

Wearing a Brave Face, Chatelaine, 2004
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On Thanksgiving Sunday of 2002, Sharon Bye-Ballard was working a couple of continents away from her Toronto home, in a gleaming hospital in Riyadh, the capital city of the desert kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The boisterous, blond nurse had moved to Saudi Arabia 18 years earlier for the same reason most other Canadians go there – tax-free money and plentiful travel opportunities, as well as the proximity to some of the world’s best scuba diving in the Red Sea. But that Sunday, Sharon was checking charts and giving medications in the hospital’s marble-floored in-vitro fertilization clinic. Her husband Glenn, a low-key British telecommunications engineer who shared her zest for scuba diving, was supposed to pick her up after work. This was Saudi Arabia, after all, and women were not permitted to drive. Then, the phone rang at the nursing station. It was Glenn. He spoke in a calm voice, but the words he used scared Sharon: “Take a limo home,” he said, using the local lingo for a taxi. “I’m helping the police.”

Sharon tried not to panic, but her heart was racing. Ten days earlier, Glenn had been interrogated by Saudi police for 26 hours. They wanted to know whether he had anything to do with the car bombings that killed British engineer Christopher Rodway two years earlier. Glenn knew nothing about the bombs, of course, but he did know two of the six men who were being held by Saudi authorities. Briton Sandy Mitchell was one of Glenn’s diving students; Bill Sampson, one of Mitchell’s Canadian friends, had come to the house a couple of times. The Saudis had arrested the two men in the fall of 2001, claiming that they had plotted to kill fellow ex-pats in a turf war over illegal booze. Two months later, Sharon and Glenn saw them on T.V., confessing to the bombings. They both looked haggard; Sharon and Glenn thought they sounded like robots.

Sharon hung up the phone, and tried to block out the fear that the same thing might happen to Glenn. When she got home, she opened the door of her three-bedroom adobi house, with the rock garden Glenn had created, and picked up the phone to call the British embassy. Glenn was British, after all. No, the British embassy knew nothing about it. Then she turned right to walk into the living room, and it hit her: The blue patterned curtains in the living room were closed. Someone had been in the house. The computer was gone; so were three and one-half cans of wine, which were illegal under Saudi Arabia's conservative laws. The phone rang: Glenn had been escorted out of his firm's office that morning, the British embassy said.

Sharon felt sick as she considered what might be happening to Glenn inside his jail cell. She sat up all night in front of the TV, flipping channels. Would Glenn turn up on TV, just like the others? No way, she thought. Not if she could help it. Over that long night, Sharon decided to fight for her husband's release, any way she could. The next day, she marched into the British embassy and demanded to meet the ambassador. She didn't even try to be polite. "If my husband shows up on TV confessing to crap he did not do," she warned the ambassador, "just get out of my way. I want to know exactly what you're going to do about it, who's going to do it and when."

Yet, as Sharon would soon find out, the laws we take for granted to protect our civil rights don't apply in Saudi Arabia. The kingdom is governed by Sharia or Islamic law, which is based on the Koran. Glenn had no right to a lawyer, no right to bail. He could be held incommunicado, and tortured, and no one would know. Court hearings are secret and brief, even if the case involved a public flogging, an amputation or a beheading. Saudi Arabia has one of the highest rates of executions in the world. Amnesty

recorded 1,409 executions 1980 to 2002. Half of them were foreigners. If the news reports were correct, Sampson and Mitchell might end up in these ugly statistics. In the spring of 2002, half a year before Glenn's arrest, they were reportedly sentenced to death by beheading in Riyadh's favored location for beheadings, Chop-Chop Square.

Sharon had been warned about Saudi Arabia's strict rules when she moved there back in 1985. Women are supposed to wear a black cloak, an abaya, in public. They aren't allowed to drive or consort with men who are not their fathers, brothers, sons or husbands. Those who broke the rules risked going to jail – or worse.

But over the years, Sharon had found ways to get around the laws. It was like living in a spy movie, she used to say. She was always calculating the risk of getting caught, arrested, and jailed. But the risk was worth it. After all, if she hadn't broken the rules, she wouldn't have met and married Glenn. On the night they met in October 1991, Sharon dressed up as a sexy devil for a poolside Halloween party in one of the men's-only compounds. Just about everything at that party was illegal – the presence of women, the wild clothes, the homemade wine and beer. Glenn, who had just arrived in Riyadh, turned up without a costume. He needed one to get into the party, and Sharon had just the thing, one of her bikinis. She even got a picture of him wearing it.

Riyadh had become a strange kind of home, one that she was reluctant to leave. Her friends were there, her husband lived there; it was a good life. Sharon made good money and enjoyed holidays around the world. In Saudi, you could have fun, break the rules, and get away with it, as long as you didn't flaunt it in public. So she stayed, even during the Gulf War when scud missiles were crashing on the city. She brushed off the

danger, along with the reports of jailing and even torture for those who broke the rules. She even got used to the car bombs.

But now, the terror had come home, and all Sharon could do was sit and wait. She had never written a journal before, but she picked up a couple of books with multicolored covers and started to write. She needed to keep track of this nightmare. On Oct 26, her eighth wedding anniversary, Sharon went to work at the IV clinic, but all she could think about was Glenn. Her mind went back to the time she and Glenn had flown to Dubai for the weekend. The plane's engines had suddenly stopped; they went into a nosedive. Sharon clutched Glenn's hand. Glenn kept his cool, dry wit. All he said was: "I wish we were over water." A day later in Dubai, they got engaged. Glenn bought her a 13-baguettes diamond ring. That was so long ago. Now she was alone, waiting.

The next day, Sharon returned to the hospital, only to be summoned to see the head of security. He handed her a card and a box of chocolates, supposedly from Glenn. She was puzzled. How would he have sent these to her from jail? The head of security called again the day after that: They want you to see your husband. He didn't explain why. Sharon didn't really care as long as she could see Glenn. Excited and nervous, she called her boss: "If I don't come back, call the British embassy."

Sharon was wearing her nurse's white scrubs with the flowered jacket when she jumped into the back of the security car. "Where's your abaya and scarf?" the driver snapped. He headed for the old part of Riyadh and pulled up in front of an old sandstone building, with bars on the windows, with guards at the gate. She followed a guard into the building and entered a spare room with a black desk, a couple of chairs and a black leather sofa.

Two Arabs walked in. The shorter one with smooth skin sat behind the desk and said something in Arabic. The taller one, with the pockmarked face, sat in the chair opposite Sharon and asked a question in excellent English:

“What’s your name?”

“I won’t answer anything unless it’s written in English,” said Sharon.

Both of them slapped the desk. “If you don’t answer, you’re going to jail,” the interrogator said. Sharon tried to think fast. What if they were trying to trick her into signing a confession that she couldn’t even read?

“I will answer,” she replied, “but only if you write the question in English.” From then on they played an elaborate translation game to ensure the questions, and Sharon’s answers, were written in English.

The game started innocently enough: “Did you get the anniversary card from Glenn?” The man behind the desk, whose name was Capt. Ahmed, bought the card and the chocolates with his own money, supposedly on Glenn’s behalf, Sharon was told. She was suspicious.

“This is a mind game,” Sharon told them. Both of them glared at her. Over the next 10 hours, they peppered her with questions: “Who visits your house? What was the daily routine? Who were Glenn’s friends? Who was in the house over the last 10 years? What were his dreams and aspirations?”

“Move to Canada and build a house,” said Sharon. The two interrogators already knew that Mitchell and Sampson had come to Glenn and Sharon’s house in the fall of 2000, after a second bomb injured two Britons and an Irishman. Mitchell and Sampson had been riding in a car with a Belgian paramedic, and they were just behind the car that

exploded. The paramedic helped to care for the injured. All three men were jailed shortly after that.

“What about that day in June when Glenn came home nervous?”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” said Sharon.

She had never been so scared in her life. Her chest hurt; her heart was palpitating. She didn’t want to drink any of the water they offered. If she had to go to the toilet, where would they take her? “Does anyone know I’m here?” she wondered. Then, at 10 p.m., the captains asked Sharon to sign each page of the yellow workbook. When she finished, Khalid looked at her: “How was my English?” That was the same question Glenn’s interrogator asked at the end of his 26-hour incarceration two weeks earlier, she thought. This must be the man who interrogated her husband. She felt sick.

Two weeks later, on Nov. 12, Sharon was summoned back to the forbidding sandstone building, this time with a representative from the British embassy. The interrogators laid out the rules of conduct: Do not talk about the case. Deal only with family matters. She handed them a letter written by a Saudi lawyer who had offered to represent Glenn. Glenn needed to sign it before the lawyer took any action. Ahmed, the captain behind the desk, threw it in the garbage. A few minutes later, Glenn entered the room. He looked surprised to see her.

Glenn started to cry. Sharon hugged him tight, trying to spot any physical sign of injury. He didn’t flinch. That was a good sign. “It’s all right,” she said tenderly. “I’m here. You’ve done nothing wrong.” They sat side by side on the black leather couch, within earshot of the two captains. “I love you. You’re a good man. You’ve done nothing

wrong,” Sharon repeated. Glenn looked awful. His eyes were red, his skin was pale, his lips were cracked. He obviously hadn’t slept.

“They’ve managed to get me to do something you and my mother could not,” said Glenn. “Eat rabbit food.” Sharon didn’t laugh. She couldn’t believe he was trying to crack a stupid joke. Sharon told Glenn she had informed his family that he was in a Saudi jail

“Don’t talk about the case,” said Glenn. “It won’t help the investigation.”

“You need a holiday,” Glenn said. Was he trying to send her a message to leave Saudi Arabia? Sandy Mitchell’s wife left the country while he was in jail; Sharon didn’t know the other men’s wives, or where they were. “After being here for nearly 20 years,” Sharon told her husband and the interrogators, “if anyone in this room thinks I’m leaving the most precious thing to me in this country, they can think again.”

Six weeks later, on Dec. 21, Sharon was allowed to see her husband again. These were awkward, stilted meetings. They always met in same room, with the two captains tuning into every word, every gesture, looking for cryptic comments, hidden messages. They decided when Sharon could see her husband, and for how long. Sharon could ask how Glenn how he was, but Glenn could not reveal how he was being treated. Instead, he focused on practical matters - his dive students, his work stuff, the house. He tried to crack another joke: “Maybe it was good for us to lose weight,” he said.

“This is not good for us,” Sharon snapped. “This is bullshit.”

“Be civil,” Glenn told Sharon. If he was trying to send her a message, she didn’t know what it was. Glenn looked at the floor most of the time. Sharon looked at his feet. He was wearing sandals; he had never worn them before and his ankle looked swollen.

While Glenn was in jail, Sharon settled into an anxious routine. She'd go to work, come home and scan the evening news, praying that Glenn wouldn't be on the screen. She hid the news from friends, fearing she might expose them to harm. She confided in only one neighbor, a man down the street. He kept her sane. "I had to talk to somebody, and he lived on the compound."

In January, the British embassy called. Glenn had confessed to making watches for Sandy Mitchell – watches that were supposedly used in the bomb plot.

The information was relayed through a lawyer who saw Glenn for half an hour on Jan. 22. But Glenn had not been charged with any crime, nor would he ever be. "Bullshit to all of this," Sharon wrote in her journal. The British embassy assured her that the "highest level" was working on the case. "When is this all going to end?" Sharon wrote in her journal. "I'm going nuts."

When the Saudis allowed her to see Glenn again on April 23, Sharon was afraid that if she spoke too bluntly or made inadvertent "cryptic comments," Glenn would pay the price in his jail cell. She had already been lectured several times by the captains about her "manners." Now she had to try to be something she was not – subservient and quiet. So, she popped a heart blocker, Inderal, to sedate herself. She and Glenn sat on the couch, holding hands. He asked mundane matters, like the bank. She assured him everything was under control.

"It must be good to have a wife who's so organized," said Capt. Khalid, the interrogator with the excellent command of English.

"Oh I'm a busy little thing," said Sharon. It was time to go. She hugged and kissed her husband.

“You didn’t thank the major,” said Glenn, referring to Khalid’s recent promotion. Sharon wanted to throw up. Why was Glenn saying this? Was he trying to improve his treatment in jail? Or had he been brainwashed?

On May 12, Sharon had just returned from another visit with Glenn. Just after 11 p.m., the doors shook. “They’re coming to get me! They’re trying to break in!” Sharon thought. The doors shook again. She looked out the window. No, it wasn’t a sandstorm. Then the doors almost jumped off their hinges. What the hell was that? Sirens went off.

The phone rang: “Are you ok? The compounds for foreigners have been bombed,” her friend said. The phone went dead.

The bombs killed 34 people in three housing compounds for westerners. Many more were injured. Sharon was scared, but sensed a flicker of hope for her husband. The Saudis had claimed that Glenn had played a small role in a bomb plot with Sampson and Mitchell. But now bombs were exploding while the men languished in jail. Here was proof they had nothing to do with it. “Will this be the end or just the beginning,” Sharon wrote in her journal. “Will it help to get the guys out?”

“I don’t want to die here,” Sharon thought the next day, as tanks rolled through the city and armed guards were posted at the entrances to the foreigners’ compounds. She knew she was no longer safe anywhere in the city. Then the British embassy called. Would Sharon sign a clemency letter? The letter did not admit any guilt – Glenn still hadn’t been charged - but it did beg forgiveness for any inconvenience the foreigners had caused. Sharon would have signed anything to free her husband. She signed.

Yet on June 3, Glenn was still in jail. “I’m going to die,” Glenn said when they met. “I’m going nuts,” he said. He was crying again. “I’m going to die here. You should leave me, divorce me, and get a life.”

“I’ll never leave you here,” Sharon said sharply. “I’ve talked to a lot of people in the U.K. and you will go home.” She swiftly changed the subject. After 45 minutes, it was time to leave.

When Sharon got home, she pulled out her journal: “I’m absolutely scared to death for him now,” she wrote. “I feel like I’m in a big black hole. I know I won’t leave or divorce him. God, what have they done to him, to the others, and for what?”

On August 8, as Glen neared the 300th day of his incarceration, a senior official from the British embassy called: “I’m at the airport.”

“Is Glenn with you?”

“Not yet. I’m sending a car.”

Sharon raced to the airport, pulled up at the women’s VIP entrance, swept past the white couches, and stepped into a hall. There he was, 20 feet away, clean-shaven in a yellow shirt and dark pants. Sharon raced down the hall and hugged and kissed her husband. They walked in a room where all the other men – Sampson, Mitchell, and the four other men who had been detained – were waiting, thin and pale. Sharon was the only wife in the room; the others had left the country long ago.

She hugged them all but didn’t recognize one man. It was Bill Sampson, half the size he used to be. “Oh my God, Bill,” Sharon said as she greeted him.

“Ya,” was all he said. One minute they were laughing and joking; the next they were talking about what was done to them. “They were going to cut off my best asset,”

said Mitchell. They talked about the two interrogators, Capt. Khalid and Major Ahmed. These two men, who had questioned Sharon and supervised all her visits with Glenn, had interrogated and tortured all of them.

“I have to apologize,” Glenn said to Mitchell. “They made me lie.”

Mitchell looked at Glenn: “They made us all lie.” “They beat my feet and hung me upside down and kicked me,” said Mitchell.

“Did handstands ‘till I fell down, and they kicked me,” said Glenn. It was a strange, disjointed scene, Sharon thought. One moment the men were laughing at dry jokes, the next they were quietly sharing stories of their interrogators’ torture techniques. They chained Glenn like a dog, made him run down the hall in shackles, with his hands handcuffed behind his back, until he fell on the concrete.

The men flew to London, leaving Sharon behind because she hadn’t yet retrieved her passport from the Saudi hospital. Ten days of bureaucratic hassle later, Sharon flew to London. She didn’t even look out the window as the plane took off.

Glenn was waiting for her at the airport and drove her to his mother’s house in Kent. A couple of months later, they lit a bonfire in the backyard. They wanted to start erasing the memory. The fire burned bright and they threw in a doll they had bought in Dubai. “Burn you bugger, burn,” said Sharon. Then she pulled out the black cloak, the abaya, she had worn in Saudi, and doused it with red wine.

“I’m never going to have to wear this thing again,” she said. It burned in a flash.

POSTSCRIPT:

It's been nearly a year since Glenn and the other men were released. They still don't know how it happened, or whether Prince Charles intervened on their behalf. Glenn and Sharon are living in a small house they bought last winter in Toronto, where Sharon found a job as a nurse. Glenn is working as a construction laborer, earning only a fraction of the income he drew while working as a key player introducing the Internet to Saudi Arabia. "They've taken away my whole confidence and my career," said Glenn, 44. He has hired an English lawyer to clear his name – even though he was never charged – recoup the money he lost, and force the two interrogators who tortured him and the others to face justice.

It hasn't happened so far, yet Glenn says the psychic wounds are gradually healing. He's started to open up a little about the beatings he received in solitary confinement after Sharon's visits, about his interrogators' efforts to make him confess that he was a British spy and Sharon was his accomplice. Glenn was so terrified they'd arrest Sharon and submit her to the same treatment that he even tried to commit suicide in jail.

Sharon, now 53, is still deeply angry and bitter about how her husband was treated. "Sometimes I feel really guilty," she said. "If I had just left, as he asked, it wouldn't have been so hard on him." Leaving wasn't an option, though; the Saudis held her passport. But Sharon would never had left, the country, no matter what. "I wanted to show him I was right there. I wasn't leaving. I was not going to let them win."