

Chapter Fourteen

Wudhu was one of the most difficult chores. Water from the tap sizzled our fingers, and it was impossible to collect handfuls for washing the face and arms. But we liked assembling near the basins because it provided an opportunity for private conversations.

Here, I met Yusuf, a Syrian Christian who had come to wash his wounds. His chastisement had been the most severe, his wounds most unsightly. Afraid of making any expression by words, lest an eavesdropper overheard me, I made a sympathetic gesture with my eyes to show my feelings. Making a similar gesture, he said: "They say I am a spy, while in fact I am not. I am simple truck driver, regularly plying between Kuwait and Iraq borders. They insist that I must confess. How can I, if I am innocent? I would not, even if they gored my eyes, removing them out of the sockets."

This was the only punishment he could now envisage, because he had undergone every other kind. In Ghurfa Amaliyyat, Yusuf had been lashed all over the body till he bled profusely and then given a respite for two days. A doctor usually stood by with a card in his hand. When he mutely showed the red ace, it meant danger. It was a signal conveying to the tormentor that the victim had had enough, and would die if punished further. Yusuf could not sleep on Bataniya, because the roughly woven blankets stuck to the raw flesh, and pricked him like needles. When he sat, the loose wool shreds would pull the wounds. If he slept on the bare floor, the cold surface rendered him uncomfortable.

After two restless days, Yusuf went to Muhaqqiq again, this time to be treated with electric shocks. With wire ends tied to his fingertips, toes, ear lobes, tongue-tip and glens, enough voltage was generated to send him flying, and down with a thud. Semi-conscious, he was led back to our cell. And exactly after two days, he went downstairs again. His clothes removed, a flame was introduced across his bare chest, down to his stomach and then to the sides of his legs. He came back to the cell in a state, which defies all description. In the following week of respite, his skin peeled off, water, blood and pus oozed out with a revolting stench.

For ten days, he went without any food or water. Rawi, an Egyptian Christian, sat next to him consoling and tending his wounds. An informer within the cell once managed to convey this to Muhaqqiq and Rawi was summoned and warned. Yusuf must be left alone.

A frequent visitor to Iraq is regarded with suspicion. Fear reins everywhere in the minds of the ruled as well as the rulers. The outcome is general distrust among the Iraqis for each other. No wonder that Sabah, a journalist, was interned with me because his estranged wife had reported against him to Mukhabirat. He was so terrified in the Muhaqqiq's chamber that he relieved himself standing there. Pushing him back into our cell, with his soiled and stinking pyjama, the Haras jeered at him "La 'ana Llahu Abaaka Wa Unimak-Ya Qadhir" – God curse your father and mother-you dirt!

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