



**A
New
Year's
Eve**

by Pınar Öğrenci, 2021

We are in Diyarbakır. The Kurdish name of the city is Amed. There are soldiers and police everywhere. I am here to testify the next day at the trial where I am being prosecuted for charges which carry a total of 18 years in prison. Atalay is with me, he will testify too. There are 24 of us.

We set up in a small cheap hotel and go out to find our lawyer's office. The city is quiet, in a mood of mourning. There is no trace of the people who normally fill the streets. Every corner is choked with military vehicles. Starting from Dağkapı, the Sur area is completely under military control.¹

¹ The 2016 siege of Sur, also known as the Sur curfew took place as part of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict in Sur district of Diyarbakır in Turkey, lasting for more than 3 months and destroying much of the neighborhood.

Growing afraid of the staring soldiers who are walking around, we decide not to linger too much. While moving from Elazığ Street towards The Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality on the way to our lawyer's office, we pass the Diyar Galeria Shopping Center on the right hand side of the road. This is where we took shelter when the police attacked the demonstration, we attended calling for peace on the last day of 2015.

We are astonished as if we were seeing the building for the first time; when we were detained we didn't have time to get an idea about the architectural qualities of the building, how it looked or how big it was. Atalay and I looked at each other and without speaking we nodded in approval and then entered the building.

As soon as we walked in, our feet lead us to the flower shop on the left hand side of the main hallway. The owner of the shop is a young, tall man. He looked at our faces for a long time.

- I know you from somewhere, but from where?
- We were here on New Year's Eve. We took part in the march.
- Where did you come from?

- We came from Istanbul, there were people from other cities too. Izmir, Manisa, Ankara, Adana, Maraş, Hakkari, Tunceli, Mardin and Van.

- They shot a doctor who was trying to intervene and rescue a young woman shot in the street that day.² Right in the middle of the street.

- Yes, we heard about that, that's why people got so angry.

- It was really crowded. The police provoked the march with bombs.

- Yeah, then they accused us of throwing bombs and injuring five police officers.

² Human rights groups reporting more than 200 people killed by the end of the siege of Sur, most of the casualties were civilians.



SUGAR

- After the second bomb exploded, the demonstrators stopped right where they were. The snow continued to fall, the deep silence surrounding us accompanied the cold air. Everyone was looking at each other's faces, trying to see what was happening at the front, looking over the back of the person in front of them. The fact that no one dispersed showed how determined people were to continue the march, but the police did not allow the crowd to approach Sur. It wasn't a good sign that the silence lasted that long. We were cold, I don't know how long we waited like that.

Tear gas suddenly broke the suspended silence. A white smoke was rising from Dağkapı. When the crowd at the front started running backwards, we started to run too and took refuge in the shopping center. Our eyes were wet with tears, it was hard to breath. Dark corridors filled with hundreds of demonstrators, young and old, echoed with coughing sounds. Then a young man started to shout:



- Bring some sugars, heval!³
- Where are the sugars?
- We have sugar here!
- Give sugar to everyone!
- Sugar for everyone. We have sugar!

I didn't understand why they were handing out sugar. We found ourselves in a small shop in the passage, while the shopkeepers were giving sugar, candies, tissues and water to those who had taken refuge there. People were trying to comfort their friends who had tears in their eyes because of the panic, fear and tear gas. While I was recording what happened with the camera in my hand, an old woman put a packed sugar in my palm.

- Here is a sugar for you!

Then I realized what the sugar and candies were good for. It turned out that sugar was used to reduce the effect of the pepper gas and prevent nausea. Sugar versus pepper gas: the contrast sounded logical...

- Yes, we are walking around with candies in our pockets, it's not clear when and where they will attack.

Once I read that sugar alleviates the bad effects of radiation, but I didn't know it was good for tears and vomiting too. Now almost everyone had sugar in their mouths. Either packaged candy or white sugar were distributed. I took a break from shooting and ate the sugar the old woman gave to me. Then I kept looking for my friend İz and filming in the arcade. However, we couldn't find İz. After a while, we entered your flower shop to help an old lady who dropped her shoe. The shop was crowded, mostly with women. As soon as we were inside the flower shop a terrible noise came from the entrance of the passage. The Anti-terrorism (TEM) Police were raiding the shopping mall, shutting the doors and locking everyone inside. Those who escaped early were lucky, but those who did not even think of running away like us were locked inside, we could no longer leave even if we wanted to. On top of that, the police used tear gas to corner people inside. It was impossible to see anything.

³ A Kurdish word used commonly in daily life, meaning friend and comrade.



CAMERA BAG

From the approaching footsteps and shouts of the police we understood they were coming towards your shop. I wanted to find a way to hide my camera. I took the monopod off the camera and hid it among the flowers. I put my camera into the camera bag and threw it under the white table inside. Atalay and I tried to hide under the sink, but the niche was so small that we were all visible.

As soon as the police entered, they pointed at me and Atalay and handcuffed us. Everything happened within seconds, we were taken into custody. They took me out through one door and Atalay through another. We walked towards the SCORPIO police cars⁴ standing on the street, guns pointed at us from left and right. At that moment, a policeman came out of the mall, waving the bag I had thrown under the table, shouting:

- Whose bag is this?

⁴ Called 'Akrep' in Turkish, 'SCORPIO' is a special kind of military vehicle used by Turkish police.



I said in a timid voice that it was mine. I picked up the bag thrown in front of me with my handcuffed hands. As it was snowing, the ground was wet and the bag was wet too. I was both glad and sad that I got the bag. The camera inside was very expensive and I could not afford to buy another one if I lost it. Also, the police could seize the footage inside and I could get into more trouble because of the footage I had shot.

When we were about to get into the SCORPIO, some journalists came and took our photos. I will never forget that moment: Two TEM policemen pointed their guns and blockaded me: I was surrounded by a triangle formed by the police. What should I have done? Stood up to the police? I could scream and protest, lie down and try to resist being taken into the SCORPIO, or I could shout slogans and make a peace sign. The usual acts done in these situations came to my mind. However, the two people in front of me were not ordinary security guards in the city, they were police officers with black masks on their heads, with only their eyes visible. I got inside the SCORPIO without attempting anything.

I saw my friend Evrim, an artist, through the back window of the SCORPIO. Evrim had come from Mardin to take part in the march. It was obvious that she was looking for us. I tried to wave my hands from the other side of the little window, almost sure that she would see me. Maybe she could do something if she saw that I was in the SCORPIO. However, it was all in vain: the windows were designed to block any view from outside. Evrim showed no reaction even though she was looking towards me.

In the vehicle, there was a young Kurdish boy of about 15 years, who'd been arrested before me. There were two policemen, each sitting across from each of us. They asked for our IDs. They were cursing, pressing our heads on the ground and asking questions.

- Where are you from, bitch? You filthy terrorist!
- I'm from Van.
- So, you're from Van⁵, huh, bitch! You filthy Armenian! You are all Armenian bastards! These are all Armenian bastards!

⁵ Van (Armenian:Վան, Kurdish: Wan, Ottoman Turkish: فان) is a city in eastern Turkey, located on the eastern shore of Lake Van. It was the capital of the kingdom of Urartu from the 9th century BC to the 6th century BC, and later as the center of the Armenian kingdom of Vaspurakan. Today, Van has a Kurdish majority and a sizeable Turkish minority.



They had convinced themselves that most of the resisting Kurds were of Armenian origin.

Since the young man next to me had some pictures of naked women on his cell phone, they were pushing him and kicking his legs. While all this was happening, I heard the driver in the front talking to Evrim. There was a sheet metal partition between the front and rear parts of the vehicle, so we couldn't see the front but could hear the voices. It seemed Evrim had kept looking for me, she was brave enough to stop the SCORPIO and ask questions.

- We lost our friend, have you seen her? Her name is Pınar Öğrenci.

- Is this bitch's name Pınar? Shouted the policeman in the front, turning his head back.

- I'm here Evrim!

- Shut your mouth, asshole! Lower your head, don't look at my face again! I'll cut your head off! Do you understand?

We went a long way in that manner, hustling and scuffling. We wouldn't have been able to see each other without the light coming in through the small window at the back of this strange vehicle, made entirely of metal, closed on all sides. I was looking outside as far as I could see through the tiny window, and thinking how beautiful

the city was under white snow as it was preparing for the new year under military and police control.

The vehicle stopped. We had no idea where we were. We got out of the SCORPIO and lined up to face the white wall of a large building. A few more SCORPIOs were driving around, and all detainees were lined up side by side, facing the wall. While we were waiting there, two buses arrived, one after another. Hundreds of men in black masks got off. They came and pulled us by our arms and boarded us on the buses. Next to each of us there a masked man who kept staring. As soon as I noticed that Atalay was also on the bus they started searching. A middle-aged female police officer pulled out my camera bag. "Now I'm done for," I said to myself.

The policewoman unzipped the top part of the bag but there was nothing of importance there. Because of its weight, it was obvious that there was more inside the bag but the woman could not find the zipper below, so she kept fiddling with the bag. I got a funny pleasure from watching the policewoman and, made no effort to show where the camera was. Finally, she found it by removing the self-adhesive parts on top of the bag, and by turning the camera 'on' she started looking at the footage I'd shot.



KAZANACAK!

AŞİTİ
OLUN DEĞİL YAŞAM

BARİŞ
HAKTIR!

BATIDAN
DOĞUYA
BARİŞ
OLUN DEĞİL YAŞAM

11 BO AŞİTİ
DİMESİN

İNADINA
BARİŞ
OLUN DEĞİL YAŞAM



- What are these?
- I recorded the march.
- What are you going to do with these, why did you shoot?
- I'm an artist, I'm making a documentary.
- Sure, sure, documentary! We know those documentaries. Were you planning to use this footage?
- Yes, I was.

Without a trace of hesitation I said yes I would use the footage though I still don't know where I found this courage. With a hostile look, she put the camera inside the bag. She zipped the bag up and threw it towards the policeman in the front and then got off the bus: I guess she was going to search the next bus behind. The policeman in the front grabbed the bag and put it on one of the shelves above. I had lost my bag again. We traveled for a long time, the policemen were still talking rubbish, pushing and shoving us about.

Finally, the buses stopped one after the other. They got us all off the bus and lined us up against a green wall. A young policeman in the bus threw my bag and my wool hat that I dropped in front of the bus door.

- Whose are these? Get them!

Then we were asked to line up in front of the door of the building. We could not understand where we were.

It didn't look like a Police Station. So, where were we? What would they do to us? We had no idea... We started to go inside one by one. Inside was crawling with police, the disturbing sounds of their walkie-talkies were bouncing off the cheap greenish ceramics that covered the walls.

They took our bags, wallets, money, phones, whatever we had on us. Then, sticking adhesive tape on the visible parts of our body such as our hands, wrists, necks and faces, and on the clothes we had on, they started to search for traces of explosives. The SCORPIO was full of explosive materials, and we could have picked up traces of explosives from there. The same risk was also true for the buses we were put on. They pulled off the blue tape they'd stuck on us and, put them into small glass bottles onto which they wrote our names. Then we formed a queue in order to have our fingerprints taken. They took our fingerprints in groups of two, three and four. When that process was over, we made another queue: this time we were to have our photos taken. Here everything was done in order, the exhausted people who were dragged from one place to another waited for their turn in queues that stretched and twisted in various ways. Everything was like a theater stage – was this setup real? How did we end up in this game, what else would happen? Could we get out of there? While I was searching for answers to various



questions in my head, a young policeman with a camera asked me to stand in front of a slightly wet wall covered in travertine. Our photos were taken from the front, right and left profiles. Who knows how bad we looked, we were so miserable. Atalay and I looked into each other's eyes, trying to reassure each other.

After all these processes were over, they gave our coats back. We proceeded in a single line from the big entrance hall into a narrow corridor. This corridor, with no doors or windows, was like a passage leading to another building. The ceilings of the corridor, lit by white fluorescent lamps, were low and sloping, we must have been passing under the stands of a stadium. Finally, they forced us to enter through a large and high door with two wings.



BAKLAVA⁶

Until that moment, I had never been so scared. After passing through those narrow corridors, we had come out into a huge sports hall. Armed police were standing in the middle, pointing their guns at the people lined up facing the wall, all about five meters apart from each other. In the stands there were a few people sitting in civilian clothes, who were probably intelligence officers. On one corner of the floor, some policemen were playing table tennis, joking and laughing. The echo of the rackets hitting the ball and the cheerful shouts of the policemen were like a setup designed to get on our nerves. Suddenly, the voice of a police officer who just arrived was heard:

- Anyone want baklava? New Year's baklava!

⁶ Baklava is a common dessert of Turkish, Arab, Kurdish, Armenian and Iranian cuisines and other countries of the Levant and Maghreb, along with the South Caucasus, Balkans and Central Asia. It's made of layers of filo pastry filled with chopped nuts and sweetened with syrup or honey.



That really took the biscuit! This was all too much! When I turned my head to face the wall slightly sideways, I saw a young policeman carrying baklava in an aluminum tray, distributing it to the other policemen. They were eating and feasting as if there were a positive atmosphere in the country which allowed them to celebrate New Year's Eve. Everything was so absurd and distressing.

Our clothes were all wet since we had waited for so long under the snow. We'd stood out for most of day without any food and water, from about three in the afternoon. Why were we taken to the sports hall and not to the police station? I was thinking of those shot dead on the orders of Pinochet in a stadium in Chile. The day was long and hours dragged on. If we bent our knees, tired from standing upright or looked at and talked to each other in whispering voice, the armed police in the middle would start yelling at us:

- Stand straight!
- Bending down is forbidden!
- Don't turn your head back, I'll tear it off!
- Put your head down, don't look at my face!

Most of the cops left and the guard was then changed. We didn't know what time it was, but it must have been late at night. Then, all of a sudden, a number of police-

men in plainclothes, with lots of papers in their hands, came in and asked us to sign them. Then they would let us leave, or at least they said so. It was not easy to understand much from those overly-long papers. Some refused to sign. Atalay and I agreed because we wanted to get out, no matter what.

They gave back our bags, wallets and phones on the way out. We got on the buses handcuffed, again accompanied by the police officers. It felt good to finally sit down somewhere, everyone was exhausted, even the policemen were silent. We were heading towards some unknown place in the dark night. Various thoughts were running through my head, I was asking myself if someone was doing something to save us, or if my mother had heard about what happened. I was looking out the window with sleepy eyes, thinking about people preparing to celebrate the New Year in their homes.

Finally, we arrived at a huge garden with pine trees, inside there were large and small buildings. This must have been the Diyarbakır Police Department. Cops with their dogs were walking around, the blue siren lights of police cars were flashing over the snow-covered pine trees. We were asked to enter the building and divide into two groups: men and women. The men's queue advanced rapidly, but



there was no progress in the women's queue. Before taking us into custody, they were doing a naked body search. We were waiting because there was no female police officer in the police station. Meanwhile, a baklava conversation started up again. Apparently, the police chief upstairs had asked his colleagues downstairs to send up a small tray of baklava. A young policeman was walking down the stairs, tray in hand.

- Does anyone want baklava? The chief sent it.

Finally, a young female police officer entered the room. We were about to faint from exhaustion, but we revived somewhat when we saw the policewoman. They took us into a room in groups of four. When it was my turn, I went in. She was a very young, brown-skinned woman, 22-23 years old at most; she had thin, leek-like blonde hair, and was wearing glasses. We gave her whatever we had. Unlike the policemen, the woman treated us well.

- Give me your valuables, please. I'll make a list. You will get them on the way out, don't worry.

- Will we ever get out?

Before I handed over my phone, I thought of asking for a lawyer by secretly charging it and texting friends on Facebook. Someone had to get us out of here, I had to

do something. While the other girls were undressing and handing over their belongings, I tried to stand back a little to gain time. I took off my clothes and stood there naked, except for my panties. I pretended to put my black coat over my back so that I wouldn't get cold, but I hid the phone in it, plugged the charger into a socket I found in a corner and threw my jacket over it. I took the card out of my camera and hid it in one of the inner pockets of my coat. I would try to stall the woman to save time until my phone was charged. I slowly took everything out of my camera bag and started putting them in front of the woman. I asked her to write down the individual serial numbers of the camera, the lens, the spare lens, the charger, and the two batteries. I was trying to take advantage of the woman's good intentions. No other cop would be so patient.

- Normally we don't write down serial numbers, just the brand of your camera.

- You are right, but these are very valuable for me. It would be great if you could write them one by one. Thank you so much.

While she was busy typing in the serial numbers, I went next to my cell phone and wrote a note on my Facebook wall.



- We've been taken into custody. Need a lawyer urgently!

I also asked for help to find a lawyer by texting a few people.

The woman realized that I was doing something and asked for my phone.

- I was charging it to inform my brothers and sisters.

- Give me the phone, please, it's forbidden! We'll inform your family!

I gave all my belongings to the policewoman and put my clothes on again. She was in a hurry to catch up with the New Year's Eve celebration, telling someone who called her on the phone that she was coming soon. And that's why she didn't even think of checking the footage on the camera. Thanks to this woman's haste for the New Year's celebrations, I managed to save my bag that had been dragged from place to place all day, the camera and the footage on it.

They put me and Arzu from the "I'm Walking for Peace" group into the cell opposite the toilets and closed the iron door on us. We were in the first cell, there were about 8-10 cells on that corridor. Ours was about 4-5 m² in size. It smelled of urine. We were breathing in air that entered through the small opening where the wall facing the cor-

ridor meets the ceiling. It was the air that came through the half-open windows of the toilets in the hallway. The same windows allowed the spotlights on the ceiling of the corridor to reach our cell, and that illuminated the interior a bit. I was obsessively trying to memorize the marks on the walls. I had looked with a similar obsession at all the walls covered with different materials that we stood in front of during the day. I was wondering what time it was, whether it was already the New Year. When I heard the footsteps in front of the door, I yelled at the police officer passing through the corridor:

- What time is it?

- What are you gonna do with time there?

We welcomed the New Year sitting on a concrete bed. We were so tired that we couldn't even open our mouths. We covered ourselves with filthy blankets and fell asleep looking at the surveillance cameras hanging from the ceiling.

The flower-seller said he remembered us and that he was very upset when he saw we were caught.

- I still have your monopod.

- Really? So, you kept it?

- Sure, it's in the warehouse. Let me get it.





A New Year's Eve by Pinar Öğrenci, 2021

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