

## **The Shell: Memoirs of a Hidden Observer** (*al-Qawqa'a: yawmiyat mutalassis*)

By Mustafa Khalifa. Published in Arabic by Dar al-Adab, Beirut, 2008

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### **Short summary**

I've had this novel in my head ever since I finished reading it, in tears. It's the astonishing story of a Syrian political prisoner, an atheist mistaken for a radical Islamist, the worst kind of enemy of the state. He is then shunned by his fellow inmates and remains silent and unspoken to for over 12 years of incarceration. The novel takes the form of a diary which Musa keeps in his head and then writes down in later years. It's narrated in a succinct and well-paced way, with each short chapter often recounting a stand-alone episode. In one of the most notorious prisons in the Middle East for human rights abuses, Tadmur, the mood is naturally bleak at times and yet often very beautifully captured. The narrator, a young graduate at the start, is defiant and stoical, and somehow able to pick out humour and irony in the shocking events and the characters he describes. Yet even the strongest personality cannot hold out under such brutal conditions forever...

The novel is something of a symbol of the Syrian opposition in the current bloody civil war and is the focus of many Facebook groups and online discussions aimed at exposing acts of violence and brutality committed by the state. With its political impact and its universal literary beauty, it is not an exaggeration to call it the work of a modern-day Solzhenitsyn. With the recent publication of extensive photographic evidence of horrendous killings in Syrian prisons, this novel provides an essential perspective on the tragedy the Syrian people are living through.

### **Synopsis and review**

This compelling novel takes the form of the diary of a Syrian prisoner of conscience, locked up for 14 years without trial in one of the Middle East's most notorious jails. There are conflicting reports about whether it is indeed fiction or autobiography, but as far as I understand it is a fictionalised account based on the Khalifa's real life experience of being imprisoned for unsubstantiated political offences from 1982 to 1994 under the previous president, Hafez al-Assad. The narrator, Musa, composes the diary in his head while in prison and only writes it down upon his release, embellishing it with only the occasional retrospective comment.

Musa returns to Damascus for the first time after several years studying film in Paris and is arrested at the airport. He is accused of being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), a charge he denies – after all, he's Christian and an atheist, an

admission for which he is severely beaten, ironically, by his interrogators. Making the same mistake in the first prison where he is held, where up to 80 men are crammed into an unimaginably small cell, he is shunned by fellow inmates, mainly MB hardliners, as an apostate and presumed government spy, a curse which will remain with him throughout his many years in jail. (*See first extract below.*)

He's transferred to the infamous Tadmur high security prison in the desert, where he languishes for over a decade without charge. Trials, or military tribunals, are held in an office on site but the verdict seems always to be guilty and the sentence is death by hanging. Not that an inmate needs to be tried to face arbitrary death at the hands of the bloodthirsty wardens. No one is ever acquitted or seems to leave the prison alive. Arriving at the prison, he and the other new inmates are severely beaten and humiliated, including being made to drink from the cesspit. Musa nearly dies from injuries inflicted in this initiation 'reception' ceremony and indeed the body count is high. (*Extract translated by Elisabeth Jaquette available on request.*)

Musa spends years on end in a huge dormitory, where 300 men are crammed into beds just 25 cm apart. The only movement is to the latrines at the end of the room and into the yard outside every few days for a 'breather' – a humiliating parade which regularly involves torture and beatings. On New Year's Eve, for example, they are made to stand naked in the freezing cold until many perish.

Treated as a pariah, Musa endures literally years without speaking or being spoken to, without making eye contact with any of the men around him. Instead, he becomes a detached observer and listener, documenting the other men's lives and relationships, hearing news from other prison cells communicated by Morse code tapped out on the walls, and learning to memorise the Quran and Hadith from hearing the words recited so often by his fellow inmates. Without pen or paper, he hones the skill of committing his diary to memory and records minute details of their surreal life, inspired by the other inmates who actively keep a mental record of the unspeakable goings on within the prison, to honour the memory of those who are killed there.

His 'voyeurism' reaches another level when he discovers a hole one day in the wall looking on to the courtyard outside. Taking cue from a mentally disturbed prisoner who sits for hours on end huddled beneath his blanket, Musa starts to do the same, secretly watching the suffering inflicted on prisoners in the yard and the regular executions.

The novel does, of course, contain shocking violence, but mercifully such episodes do not overload the narrative and are all the more powerful for their infrequency. (Or perhaps it just seemed that way to me, as I fully expected the book to be page after page of hideous torture.) The narrator establishes a background of fear and pain, but stoically focuses on other details of life between those walls: the bitter cold, the unbearable heat and dust in the summer sandstorms, starvation, outbreaks of highly infectious diseases, visits paid for with bribes at astonishingly high prices (kilos of gold), disputes and vendetta killings...

The style of narration is simple and concise, but not without emotional reflection, and perhaps the most compelling aspect of the narrative is the psychological depth to the characters – something that is achieved in a film-like way minimal description. We are

drawn ever deeper into Musa's complex psychology as well as that of the inmates and the jailors, as Musa reflects on the relationships around him and the shifting tensions. He himself, very gradually, develops relationships and starts to emerge from his shell. Inevitably, he comes to identify with the institutionalised prisoner community, a mental state of being from which he will probably never be able to extricate himself, a trauma from which a survivor of such an ordeal can perhaps never fully recover.

Things do gradually improve for Musa after several years when he offers his watch to be fashioned into a scalpel for an operation, performed in secret, on an inmate left to die of appendicitis by the prison authorities. (*See 2<sup>nd</sup> extract below.*) Still, no one speaks to him, but he is at least treated with a little more warmth. The real turning point comes when a new intake of prisoners includes a group of Islamic extremists and Musa's life is again at risk: moderates among the prisoners intervene to protect him. Vicious fights break out, but in a dramatic showdown, Musa finally breaks his decade-long silence and speaks out publicly in defence of his personal choice to have or not to have a faith. His bravery and honesty open up new friendships as a small group of liberal doctors begin to speak to him and when he shares the secret of the spyhole he gains more trust, especially that of the representative among the inmates, the 'barracks chief', Abu Hussein.

A particularly close friendship blossoms with Nasim, a doctor who also studied in France. Nasim is similarly apolitical and is imprisoned as a hostage to put pressure on his brother, wanted for involvement in the MB. Their honeymoon period, where they enjoy deep heart-to-heart conversations in French and even play chess with a set they craft out of bread dough, comes to a tragic end with a heart-wrenching episode of an elderly man imprisoned with his three sons. He is made to choose one out of the four of them to escape execution. Choosing his youngest son, he is devastated when the authorities ignore this request (apparently it was a sick joke), and all three sons are condemned. There is widespread horror and this event sparks the first open performance of the funeral prayer, by every single inmate, in a prison where any man caught praying or reciting the Quran is brutally punished. Nasim watches the execution through the hole, and is horrified by the inhumanity of the authorities and their unspeakable actions which he had until then not witnessed directly. There is also a sense, though it is not stated explicitly, that he is also horrified at his friend Musa, who had calmly been witnessing such things all this time. Nasim succumbs to depression and goes on hunger strike, and even when he is forcibly given anti-depressants after losing his mind completely and attacking several guards, he is never quite the same again.

The end is in sight when one day Musa is inexplicably transferred from Tadmur, following intervention by his uncle, who in recent years has become a Socialist party minister in the government. He arrives at a low security, 5-star prison for awkward oppositionists, mostly Communists, where he is astonished at the relative comfort and freedom compared to the treatment of the true enemies of the state, the Muslim Brotherhood. Even then, things are not straightforward, and Musa's refusal to confess to membership of any outlawed political organisations, or to sign a thank you letter to the president, means his release is postponed indefinitely as he is transferred between the three security agencies. Incredibly, the torture is ratcheted up to some of the worst ordeals he has faced so far, yet, emboldened by heroic stories of what other prisoners have endured, he grits his teeth and refuses to accept the authorities' conditions for

release. In the end, his release comes by surprise when his uncle pressures Musa's brother to sign the declaration on his behalf.

The final chapters recount the bizarre and painful months following his release from prison, a telling summary of the psychological damage inflicted over this eternity of institutionalised humiliation. The change in tone and in Musa's mood is palpable and overwhelmingly sad: from a defiant, stoical, optimistic young man on the inside, bolstered by the strength and experience of his peers, and by the sense of community which it took so many years to feel part of, he suddenly seems to undergo an utter transformation into an old man: tired, dejected and alienated in the outside world. While his family fuss over him, trying to set him up with a marriage and a normal life, he shrinks further and further from human company and into the shell to which he is accustomed, seeking solace in solitude and in drink.

The novel culminates in a harrowing scene which is no less traumatic for the fact that the reader can feel it coming, though Musa is wholly shocked by the event. Nasim and another prisoner have also been released in a move by the authorities to rid themselves of all terminally ill prisoners. In contrast to the confidence and enthusiasm of the other prisoner for his plans to start a new life abroad, Nasim's speechlessness and inability to readjust to life on the outside are, in a more extreme form, an echo of Musa's own sense of the impossibility of reconciling himself to this society which manages to exist in blissful ignorance of, or wilful refusal to speak of, the appalling savagery of its ruling regime. When Nasim commits suicide before Musa's very eyes, the sense of Musa's isolation and inability to communicate with the world around him is fossilised. He survived many years in his shell in prison, but how will he adapt to the larger prison on the outside?

For all its stark, documentary-style narration, this is a deeply moving psychological story of a noble attempt at personal resistance, and yet an eventual crushing defeat at the hands of a brutal impersonal power. It is a forceful indictment of the Assad regime in Syria, but stands equally strongly as a universal rallying cry for justice and freedom from political persecution and arbitrary military rule. Incidentally, Tadmur Prison was closed in 2001 but reopened in 2011, and the horrors perpetrated by the Syrian authorities have been one of the main causes of the Syrian revolution and ongoing civil war.

The author, Mustafa Khalifa, lives in exile from Syria. Besides writing this novel, he is an eloquent and insightful political commentator on the situation in his native country. (See his 2012 editorial *'What if Bashar Assad Wins?'*) The novel has been translated into French as La Coquille and I believe it would find an avid readership if translated into English.

## Two chapters translated 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 headcount and found there were 86 of us in there. Looking at the ceiling, I worked out that the room was no more than 25 square metres 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 12 and 13... 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 afterwards 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. '14 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 bellowed. '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 learnt 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.

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After squatting a while, I felt the need to relieve myself. I turned to my neighbour.

'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 86 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 metre clearance between the pipe and the ceiling. Two boys were sleeping up there, both about 15 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 great pain. I wanted to help him, but what could I do? I looked around, embarrassed. Although his bed was a whole 25 cm 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 round 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 neighbour 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 grey 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 50 per cent. 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 realised that I had been quite inattentive, and no matter how much I had observed my fellow inmates in secret, I had only seen 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 realised later that there were dozens kicking around in the dormitory.* Thread was easy to come by: they just unravelled a piece of fabric, and patiently and quietly spun the fine thread again ready for whatever they needed it for.

That's when I realised 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, 4 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-coloured 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 that word 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 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 sterilised 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 facemask 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 centimetres 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 pyjama 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 recognised the pyjama 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 realised 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 pyjama 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.*