

Chapter Fifteen

The Iranians in the cell were a strange lot. These young men, all aged between twenty and twenty-five, were allured into Iraq by radio propaganda. Disenchanted by the strict Islamic discipline gaining ground in Iran, they chose to believe in the Iraqi promise that they would be transported safely to any point in Europe, where the streets, they thought, were paved with gold. Stealthily, they crossed the border, telling their parents that they were out on a short holiday within the country. Some of them travelled without a passport, while others had Shanas Nameh, the identity card only. These defectors gave themselves up as Laje'en Siyasi, political refugees, expecting a privileged treatment from the Ba'thist regime. They were all consigned to the hospitality of Mukhaberat.

These young men suffered from highly individualistic tendencies. Each thought that he suffered the most, and that his own plight was the gravest. Those who came in company of two or more blamed each other. Jabbar used to say: "Had it not been for that cursed Feeruz, I would not have been here!" However, due to their common ethnic origin, ignorance of Arabic language, affiliation with Mujahedeen and other dissident political parties in Iran, they were able to create a fragile fraternity within our cell. Khomeini, whom they mentioned as *Aqa Jan* only, was good and pious before he assumed power, they said.

Waheedi, the most educated among them explained his views by parables. He said, "Once an Iranian from a remote village came to Tehran. Strolling in the fruit market, he bought one small, yellow peach. He found it extraordinarily sweet. When he returned to his village he related this to his friends with great relish. During his second visit, which fell in another season, peaches were not to be found. He looked for it everywhere, and finally laid hands on overgrown yellow lemons, thinking that they were peaches. As he took the first bite, the bitter, sour lemon sent him reeling. With an understandable disgust, he said: 'Buzurg Shud, Kharab Shud.... It became big, and it became spoilt.' You know, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolute."

The Iranians in my cell were neither subjected to any questioning nor any torture. This total indifference to their state was enough to torment them. Sitting next to the unhinged door of washrooms, they would

be weeping silently, remembering their families and their beautiful, beloved country. They were here for six months now, and none knew the fate awaiting them. Once they tried to contact a Muhaqqiq through the Haras, but the trained guard simply said: – “Antum Dhuyuf....” – You are guests.... do not worry.

Waheedi, Ali Reza, Feeruz, Jabbar, Darwesh and others sometimes sat in a group, engaged in small talks, ridiculing the Arabs and their ways, cracking jokes at each other's expense—all in an effort to forget their worries. Man's ability to contrive ways of forgetting the nagging worries is a providential gift. He does this sometimes by diverting his mind to other subjects; but strangely, he succeeds in forgetting also by simply willing to forget. Difficult though it is to explain in words, the fact is I persuaded myself that I had no past, no future. Voluntarily I believed that I was alone, had no parents, no children, and no wife. Oddly enough, this greatly relieved me of the worries. When a faint voice within me emerged to remind me of the disillusion, I suppressed it.

They would recite verses from Hafiz, Sa'di, Qa'ani, Khusrow, Khayyam and other classical, ancient and modern, and thus while away their time. They were highly critical of the Arabs whom they considered inferior, inhuman and dirty. Jabbar had a very subtle sense of humour. Looking at an Arab inmate who had just been to Hammam for a bath, and then had sat in toilet to relieve himself, he said: – "Do you know a camel once dipped itself in a river and walking back on the muddy ground, proudly announced to its companions: 'I have had a bath.' The companion looked at it amused, and then one said: 'yes we can see it from your feet!'" We both laughed. "You are in a good mood today, Jabbar", I said. "Mood? *Dile Man Danad, Wa Man Danam, Wa Danad Dile Man....* my heart knows, and I know and so knows my heart."

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