

Chapter Seventeen

Days rolled into weeks and weeks into months; my hopes for release and freedom were diminished and denuded. Every time I returned from the Muhaqqiq, my companions would ask: "*Waqq'at?*" – Did you sign? I had not been asked to sign anything till when I was summoned for the sixth time. Eight pages written in Arabic were spread before me to sign, with blindfold pushed upwards to allow me to see the words at the end, "*Al-Muttaham*" – the Accused. No one was supposed to read the contents, even if it meant signing ones own death warrant.

In the cell, I broke the news to my friends, and they were jubilant. Extending their hands to congratulate me, they explained: "You have signed. Your investigation is now over. *Inshallah Takhruj...*" – God willing you will soon leave. Two more months elapsed, and I was still there. A delay after having signed portended serious consequences, and my friends began to doubt my innocence. Abu Mansoor whispered to his friend: "This man must have committed a big offence, else he would not be here for so long after *Tawqi'*. He might go to Abu Ghuraib for a couple of years."

Early one morning, Muhammad who worked in Amanaat downstairs, lingered into our cell and called my name. As I entered the Amanaat, I remembered my first day, and strange feeling overwhelmed me. There, seated on a small chair, I saw my wife after four months, but we were not allowed to converse. Both of us were asked to put on our clothes and check our belongings. Muhammad said: "You are going home today. Be happy and smile." We managed a nervous smile, for here you do whatever you are told to do. And then within minutes, an officer announced: "Sorry, but the releasing officer will be late by two hours. So change your clothes and go back to your cell."

This tormenting exercise was repeated on us thrice. Every time we were brought to Amanaat, given back our clothes and suitcases, and then under one pretext or the other, were again thrown into our cells. The officers seemed to enjoy this game of cat and mouse; though we could no more tolerate the cruel joke. On the last occasion, the officer in charge made us sign several papers, amid unprintable abuses, and allowed us out in their car. We were taken to another cell situated in the heart of Baghdad. A room was

given to us, where we sat to recall our experiences from the first day, shed tears over each other's miseries so as to mitigate the overwhelming grief.

A day later when our photographs and fingerprints had been taken, we were transferred to a third place where old hoary, half-naked inmates, most of them totally deranged mentally, accepted us without any curiosity. One of them beckoned us to an adjacent room, which we entered. My wife was taken to another room reserved for Iranian ladies while I stayed behind with some hard-core criminals who had been there for as long as nine months. An Egyptian, Majid by name, politely welcomed me and said, "Welcome to Sheraton. Feel at home, please. And what did they tell you?" Nervously I answered: "They have asked me to remain here for a night." Giving a mischievous smile, he said: "Yes, they told me so when they brought me here seven months ago." My heart sank.

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