

My cave was a shadowy concrete cube, two metres by three; even the dim light of day barely impinged on the darkness. At the back was a block of cement by way of a bench. In the corner, near the door, was a squat toilet. Three rows of holes, each ten centimetres in diameter, had been bored into the top of the wall next to the corridor. In the centre of the ceiling, a similar-sized hole allowed air to circulate. Above that was some kind of hangar, about 180 metres high, which formed a level above the cells. That level, which we could barely make out, had a corrugated iron roof and openings at each end, crisscrossed with bars. The cell doors lined a central corridor that ran the length of the block. A steel-clad vent in the middle of the corridor's ceiling was our only indirect source of air and light.

This was my new abode. I'd never been superstitious, at least not about dates and numbers but, like everyone struck by misfortune, I began to be.

As soon as the door was shut, I was in the dark. A heavy silence hung over the block. Even the birds had stopped chirping. The sound of soldiers' boots and the abrupt clack of locks and doors made no impression on the emptiness that engulfed my mind and soul. I looked into this pit without really believing it. It made me think of the Christians' cave in the Bible. The idea made me smile. As if death had a religion!

I took stock of my situation. "What have you done, oh you I see..."* I was standing in what appeared to be my grave. Number thirteen: it was the worst cell of all. The squat toilets

* From Paul Verlaine's prison poem, 'Le ciel est par-dessus le toit', written in 1880. This line comes from the last stanza, in which Verlaine is addressing himself in prison: "What have you done, oh you I see here, / endlessly weeping, / tell me, what have you done / with your youth?" ("Qu'as-tu fait, ô toi que voilà / Pleurant sans cesse, / Dis, qu'as-tu fait, toi que voilà, / De ta jeunesse?")

had no U-bend – the stench of the sewers from both blocks in the prison came through them – and the smell was so bad that every time the guards opened the door to give me my ration, they recoiled, buffeted by fetid air. The roof had holes like Gruyère cheese and, every time it rained, the cell turned into a shower. When it stopped raining outside, it carried on in my cell for at least another week, the time it took for the puddle on the roof to drain away. In winter, when the temperature fell below zero, it became unbearable.

The only furnishings were the block of concrete and two army blankets that dated from 1936, now worn threadbare. On the floor was a plastic water pitcher shaped like an amphora that could hold about five litres and a small plastic carafe and plate.

I had to take action, and fast; I needed to make some radical decisions. First, I had to eradicate any questioning from my mind, rid it of anything that might hamper, paralyse or drag it downwards, into the chasms of doubt and despair.

When I heard the locks snap shut, echoing like gongs, I realised we were going to be here for some time. So I decided I must forget the world outside. I no longer had a family, or friends. I had no personal memories and no future. I was here and here only. My cell was my universe; my companions in misfortune my only society; culture and faith my only wealth. I had to completely resign myself, to forget the whys and wherefores and accept what I called my three sentences.

The sentence imposed by men, by whose will I was here, which I decided not to appeal because, albeit unwittingly, I had entered a man's home with a weapon, I had violated his personal space and the peace of his family and children. In our culture, we say: "It's entirely lawful for someone who breaks into your house to die" – entirely legitimate, I would say.

Next, the sentence imposed by heaven, which I accepted unconditionally as a challenge, a trial, a cross to bear: my own. For me, life is an ultimate test. There are some to whom God

gives everything and some from whom He takes everything. He observes how each person reacts. I am still convinced that, had He given me everything, I would have foundered; today I would be a pot-bellied old general, alcoholic and utterly corrupt.

And lastly, my own sentence: since I was responsible for my destiny, I could only plead guilty. I was both Sisyphus and Antigone, resigned and courageous. After this trial on three charges, my ego had been neutralised and the question 'why' nullified; now I could live and survive, fully embrace the present and alone decide my fate.

Outside, the sounds of the soldiers stopped abruptly and all we could hear was the purr of the trucks' engines fading into the distance, carrying with them whatever uncertainty remained as to our fate. The day passed slowly and the silence became even more oppressive; time seemed to have stopped, life was suspended. Even the birds stayed obstinately mute, their silence heavy with premonition. Then a timid voice called out, carried by its echo across cold, blank walls, as if seeking a gap or refuge in the reinforced concrete. Another followed, then another. Questions were coming from all sides, with answers no one heard, strange names, distorted voices, and that pitiless concrete which, like a vampire grown ravenous after years of famine, greedily sucked up these scraps of life. The birds, surprised at nature's stubbornness and men's optimistic fatalism, overcame their doubts and joined the general commotion at last.

At midday the guards arrived. They served us a small bread roll and a carafe of chickpeas boiled in water with a little salt. This would be Tazmamart's eternal, unchanging menu, with a pot of pasta for supper, again boiled in slightly salty water.

As the transfer had taken place in mid-August, we each received a khaki canvas shirt and trousers, the classic military summer uniform. The striped uniforms of civilian prison were taken away, though we kept the plastic sandals we'd arrived wearing. We swapped our clothes quite cheerfully. Deep down,

we were almost relieved to take off that shameful apparel in favour of the more or less reputable uniform of the army, to which – after all – we still belonged. Despite the horror of our surroundings, it imparted the semblance of respectability. Of all we had lost – which was everything – the hardest to bear was the loss of our dignity. That illusion of regaining respectability by being restored to a military body did not last long. We'd taken a step back only to leap further into the abyss.

From the beginning of October, the temperature began to drop. After summer's suffocating heat, we would encounter the torments of glacial winters in pre-Saharan lands, combined with the bitter climate of the Middle Atlas. Autumn was very short and temperatures plunged ever downwards. We begged for a winter uniform, as was customary in the army, but it was no use. We came up against what would be our daily lot from now on: indifference.

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In order to sleep at night, I would fold my blanket width-wise to make a band of about ten inches. That way I had something thick to wedge between my ribs and hips and the cement because, of course, I could only lie on my side. If I wanted to turn over, I had to get up, repeat the operation and lie back down again on the other side having rearranged everything, in other words, having put the other blanket – also folded in two – over me, so I could carefully tuck the edges under my body. The secret lay in not leaving even the tiniest opening for the cold to get in. Every time my body shifted, I had to perform a complicated gymnastic manoeuvre, like a never-ending ritual. The smallest crack in my improvised shell became an instrument of torture, a stake piercing my skin and bone continuously; the overall temperature inside the shelter instantly became unbearable. To put it right, I had to start all over again. Having said that, time didn't matter.

As the days went on, I became more adept and my adjustments less frequent. That allowed me to sleep more and wear myself out a little less.

Once I was under the blanket, every movement entailed a risk. So I had to put up with the pain in my hip and my shoulders for as long as I possibly could and, above all, save the stored-up air, not allowing any to escape except at the point when I could not breathe. Any heat source was worth saving; nothing must be lost. I would hold in the tiniest little fart – with all the starch we swallowed every day, God knows there were enough of them – until I was under the blanket and certain it wouldn't be wasted. Smell? What smell? There were so many of them. More every day. We didn't even notice them any more. We'd made the stench seem ordinary, as we had the hunger, the cold and all the rest of it – thirst too, since the water we were given was polluted. When we poured it into the plastic pot, the sides immediately turned viscous and a film of sludge settled in it. We decided early on not to drink it. Since the food was liquid for the most part, it was unlikely we would die of thirst. So we didn't drink this filthy water unless we absolutely had to. Those who departed from this rule paid for it with their lives.

In winter, we had to walk. From the corner near the door to the one between the toilet and the bed was the diagonal of life, the walking diagonal. There was only one: four steps one way and four the other, a half-turn to left and right alternately, so as not to get dizzy. I'd learned that at the cinema. When I wasn't walking, I was praying; it was good physical exercise. I'd decided to pay off the debts I owed to God. In Islam, prayer is encouraged from the age of twelve, so I decided to pray not five but thirty-five times a day, which gave me an extra six days and was a good way to keep myself going.