

Signs and Wonders in a Damascus Prison

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A prisoner finds some small comfort in rituals and fortune-telling.

I never used to believe in signs and superstitions. I tended to rely on scientific explanations for what happened in my life, so it would have been strange for me to believe in fortune-telling or fate.

All this changed after I was arrested in April 2013 and locked in the hell that is the Palestine Branch of the security services in Damascus. [ed. military intelligence section that used to handle Palestinian paramilitaries.] There, I was surrounded by prisoners who searched for hope in the tiniest and strangest of minutiae.

I found it funny at first. After days in horror of the prison cell, however, I began to realise that rational thought could no longer sustain me. I began to listen to my cellmates' superstitious beliefs, looking out for any small detail that might somehow indicate how much time I had left in here.

What did it mean if there were insects in my loaf of bread, or cockroaches scuttling on top of my mattress? Or that my ears were ringing, or my eyelid began to twitch involuntarily?

It is impossible to describe the suffering and desperation of prisoners. It is the death of hope. One cannot explain the atmosphere inside the prison. There is a constant rush of adrenaline, and you are plagued by anxiety, insomnia and fear. You beg and plead with the unknown, or with God.

Those who have not experienced it cannot understand how one begins to find hope in imaginary signs. Somehow, you see some portent in the appearance of a butterfly in your cell, or a sign of salvation in accidentally putting your shoes on the wrong feet.

If your right ear starts ringing, you think about who might be plotting your rescue. When the ringing stops, your hope finds another outlet.

I showed my outstretched palm to anyone who claimed they could read it, and I listened to them tell me what I wanted to hear. They said that I would hear good news in two minutes' time, or maybe it two hours, two weeks or two months.

It is impossible for those who have not lived through this particular hell, even briefly, to understand how and why a prisoner turns to the world of signs and portents.

Here, nothing happens without a reason. There is no such thing as a random detail, nothing that is without meaning. It could be a prison guard's offhand smile, the tone of his voice, a change in the times allocated to go to the bathroom or to be taken for torture.

We scrutinise the mood of the guards, look at whether they are wearing military uniforms or civilian clothes, and listen for an increase or decrease of voices outside the cell.

It could be the type, quantity and smell of a meal, or change in a mobile phone ringtone. The colour of the folder the interrogator carries, whether the paper is blank or lined, even the use of a hose or a plastic rod for beatings.

This is the only freedom for those living in the void – to look for clues in the wings of a butterfly.

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