooz Sarshar, a Farsi translator who had been with the bureau for almost ten years. His eyes showed intelligence and wisdom, reflecting a kind nature and mild temperament. Unlike Muala, he greeted and welcomed me warmly.

Feghali then had one of the more senior supervisors, Larry, set up my access code, password, and username for the unit’s LAN-based computer system. He also showed me the unit’s central filing cabinet, organized by language, where archived copies of everything that had been translated in the past five years were kept. That was about it. He left me with Muala and went back to his office.

Muala didn’t seem too happy. I didn’t blame her; I assumed she had a lot to do and considered this a distraction. She directed me to the archived cabinet where I was to begin reading files

random: that way I would become familiar with how translation documents were titled, formatted and written. I started with Turkish and Farsi files, filled with hundreds of pages. Translations were performed in two ways: verbatim (from foreign to English, word by word, phrase by phrase); and summary (translate only a summary of what you heard or read).

In a couple of hours, I finished my review. I had a good grasp of the format and general flow, but reading the English translation without hearing actual audio in the target language gave me only half the picture. I decided to review an archived translation and listen to the audio in Farsi or Turkish simultaneously.

As I plugged in my headset, Muala came over and asked me what I was doing. When I explained my idea of listening and reviewing the translations simultaneously, she seemed panicky and started going through the files I had selected, a mixture of Farsi and Turkish archived translations. She grabbed the stack of Turkish files and said, “Hmmm, I think it is better to do it for Farsi for right now.” Then she walked away with all the Turkish files. Though I found this a little peculiar, again I shrugged it off.

Around three, Sarshar stopped by my desk and invited me to join him for a cup of tea in the little kitchen area. He asked me about my background, and when I told him about my father’s position at the Shah’s Hospital in Tehran, he asked for his name. To my utter surprise, he not only told me the name of my father’s high school but he actually knew my father, having attended the same. *What a small world!* I thought. From that day on, Sarshar became my closest colleague at the unit.

He pointed toward the door. “Be careful of the three devils,” he said in a close whisper. “They are a little odd and more than a little devious. The rest of us Farsi translators don’t speak more than a word—*hello* or *bye*—to them. Muala is not happy to have you here; she’s threatened.”

I was surprised. “But why?”

“You’ll find out more, later ... The problem they’ve got is this: they are not even a little bit proficient in Turkish. Their mother’s ancestors were from Turkey, but the women never lived there, never attended school ... they simply don’t have any proficiency.... The special agent in charge of Turkey will tell you about the entire fiasco; he’s a nice guy, his name is Saccher or something like that.”

My jaw dropped. I didn’t believe him. How could that be? The FBI wouldn’t allow people to “claim” proficiency; they had tests for that—didn’t they? This was impossible. Then I remembered the response Muala had given me—the face she pulled—and her later panic at the idea of me going over Turkish files and listening to their sources at once. I decided not to dwell on office gossip but to focus instead on actual work.

My first two days were spent reviewing archived translated files and listening to or reading the original sources. The rest of the time was spent learning the ropes. Sarshar was very helpful; he would take time with a question and show me how to do certain things.

In a few days I would meet Special Agent Dennis Saccher, in charge of my newly assigned unit of Turkish Counterintelligence, and he would go over my primary and permanent projects.

On my third day, Friday, Feghali came by and told me to go home and pack for a two-day trip, a very important counterterrorism assignment.

“What trip?”

“First to Wilmington, then to Philadelphia, and maybe afterwards to New Jersey.”

I thought he was joking. “I’m not trained yet; I still have a long way to go.”

Feghali laughed and patted me on the shoulder. “Woman, they badly need a Turkish interpreter

you're all we got; you are it, baby. Consider it your *baptism by fire!*"

~~I pressed him for details, but he didn't know much. Something about agents holding Turkish speaking detainees related to 9/11. He gave me a piece of paper with the address of the Wilmington field office and a phone number for the agent in charge of the investigation. They would wait for my arrival that same night.~~

When I got home, I headed directly to our bedroom and started packing an overnight bag. I explained the assignment to Matthew as I packed and changed into my jeans and T-shirt. His reaction was exactly like mine. "But honey, you're not ready.... They can't send you on an assignment like this." I shrugged and told him they "can and did," assuring him I would be OK.

By the time I pulled up in front of the FBI Wilmington field office's nondescript brick building, it was almost eleven.

I went inside and gave the receptionist my name and that of the agent given to me by Fegha. Less than two minutes later, a man in his mid thirties, dressed in wrinkled khakis and looking exhausted, came to get me. On the way to what he referred to as "the interrogation room," he explained that they had detained two men under suspicious circumstances; they were here illegally and did not speak any English.

Inside the room, under harsh fluorescent lights, men were seated around a gray aluminum desk. It was easy to identify the two detainees: each was chained to a chair by his wrists and ankles. The older, in his late thirties, had a dark olive complexion and black mustache; the other, in his late twenties, had fair skin and honey brown hair. Three agents sat across from them; no one was speaking. They all looked exhausted. I was thanked for getting there on such short notice, offered the desk and chair, and given a yellow legal notepad and an FBI pen.

The session started immediately. An older agent, who seemed to be in charge, asked me to interpret his questions and translate their responses into English. His questions were straightforward and the men's answers were mostly "yes," "no," and "I don't understand," with a few that were a bit longer.

The session lasted almost two hours, during which one of the detainees requested a bathroom. One of the agents removed his cuffs and walked him there. I was impressed with the level of respect with which the FBI agents treated both men, and their professional and courteous manner. It was 11 a.m. by the time the session ended. The agent in charge asked me to walk out with him, and after we left the room, asked me what I thought of the men's answers and their attitudes in general. I gave him my assessment: one seemed a bit more evasive than the other; one was from a particular region known for nationalism but not religious fanaticism; the other seemed of Kurdish descent from that particular region with the following characteristics ... The agent listened carefully. Would I come to the Philadelphia field office and do the same thing there? I said I could. I was to meet them in front of the building at eight o'clock, less than seven hours away!

We were joined in Philadelphia by several other men, some of them from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), others from the FBI Philadelphia and New Jersey field offices. From their looks and what they talked about I could tell they had been working around the clock since 9/11. They seemed exhausted yet eager to get things done, to accomplish something. Their dedication was worthy of respect.

"What we want to do is this: question, interrogate these guys, check out their background, and decide whether they are keepers or not," one of the younger agents told me. "If not, let them go, and go back and chase the real bad guys until we get 'em." He shook his head in disgust. "The jerks at HQ have issued an order for us to go and round up as many people as we can; chain 'em, lock 'em up, and send HQ the count. The larger the number the better; they've set a quota. They're not after the bad guys, they just want to show the press and the Hill this number, to be able to say, today we arrested

this many; yesterday we arrested that many ...”

—That surprised me.

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The other agent added, “We get these guys on a simple INS violation. What do we do? We have to arrest ’em, sit around and baby-sit ’em while they’re interrogated and locked up, instead of being out there and doing what we’re good at doing.”

This interrogation lasted three hours. Before they began the questioning, the agents first asked me to interpret the detainees’ Miranda rights. One of the detainees shook his head. “How can that be?” he said, confused. “If we don’t have money, they—the government—will assign a government attorney for us; but that doesn’t make sense! If they are government attorneys, they will always represent the government and try to set us up and screw us over! Is this a trap?”

I understood only too well. In countries like Turkey, Miranda rights, due process, or court-appointed attorneys at no cost simply don’t exist. This was a thought-provoking dilemma, similar to a “diminished capacity” or “mental defect” case: having grown up with oppression and becoming accustomed to it, they could not comprehend or believe the rights being explained to them. In this case, the two waived their rights for exactly this reason.

Almost three hours later, after the session was over, the agent in charge suggested to the other that they have a briefing session with me and discuss my impression and analysis based on the cultural, geographical and education background of these detainees. All agreed.

I then went over each of the three detainees, describing the environment each grew up in, the area’s culture and religious outlook, level of education based on language skills and degree of articulation, and anything else to help these agents assess the level of risk.

At first it felt preposterous for me, a novice, to be providing these experts with my analysis, yet within minutes their willingness to truly listen, their eagerness to find out, and their subsequent thoughtful-point questions put me at ease. I was impressed with these field agents.

When I finished in Philadelphia it was almost four o’clock. Once on the highway I called Feghali’s office, telling him I was on my way back.

“What!” he screamed. “No—turn around and go back!”

“What? Why? I’m finished.”

He replied without a pause, “Because we already approved the hotel and meal budget for your trip until Sunday—go back, check into a hotel, order yourself a nice dinner, sleep late and drive back tomorrow. Then of course send us the bill.”

I tried to reason with him. The job was over; I could be home by eight. Why waste the money?

He continued in a more irritated tone. “Don’t you understand? Each supervisor has a budget for his translators, for his unit. The larger that budget the more important the unit. I want you to *spend* your budget: hotel, meals, and everything. Consider it your mini rest day; we are not in the business of saving the FBI money, my friend. The motto here is, the more your department spends, the more your department is loved.”

I was getting really annoyed. “Well, I’m halfway there already. I have a paper due on Monday. I’m heading back. I’ll see you next week.” With that I hung up.

This budget quota business didn’t make sense; in fact I hated the whole idea. I told myself to stop thinking about Feghali and be happy for a job well done. Soon I would be home.

The following week, on my first day at work since the trip to Wilmington and Philadelphia, Feghali told me to call Special Agent Dennis Saccher, to whom I now was formally assigned. I could detect a coolness toward me; Feghali was still upset with me for not staying the extra night.

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