

Chapter Six

Georges and Oscar were Christians. Georges was an Iraqi from Kirkuk, while Oscar was a Catholic from Philippines. Just as December set in, they remembered the festival of Christmas, and hoped that they would be released to reunite with their families. And then Christmas passed uneventfully, so they expected the release on the New Year eve. Nothing happened. Georges was spending his second month in the cell, but Oscar had been there for six months. Both spoke fluent and flawless English.

Everyone in the cell likes to know the other man's story and the reason for his apprehension. Then one would compare its seriousness with ones own case, and reckon if he himself stood any chance of reprieve. "Georges, what have you done?" I asked. "Nothing serious. I am accused of having shown disrespect to Seyyid al-Rais (the President). In a fit of anger, I wrinkled a newspaper, and it happened to contain his photograph." He was reported, and subsequently accused of, or rather convicted of, being anti-Ba'thist. I did not realize how difficult life must be for the Iraqis. Later on, I found that there hardly was any printed material, a daily, a weekly or a monthly, which did not carry the President's portrait. Any use of these papers, other than reading, could render the Iraqis vulnerable.

And then suddenly I sensed that the friends in my cell were buoyant with some expectations. It was January, and an army anniversary was approaching. Hawwaz and Burhan confided that there would be a general "Afw", a pardon for all of us. Qathan said that the Haras had told him, that Seyyid al-Rais did this every year, and there was no reason why he should not do it this year.

Qahtan was from Tikrit, and enjoyed special liberties with some of the guards who knew him personally. They allowed him to come out in the corridor and smoke one or two cigarettes. There they talked to him, and parted with the outside news. But Qahtan had to pay a price for the favours. He passed the information about the conduct, and the talk of every cellmate to Haras, who in turn transmitted it to the Muhaqqiqs. So our attitude towards Qahtan was that of fear and respect.

As the date of the anniversary drew near, the feelings in the cell ran high. Strange enough, but nobody

in the cell forgets the dates. The duration of one's confinement and detention is measured by the number of days. Abu Ali says: "I am completing my hundred and fourth day today", and Faisal says that he is doing his hundred and seventy eighth, out of which he spent exactly sixty three days alone in a single cell on the first floor and further fourteen in the red cell – Ghurfatul Hamraa.

Qahtan was now surrounded by all of us, eager to get a final confirmation from him about Afw. He took out a rosary—a *tasbeeh* or *sabha*, made of strings pulled from *Bataniya* (the blankets) and then plaited and knotted to resemble the beads. Placing his hand upon a distant knot and with eyes closed, he started from the first knot chanting: "Allah, Muhammad, Allah, Muhammad....." the final knot ended with Allah, and I could see how elated he was. "*Hatman, Aku Afw*", he said. "Definitely, there is a pardon."

The date passed and there was no sign of any reprieve, not for Qahtan either!

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