

Chapter Three

A young man sat at a far corner in the cell, looking down through his parted knees, dejected and detached. And then he lifted his head looking straight, with a blank gaze. He was hardly twenty-two; his body slim, weak and full of marks left behind by the chains and the lashes. These never seemed to heal. Mates next to him teased him, gently stabbed and prodded his body with their fingers, and cracked jokes at his expense. His response would be varied. At times he was irritated and enraged. He would stand up protesting, brandishing a warning finger at them. And sometimes he would make a rejoinder and add to the general joviality. It was evident that this terrible experience in Mukhaberat had had a telling effect upon his mind.

His name was Waseem, and he hailed from a known family of Iraq, the Kashiful Ghitas. He had lived in Switzerland for four years, pursuing a course in Engineering, and spoke English and German with considerable ease. On his way back on vacation, he came to Beirut to meet his brother who was actively engaged in religious publication work, and was known for his affiliation with Amal. As he crossed the border to Iraq, the devils of Mukhaberat apprehended him, promising a very brief and informal interview. He was now here for the past five months! Accused of anti-Ba'thist activities, of course.

A small window carved within the massive metal door opened one day, and Haras shouted Waseem's name. The senior most among us had assumed headship in the cell, and acted as a transmitter. He looked at Waseem and said, "Harval" – Run. And Waseem lept from his nook, answering "Na 'am, Sayyidi". A sharp merciless gaze from the guard shook him to his core, and then from through the window he was given a blindfold to wear. This was made of a black leather cover with a rubber strap. It covered your eyes and hung down crisply to your nostrils, and had the nauseating stench of human sweat. Then the door unlocked, two arms pulling him out like a doomed animal, and the handcuffs were fitted to his wrists. The door was locked again, and we were now to wait for his return to know about his fateful encounter with the Muhaqqiq.

A day in the cell is measured by events. There are no clocks, and no watch is allowed. It was

appreciably long before the unlocking of the door silenced us all, our eyes frightfully riveted to it. Waseem reappeared, crestfallen and bent from his waist, plodding heavily forward. The shirt he wore stuck to his back, showing clear bloodstains. It had been the most terrible day of his stay. The interrogators first served him with the blows, and then whipped him with "Sonda" till his flesh showed, and blood trickled all over his back. Later they tied him firmly with chains around his wrists and ankles and onto an iron frame. The hands were then pulled on either side till he felt that they were coming out of the shoulders, and so were the legs till they seemed to dislocate from the hips. And then the frame was hung and turned so that he lay upside down. "Speak the truth else you will die!" The words which were meant to elicit from him a confession. Waseem threw himself to the ground, unable to walk or talk for three days. In his half wakeful state, droplets of tears rolled down his cheek, with a weak voice "What have I done, mother-what have I done?"

He woke up after three days, this time surprisingly alert and sane. "You belong to Kashiful Ghitas?" I asked. "Yes", he said, I was surprised, for I knew that one Ali Kashiful Ghita was acting for the Ba'hist under the guise of an Aalim-a Mujtahid. In fact, Ali Kashiful Ghita brought disgrace upon his revered family by joining hands with the infidels against Syed Muhsin El-Hakim. Waseem understood this implication. "Please do not mention my uncle Ali. He is a traitor".

For two more months, Waseem was in the cell, each day waiting for his fate. His mind was now split between hope and despair. He sometimes anticipated his release-talked about his marriage and settling in life. And then suddenly turned round to ask: "But I am useless; look at my features-I am so ugly. Who will give me her hand in marriage?" Waseem felt so concerned about his lower jawbones, which jutted out conspicuously. He would show me his teeth, and observe that the upper row stood behind the lower ones when he shut the mouth. And when hope welled up, he would say: "Never mind, I 'will visit my dentist first and tell him to mend my jaw"! A ripple of laughter followed. My Iranian friend Jabbar asked: "What did he say? -a dentist? Why a dentist? Tell him to knock this door and ask for Muhaqqiq. He will mend his jaws in the Ghurfa Amaliyyat" Laughter again. One day Waseem signed before Qadhi, and was consigned to Abu Ghuraib for sentence. God only knows what befell him.

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