

MOUSTAFA KHALIFÉ

from The Shell

Translated from Arabic by Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp

21 APRIL

I OPENED MY EYES SLOWLY. I could barely breathe from the suffocating smells around me. All I could see was feet everywhere. I was lying on the floor amidst a dense forest of legs, surrounded by a stench of unwashed feet, blood, festering wounds, the filthy floor, which hadn't seen a mop for a very long time . . . and the heavy breath of all the men standing crammed together.

A little later, I managed a head count and found there were eight-six of us in there. Looking at the ceiling, I worked out that the room was no more than twenty-five square meters in size.

Conversation was held in a whisper, resulting in a constant hum that seemed to hover over everything. I wanted to stand up and get some fresh air. Every part of me was in excruciating pain. It was all I could do to bear it as I struggled to get up. Trying to stand on the soles of my feet, I cried out in agony.

The men around me noticed and several hands reached out to support me under my arms and help me up. I was standing there, propped up by these hands, when a young man beside me spoke.

"Patience, brother. Have patience. The pain is harsh, but it will pass."

"He who is with God will have God at his side," said another. "Don't despair, brother."

Moving helped the pain to subside somewhat. I looked around and saw grown men, young men, even children of twelve and thirteen . . . men who were middle-aged and even elderly.

I turned to the man who had encouraged me shortly before.

"Who are all these people?" I asked him. "Why are we here? Why are people standing?"

Staring at me, with a look of utter incredulity, almost stupidity, as if to say, "What, isn't it obvious?" he replied with a question.

"Can't you see what's happening in this country?"

When I was in France, I'd heard that there had been political unrest and that

there was a party called the Muslim Brotherhood carrying out acts of violence here and there. But I couldn't make head nor tail of it, so hadn't really taken it seriously, and I didn't know any of the details. I'd never been particularly interested in the news or any kind of organized political activity, although at secondary school and afterward I knew some Marxists and was influenced by some of their ideas. I'd been particularly impressed by those of my uncle, who I think was quite important in the Communist Party.

"No. I don't know." I replied. "Why? What is happening?"

"For God's sake, man—don't you live here?"

Wanting to put an end to all these questions, I replied in a way I hoped might cover anything else he might ask.

"No. I've been living in France. I just got back today—I mean . . ." I looked at my watch. "Fourteen hours ago."

"You've still got your watch? Blimey, man—hide it! Well, you see all these men? They are the prime of the faithful, defenders of Islam in this country. It's a test, brother, a test from God Almighty."

I interrupted him, sensing that my circumstances were somewhat different.

"Right. Well, for God's sake, what have they put me in here for?" Exasperated at this unjust treatment, I exclaimed angrily, "I'm Christian, not Muslim. For Christ's sake, I don't even believe in God!"

This was the second time I'd announced that I was an atheist. The first time, also only the briefest mention, it had earned me a taste of Ayoub's cane, under orders from Abu Ramzat, who was there butchering Muslims . . . Why? Because we live in an Islamic country! The second time, though, it would cost me many long years of total isolation and of being treated like an insect, if not something even more despicable.

I noticed how he seemed to recoil in horror, but as we were squeezed so closely together, only his upper body could retreat from me.

"Deliver us, Lord, from the curse of Satan!" he muttered spontaneously. Then, more loudly, he added, "Guys, we've got an apostate Christian here! There is a spy amongst us."

All eyes seemed to turn and fix on me, just as I heard a voice behind me.

"Who's that raising his voice? Silence!" this authoritative voice belted. "Silence, goddammit! Changeover time!"

What happened next was quite baffling. On the far side of the room was a group of men lying on the floor, in a strange formation. Lined up like cigarettes in a pack, I thought. Between those men lying down and those of us standing was a third group, all squatting on the ground. After

the huge guy had spoken—later on I learned that he was the barracks elder—the three groups started to move. Moments later, everyone who had been lying down was now standing up and gradually occupying the corner that we had just been in. We were crouching. The third group had moved over to the sleeping area.

“All right, everyone on the floor—swords!”

It turned out that *swords* meant lying on one’s side. The first man lay down on the floor squeezed up against the wall, his back against it, while the second man lay facing him, each lying stomach to stomach and head to toe. The third man then lay with his back squeezed up against the second’s, the third and the fourth were stomach to stomach again, and so on, always with one man’s head at the feet of the next. Once the row of men on the floor had reached the opposite wall of the room, there were still six or seven men who couldn’t fit.

“Yallah, big guy—get to work!” the barracks elder barked.

Another huge man got up quietly. He looked like a wrestler. He walked over to the first man lying at the end of the row and carefully stepped between him and the wall. Leaning back against the wall, he started to push the soles of his feet against the man on the floor, pushing harder and harder against him. The men on the floor were squeezed together slightly, creating enough space for one more to lie down. The big man called over to one of the group who were left over.

“Yallah, down here.”

The new guy lay on his side between the feet of the big man, the “presser,” and the first man on the floor. Then the “presser” started to push against him and again made enough space for one more.

“Yallah . . . Lie down . . .” Again, more pushing and another man lay down, and in the end there was space for all the men for whom there previously hadn’t been room. The big guy, “the presser,” went quietly back to his place, shaking his hands. I looked over at the men on the floor. Some had fallen asleep straight away.

I spent three days in that room.

I heard that some men spent many months in there at one point or other, and sometimes there were even more men in there than there had been at that time.

I got to know the room very well in those three days.



AFTER SQUATTING A WHILE, I felt the need to relieve myself. I turned to my neighbor.

“Where do you do your business?” I asked. He turned his face away from me and didn’t answer. I asked another man beside me and he didn’t answer either. I remembered that I was a Christian, an apostate, a spy: accusations I would never shake off.

I wasn’t far from the barracks elder. I asked him and he pointed to the toilet. So, there was a toilet in the room, at least. I had to wait over an hour. There was one toilet and one tap, for eighty-six men.

I went back to my place. There was movement above. I looked up and saw a sewage pipe crossing the room from one end to the other that looked like it was for the entire building. There was about half a meter clearance between the pipe and the ceiling. Two boys were sleeping up there, both about fifteen years old. One was hugging the pipe with his arms and chest, his legs dangling down and his head resting against the pipe with the gurgling sound of water running through it.

“I’ve never slept so well in my life!” I heard one of them say the next morning.

29 SEPTEMBER

YOUSSEF, WIDELY KNOWN AS Commander Cuckoo, has started coming over to see me again. Things have picked up a bit in the dormitory in the last month or so. They at least no longer try so hard to prevent him from coming to see me.

I woke up early in the morning, an hour or two earlier than normal, to the sound of a man groaning in pain. It was the guy in the next bed. His hand was clutching his stomach and he was moaning, clearly in agony, but trying not to howl out loud. I looked around. I was the only one he had woken up. He looked right at me: it was the first time our eyes had met. His eyes were full of the desperate plea of a man in agony. I wanted to help him, but what could I do? I looked around, embarrassed. Although his bed was a whole twewnty-five centimeters from mine, he seemed extremely close. I thought about asking him what was wrong and what he needed, but I didn’t know how to! At that moment he turned his face away. The minutes passed slowly . . . a few other prisoners woke up and came over. He asked them to fetch the doctor. One of the doctors among the inmates came over. He asked him what the matter was and examined him.

“Unbearable stomach cramps, doctor. It just won’t stop. My time has come. I’m going to die.”

In the next hour, three of the prisoners who were doctors met with Abu Hussein, the barracks chief.

“Severe appendicitis. We don’t know when it might burst. He urgently needs an operation to remove the appendix, before it bursts. If it does, the patient will die.”

Abu Hussein looked at the doctors, then over at the patient. He muttered a question, as if he were talking to himself.

“So . . . what can we do? We need a solution . . . I think there’s only one thing we can do: we’ll have to knock on the door and ask for the prison doctor. That’s all we can do. But will they even reply? Let’s try and see what happens. It doesn’t look great, though — after all, if he dies, it’s just one man. What do you think?”

“As you see fit, Abu Hussein.”

Abu Hussein knocked on the door. The police and the gendarmes were in the yard bringing around breakfast. We heard the voice of Sergeant Abu Asshole.

“Who’s that son of a bitch knocking on the door?”

Abu Hussein gave him the number of the dormitory and said that Dr. Samir wished to see the prison doctor on an urgent matter. Dr. Samir was surprised that he had mentioned his name, but he stood at Abu Hussein’s side waiting for the prison doctor.

“Sorry, doctor,” said Abu Hussein. “I don’t know why I gave your name. I guess it was instinct: they know you now, so perhaps they’ll listen to you.”

The tuberculosis hadn’t yet been eradicated and Dr. Samir was still treating dozens of cases which they referred to as intractable. Because of this, he was in regular contact with the police.

It was over an hour before the doctor came because it was still so early in the morning. My neighbor was writhing in pain, but trying to hold himself back from screaming out loud. The door opened and the doctor and his assistant appeared along with some police officers. The doctor asked Dr. Samir why he had called for him. Samir explained. The prison doctor didn’t reply, he simply turned and left without saying a word. The assistant glared at Samir.

“You made all this fuss over a case of appendicitis?” he said. “Sure, it sounds like that’s what the bastard’s got. So what? What’s wrong with you? I should have known you’d be taking the piss as always. Get outside — now!”

Dr. Samir left the room and the assistant turned to Abu Hussein.

“Who knocked on the door, you piece of shit?”

“It was me, sir.”

“Outside, you dog. You son of a bitch.”

Abu Hussein also left the room and the door closed. Half an hour later we could hear their screams. When the helicopter arrived, the beating stopped and they were let back into the dorm.

“Doctor, please forgive me. That was all my fault. I shouldn’t have got you involved.”

Samir laughed and even had a skip in his step as he went to embrace Abu Hussein.

“It doesn’t matter, Abu Hussein,” he said. “Let’s forget about it. But, man, those whips are fierce! Well, you can pay me back on the outside, I guess—when you get back to Umm Hussein. But the important thing now is, what do we do with the patient?”

He presented the question to the entire dorm, and was met with a barrage of suggestions, comments, and questions.

“For fuck’s sake . . . I don’t understand! Why did they treat the tuberculosis, and yet they won’t do anything about appendicitis?”

“Brother, look at it from their perspective. Appendicitis only affects the individual, so it’s just a single case. If he dies, it makes no difference to them. But tuberculosis affects many people, so that means trouble for the government, the bastards. They lose out if everyone dies, because we’re their hostages. They need at least some of us alive to exert pressure on everyone outside.”

The discussion went on for ten minutes at most. A handsome, middle-aged man with gray hair and small, glistening eyes sat down on Abu Hussein’s bed to share his opinion.

“Abu Hussein,” he said. “You know I’m a surgeon. I’m the best man here to operate on the patient, to remove the appendix. But I’d need certain things. And the patient would need to acknowledge in front of everyone here that he takes full responsibility for the operation.”

Without saying a word, Abu Hussein took the doctor by the hand and led him over to the patient. They moved from the bed on my left and sat down on the edge of the one on my right.

“Tell him what you need him to do,” said Abu Hussein.

“Look, brother. I’m going to be honest with you. You have a critical inflammation of the appendix. Very soon, if we don’t operate, it will burst and you’ll die. We still have the option of operating on you, but I warn you, the conditions we’d be working under mean the chance of success is

less than fifty percent. We'd like you to choose, in front of all these people, between certain death and possible death."

The patient opted for possible death, and declared publicly that the doctor was not in any way to be held responsible. The doctor told Abu Hussein what he needed for the operation.

"We've got clean fabric. We've got alcohol. We've got salt. We've got a few antibiotic tablets that Samir managed to get from the police. We've got needles and thread, and we've got the means to light a fire. But we'll need some metal objects to turn into scalpels."

As all these things emerged, I realized that I had been quite inattentive, and no matter how much I had observed my fellow inmates in secret, I had seen only what was on the surface.

The internal walls of the dormitory were covered with rough cement, which everyone used to file down their nails. There were no nail clippers in the prison, after all. This was also how various implements were fashioned, such as needles that were filed down from small pieces of bone. Someone would hold the bone and rub it against the wall, day in, day out, for several days, until it was as sharp as a needle. Then, with incredible patience, he would work open a hole for the eye of the needle, using another pin that had also been filed down against the rough wall. *A needle here was such a precious resource, but I realized later that there were dozens kicking around in the dormitory.* Thread was easy to come by: they just unraveled a piece of fabric, and patiently and quietly spun the fine thread again, ready for whatever they needed it for.

That's when I realized that most of their clothes had worn out, just like mine. *How had it not occurred to me to wonder what they were using to patch them up?* Of course, my trousers were worn out through the knees and thighs and badly needed patching up.

As for the alcohol, some of the doctors had—with unanimous consensus among them—been distilling jam in plastic containers. Where had they got them from? The liquid had turned into alcohol. It was a very small quantity, but alcohol nonetheless.

Abu Hussein spread the word around the dormitory. "Could everyone who has anything metal, no matter what type of metal or what shape, please hand it over?"

All kinds of metal objects appeared: pins, a one-lira coin complete with the image of the president, four empty sardine cans, bits of metal wire, a gold wedding ring.

I reached into the inner pocket of my jacket and felt my watch. I

put my fingers around it. I should give it to them. But to whom? And would they even accept it? Or would they throw it in my face, thinking it something contaminated from an impure apostate? My watch would be ideal as the metal strap was made of thin metal links which it would be easy to sharpen. The back cover could be used too and even the glass if necessary. I hesitated for quite some time. A few men were standing around, filing down pieces of metal according to the doctor's instructions. A blanket was stretched out over by the latrines, where the guard on the roof wouldn't see anything. The patient was laid out on this blanket, groaning, while the surgeon was talking to a group of doctors in the middle of the dormitory.

I decided it was time for action. Should I subtly go and leave my watch in an obvious place where they couldn't miss it? But then wouldn't they ask who it belonged to? Would I reply and tell them it's mine? I doubted that I would. If only Youssef, Commander Cuckoo, would come and see me at that moment, I thought, then I would give it to him.

Well, *que sera sera*. I stood up and walked over to the surgeon. Without a word, I stretched my hand out to give him my watch. Everyone was amazed, watching in stunned silence. The surgeon looked straight at me, his surprise visible in his warm, honey-colored eyes. Slowly, he held out his hand and took the watch from me.

"Thank you," he said. Then he turned to the doctors, looking closely at the watch. "Right, now we can start. This watch will be a huge help."

I went back to my bed and sat down. Slightly intoxicated, slightly pleased with myself, I turned those words over and over in my head: "Thank you." After all these years, one of them had thanked me. Someone had finally spoken to me and looked me in the eyes, with a look that expressed something other than disgust or hatred.

The doctors distributed the parts of the watch and strap to various inmates who were deeply engrossed in the process of filing away and sharpening. Suddenly there was the creaking sound of the key in the door. The names of nine men from our dorm were called out: three were to be executed and six were summoned for trial. Preparations for the operation were put on hold for over an hour, while those condemned to be executed performed their ablutions, prayed, and said their farewells. They took off their good clothes and swapped them for old, threadbare ones. The door opened . . . and they were gone.

"May they rest in peace and God's mercy," said the surgeon. "Right, guys, let's get back to work."

He turned to some of the doctors and the guys getting the tools ready. "The patient won't be able to hold out much longer." They finished preparing the scalpels. The doctor and some of the men went over to where the patient was lying on the floor, moaning, in front of the sinks.

I was overcome by curiosity and wanted to see the operation. I said that it was my right to see what was going on, and slowly I walked over to the latrines. There were about a dozen men, all busy getting ready. I moved out of the way and went to stand to one side. Nobody paid me any attention, so I stood there and watched.

There was a plastic bag full of fat. They must have been saving up solidified fat they had scraped from the food, then filtered it and put it into the bag. There were several sardine tins filled with fat into which they had dipped pieces of fabric, twisted tightly into wicks. Someone took out a box of matches and lit one. Where on earth did all those matches come from? It started to burn, giving off smoke, and they held another sardine tin over the flame, this one containing water and the "scalpels." They blew on the smoke rising from the flame, trying to disperse it so it wouldn't rise up to the roof where the guard might smell it. Soon, the water was boiling, and they sterilized the surgical instruments.

At that point, the surgeon was washing the patient's belly with water and soap. Then he prepared a salt solution which he spread over the same area. He washed his hands thoroughly and insisted on putting on a face mask before commencing the operation. The tone of his voice changed as he started to issue orders.

"We don't have any painkillers . . . so you will just have to endure the pain. And you absolutely must not move."

"You four, come here and hold him firmly. Take a limb each."

The surgeon took the scalpels from the sardine tin and started to test them, one by one. He chose the scalpel made from the back of my watch, which he tested on his thumbnail.

"Right, then, brother. We are in God's hands now. Guys, hold him tightly and don't let him move an inch."

With the words "In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful," he inserted the scalpel into the patient's stomach and made an incision approximately ten centimeters long.

The patient screamed and wailed for his mother. But he didn't move.

THE OPERATION WAS SOON FINISHED; the surgeon worked with astonishing speed. After stitching up the incision, he wiped it and cleaned

it. He mixed a few antibiotic pills into a paste and spread it over the wound, then bandaged the patient tightly with a clean strip of fabric.

“May God be merciful on you, brother. Guys, carry him to his bed.”

I went back to my bed, where I found some pajama trousers and, laid out on two pieces of fabric, a needle and thread. I picked them up and looked around, but nobody caught my eye. Who had left these things here? I recognized the pajama trousers: they had belonged to one of the men who’d been executed earlier that day. But who had left them on my bed?

I soon realized that they were a gift. Was this compensation for the watch? Did it mean that I was no longer considered an apostate spy? I turned to Abu Hussein and held the objects up to show him. Before I could say a word, he spoke with a curtness I could tell was contrived.

“They’re for you. If they’re on your bed, it means they’re yours.”

FROM THAT DAY ON, things seemed to get slightly better for me. I patched up my trousers on the front and back, and started to wear the pajama trousers when I was washing the other ones. Youssef, aka Commander Cuckoo, started coming to see me without anyone telling him not to.

Now, a month after the operation, the patient has got better and has started to walk around comfortably.

But he would still be hanged about a year later.