

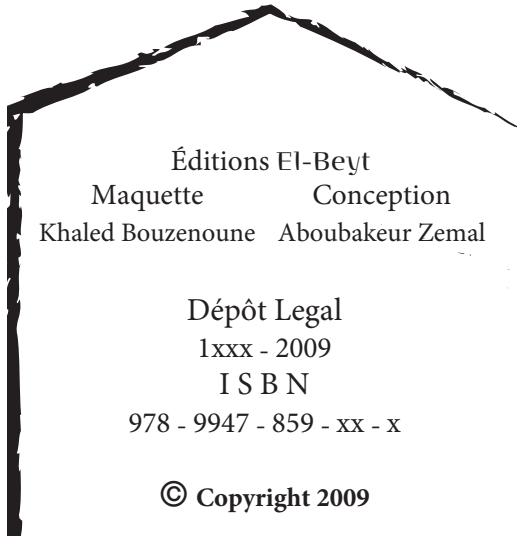
Azzedine Mihoubi

A novel
Tora Bora
Confession



Translated by
Omar ziani





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Confession

A novel

Translated by
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Amin Abu Rashid, aka the Afghan

Place: Askram Palace Hotel

Date: December 31, 2039

Time: 2.34 am

When Muhammad Amin Al Sadhan's name was called, the audience displayed no interest at first. But, when Haussmann repeated "Alias Amin Abu Abu Rashid the Afghan", all showed increased interest in the tall, husky man.

He was smart in his white suit, with the beard shaved off. His face bore a light smile.

His age verged on seventy. In his hand, he carried a rosary with blue beads, on his head a purple silk cap. He started: "In the name of Allah, The Merciful and The Compassionate. May all prayers and peace be upon the most honorable of all messengers and prophets, Muhammad Bin Abdullah, the one sent in mercy for mankind. People of God, I am aware that you were spellbound by the confessions of those that preceded me. From the Cuban, I have learnt resilience in the face of adversity, though I loathed the rashness of his youth. As for the Spaniard, I learnt from him his capacity to keep secrets, and I did not like his insistence on vengeance. I have not heard the

Japanese lady's confession, but I do not deny my love for the Japanese, for they are known for their loyalty and devotion and pride in their country. As for the hotel owner, Mr. Haussmann, I liked his sense of humor, but I invite him to keep the bounty if it comes my way, for Allah has bestowed on me sufficient wealth. As far as I am concerned, I really do not know whether I will be strong enough to confess in front of you, for I no longer remember from my biography but the days I spent in the mountains of Tora Bora in Afghanistan with some of the Mujahedeen, most of whom were Arab, under the bombing by American B-52s, and the six years I spent as a detainee in Guantanamo.

I was, as they said, a terrorist from the Al Qaeda Group. In fact, I was not far from Osama Bin Laden at the time, as we considered ourselves guests of the Taliban Emirate and its Emir, Mullah Omar.

In your silence is a motive that compels me to converse with you at length. I am now seventy-two, I will break down in front of you as follows: Sixteen years I spent at Yarmuk Camp in Damascus, where Palestinians have resided since the Disaster. My origins go back to Nablus. My father passed away in a traffic accident, leaving Um Amin and a two-room house in a narrow alley. Four years I expended in Aleppo, where I majored in mechanical engineering, while working at textile factories.

I spent one and a half years in the Bekkaa Valley in Lebanon, where I joined the Resistance with some Palestinians living in neighboring countries, following Israel's invasion of the Lebanese territory in hot pursuit of the Palestinian Resistance there.

I moved to with my mother to Amman, where my uncles live, and I settled down in Jordan. I worked at a printing and publishing house for two years, and knew members from the ring that organized the travel of people wishing to reach Afghanistan for the sake of Jihad to free it from the grip of the faithless Russians, to set up the Islamic State.

In 1986, I joined Peshawar in Pakistan and stayed there till 2001, as follows: Eight months in Peshawar, where the office specializing in recruiting Arab was located. There, I got acquainted to Abdullah Azzam.

Three years I spent between Kandahar and Kabul, charged with tasks, most of which were related to the maintenance of arms. During that period, I learnt the language of the Pashto which prevented the Pakistanis and Russia's stooges, Karmel's regime and Mujeeb Urahman's government, and those that succeeded them, from knowing my identity.

What is more, I married a Pashto woman called Rafika, whose father was a former policeman who supported the Mujahedeen, while her two brothers Muhibullah and Abu Al-Fadhl were followers of Hikmatyar. I had no children from her, as our marriage lasted for no more than thirteen months, as I decided to separate from her, owing to the difficulty in settling down. She understood my position very well. The strange thing is that, two years later, I married Dallal, my cousin, a graduate of Al Al-Bait in Amman. She was in Jordan and I was in Afghanistan.

Though she was not as religiously fervent as I would have liked, she still accepted to marry me, maybe because of my beauty, or since I promised her to quit Jihad definitely in the spring of 1993. She was kind and smart, and trusted me completely.

I remember we spent a whole month together in Mecca to perform pilgrimage, where she asked me: "Palestine is closer, why go to Afghanistan and die there?"

"Jihad has no homeland," I replied, trying to dodge a question I had heard many a time. I heard from others what makes me consider Jihad in Fiji Islands, on planet Venus or Saturn take precedence over Jihad in Jerusalem as the tree of the Jews did not originate in the vicinity of Al Aqsa Mosque. That is what I learnt from the elders of Jihad, and what I remember from their fatwa. Some of you may wonder how I could move from one place to another without being harassed by Jordanian security, or other intelligence services, that know us and watch our movements. The reason is simple, I was one of those that did not stint them some tips they use in the reports they dispatched to their bosses who, in turn, read them then put them away in drawers, to pull them out in times of trouble. I was, like many others, more like informers when necessary, to spare ourselves the repression of intelligence services. At the same time, we were recruiting fresh youth to send to Afghanistan, where Arab Afghans commanded a strong presence, and became a number to be reckoned with in the equations of the fight. No step could be taken

without their opinion, be it an approval or a refusal, especially after the announcement of the foundation of Al Qaeda; Al Qaeda being the party of Arabs in Afghanistan.

I won't hide that I started getting interested in the Islamic movement, or what was known as "the Awakening", after Khomeini's victorious revolution in Iran. I admired that man who defied the Shah, America and the Savak, and wished I had been amongst those that besieged the American embassy in Teheran.

My anger at the Americans grew after I read Henry Kissinger's statement sixty years before. When asked which party America preferred to see victorious in the First Gulf War, he replied: "America wants losers". It dawned on me then that that our tragedies would increase, and that there was no solution but to wage war on America everywhere.

I cannot express my happiness after the killing of 241 Marines, who were blown up to smithereens, to minute pieces and on the Beirut coastline in the year 1983. That night, a resident of Nahr Al Barid, ecstatic at the news, told me: "this is Vietnam on a smaller scale."

What happened in Iran left in my soul a profound thing that I am incapable of describing. I also reacted to the events that rocked the city of Hama in Syria, when an armed movement from the Syrian Moslem Brothers arose and was annihilated by use of force. I did not understand how our enemies increased in number at home and abroad. When I joined the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon, I did not feel the warmth I had anticipated before arriving in the

Bekkaa Valley. I remember joining, with three friends, a camp on the eastern side of the Bekkaa Valley. There, I got acquainted with a number of Arab gunmen, most of whom were students in Syria who volunteered for the Resistance; two Iraqis, seven Syrians, an Egyptian, two Algerians, a Moroccan, and a Tunisian, in addition to three from Sudan and one Yemeni. The Camp leader was called Abu Wael, a Palestinian from Ain El Hilwa, and a follower of Fatah the Revolution.

Hamoudi the Iraqi asked me: "Did the Arab army, in the Palestine War over thirty years ago, fight Israel inside Palestine or outside?"

"I don't know. But I guess they fought inside the Palestinian territory."

"In this case, they failed from the inside, and they want us to recover Palestine from the Bekkaa."

"Things are different. Israel has invaded Lebanon and we are defending Beirut."

"Which means Palestine is outside their calculations."

Two days later I learnt that Hamoudi was transferred to another camp, then taken out of Lebanon. As for me, I was entrusted with the task of recording everything related to the supplies that reached us from parties we did not know; weapons, ammunition, blankets and food. Amongst us was Mustapha Sbaa, a folk singer who spent his nights singing songs from Palestinian folklore. He never stopped dancing and playing with his kaffieh.

Since I am before you confessing today, and as there is nothing to prevent me from telling everything, I do not mind to reveal what I feel; I am right, and at this very moment I think that when a man confesses, he should not regret, for that means nothing. When you do something and bear the trouble, what use is it to tell people that you regret having done it? Ridiculous! I did a lot of things. I did all that because I was convinced that there was good in it for me and for others, even if it was with coercion. I did it because Allah willed it to happen. I do what the Koran ordains; what the others say is mere idle talk and corrupt speech. There are ready Fatwa that are presented to us whenever our leaders feel that we are in need of a religious motive that gives us the right to do anything, even killing.

I see in the eyes of some of you that you are a trifle skeptical. This does not matter at all for me, even if I am over seventy. For he who has spent a day or two in the tunnels of Tora Bora under the bombs, or a few days in Guantanamo being humiliated, will know that he is right in everything he has done. I can glimpse in the eyes of some of you that they are cursing me in secret, saying "woe to this old man who has killed thousands of people and here he is today telling us that he regrets nothing. Yes, I have no regrets, for the Americans did not regret what they did in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq and other places in the world.

The Jews, too, are bragging about what they have done in Palestine. How do you want me, the Palestinian

who has been homeless for over a hundred years, to say that I have done inappropriate things, a great evil, and a mortal sin.

I believe in what I have done; do you, at this moment, want to deprive me of something that has lived with me a lifetime? Be sure that this is no hard matter.

Yes, the days of Al Qaeda are long gone, and Jihad has taken on forms different from what existed in our time. Jihad is now proclaimed by individuals with no connection whatsoever with religion, but I will relate to you some of what I witnessed.

In Peshawar, the antechamber to Paradise as I call it, Mujahedeen came from all over the world, even from Europe, teeming with immigrants children, who were moved by their Jihadist tendencies and their wish to defend Allah's religion and the dignity of Moslems.

In the spring of 1991, I met Rasheed, an Algerian nicknamed Ikrima, taciturn, fast-moving and having a quick temper. He was rarely seen laughing. His complexion was light brown. On his right forearm was a tattoo in the shape of Latin letters that I had not succeeded in deciphering. I remember him telling me about himself when we were on our way to Kandahar by night: I was born in Bousaada in eastern Algeria. I finished high school there and joined the paramedical school, and then I worked at a hospital in Msila, which is not very far from Bousaada. In fact, I had no religious leanings early in my youth and until the mid-1980s, when I discovered the taped sermons of the Egyptian preacher

Abdulhamid Kechk, which we started circulating amongst ourselves, the young people of the city. We were deeply moved by his teachings and harangues, especially those in which he ridiculed Arab regimes and rulers. Then, I had not yet heard of Abbassi and Benhadj, until the streets erupted in violent riots in October 1988, when the powers that be allowed the founding of political parties, then we started hearing about the daily creation of a front or a movement or an alliance or a union; various names, in excess of sixty parties, most of which could not gather one hundred members, except the Salvation Front, which occupied the streets, the mosques, the universities and the Fridays. One could see only white shirts everywhere, endless marches and rallies, with no other goal but to terminate the ruling party, the National Liberation Front, which had become totally incapable of convincing people of its ability to lead the country. Its hardship was compounded by the fact many of its members abandoned it or joined us. We were able to raise our voice, nothing frightened us, and the State had lost its might. An unemployed person can become a political leader. It was a strange situation; I found that I was capable of recruiting thousands of people in my town simply with a speech I delivered in a mosque or in any other place. I decided to settle in Algiers, but that did not last for more than two months, when I met brother Messaoud in a large rally organized by the Salvation Front in support of Iraq. He related to me his experience in Afghanistan, his pride in jihad against the Russian infidels. Many a

time he related the miracles of the angels fighting on the side of the Mujahedeen. He prompted in me the wish to go to Afghanistan. Not many days passed before I found the doors wide open before me to join the Mujaedeen in Peshawar via Damascus and Jeddah. I left behind me the Salvation Front, my family and all the plans I had laid out after the victory of Islam in Algeria, by which I mean building a house, buying a car and getting married. My only goal was to become one of the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan.

One Friday afternoon, after prayer, I had lunch with Rasheed, who started describing Bousaada, the conservative city, listing the names of streets and neighborhoods and the noble families. He did not forget to remind me that the French painter, Nasruddin Dinet, lived there until his death, recounting the life of the man who became a Moslem and visited the holy places of Islam. When he turned light-hearted, Rasheed would jokingly tell me: "we are Abbassi's in-laws!"

In the beginning, Rasheed was in charge of Algerians in Afghanistan, securing communication between them and some of the Salvation Front's leaders. He did not have good words for Nahnah, all the time repeating that the man's characteristic was his talking ability, but if you believed him in the morning, you would have to wash your ears in the evening. Rasheed never hesitated to state that he did not like the Moslem Brothers, as they loved to engage in politics and killed hope in those like us who are in a haste to apply Allah's Law on Allah's creatures. Even

here in Afghanistan, the Algerian Brothers are not prone to using force and taking up arms, as they spend a long time in useless political discussions. All their discourse centers around who attacked an army barracks in El Oued, who masterminded the blowing up of Algiers airport, and what would happen if Islamists were defeated in the legislative elections. As if they had not left Algeria.

Rasheed was extremely candid, and believed what he said. He sustained severe wounds twice in Panjshir Valley, but survived miraculously. As soon as his wounds healed, he asked to return to fighting, but would not be allowed. He would, nonetheless, never stop claiming his right to Jihad. Such was his resolve. At the end of 1994, I met him once more in Peshawar and he told me:

"I'm going back to Algeria."

Surprised at his decision, as he was not the kind to renounce his principles, I told him:

"But Jihad is not yet over in Afghanistan."

"Jihad is in Algeria, too. The Group there needs our support since we fought the Russian infidels."

"Are there infidels in Algeria?"

"Those that do not apply Allah's Law are no different from the Russians even if they are my people. The news we are getting from Algeria is that the dictatorship is on the verge of collapse."

"The news we are getting is that many of the killed are innocent."

"They will be resurrected according to their intentions."

"We have been taught that Algeria is the country of martyrs and Mujahedeen."

"They have deviated, and the solution is their eradication."

"How about the Front's leaders?"

"I don't care about them. They chose politics to end up in a military jail, but the Armed Islamic Group chose the right path."

"Think again."

"Between Djafar "he Afghan" and Abbassi, Ikrima needs no one to show him the way."

"I know, but think again."

"You don't seem to understand what it means to wage jihad in religion's name."

I did not wish to engage in an argument with him, so he assaulted me with a scolding speech:

"Don't push me to say that you in Palestine have created a political party or a front in every house and are pretending that you will free Jerusalem. If Saladin were resurrected, he would spit in your faces one by one..."

He left it there, then gave me a quick hug, saying:

"Pray for our victory. You will be proud of us."

He vanished amongst the arriving and the departing and those seeking a place in Paradise.

Peshawar is the gate to divine conquest and the crossing to Paradise.

I was pondering Rasheed the Algerian's words on Palestine. I was also recollecting the days in the

Bekkaa when we discovered the men that allured us that they would recover Palestine, while they are far from being capable of it. I used to see in Sheikh Yassin the man capable of erasing the Oslo Agreement which killed all hope of return.

Dallal was not wrong when she said Palestine is closer, so why go to Afghanistan and die there.

Since Abdullah Azzam died a martyr in the winter of 1987 in Peshawar, I was obsessed with leaving Afghanistan. I thought of returning to Jordan, to be closer to Palestine. I always said Dallal was right in what she said. I was obsessed with staying in Afghanistan and returning to my family. I did not hesitate to broach the subject with Salah Al Hawamda, a veteran Arab who joined jihad against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, where he took part in many battles. The Mujahedeen viewed him as one of the most respected of themselves. He started his journey with the Moslem Brothers in Egypt, while a student at Al Azhar, where he adopted the ideas of Al Takfeer wa Al Hijra. He set up a cell at Al Zarqaa that was swiftly arrested. He tried once more in Amman, until he grew convinced with Jihad in Afghanistan where he spent over a quarter of a century, becoming with the passage of time the memory of the Afghan Arabs there. He commanded great respect. I said to him: "I'm thinking of going back."
"So are all of us."

"You too?"

"We did what we had to. Didn't the Prophet's companions and followers go on lengthy campaigns then those that survived would return?"

"What will you do after going back?"

"Our destiny, Abu Rashid, is to remain Mujahedeen. I'm close on sixty, with no home, no children. I have no option but to finish my journey on Allah's way.

He fell silent for a while, then stares at me laughing:

"Abu Rashid, this person in front you used to carry a Stinger missile on his shoulder and hike for long distances. This person witnessed the flight of the Russians. This person has lived through everything, but did not live a single instant for himself. He knows the opium and arms trails. Abu Rashid, I sat with Americans, I mean their intelligence people, as I'm sitting with you now. We felt safe with them, to the point where we considered them as Mujahedeen just like ourselves. But as soon as the Russians left, everything changed and they turned on us, or maybe we turned on them. That was incredible."

Khetyar used to talk to me while sipping his berry juice, and then he would feel for his belongings, as if he was looking for a missing object. He would pull out a pile of papers, with a small plan amongst them. He tidied his pages again, and then he put it in my pocket, telling me:

"Read that which we have learnt from our guide,

Hassan Al Bana. Read and you will see that some day will come when we will do what he asked sixty years ago. Read to learn about jihad.”

When I grasped the plan, it was damp and old, with some of its pages torn on which appeared irregular scribbles written with a pencil underneath sentences and words. I remember it was a call addressed to the Moslem Brothers:

“If you are asked: What are you calling to? Say: we are calling to Islam as brought along by Muhammad, and the government is part of it. If you are asked: You are inciting to revolution? Say: We are preaching the truth. If you attack us and stand in our way, Allah has permitted us to defend ourselves, and you will be the oppressive mutineers. I will be frank with you, to tell you that your message is as yet unknown to many. But the day they know it and grasp its goals, it will face strong opposition and great enmity. You will face much hardship, and will realize the people’s ignorance of Islamic truth. You will find in the clergy and official scholars some who will express their surprise at the way you understand Islam and will deny that you are waging jihad.

By jihad I mean the religious duty that is valid until Doomsday as explained by Allah’s Messenger: He who dies without going on a jihad campaign will die a death of pre-Islamic times. The lowest position is selflessness, while the highest is being killed for the sake Allah.

Allah says: "Lo! Allah has bought from the believers their lives and their wealth because the Garden will be theirs; they shall fight in the way of Allah and shall slay and be slain. It is a promise which is binding on Him in the Torah and the Gospel and the Quran. Who fulfilth his covenant better than Allah? Rejoice then in your bargain that ye have made, for that is the supreme triumph."

I stopped a little and wondered whether Rasheed the Algerian understanding of the Brothers' relationship with jihad was right. What I read in Al Bana's call is totally different from what I learnt from the Brothers in Jordan, and the words of its founder reveal that it was established for the sake of conducting jihad. I proceeded reading Al Bana's manuscript, so I found myself before the method to be used in the implementation of the act of jihad.

For instance, there was that recommendation instructing the person in charge of an operation to ensure he carried no personal papers or documents that revealed names and addresses. Neither should he leave in his home any evidence pointing to his carrying out the operation or having taken part in it. One must also plan an escape route, just as one planned the attack. One should equally keep one's cool and control over one's nerves to enable one's brain to think and react efficiently in all situations and to follow the carefully prepared plan. The attacker

should not wear white, black or blue clothes as they are easily detected in darkness. He should never let himself fall in the hands of his foes, by resorting to all ways and means to escape. Debating is strictly prohibited, it is only allowed before planning and until the order to execute the operation is issued.

Executing the operation requires observance of the previous rules to ensure its complete success.

If the perpetrator is arrested, there are two possibilities. In the first case, the attacker is caught red-handed, in which case denial is not useful. He has only to answer general questions, like what his name, address and occupation are, insisting he has any accomplices and that he has received no orders from any party. If he is asked about his organization, he should strongly deny any. If he is faced with evidence of his being part of an organization, he should declare that he left it as they were not practically-oriented and that he carried out the act out of patriotism. He should not be talkative, giving only short answers. He should not try to impress the interrogator with his intelligence by being talkative. In case he is arrested on mere suspicions, he should stick to denying responsibility for the operation, as denial won't hurt him but will benefit him. He should absolutely avoid believing the sweet promises of the interrogator that he will not be punished, that he will be released to deceive him to confess.

Moreover, he should not be intimidated by threats, since the consequence will be his being declared innocent for insufficient evidence. He should not believe the investigator that he knows about his accomplices and that they have confessed, even if he confronts him with them, as this is a ruse.

He must state that he has no accomplices and deny knowing them, as well as not to engage in conversation with no other person, even a colleague who happens to be in detention. However, he should contact the Brothers or his workplace through the prison phone. He must be fully convinced that his brothers outside are concerned about him and, if it happens that they do not contact him for some time, he should never despair, for it may be in his own interest that they do not get in touch with him.

Finally, the perpetrator should remember that he is acting for Allah and with Allah's assistance. Let your bounds with Allah be strong and Allah is with him." As for those that strive in Us, We surely guide them to Our paths."

This was how they used to think, half a century ago.

I closed the manuscript, and turned back to Ikhtyar, but he was not in his spot. I wondered how Al Bana could display such high accuracy in directing his followers. These were directions produced by intelligence services not ideas emanating from groups whose

slogan was preaching. I didn't understand anymore, and I had started agreeing with those that claimed that the British had created the Moslem Brothers' movement.

was what we were doing jihad or were we trying to dupe God in religion's name?

Was what I had learnt from Abdulla Azzam at the services office in Peshawar, and the battle of Gagai in which I was wounded a year after my arrival in Afghanistan, sufficient to grant the Brothers the epithet of Mujahedeen? Or is everything subject to calculations?

Why did I elect last winter to return to Afghanistan instead of staying in Amman, where I attended the funeral of my mother after severe affliction with asthma, with Dallal promising me to give a baby she would name Azzam?

We were not in agreement with the people of Afghanistan. On the contrary, they did not wish to see us stay. This applied even to Taliban who benefitted from the divisions in the ranks of the Mujahedeen. Every party retreated into its shell in the name of its tribe and jihad was being waged under several banners, especially after the withdrawal of the Russian army.

It was not easy to manage Afghanistan with a single Islamic consultative council that included all parties and Taliban emerged as a strike force. I heard Anas

the Egyptian say: "Taliban are not mere fighters, they have plans to set up an Islamic emirate that will heed calls neither from the East nor from the West. In fact, when they decided to destroy the status of Buddha it became clear that some of their leaders had not heard of the UNESCO before and wondered whether it had weapons it would use to fight them. Taliban are the end product of the union between scientific and jihadist Salafism, their theories being an admixture of some thinking from Najd and many more ideas reaching them from Algeria and Sudan. Taliban see themselves as the saviors of the world that has strayed from the right path. At least, that is how things appear to Taliban leaders."

In times of serenity, we used to whisper about the Mujahedeen's defects, while pondering our fate, we who came seeking martyrdom, but had not obtained it. Some would advise us saying: "Go to Chechnya, Bosnia, Algeria or Somalia, Kashmir or America, if you manage to reach it."

He who was considering a path into a place in which to do jihad would need a ready-made fatwa. Some of them might secure Al Bana's manuscript, as it contained fine advice to turn them into fully-fledged Mujahedeen. Among the things that I felt disgust for in the Arab mujahedeen's behavior were the conspiracies of which I was an eye-witness. These occurred between groups belonging to some leader

or another, and I did not know whether there were spoils and prizes in this never-ending war. There was only killing solitude. My worst memory was that of the assassination of the martyr Abdullah Azzam. Every time I tried to deny Osama Bin Laden's involvement in the booby-trapping of his car, my conviction grew that he had a hand in it, be it in a silk glove.

Cursed are my confessions of tonight.

You are taxing my memory in recalling things I wish remained in oblivion. I now read in your eyes only a wish to go far into the story. I know you are expecting from me a testimony on our role- The Afghan Arabs- in the attack on the World Trade Center towers in New York, on 11th September 2001.

I am not one of those that invent and tailor a history for themselves when they are far from those that planned that major episode. I was not with them on that night, I mean the night Osama agreed with some of those that suggested the perpetration of a major operation against America, though it was evident that the idea had been adopted a year or two before, and D-day had arrived.

On that night, I was in Khost on a mission. On my return, I sensed something unusual was in the air. Saad Al Mujtabi, the Sudanese, informed me of a meeting attended by Abu Farj the Libyan, Abu Muhammad the Egyptian, Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, Ibn Sheiba, AL Zawahiry, Muhammad Atif, and others whom

I did not know, in which he signal for revenge was given against the Americans who bombed Arab Mujahedeen's positions following the attacks against the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar Essalaam. The goal was not a display of Al Qaeda's strength and its ability to outmaneuver American security as was claimed by Arab and American newspapers and channels. True, Bill Clinton, not George Bush Junior, ordered the bombing of the Mujahedeen's positions, but there is no difference between the two, as both have come out from the same mantle tailored and sewn by the Jews.

From childhood, I have heard that America is the enemy of the Arabs and Islam, so I grew up hating her, repeating Darwish's statement: "America is the plague, the plague is America."

With the passage of time, my loathing of anything American grew, and I swore that I would never set foot on its soil. I was told in Guantanamo that we had been in a secret prison on an American base, but we didn't know whether that had been in America or in an East-European country. America is unfair to the Arabs and biased towards Israel, that is why we hate her, and hate whoever loves or defends her. That was what prompted my glee at seeing her pride destroyed in September; I feel that those that carried out this historic operation have earned their place among the greatest heroes.

I did not know those that perpetrated that act on 11th September. I may have encountered them, or they may be from the second generation of Mujahedeen; Ahmad Al Ghamdi, Muhammad Atta, Khalid Al Mihdhar, Ziad Al Jarrah, and Marwan Al-Shuhi formed what was called "sleeper cells". As far as we were concerned, we could have called "wide-awake cells". Then, most of them were from Saudi Arabia and, since they were from the same country, they agreed on everything after swearing an oath on one copy the Quran. The presence of others from other countries would have jeopardized the operation, which was how we explained the matter.

Since the demise of Azzam, I had been going to the city of Khost to pick up mail sent by some parties that collaborated with the services office. Most of the mail was money-orders sent to Afghan Arabs by their relatives or unknown sources. It happened that I reached Khost two days prior to the attack on the World Trade Center. Thousands of Taliban went out, at night, after hearing the news on some radio stations, exclaiming "There is no God but Allah" and "God is great." I felt an urge to watch television, but where could I find one? All Afghans were equally seized by a longing to watch that, and I am certain that the hard-line Taliban hoped they had TV sets in their homes. The day dwindled away without my mate Ahmed Farooq, a Syrian who had recently arrived in

Afghanistan, and me coming across a television. He said: "We can't just stay like here like this, with our eyes closed, without enjoying the pictures of what happened in America."

"When we reach the status of Osama and Mullah Omar, we shall have such a perk."

"I don't see any reason to stop people from watching such an event."

"You have only witnessed Taliban forbidding people from watching television, but we have been prevented from access to all conveniences. We have either to accept or leave"

"Oh, yes, like aroused ladies playing hard to get."

"Be as poetic as you wish, you will not see a single picture."

"Don't you have friends in Khost?"

"All of them are Taliban."

"In this case, let's go to Peshawar."

"It will take us two days to get there, if we get there."

"Why?"

"Do you think the American won't retaliate?"

"What does that have to do with us?"

"We're the coat stands"

Before midday, we reached the home of Habibullah Amin, a cloth merchant and highly influential man in Khost. We knocked on the door several times, but he did not open up. I started calling his name, but he did

not respond. He must be away. I tried again, using the Pashto language. His elder son, Mahran, appeared at the window, followed by his father who was haughty and intoxicated. He apologized for he feared the Taliban police would raid his home by surprise and cause him trouble for the television set he kept in the cellar of his house. He had been watching Pakistani channels that broadcast non-stop footage of the New York attacks. As soon as Ahmed Al Farooq saw the television, he rejoiced and started intoning "God is great. There is no God but Allah the One, the Vanquisher", while Habib told him "speak less loudly."

We spent a long time in Habib's house, and he offered us his usual hospitality with Chinese tea, dried fruit, pastries and nuts. When we were leaving, he slipped a rolled piece of paper in my pocket, whispering in my ear "You may need it."

He asked me about my companion and I informed him that he was a fresh recruit, so he once more whispered in my ear: "He is not fit for jihad. Advise him to go back home."

Habibullah had a sharp eye, and he weighed people as if they were goods, without needing to know them. Poor Ahmed Al Farooq, American forces arrested him two months after 11th September, and dumped him in Bagram base prison then to Guantanamo where he stayed until released to return to Syria, as if he had only left Syria for the American prison.

I left Khost for Jalalabad where a large number of Afghan Arabs stayed. On my way, I opened the rolled piece of paper to see 6 blue pills; I smiled as it turned out to be Viagra.

Habibullah had a wide network of relations, with all the warlords, from the Tajik to the Pashto, with rumors that he was connected with Mullah Omar, and Hikmatyar before, and with many Arab mujahedeen, especially Osama.

Some bad tongues claim that his source of income was opium and heroin trafficking, as he had a network that reached beyond Pakistan, and enjoys the protection of many security agencies. He deals with everybody and never loses, for they need him as he needs them. Some said that his name Habibullah, God's friend, should be changed to Habib Taliban, the Taliban's friend.

Seven days after the New York episode, I met Ibrahim Abu Dahdah the Egyptian. I saw that he was concerned about something that had gone past him without him understanding the essence of it. He used to ask me about the real perpetrators of those attacks. Every time, he would repeat, "I don't think that the like of us can fly planes in the New York skies and destroy such huge towers. Bats cannot turn into eagles. We are cave-dwellers not astronauts."

He was annoyed and all time doubted that the perpetrators were Afghan, or even plain Arabs, for

that matter. He was ready to swear that the attackers were none other than American Jews.

I asked him, as he was close to Ayman Al Zawahiri, if the leaders considered the reactions after the Americans pointed an accusing finger at Osama and Taliban. He laughed and replied:

“Think about yourself. As for them, I don’t think they are that naïve. They have not been living as you believe, for God’s sake. They keep their house in order”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will understand when you see roses falling on us from the sky.”

We were following the post-New York news with extreme concern, and I did not understand the hatred of some Taliban harbored for us, as if we had been traitors or American agents.

I even made out in the eyes of some of them a rage, as if they were telling us “Leave us alone, you have compromised us with the American monster.” I will not generalize this, for many of them considered that the Arabs have to right in ruling the country.

Every time my confusion grew, I would approach Ibrahim the Egyptian, who was totally captivated by what was happening in Afghanistan, and so he did not relieve me of an iota. On the contrary, he would throw the oil of his worries into the fire of feelings and make things look even gloomier. As if we had

been living in a paradise. He told me while sipping an unsweetened tea:

"Do you know something, Burashid. When we heard about the killing of Shah Messaoud two days before the New York attacks, I felt that what was in store would be even bigger. Those who killed Messaoud know the way to New York even if they were alleged to have come from Paris, even if they had been survivors from the cell of Khalid Kalkal."

"What use is the killing of Messaoud?"

"So the Americans will have Taliban all to themselves and we will be the fuel of their next war."

"DO you think so?"

"I don't think, I am quite convinced."

4

The days and the hours passed sluggishly, and from time to time, we would receive orders instructing us to exercise caution during our journeys to the border areas as they were monitored by the army of Musharraf the Pakistani. We were also advised to keep away from the training camps dispatched over many regions, some of them close to Jalalabad, and not very far from the mountains of Tora Bora.

Oh, Tora Bora...the Epic of Arab mujahedeen, I wish the customers of luxury hotels and exhibition halls came here to see with their own eyes what hell looks like.

You do not have to visit Tora Bora, watch it the footage broadcast by satellite channels, and you will realize that whoever spent a year there has the right to enter Paradise with his shoes.

I visited it in the winter of 1993, when the paths were hardly practicable and the sharp jagged stones made coarse feet bleed. When I returned there in the first days of Ramadan of 2001, the roads had not changed, and there was no other alternative to reaching the positions of the Mujahedeen but to use donkeys and mules, although there were traces of off-road vehicles, and the road had numerous steep curves. When we reached the position late in the evening, I noticed that it was not abandoned as I had believed, but that there was a city in the heart of the mountain. There were five caves. Whoever entered them felt great melancholy and would be terrified by the gloom and the unknown. That was how I saw the Mujahedeen's caves. This would be the first impression.

I entered the second cave, lined on its sides with sandbags, with three Jeeps equipped with guns. The cave was no different from buildings on narrow alleys, as the Mujahedeen filed downstairs through a concrete stairway, which would split into three galleries, each leading to a small room two or more meters high. Some of the rooms were used to store light weapons, others sheltered large metal chests, still others were furnished with carpets. At the

end of the corridor, another stairway led upwards, curved right then left. A large lobby appeared as well as automatic lifts fixed to long columns. The place was abuzz with the comings and goings of the Mujahedeen, like a bee-hive. Most of those inside the cave carried Kalashnikovs. There were lights in the corners using water power, and a loudspeaker generating from time to time, in Arabic, messages or requests for particular people for particular tasks. We were dispatched over rooms with numbers, each accommodating eight persons.

We, the newcomers to Tora Bora caves, were watching bemused what the Mujahedeen were doing in those mountains whose name alone would give one goose bumps.

I asked Muhammad Nadheer the Yemeni about his feelings and he replied: "Like the movies".

"This is the doing of the Yemenites."

The first time, I did not grasp his meaning, so he added with a smile:

'Don't forget that Osama is a Yemeni. The strange thing is that we were the first to build skyscrapers.'

I said to him in a whisper: "That is why it was easy for you to destroy them!"

"And we would destroy others, if Osama so orders."

"Is he here?"

"I think so."

"Are there women in the caves?"

"How would I know? What we see is one beard following another, and there is no trace of burqas and veils. Just then, the call for the sunset prayer was heard. Everybody was fasting. All rushed to the large lobby to prepare for prayer, while through the loudspeaker came the order for the watch platoon to disperse over the perimeter of the caves. Dozens of Mujahedeen stood in the lobby of the second room that opens through a wide gate on the other caves and ate a few dates. A few minutes later, I saw Osama Bin Laden enter through the gate of the third cave with several other people and his driver, Salim Hamdan. He greeted us, took his place in the first row speaking to no one. He was followed two minutes later by an elderly man, whose features and name I did not make out clearly. He led the prayer, reading a long portion from Surat Al Umran in a hoarse voice. He concluded the prayer with surat Al Ikhlas, then raised his hands in prayer and beseeching God's favors:

"Our Lord! If it were not for You, we would not have known guidance, given alms or offered prayers. Please, bestow serenity on us, and fortitude, as our foes have aggressed us and plan to sow the seeds of unrest in our midst,. Our Lord!, please cause our shooting to be straight, and answer our prayer. God, You we beseech to destroy our foes. Our Lord! protect us and grant us Your victory, we have no shelter besides You after those far and near have let us down. God is our last and

sure resort. Our Lord!, Annihilate Your foes, you the Dearest and Most Potent. Our Lord!, sever the heads of sedition amongst the infidels and leave none alive. God, please bestow Your prayers on Muhammad and his kin and companions. Our Lord! We implore You with your fairest names to give us strength in Your path. Our Lord!, we are Your slaves, sons of Your slaves, sons of Your female slaves, our forelocks are in Your hands, Your judgment shall come to pass on us, the fate You have prescribed for us most fair; we ask You with every name that is Yours, that You have given Yourself or have enshrined in Your book, or You have taught any human, or have kept for Yourself in the knowledge of the unknown to make the Quran the spring of our hearts, the light of our hearts, the release of our sadness and the relief of our worries. Brothers, may God accept you prayers, and support you with victory." Now, I will invite Sheikh Osama to deliver a speech.

When the Sheikh raised his hands in prayer, I understood that something was about to happen. It is a call for war. Osama stood up then sat to the man's right, looking aside as if he was looking for someone or something. He then called in a rattling voice: "Where's Muath?" He was approached by one of his close aides who whispered in his ear while Osama shook his head. The aide hurried towards the stairs leading down.

Osama's features were tense, with a measure of confusion on his face, from his eyes fled a cloud of anxiety.

He looked at us, saying:

"In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. May the prayer and peace be upon the most honorable of messengers, on his Kinsfolk and Companions.

Abu Omar, may God be pleased with both, related: "God's Messenger used to hold me by the shoulders and say: "In this life, be like a stranger or a wayfarer." Abu Omar, may God be pleased with both of them, used to say: "If you are alive in the evening, don't expect to be still alive in the morning, and if you are alive in the morning, don't expect to last through the evening. Take from the days of good health to compensate for the time of ill-health, and from your lifetime for your demise." Imam Dhahabi, may Allah have mercy on him, used to say: "You seem to believe that the winner will not be affected by terror in the two Houses, nor by fright or pain or fear. Ask you God to grant you health and that we be resurrected in Saad's group." I would not have addressed you, folks of jihad, if there had not been a requirement for that. I would not have had to meet you today in this place wherein I have spent many a year preparing for this day. I am aware that many amongst you have not seen the place and have not visited Tora Bora, the citadel of the noble, the free men, the forbearing, and the steadfast, in the face of

the haughty American tyrant. I am aware that you have renounced this Life, abandoning it to others, that you have left kinsfolk and offspring, so you have become the crème of the strangers. You have come to this Moslem country to interdict the aggression of the oppressors and the infidels. You have elected to be martyrs in God's path. Some of you have spent half their life in this land, some a quarter or more, others still have been here for a few weeks, but all of you are God's soldiers in defense of His word. A few weeks have passed since the Battle of Glory that shook America and inflicted on her great humiliation. I give you the glad tidings that those that flew in the skies of New York and Washington belong with us and we belong with them, and this is your brother Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, and then he looked right, pointing at him with his hand, while Khalid Sheikh kept his head down, in timidity or modesty. Osama proceeded: "Khalid has not slept for two weeks: he did not believe that the planes reached their targets. He did not believe that Muhammad Atta, Khalid Al Mihdhar and their brothers had outfoxed American security and agencies, and he kept telling me that if he had been with them, he might not have dared do that. He had spent two years planning a blow that Bush and his puppets, would never forget, and that the memory of History would not erase. May God grant you a fair reward, Khalid. Blessed be

the Guardians of Islam who destroyed America. I pray to God that He grant them elevated positions and bless them. Now that America has turned into a wounded animal, I have received trustworthy intelligence that they are preparing for a powerful attack to destroy us, and to destroy the Islamic emirate of Taliban. But, you may rest assured that their aircraft and fleets will be to no avail in front of our faith in our right to defend God's Truth and the rights of the oppressed. America will attack us, but she will not succeed. She may succeed in destroying our training camps, and kill large numbers of people, but she will not extinguish the embers of jihad that lie inside us, we the believers in the eternal message of Islam.

We shall remain standing up. We shall not fall. They will hear from me things that will cause them to think long and hard before undertaking any action. Our Taliban brothers, and foremost amongst them the gallant Mullah Omar, May God protect him, have granted us generous hospitality. They are well aware that we resemble the body, whenever one its organs is affected with ill-health, all the other organs summon one other and sit up with fever. Whatever befalls them shall befall us. My Mujahedeen brothers, America has heard the roar from the explosion of its towers, and America and its allies will soon hear our voice. The winds of faith are blowing, and so are the winds of change to erase falsehood from the

peninsula of Mohammad, may God's prayer and peace be upon him. I will address to America and its people a few words: I swear by God who raised the heavens with no pillars that America, and those that live in America, will not dream of living in peace before peace becomes a fact of life in Palestine, and before all infidel armies have left the land of Muhammad.

Our Lord!, I implore You, the Lord of the Worlds, the Beneficent, the Merciful, Owner of the Day of Judgment, the Alive, the Eternal, the Venerated, the Wise, to support us with Your victory. Our Lord!, I ask You, the Master of the soldiers of the Heavens and the Earth, and I ask You, the Owner of the keys to the Heavens and the Earth, the Creator of all things, I ask You, since You are able to do all things, and I ask You, since You are Allah who says to a thing "be!" and it is. Please, descend upon Your foes the soldiers of Your ire. Oh, Allah, none but You know who Your soldiers are, so let us see of them whatever You please. Oh, Allah, please unleash upon them soldiers from the heavens and soldiers from the earth, and soldiers from your tiniest creatures, and soldiers from your strongest creatures. Our Lord!, they have waxed tyrannical towards us, while You are the Mighty One, they have grown powerful over us, while You are the Most Powerful. Our Lord! Heal the grudge in our chests by defeating them and dispersing their ranks. Our Lord! Mete unto them whatever punishment

You please, and howsoever You please. Please, God, make true on Your Promise to us. You have said and Your words are the Truth, « Ask Me, and your prayers will be answered ». May Allah protect you”

From the back row rose the voice of one of the Mujahedeen: « Sheikh Osama, we have and haven't understood. Do we stay here, or should every one of us choose a different location?”

Osama replied, without being annoyed by the question: “I think your presence in fortified Tora Bora grants you much protection, with your Taliban brothers deployed around it.”

“You said YOUR presence, how about you?”

“I meant the presence of all of us.”

Another of the Mujahidin, probably from the Arab Maghreb from his accent, said: “ I beg to differ by saying that it is not a shrewd move to put all our eggs in one basket. It is better to disperse over several areas in Afghanistan.”

Al Zawahiri, after requesting Osama's permission to respond, replied: “Do you know that this fortress has cost our brother Osama huge amounts of money and effort to excavate build and ensure absolute secrecy?”

“I don't doubt that, but we will only be hiding and we may end up buried under the rubble.”

Osama intervened:” Do you know that we have within these caves laboratories for chemical weapons

and radars to monitor everything around us. We have thought about everything.

The same fighter asked another question: "What if they besiege us for a long period of time?"

"We have enough supplies to hold out for a whole year."

"We are lucky to be fasting!"

"Enough!" Al Zawahiri snapped, as if he was aiming at ending the conversation about a matter that had already been settled, convincing the Mujahedeen to barricade themselves inside the caves, not to expose themselves to American bombing of areas that did not provide enough protection, especially that intelligence had reached the Movement pointing to an imminent American strike.

All fell quiet, while Muath went up to Osama who was squatting and handed him a grey box containing envelopes.

We were looking at him, bemused. He addressed us: "Brothers, when we met in the land of Islamic Afghanistan, we were united by "There is no God but Allah", and none other than jihad bound us together. These are decisive times, and I wish to entrust to your hands, you that have with God's will come from all manner of countries, from the Maghreb, Syria and the Gulf, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Europe and America. You have sojourned here long, believing in the mission for whose sake you have come. I need

not remind you of the adversity we are facing, but I feel that we are living through a major test after the Battle of New York. I have seen it fit to promise you that our jihad shall live till our last breath, and I beg your pardon for entrusting to you all a bequest I have written on paper, so each one of you will keep it, and only open it if he receives confirmed news that Osama has fallen a martyr or God has called him back to Him; I promise you I will not fall in the hands of the Americans even if they bring devils with them.”

The Mujahedeen’s voices went up:” Allah is the Greatest, Allah is the Greatest.” Then, Osama asked Muath to hand out the envelopes to us, whispering in our ears:”This is a trust, never open it.”

All left holding a sealed envelope, and we had not seen Osama from that day, as if the earth had swallowed him, while some of his aides said that he was living as a recluse, praying Allah to protect us from any harm. He did not take part in any prayer with us. I recalled the words of the fighter who queried Osama’s use of “YOUR presence”. It meant that he had abandoned the fortified citadel, either for a more fortified place, or had left Afghanistan with some of his close aides. I kept Osama’s letter in leather quiver with which I never parted, waiting for the strike America had promised. Every day, I would discover something new in the Tora Bora caves, and ask if those who had planned a city under a mountain

reserved for the banished and those condemned to hard labor. After the first had passed, I grew used to life in those enchanted caves, and would stand guard for two hours per day, and enjoy a conversation with Mohammad Nadheer the Yemeni, who would answer me, whenever I asked him to tell me the story of Seif Bin Dhee Yazen, "This is a story best told with Kat, while in this country there is only opium."

He would interrupt the story, and then tell me: "Do you know something, Burashid; there are times when I have doubts about everything we are doing. All of it is an American plot: us, Al Qaeda, Al Jazeera and Tora Bora, and 9/11. We are a colorless lie."

"It is a lie that we believe."

News reached us from Kabul and Jalalabad, but there was no indication that Osama was in either place. All that people were thinking about was the forthcoming American storm, as on every single day, the White House would declare that it is mustering forces to capture Osama and annihilate the Taliban emirate. On the seventh day of October, news reached us that the American bombardment had started by targeting abandoned site that we had used as training camps. The aircraft homing in from all sides did not hesitate to strike any thing moving on the ground. That was how Mohammad Atif, one of Al Qaeda's veteran emirs, described the situation to us.

After the Isha prayer, I sneaked out the cave and

pretended, when challenged by a guard as to why I was going out, that I felt dizzy and that I was advised to take a short walk. I went 500 yards away from the cave and started looking in the direction of Kabul and Jalalabad to confirm the news that Mohammad Atif gave us after every prayer. I saw what the Mujahedeen who had heeded Osama's advice to stay inside the cave could not see.

Squadrons of aircraft were flying at low altitude, towards various headings. Earth-shattering noises could be heard, but no alarms, for in Afghanistan people have grown accustomed to the fact that of humming of planes clogged the ears. I went back to the cave, and saw that two of the Jeeps that were parked at the cave entrance had disappeared. I could not hold my peace, so I told some of the Mujahedeen what I had seen. So, they believed Mohammad Atif's accounts. Mohammad Nadheer commented on what I had recounted them by saying: "Let's get our heads ready for cupping!"

On the last day of October, we were surprised by Mohammad Atif's voice calling us to immediately head for the cave's hall. We gathered and awaited his arrival. When he came, he was not alone, he was preceded by three Mujahedeen, with the one in the middle having his hands tied. He greeted us and said sharply: "This is a traitor who must be punished."

We could not believe that the man was Hamid Al

Sukarri, one of Osama's closest companions, who assisted him in some matters. Mohammad Atif added: "I know that you have seen this man being Osama's shadow for many years. But, he has been blown, for he was infiltrated in our organization and he faithfully reported everything that happened here or in other places to God's enemies. He was a spy. We caught him red-handed contacting agents in Kabul and Peshawar."

"Kill him and have no mercy." Shouted some Mujahedeen, who were supported by others, but Mohammad Atif addressed the audience reassuringly: "He will help us uncover the other traitors. We won't kill him now, but we will let him continue contacting the others and feed them false information. When his role ends, we will throw him to Tora Bora's vultures." He asked us to disperse and exercise caution with everything, and to pray often.

5

The month of October passed as if it was an eternity, and we didn't ask where Osama had gone, for we too were burying our heads in caves. During the Asr prayer on Monday the third of December, we were surprised to see Osama join us in the prayer. Questions spread amongst us like fire through dry stalks. The man is back, but not alone. I felt that several projects were

being devised and concealed from us who were close to the top of Al Qaeda. How else could we explain the presence of blue-eyed people in those meetings? They came and left without anyone asking about them, how they came and why. There were black areas which we did not approach, with Osama alone with his cane leading us where the end did not concern us. He prayed with us, and then he left with his companions to a destination unknown to us. We had not seen him since that prayer. Silence filled the caves of fear and peace. The man has been away for many days and did not return alone, and did not address us at all. He was not sad, but in his eyes were perplexity and anxiety. My only companion was Mohammad Nadheer who could not grasp some of the paradoxes in his life, for he descended from a southern family and his uncle was a Communist as he pretended, while his brother defended the Union and was wanted for taking part in the attack against the American destroyer "Cole" a year before the attack on the two towers in New York. Mohammad was not keen to speak about Badruddin Al Huthi and his rebellion in Yemen. He concluded his speech saying "Yemen is a strange country". He did not ask me even once about my career, as if he knew all of its details.

At dawn on Tuesday, the fourth of December 2001, we felt an earthquake rock Tora Bora, so everybody in the cave hurried towards fortified areas for emergencies. In fact, the five caves were a large shelter. We started

hearing continuous strikes from all five sides. It was not an earthquake, but an intensive bombing by American planes. At that moment, the public address system began producing prayers inside the cave:

“Our Lord! we ask You by the light of Your face that fills the corners of your throne, and we ask You by Your power that overpowers all Your creatures, save us and support us. Our Lord!, strengthen our hearts. Our Lord!, descend upon us warmth, peace safety and security in this land to which we have come as Mujahedeen in Your path. Our Lord!, cause their union to come apart and their ranks to disperse and unleash upon them the wonders of Your powers. Our Lord!, cause them to be torn into shreds. Our Lord!, count them all, kill them all and leave none. You are indeed All-powerful and capable of answering our prayers. There is no God but Allah. Our Lord!, You whose kingdom encompasses all things, You the shelter, and on whom we rely. Our Lord!, bestow upon us Your protection, and favor us with Your custody and guard us with Your eye that never slumbers. Our Lord!, You enemy has exceeded all bounds and transgressed and waged upon You an open warfare. Oh, Allah, destroy their tanks, bring down their aircraft and sink their ships. Our Lord!, weaken their might. Our Lord! Inject terror in their hearts. Our Lord!, disperse their ranks, and let their malice be their slaughtering. Oh, Allah shred them in the worst fashion. Our Lord! we seek Your help against their evils. Our

Lord! Unleash upon them the wonders of Your powers. Our Lord!, we have none to succor us but You, we find no other option but to turn to You. We are utterly powerless but for Your might. Our Lord!, to You we grieve about our weakness and lack of resources and our humiliation by others. To you alone we complain, as You are our shelter. Please, grant us victory over the oppressors.”

Even though we felt the need to have a stronger faith at that moment, a clamor filled the place, with everyone seeking a corner that will furnish him with some safety. The bombing did not stop, and the corners of the cave were shaking as a hand was trying to uproot it, while some of the Mujahedeen jumped from the top of the staircase to avoid harm that might come from any side. Since I was aware that I had no option but to stay in the room assigned to me, I could see Mohammad Nadheer crying bitterly:

“Why are you crying?”

“Out of fear of dying a stranger in a cave that will never be reached by my mother.”

“Neither will my mother, but we aren’t dead yet.

“You don’t know my mother.”

“You don’t know my mother, either.”

“Do you wish to hear the story of Seif Bin Dhee Yazn”

“If you don’t ask me for Kat or opium.”

“The opium coming from the sky is enough!”

The Yemeni proceeded to tell me the story of Seif

Bin Dhee Yazn, the king who chased the Abyssinians from Yemen and freed his wife Mouniat Anufus from their grip. Mohammad Nadheer would dwell long on describing the genealogy of Seif, whose lineage is connected with the Jinn.

When he finished the story at noon, he would tell me: "If only he was with us." We heard that some of the bombs had exploded close to the caves entrances, but no casualties were reported among the Mujahedeenduring the most intense hours of the bombing, still anxiety was high and rising in an unprecedented manner. We did not sleep that night, waiting for Mohammad Atif to arrive and inform us about the situation in which we were. I said to those of the Mujahedeen who were with me in the shelter:

"If the bombing goes on, we will be buried alive."

"And die martyrs."

Someone, whose nationality I do not recall, said:

"We aren't resisting, but hiding and we don't know what `s happening to the dwellers of Kabul, Jalalabad, Khost and Herat."

"God is with them"

Someone else, whom I did not know, added: "We should be in trenches and in fighting posts."

"The emirate has a protecting God. We have to wait until dawn breaks", said the first man, leaning on a wooden box. A third man added: "If Osama is with us, why should we worry?"

"Isn't it better if god was with us, because Osama is with people we don't know?"

As soon as I had finished uttering those words, Mohammad Nadheer burst in my face: "The man has built a fortress to protect you and you are suspicious of him."

"Mohammad, no one is suspicious of Osama, but now we aren't doing jihad."

"What is stopping you from going out alone to Panjsher Valley and downing the B-52s?"

A fourth Mujahidin intervened: "Leave it alone, for it is stinky."

We fell silent while the bombing went on.

On the fourth day, the bombing reached an unbearable level, the walls of the fortified citadel were cracked, power was lost, the lifts stopped working and it was no longer possible to hear the loudspeaker.

However strong our faith in God was, terror struck all of us. At about ten in the evening, the bombing relented. We realized that staying in the cave meant to die. At that moment, a person in charge of coordinating the Mujahedeen's actions approached and informed us that we had to leave the cave before dawn of the fifth day, as news arrived of a land operation by American and allied forces. We had better leave Tora Bora which might be blown up using bombs with nuclear effect.

We were split up into groups of thirty Mujahedeen with an emir at the head of each group. We were asked by a commander from Al Qaeda if any of us spoke Pashto,

so I raised my hand and I was told that I could be called upon to serve as a guide and interpreter, if need be. The commander asked us to head east hugging the road to Khyber Pass. The decision was made to divide us into smaller groups, the first, in which I was, being told to head east to Khost; the second to Ghazni then to Kandahar; the last would try to sneak into Peshawar through Khyber paths known only to those that were conversant with jihad. We walked for over twenty kilometers with two donkeys and two mules. We did not speak much, for we lost our appetite for talking in that cave. We were not frightened though we were not carrying weapons save for a few brand-new and some rusted RPGs. The planes flew over our heads and we must have looked like stones. It seemed that the planes were not interested in us. Sometimes, I would hear a funny rejoinder from Mohammad Nadheer: "How about shooting down one or two planes then use them to destroy the Kremlin?"

"If I were you, I would go back to New York, for there are still plenty of towers..."

"Do you have a driver's license?"

"Of course."

"I will let you fly the first plane"

He had a long laugh, then shouted at the top of his voice: "Death to America, glory for the Taliban."

He fell silent as if he had expectorated all the loathing he had in his chest, and we continued our journey through

the teeth of the insane American death. We were met by some Taliban who drove us in Jeeps at breakneck speed through a difficult road peppered with potholes, while my Yemeni friend repeatedly commented "If I was a woman, I'd have aborted." Or he would say: "Even if she had twins in her belly, like the World Trade Center." An hour later, darkness started lifting and the cars turned towards a village that seemed abandoned, while some Mujahedeen gave in to sleep after days of anxiety and fatigue inside Tora Bora's caves.

Aman Allah the Afghan told us, after making sure that all were ready to continue their flight from American bombings: "The Americans have deployed along the Kabul, Jalalabad, Tora Bora axis, Tora Bora is surrounded, the Mujahedeen are in the north-eastern region, far from us."

I said to him, after asking for permission from the platoon emir: "The borders with Pakistan?"

"They are under the protection of the Pakistani army."

"And we are under the protection of God."

He started ordering his escort to be ready to drive each group to its intended destination. We got into one car, as we were goods in Kabul's old market. Mohammad Nadheer was seated next to me, and he never stopped joking. He whispered in my ear: "I'll be with you even in hell." The car headed towards the trails leading to Khyber Pass, the gate to Peshawar. Behind us was the third vehicle that would proceed through the bushes

to Ghazni. That was like a real evacuation conducted by Taliban. They dispatched the Afghan Arabs to areas that were far from the line of battle. We did not know whether that was agreed with Osama and Mullah Omar, or if Taliban wished to prevent the death of the Arabs in a confrontation they knew was lethal. In the past years, we used to feel at ease, as Afghanistan was host only to its people, the Pashto, the Uzbek, the Tajik, the Hazaara, the Nuristan, and the Arabs. There was nothing that suggested a difference between the Afghans and the Pakistanis. Moreover, Taliban live in both countries, had the same tongues and the same features.

We could see American planes attacking Tora Bora, and hear sporadic gunfire to the west. Mohammad Nadheer would eagerly whisper in my ear: "I don't now whether Osama is still in his fortress or if he has left."

"God only knows."

"I don't know what his testament contains."

"I'm afraid that all us may die and his advice will remain known only to him." It was as if the Yemeni did not like what I had said, so he started another subject: 'do you know anyone in Khost?'"

"You can only know Khost, the Green City, through Habibullah."

"Who is he?"

"You'll get to know him. Don't be surprised if you're told that he's acquainted with Bush."

"So, he knows Osama."

"No, it is Osama who knows Habibullah."

Many times, I asked the driver whether we were getting closer or farther, as we had already been moving for more than two and a half hours and we had still not left the winding tough roads. The driver would answer: "We still have a long way to go." It was as if he was driving us to Heart or Mazar Sharif, or even to Helmand and Nimroz. Maybe he had strayed and he was returning to Tora Bora. I was overcome by sleep, so I dozed off while Mohammad Nadheer was trading stories with the other Mujahedeen that were not related to our situation then.

The all-terrain vehicle was going at high speed through the valleys and the narrow paths, and shook us to the bones, though we were not frightened, for we had grown accustomed to that.

The road to Khost gave no indication of the presence of foreign forces, as we went through villages and we could only see men leaning against adobe walls, huddling in their clothes. Of the men, we could only make out their khaki blackish headdresses. Children were on the roadside, looking at us bemused, for they did not know what had happened on September the eleventh, and had never heard of Bush or Rumsfeld or Powell, but they had learnt the names of Osama and Mullah Omar. I don't remember seeing a single woman throughout my journey.

We reached Jandi, and then headed west towards Tangai and Sikandra and Jabbah, before pausing for half an hour at Serkai, where everyone relieved themselves. I rested under a pine tree near the ruins of an ancient citadel destroyed, apparently, by Russian planes. The idea came to me of burying Osama's letter that contained his last will near that tree, with the ruins of the citadel's walls serving as a mark for me when I decided to return this spot. I also buried a silver ring and three Pakistani rupee coins. Before leaving the place, I looked around to make sure that my secret was safe. The car proceeded towards Tirzai, where six Mujahedeen alighted, bid us farewell, while we continued to the citadel of Ayub Khan close to the center of Khost.

Everything seemed normal, but we looked apprehensively as we feared the eyes that might have been planted in the city streets to track the Arabs especially, for they were the ones targeted, as for Taliban they the natives of the country and could be identified by the Kalashnikov dangling from their shoulders.

We stayed at the citadel of Ayub Khan a full hour, and was in the company only of the Yemeni Mohammad Nadheer, the Egyptian Fathi from the Upper Nile, a new recruit, and a Pakistani whose name I can't remember and who told me he had uncles in Khost. He did not stay long with us before departing. I suggested to my

companion that we go Habibullah, a man on whom God has bestowed great wealth, of which he gave away unstintingly.

It was cold, and the road leading to Habibullah in Gurumbai was sinking in mud, and we had no other option but to go through it.

We perceived nothing of what we had anticipated in Tora Bora: there were no American soldiers patrolling the streets and snatching people by force. Khost was its good old self, except for the change in the weather. I heard no one speak about the eleventh of September or what American planes had been doing for weeks, as if that did not concern them, or they may not have heard their whiz or the roar of their bombs.

The Yemeni told me, while his feet sank in a muddy pool: "It's like this Habibullah is living in Hadramut."

"As if you only know Afghanistan and Yemen.»

"And Tora Bora."

"When we reach Habibullah's home, you'll discover a new Tora Bora."

"Let's first get there, and then God will ease things for us."

The Yemeni then turned towards Fathi the Egyptian: "You've been quiet since last night. Come on; tell us a joke about the people of Upper Egypt."

The Egyptian reacted angrily: "Fear God, brother."

"Have I been pissing in the Nile?"

"No, I saw you pissing at night." the Egyptian replied,

and then he relaxed and started telling a few jokes about the rural people of Upper Egypt. I remember a joke, though I don't know where he had got it, about two Upper Egypt men visiting New York to see the destruction caused by the attack on the two towers. The first one said the other: "Hassanein, do you the extent of the damage?"

Mohammad in replied: "Yes, but they still have high towers."

"That's right, let's go into one of these very high towers."

The two men climbed a hundred floors without using the lift, so they were predictably exhausted. The took a little rest, then Hassanein looked from the top of the tower and saw that people were like ants, so he called Mohammadein: "Tell me , Mohammadein, if someone jumped from this tower, what do you think would happen to him?"

"He would reach the ground in five days."

"Would he be dead?"

"Of course, after five days without eating or drinking."

We didn't stop laughing until we reached Habibullah's house. From afar, I could see people going g in and coming out, as if something was going on in the house. Curiosity compelled me to get closer and make queries. As soon as his son Dhafrallah saw me, he got closer and addressed me in Pashto, asking about my two companions. I laid his worries to rest, telling him that they were Mujahedeen and that he had nothing to fear

from them. I asked him about what was going on in their home, and the unusual traffic. He said that there were traders who feared a war, so they had come to get supplies of things that were at a premium. He excused himself before going to inform his father of my arrival. When I told my companions about the short dialogue I had had with Dhafrallah, the Yemeni said: "When war broke out between North Yemen and South Yemen, the shopkeepers used to pray 'Our Lord!, make this blessing last, and protect it from disappearance.' When the war ended, they became wealthy and all joined the ruling party. The man from Upper Egypt rejoined: "We don't have a war, but shopkeepers there grow like snowballs."

The Yemeni answered in an unexpected fashion: 'tomorrow the sun will rise and they will melt.'

You cannot imagine the comic scene, and the eyes staring at us, so that even women behind their burqa in the street burst out laughing at us, as if we had been mad men who had run away from a lunatic asylum.

Dhafarallah returned and asked me and my companions to accompany him to his father's council in a large in the middle of which stood two low tables on which sat silver tea-pots.

Dhafarallah hugged me and whispered in my ear in his usual fashion asking who the people were that accompanied me. I told him, but he would not be relieved and would put the question differently: "How long have they been in

Afghanistan?" I answered him, but he would ask a different question: "if, they had, they would have learnt Pashto. I would explain that they had not left the training camps as with the other Arabs. As for me, I had married Rafiqqa then divorced her a year later because I was not good enough for her. In the council, there were twenty people whispering to one another, with a few of them remaining silent and looking at us out of curiosity. For the first time, I felt ill at ease in that place, that the council was heavy, if not suspicious.

I said to Habibullah: "I know people come to you to settle some matters, and we do not wish to intrude..."

He tapped me on the shoulder and smiled as if he had grasped what I meant: "Do you wish to cross into Peshawar?"

"Yes, I do."

"The Pakistani army has beefed up its control, it's not easy to cross."

"What's the solution, then?"

"We pay them."

"Where are we going to get the money from?"

"Bounty is in Osama's pocket."

"Osama has melted like a grain of salt in the river Panjsher."

"Leave that to me."

He continued his conversation with his guest, while the Yemeni edged towards me and said softly: "I didn't understand a thing besides Peshawar, Pakistan, Osama

and Panjsher. What were you two talking about?"

"I asked him whether he knew Osama's whereabouts?"

"Does he now?"

"Of course, he does. I mean he knows Osama but doesn't know where he is."

"How about us, where are going?"

"We'll spend the night here, and tomorrow is another day."

"To be honest, I'm not at ease here."

"Neither am I."

Fathi, the man from Upper Egypt, did not say a thing. He remained silent as if the matter did not affect him.

I said to Habibullah: "What do you think of Kandahar?"

"I'd advise you not to go there."

"And Kabul?"

"Don't even think about it. You should spend the night with your companions in a house of mine in Mandi, not far from Gurumbai and in the morning I'll have worked out a solution, God willing."

"What can a dead man do when he's between the hands of the mortician?"

Dhafrullah accompanied us in a black car to his father's house in Mandi. As he was a loquacious fellow, he asked me questions about Tora Bora, what we had been doing there, if there had been Afghans there, what we had been eating. I felt as if he wanted to know a few things about us. He did not stop until we reached the house.

When we got out of the car, he pushed the wooden door with his foot and we found ourselves in a large courtyard sheltering some cows and donkeys.

"This is a farm!"

Pushing the door with his hand, he laughed and said: "We don't need keys."

"How about thieves?"

"We know all of them. Sometimes they seek shelter in the house."

The Yemeni whispered in my ear: "Tora Bora was a better place."

The man from Upper Egypt added: 'A five-star Tora Bora!'"

We crossed a wide corridor with closed rooms, till we got to a locked door. Dhafrullah opened the door to reveal a clean large room containing everything a man needed for his comfort and sleep.

"This is for VIPs."

"May God grant you a fair reward."

Dhafrullah fetched some fruits from a nearby room, bid us farewell and left.

The Yemeni said: "We're lucky to be away from the cow dung."

The and from Upper Egypt commented: "We even missed cow dung in Tora Bora!"

"Since you miss it, I advise you to take your mattress and sleep among Habibullah's cows!"

We laughed uproariously as if we were watching a comedy.

We ate some fruit, prayed then lay down each in his own corner. We slept like the dead so fatigued we were. We thought about nothing but the rest that we had been missing for days, if not for years.

As soon as sleep overcame us, the Yemeni started singing:

“He who pacifies people shall be peaceful

He who insults people shall be insulted

He who oppresses people

He who has mercy for people shall know mercy

He who keeps his vow shall be deemed loyal

He who hearkens shall understand

He who trusts God shall progress

He who seeks knowledge shall know

He who violates reason shall stray

He who pursues sin shall regret”

Mohammad Nadheer then slept as if he had not been chanting proverbs from his homeland, in his soul lurked yearning and alienation.

We heard the cows mewing from time, so we woke up, till he heard the call for the dawn prayer. The man from Upper Egypt used his foot to wake us up for the prayer, but Mohammad Nadheer did not budge and continued sleeping, while I arose reluctantly, for I was half-dead.

The man from Upper Egypt told me after the prayer:

“Do you know something, Burashid, I miss praying in Sayeda Zayneb very much.”

“And I miss Zaynab, my mother.”

"I sometimes wonder why we don't smell the scent of jihad though we are near Jerusalem. Does killing tourists in Luxor count as jihad?"

"What should I say? I'm a Palestinian of many generations."

"It seems there are mistakes in our lives that we haven't realized."

"Or when Tora Bora was shaking under our feet."

The Yemeni poked his head from under the blanket and said to the man from Upper Egypt: "Sheikh Fathi, whether we have erred or not, this is not the time for that. The question is "how can we get to Peshawar?"

"This is a question that should addresses to Habibullah."

"And you, Burashid, what is your opinion?"

I said to the Yemeni while I uncovered him: "my opinion is that you should rise, do your ritual ablution, pray and make us tea, then we will wait for Habibullah to show us the way.

"As I said, what can a dead man do when he's between the hands of the mortician?"

6

The time was past seven in the morning and neither Dhafrullah nor his father showed up. I suggested to the Yemeni and the man from Upper Egypt to leave the house, for it was possible that Habibullah did not wish

to disturb us. Fathi went out followed by me, while Mohammad Nadheer stayed behind a little longer. He raced to join us, saying: "The house is surrounded."

I went ahead to see what was happening and was surprised to see dozens of American soldiers armed to the teeth deployed outside the house, their weapons aimed towards the door. I had barely retreated, when three or four of them rushed to catch me, yelling: "stop or we'll shoot." But, I managed to reach the corridor, while the Yemeni had not realized what had happened and, as usual, started to joke: "Are the cows running after you?"

Fathi was screaming: "The Americans have us surrounded."

We stayed inside the room baffled: we hadn't heard the Americans, or those that were with them, sneak on us. Suddenly, we heard a voice: "You are surrounded. Surrender and you won't be harmed."

The warning was repeated several times. The man from Upper Egypt said: "we have come to Afghanistan to die as martyrs."

The Yemeni retorted: "Martyrs in Tora Bora or Panjsher, not in Habibullah's home!"

"Are you saying that we should surrender?"

I said to the man from Upper Egypt: "I agree with Mohammad Nadheer. We can't fight such a large force."

"I will not surrender." The man from Upper Egypt, feeling

for the trigger, said. The Yemeni laughed, teasing him: "Are you scared of going back to Beni Sweef and be called a coward?"

"When they hear about death, they will organize parties, while my father will receive congratulations in his large tent."

"Now, now, forget about that. There are only three of us with bullets that can't kill even rats. It's better for us to surrender than face an overwhelming force." As a matter of fact, none of us was ready to die at that moment, for since we were evacuated from the Tora Bora caves, the embers of jihad had started dying in us. I was nagged by a suspicion that Habibullah had allied with the Americans. I did not rule out the possibility that he informed them of our hideout. I am certain he planned it all along and received Dollars for betraying us. America's Habib not Allah's Habib. We proceeded towards the courtyard housing the cows and donkeys, with our weapons raised above our heads. We stopped in the centre of the yard while American soldiers came up towards us. One of the soldiers beckoned to us to put down our arms, pouches and belts, then asked us to come out one by one.

The street was teeming with American soldiers; some Afghans were also with them, maybe Arabic interpreters. There were six all-terrain vehicles packed with Mujahedeen just like us. I do not know what Habibullah earned in the betrayal, but if he had not

been rewarded with money, he must have received loads of blue pills. Black blindfolds were placed over our eyes, and then we were unceremoniously thrown into the last car. The Yemeni could no longer control his nerves, so he screamed: "God is the Greatest, God is the Greatest", while the man from Upper Egypt pulled him hard from his coat: "this is not the time. Sit down."

What I can never forget was that the American soldiers were laughing at Mohammad Nadheer, as he was yelling alone, with no one else echoing his shouts. The cars sped through the narrow streets while swarms of children running behind and throwing volleys of stones at us.

"Even the kids have turned against us."

There were four more Mujahedeen in the car with us, one Algerian, two from Tunisia and one from Sudan. Every one of us told the story of their capture, with Habibullah a constant name in all the stories. "Habib America, May you be cursed along with the Viagra pills!"

When the cars stopped, we realized that we had left Khost an hour before. A few days later, one of the Mujahedeen would inform me that we had been taken to a military base since he had seen a runway for cargo planes and helicopters in which large tents had been erected, with each tent being used for a particular task. The first one served for the interrogation of arrested Mujahedeen, and recording their personal data. The

second tent served to establish the destination of every detainee. The third tent had been prepared for the interrogations by CIA agents of Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders whose identities had been confirmed. I remember being asked to give my full name, the date of my arrival in Afghanistan, the places I had passed through, the battles in which I had taken part, my relationship to Taliban and Osama, how many times I had performed the pilgrimage of Hajj, and other questions I could not understand, such as my favorite colors, my favorite car makes and my opinion on marrying four women. I realized that I was not one of the big fish they were after, but I was in their hands and they could do whatever they pleased with me. My friends, the man from Upper Egypt and the Yemeni melted in the crowds of detainees at Khost, and I was only to meet them again two years later in Guantanamo. Every one of us had a number, one's only identity. If you were called, answer and do not pretend not to know, or try to fool them, for there were Arabs and Afghans amongst them who could decode every single word you uttered. We were powerless. I do not know how long I stayed at that base, maybe a month or less.

Since that moment, I started feeling the death of time. It was impossible to know the times of asr and isha prayers. It was hard to tell the days of the week. We had become mere insignificant details in the American

agenda. I remember spending the night inside the tent without being allowed to relieve ourselves or to pray. This situation lasted until we were called, disordered numbers, before being led two hundred meters away and were placed in a cargo plane, with no idea about the situation, our eyes being blindfolded, our hands tied behind our backs with choice handcuffs. We were not allowed to speak to each other. Two hours into the flight, the guards removed the black blindfolds, freed one hand and handcuffed the other to the seats. There were ten or more detainees, and an officer, speaking Arabic with an American accent, said: "You are twenty thousand feet above ground; you can't know whether you're heading north, east, south or west. You can look out the windows, and see the unknown. Enjoy it, because you'll regret it bitterly if you don't wash your eyes with the unknown."

The officer kept quiet for a while, and then started staring at us one by one before laughing: "So, you are the ones that have destroyed America. We won't destroy you. We'll give you cold meals. Don't be afraid, the meals will be halal with no pork, for we respect human rights." Then, he started laughing hysterically, followed by the guards, but we do not answer him. The officer proceeded: "I don't want you to ask me where we are headed. Believe me, I don't know. The only one who knows is the captain of the plane. I'm sure, though, we're not going to a five-star hotel, neither shall we

stay in Afghanistan for Taliban and Osama have made it unfit for you or for us.”

At that moment, they handed us meals inside sealed plates. None of us said a word, as if we had made a covenant of silence, while the officer continued eyeing us and said:” enjoy your meal”, before leaving for the cockpit. We had started feeling the plane shake because of turbulence and the captain had announced that we were flying through a powerful storm, and he nearly mentioned the plane’s destination before realizing his error and shutting off the sound. A detainee sitting to my right began reading the Quran and praying God we would weather the storm unscathed. We spent twenty minutes like a feather in the wind. The storm had barely abated, that the officer showed up again and uttered provocative words:” You hijack planes and use them to attack towers and kill people, while we face storms to get you away from war so you can live in peace.”

At this point, one of the Mujahedeen retorted violently:” You’re talking as if you rule the world. You do with people whatever you please, and then you turn them into laughing stock. Twenty years ago, you were kissing our feet so we fought the Russians, and today you’d like us to kiss your feet so we confess to plotting to attack you.”

”Well said. Anyone else wishes to speak?” asked the officer, with a noticeable change in the tone of his voice. The officer repeated the question twice without any of

us speaking, for we deemed that what our brother, who would later turn out to be a Libyan and a veteran afghan Arab, had said sufficed. The officer then looked at the meals that had remained untouched: "Are you on a hunger strike? Maybe you are fasting." No one replied, so he said sarcastically: "And on speech strike?"

Ever more provocative, the Libyan said, addressing his words to us: "I don't think that being on a plane at this altitude should prevent us from praying. Do your prayers with devotion, and pray God to end our captivity." We began praying seated, at the surprise of the officer and the others. When we were finished, the Libyan proceeded to invoke God in a stentorian voice: "Our Lord!, the virtuous youth of the Nation have been made captive, please relieve them from their plight, and please strengthen their hearts. Lord!, please reward their kinsfolk with better youth. God, the people of the Cross have come on foot and on horseback and desecrated the land of Islam. The Jews are wreaking havoc in the Al Aqsa Mosque, the passage of God's Messenger. Our Lord! Disperse their ranks, and cause their alliance to fail. Lord!, shake the earth under their feet. Our Lord! we seek your succor against their evils. Our Lord!, unleash upon them a dark day. Our Lord!, unleash upon them the wonders of Your powers God, Revealer of the Scripture, the mover of clouds, the Vanquisher of the parties, defeat them and grant us victory over them. Our Lord! You are our support, our

defender, with Your help we journey, with Your help we fight. Praise be to God!

Our Lord! these young men have gathered to defend Your religion and raise Your banner. Our Lord!, grant them Your support and strengthen their hearts. Our Lord!, make us and Islam's youth firm in adversity, and let their shooting be accurate. Our Lord!, cause all Muslims to unite in tight ranks. Our Lord!, bestow upon us perseverance, fortitude, and cause us to defeat the infidels. Our Lord! Lay not on us such a burden as Thou didst lay on those before us! Our Lord! Impose not on us that which we have not the strength to bear! Pardon us, absolve us and have mercy on us, Thou, our Protector, and give us victory over the disbelieving folk. Our Lord! Consent to this Nation a behest of reason that Your pious folk rise in rank, and that the sinful folk live in humiliation, a Nation that shall enjoy right conduct, and forbid indecency. Our Lord! Shower Your prayers and peace on Your Slave and Messenger Mohammad, on his kinsfolk and Companions. And the conclusion of our prayer will be: Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds."

We punctuated his prayers with "Amen!", while some of us were moved to tears. As the prayers tempo rose, so did our voices. The Americans were frightened and anxious, as if they had not experienced such a bloodcurdling situation before. Silence filled the plane for several minutes, and the officer realized that the

tactic he had used to compel us to talk was inefficient, and that he facing warriors that would not relinquish their convictions just because they had been captured, but still tried again: "Your way of praying is no different from ours, we the followers of the Evangelical Church, but your invocations are quite different, for we only know the prayers we say before meals. The officer continued ranting with speech I do not remember. Then, it dawned on him that we were not listening so he moved to something else: "We'll be arriving in half an hour's time."

I turned towards the Libyan and said: "I'm your brother, Burashid, I was been in Afghanistan for fifteen years."

"I'm Ahmad Saadaoui, alias Al Qaaqaa in Algeria since 1990."

"And I'm Yusri Mahmud Abdullah from Egypt, I don't have an alias, I was in Afghanistan for 5 years."

"I'm Sayyid Ibrahim Al Minshawi from Egypt, also known as Al Abbes, two years in Afghanistan."

"I'm Monsif Bin Aouda from Tunisia, I arrived in Afghanistan five months ago."

"I'm Deedee Ould Ahmad, alias Al Shinqiti from Mauretania. I joined jihad nine years ago."

"I'm Mir Fathallah from Pakistan. I don't know how long I stayed in Afghanistan since my uncles live in Jalalabad."

"I'm Ahmad Saeed Al Shabu from Chad. I grew up in Mecca and joined jihad seven years ago."

"I'm Rakan Muhyideen, from Iraqi Kurdistan. I spent a year in Heart, and then joined Commander Messaoud 10 years ago."

"I'm your brother Faraj Senoussi, Libyan; I got to Afghanistan 20 years ago." That was how we introduced ourselves, while the American officer kept silent, watching the episode from beginning to end. When we finished, he said: "I'm Captain Scott McKenzie from New Jersey. I'm a Marine. These are Lieutenants John Cook Percy and Michael Brooks from the same unit. Those are privates Tony Richardson and Philip Snob who joined us recently. Now that we've been introduced and become one family, with one difference: you're terrorists, while we're the defenders of mankind against your evil deeds." The odd thing was that he elicited no response from us, but he would exceed the proper bounds. At times, he got irritated when we did not react, so he would grow even more provocative.

When the plane started reducing speed, and the captain announced that we were nearing our destination, the soldiers rushed to put the blindfolds back on our eyes and handcuff us.

I whispered in my friend's ear: "It seems to me that we're in some European country."

"I think so."

"Storms in the north and sandstorms in the south."

"It doesn't matter where we are headed for we are prisoners."

"God will grant us relief."

The plane was losing altitude fast, and I felt so dizzy that I was on the verge of passing out. I started reciting some Quran verses while bracing myself very hard, then I heard my companions reciting under breath when they uttered "Praise be to God." Our transfer by truck from the airport at which the plane landed to the detention center did not take long. It must have been only half an hour's drive which we covered handcuffed and blindfolded so we could not see a thing. As soon as we got there, they admitted us into a long corridor, and then took us down a metallic staircase to what seemed to be a basement. That was how I sensed things. It was a wet place, echoes confirming the humidity. We stayed in the basement for few minutes, then they began to dispatch every one of us to a tiny room or a cell. When they removed the black blindfold and the handcuffs, I felt an overwhelming relaxation. I lay down on the bed. I had only a copy of the Quran I was allowed to keep after they had taken all my papers, except Osama's testament, which I had buried inside a tree trunk in Serkai. There may come a day, if I am still alive, to track it and peruse its content. The room resembled the underground shelter built by the Germans and the Allies during World War Two to provide protection during the bombing of cities. This may be an abandoned base, or a military building refurbished to host us as prisoners. I did not really know, but that was how I felt.

The place was humid, but the bedding, the blankets and the utensils were brand new. I concluded that the place had been prepared for us. How long we were going to stay there, or what the Americans will do with us, was anybody's guess. We were terrorists, as they labeled us, who had declared war on them, that is we were their foes, so they could kill, or imprison or send us into exile to Mars. The journey of torture with the American jailor had started. No one spoke to you, your only companion being the Quran, or the recalling of all memories, from the Yarmouk camp to the Bekkaa, to Amman, Peshawar, Khost and Tora Bora. One played back the film of faces one had known, Rafiq, Abu Fadhl, Khtyar, Dallal, Abdullah Azzam, Hamoudi the Iraqi, Abu Dahdah, Rasheed the Algerian, Anas the Egyptian, Mohammad Nadheer, Fethi the man from Upper Egypt, Habibullah and his sons, Osama, Hamad Atif and others from Tora Bora. Many details sprung to the surface. In these solitary rooms, one had no mate save for the Quran and memories, and a burrow through which rats crossed.

The first night was quiet but for sounds from outside, hard to identify, whether these were trucks passing close by, or heavy storms, or as if we were in the vicinity of a sea.

I had barely fallen asleep, when the door was opened and a dish was placed in front of me: fish, vegetables, an apple and a bottle of water. The guard

did not speak to me and locked the door. I had no other choice, after the pangs of hunger, but to eat and sleep, the first steps towards accepting the fait accompli. On the second day, the door was opened and a soldier and two civilians entered my cell. One of the civilians has Arab features, while the second was a tall blue-eyed man. The soldier asked me to rise after noticing that I didn't stand up upon their entry. I stood up and was addressed by the swarthy man in fluent Arabic: "My name is Imad, I'm an interpreter with the American army, and this is Mr. Ralph from American intelligence who wishes to ask you questions, and he hopes you'll give him straight answers, in your own good interest."

"My own good interest?", I asked him.

He started translating, and I understood that he did not wish to involve himself in matters that were none of his concern.

Ralph intervened, and he started the conversation, jotting down notes on a small notebook: "You are under arrest on charges of terrorism, and it's in your own good interest to say whatever helps to prove your innocence."

"My own good interest is for you to send back to Peshawar."

"You'll find us there."

"How about Jordan?"

"We're there, too."

"And Hell?"

"We left that to you."

"What do you want?"

"We know you're not Osama Bin Laden. We'd like to know who you are."

"I'm one of the Mujahedeen."

"We know that, as we know that you joined the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon and that you collaborate with Jordanian intelligence, that you know Habibullah that you're married to..."

"You know everything and still insist on asking me." I interrupted him.

"I'm asking you the things I don't know, like how many times you've met Osama."

"Not more than half a dozen times."

"Did you speak to him?"

"No, I only heard him speak."

"What did he use to say?"

"He used to threaten you with a protracted war."

"Where did you meet him?"

"In Jalalabad and Tora Bora, and once in Kabul."

"Can describe Tora Bora for me?"

"Incredibly rugged mountains."

"I mean the caves in which you were hiding."

"Heavily fortified."

"Were there any chemical weapons?"

"I don't know."

"Any other weapons?"

"I don't know, but the most common weapons were

the RPGs and the Kalashnikovs.”

“Was there any wireless equipment?”

“I don’t know.”

“When did you see Osama Bin Laden...?”

“Before you started bombing Tora Bora.”

“Was he at ease?”

“What do you mean “at ease”?”

Did he smile when he addressed you?”

“I think so.”

“Don’t think, did he or didn’t he smile?”

“I can say he used to smile.”

“Did you know that he had a relationship with Habibullah?”

“I heard Habibullah refer to some relation between both of them.”

“Did you meet Mullah Omar?”

“No, never. I don’t even know what he looks like.”

“Which Taliban commanders do you know?”

“They all look alike; you couldn’t tell one commander from another.”

“If we asked you to cooperate with us as you did with Jordan intelligence, would you accept?”

“I don’t understand’

“We grant you some freedom of movement and you get information for us from the other detainees here and their relationship with Osama Bin Laden and Taliban, and what they know about the perpetrators of the attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade

center in New York.”

“Just like that. You’re simply asking me to change from a fighter in God’s way to a traitor.”

“This is not treason, this is cooperation.”

“Ask someone else.”

“Help us find someone else.”

Our conversation ended with this question, as the officer, the interpreter and the guard left amidst screams in the corridor, or in a nearby room. As if someone was being subjected to torture.

The tall man did not return and neither did the interpreter. The lunch and dinner meals, however, arrived on a regular basis, and I never fussed about whether they were halal or not. The highest hope I nurtured was to drill a hole in the thick wall so I could smell the fresh air of the world outside.

All day long, I toyed with my memory and relieved my anguish by reading the Quran. Behind the doors, I could only hear the footsteps of the guards handing meals or interrogating prisoners.

Did the tall man forgive me, or were the question he had asked me sufficient for him to realize that I was not important, that I was a negligible number in Al Qaeda of Osama, utterly useless?

I had no notion of time: I could not tell the days, and my beard grew thicker. If only they would come, so I could tell them who I was, that it was I who had killed Kennedy, plotted to destroy New York, would piss on

the Statue of Liberty and fart near the White House.

I don't know whether nine or more days had elapsed with me secluded from the world, with meals reaching me and some water and the guards' footsteps. My anxiety grew, but who had the key?

That night, the winds were strong, the roll of thunder could be heard from behind the thick walls, and I was reminiscing about Dallal who had questioned my going to jihad in a remote place, instead of Palestine. The last time I had left Dallal, she had been telling me she wanted a child to fill her life and compensate her for my absence. I did not know whether if Azzam was filling my home with happiness. I started imagining what the child's features were like: did he take after me, or was he more like his mother? What if it was a girl? I will call her Rafiqa, in memory of that Pashtu girl who had told me the night I had bid her farewell "I'd advise you to go back, for you're headed for a lot of trouble in this country." I had not heeded her advice, for she had been a woman, her role being restricted to giving children, cooking and doing the washing, while men took care of the tough stuff.

It was the first time that the door burst startling me into rising to see the tall intelligence officer, the interpreter and four guards file into the cell, carrying electronic devices and a tape recorder. I was told to sit down and so I did, all the time looking at the interpreter, as if I was seeking his help, winning him over to my side.

The officer sat to my right and said: "Did you listen to Osama taped message broadcast after 9/11?"

"No, I was already a prisoner."

"Then, listen carefully to know why you're here."

One of the soldiers played a taped message by Osama Bin Laden that went: "Here is America after God inflicted an affliction on her on one of the battlegrounds, destroying her most august buildings. Our Lord be praised! And here is America, overwhelmed with terror, from the north to the south and from the east to the west. Our Lord be praised! What America is experiencing a taste of today is an infinitesimal fraction of what we have endured for decades. Our Nation, for over eighty years, has tasted this humiliation and known ignominy. Its offspring have been slain, its blood shed, its most sacred places transgressed. The Nation has been subjected to killing that violates what God has revealed, with no one hearing or replying. But, when God caused a party of Islam, a vanguard of Islam, may God reward them, to wreak utter destruction on America, may God bestow upon them a high position and admit them into the Highest Paradise, when these retaliated in revenge of their oppressed offspring and of their brethren and sisters in Palestine and in many an Islamic country, the whole world screamed in unison, Infidelity howled followed by Hypocrisy."

The officer stopped the recorder and asked

sarcastically: "Did you like Bin Laden's speech?"

"Did you expect him to extend his condolences to you?"

"You'll hear more", promised the officer, playing the message again. Osama went on: "I swear by God, the Most-Powerful, Who raised the sky with no pillars that America and those that live in America, will not dream of living in peace before peace becomes a fact of life in Palestine, and before all the infidel armies have left the land of Mohammad."

The officer then took a long look at me while I stared into his eyes, before he added: "You seem to have heard this speech before."

"No, I haven't heard it, I've lived it."

The officer nodded for a short while then resumed: "Have you thought our proposal out. You've had ten days to think it over, which I long enough to plan the destruction of half of the planet. Will you cooperate with us?"

"No, I haven't thought it over."

"We've been thinking in your place and invite you once more to collaborate with us."

"You've thought for me?"

"We've received new electrical appliances that are powered by human energy and we'll be testing them." From the interpreter's twisted features I concluded that things were going to be different. Two guards seized me, while a third guard compressed my neck with his hand

and raised my head. They took off my clothes while I resisted, as the officer and the interpreter watched the scene from near the door.

My resistance was to no avail, as a guard placed an electrical wire on my left side near the kidney and another on my right wrist, and then turned on the red switch on the appliance. The electric shock jolted my body and I let out a scream that that must have shaken the jail's pillars. He repeated the shock and I fell to the floor, but they put me back on my feet to repeat the operation seven times. I felt as if I no longer had a body that carried me, as it had turned to minced meat. I passed out then came to after about ten minutes. Nothing had changed in the cell: the officer and the interpreter were at the same spot, and the guards were waiting for the signal to resume torturing me. I was all time saying "There is no power save through our Lord."

The officer told me:"

"I'm impressed by your resistance. It seems that the Viagra you used to get from Habibullah as helped you a lot."

"May God`s curse be on you and him."

"America's curse has not reached you yet."

He beckoned to the guards to continue the torture session. They placed their wires, one on my right ear and the other in an area I'm ashamed to mention. The guard turned the switch and the electrical signal

ripped at the speed of a short fuse to cause a tremor in my collapsed body and I fainted. When I regained consciousness, I saw the officer laughing and telling me: "Will you cooperate with us now?"

"What cooperation are you talking about?"

"There are ten detainees in this prison. Some were involved in the bombing of our embassies in Dar Salaam and Nairobi, others know what went on in September, and others still were close to Bin Laden. We want you to tap them, to get for us what we haven't been able to secure with electricity, hot water, hanging by the feet with the head dangling for two hours, and other techniques I wish you won't get a share of.

"I can't betray my brothers."

"Sometimes one has to give virility a rest."

"I'm talking about treason, while virility is what you're doing now."

"The only thing I have left is to exercise my virility on you."

They continued torturing me for more than two hours. Every time they would change the spots where they place the wires and increase the voltage, until I passed out and only woke up after I had heard a dog barking coming from the other room.

The next evening, the interpreter came alone and he told me that he was of Syrian descent but a Turkish national, residing in Dyar Bakir. His name was Suleiman and he had studied in the USA, and then joined the American

army five years before. He was not pleased with what he was doing, but he was endeavoring to improve the situation of some prisoners through his relations with intelligence officers. He asked me to accede to some of their requests so that they would not make the torture so bad as to entail death or madness. Since I had been convinced by Suleiman's discourse, I asked him if other prisoners had accepted. He told me that I had been chosen because the officers trusted me, being a veteran fighter. His speech reeked with the smell of a trap, so I told him to give me some time to think and that I would give him my answer the next day. He left with a hardly perceptible grin on his face. I studied the matter from all of its facets and reached the conclusion that death a more merciful option than revealing the secrets of those that waged jihad in God's path. There was no comparing martyrdom and treason. I stopped thinking about the matter. At dinnertime, I saw that the meal had changed, with a lot of bread, vegetables, fruits chicken and some sweets, as if I was in a luxury hotel. Maybe, they thought I had swallowed the bait. I ate the whole meal for the next day I would be served meals I would not be able to eat. God will help us.

The man was true to his promise as he came followed by the tall officer and one guard. The officer said: "I knew you are kind-hearted and that you'll cooperate with us."

"You're wrong, officer. It's true that this man is kind,

half of his heart is with you and the other half is with us, but as far as I'm concerned, all of my heart is with the Mujahedeen. I thought long and hard then welcomed the electricity meal.

The officer looked at Suleiman as if he was criticizing him, then grasped my shirt and pulled me to him, saying:

"Electricity is a mere appetizer; you'll be eating meals your mother has never cooked." I could not bear his remark and spat in his face, but Suleiman pushed me away and landed me on the bed, warning: "They'll kill you."

They left in a fury. I braced for some tough meals. I did have what I asked for, much torture and little reprieve. At year's end, they gathered all of us in one room and asked us to join them in their dancing. They did not coerce us into it, but they planned to torture us by having us drink and perform lewd dancing with prostitutes. I saw my mates again, their features had changed and some had even bruises on their faces. That was the last time I had seen the other detainees. We went back to our previous ordeal with continuous torture, until the spring of 2002 when we were transferred to Guantanamo in a cargo plane. I remember that on the night of our departure I was approached by another American intelligence officer who told me Officer Max sent me his best regards and that my wife had given birth to a girl she named Amina. I wished I had been

there and called her Rafiq. My country's intelligence services are extremely reliable!

I was glad at the news, but my anguish grew after Suleiman the interpreter informed me that Guantanamo was at the end of the world, in Cuba. To be honest, that was the first time I had heard of an American base in Cuba, though I had known that Cuba had been blockaded by America for forty years. Suleiman refused to tell me the name of the prison in which we had been detained so far, saying vehemently "anything but this."

7

It was a long journey to Guantanamo, with our eyes blindfolded, our hands cuffed and no conversation between us, except for some whispered words, plentiful praying and reciting of the Quran.

The journey was different from previous ones insofar as the American soldiers did not talk to us about anything. They now knew everything about us. Didn't I tell you that they had informed about the birth of my daughter. They had eyes and ears everywhere. During the flight to Guantanamo, The plane made two stopovers at military bases, which were impossible to identify, for America has dozens of bases in the seas and the oceans. At dawn of the next day, the plane touched down at Guantanamo. We could not see a thing as we

were blindfolded and that was compounded by the shackling of our legs. We were marched in Indian file, all the time hearing soldiers calling each other and trucks passing nearby, till we reached a building where cells were assigned to each of us. I have to say this for the Americans: they are highly organized in whatever they undertake; even prisons were managed with the utmost accuracy. We remained standing until an interpreter came to advise us to remember our numbers as the detention center only dealt with numbers not with human beings. My number was 217, which meant that more than two hundred prisoners had preceded me to this place. I did not know what Habibullah's share was of those he betrayed or sold for a pittance. I was led by two guards to a cage with thick bars and there they removed my blindfold and asked me to change my clothes. The strange thing was that the clothes, light orange in color, were ready for me and to my exact size. Didn't I tell you that they were highly organized? One of the guards addressed me in Americanized Arabic: "Welcome to Guantanamo", closed the door behind him then walked away. Like any exhausted traveler, I lay on the bed and tried to sleep in the open cage. I had barely fallen asleep when the guard appeared again and threw into my hands the copy of the Quran they had seized on board the plane. I do not know whether they were really scared of it. But I was convinced of what officer Scott McKenzie had stated;

America had great respect for human rights, especially in its cages and in its secret and not so prisons. The first night went by as if we were guests of honor and we were fortunate the weather was not cold. At dawn, I heard a voice calling us to prayer, then the supplications after the call to prayer and with it broke out irritating music. A detainee in the opposite corner volunteered: "You'll get used to it."

At around ten, a skinhead guard appeared and led me to the courtyard, blindfolded and barefoot, then said: "We'll have a little stroll." I started walking gingerly on the sharp pebble stones and every time I started moaning in pain, he would drag me to make the torture worse. The session lasted for a full hour, and then he took me back to the cage, saying sarcastically: "This is nicer than Hyde Park." I could only spit on the floor and the guard laughed, saying: "They all do this." Subsequently, two guards would arrive, one of them threw a piece of bread, and the second something that looked like food, stating like officer Scott: "It's all halal." He closed the door then left. I called him: "Where's water?". "Drink your piss," he replied at the top of his voice. Days rolled on, with me in that cage, secluded from other humans except for some voices. Maybe I was lucky, for I was in an open cell and I could greet people or return their greetings, and I was tortured just enough to keep my body resisting. I would dare ask Matt the guard about the date for my trial and he

would bark:” When you confess that you killed 2986 Americans in half an hour.”

”I’ll confess to everything, even to killing Princess Diana.”

”Everyone says that.”

After an hour, Matt would come and ask me if I wanted to have a walk outside. I did not understand what he meant, so he would laugh and say:” In a quarter of an hour, the Doors of Paradise will be opened for you.”

”I’ve read your file. I saw that you ingested a lot of Viagra and hadn’t yet achieved the pleasure you sought. The pleasure in Tora Bora is fear. But the pleasure in Guanmo is the real orgasm. Did you understand?”

”No.”

”You’ll understand in a few minutes` time.”

Matt whistled and two guards materialized as if they had been ready and waiting. They seized me, strapped my hands and legs to the bed in the position of crucifixion, while I vainly tried to resist, at the same time as Matt was pushing me with his stick.

”You murder people and refuse pleasure, what kind of humans are you?”

He let out a second whistle and two female soldiers appeared, one was blonde, the other a chubby brunette.

Matt said: ”They’re yours.”

I nearly choked on my tongue, became speechless and began crying. Then he addressed the two women:” He’s yours.”

The blonde started caressing my face: "I love dark skin and your hair turns me on."

"He looks like Brad Pitt", said the big woman while ripping my shirt from the top. The blonde replied: "Look at his eyes, he looks like George Clooney."

I was going mad, seeking to free myself and from the awkward situation, but the chubby soldier did not wait long before hurtling her whole body on me and started undressing me, saying: "This is the forty-seventh Arab whose lust I have satisfied in Guanmo."

"And your lust, too", said Matt, eyeing me with contempt. He then ordered one guard to fetch him a camera: "Do you know something, buddy, your picture is worthy of being the cover photograph of Playboy."

I could do nothing against this gross sexual harassment but to say a prayer « God is my only and sure recourse ». The guard started taking pictures of me in that humiliating posture when my dignity was being trampled upon. This situation lasted for more than half an hour, with guards and other detainees filing through the corridor without the slightest interest in what I was enduring. The situation was absolutely normal! A soldier hung the American flag near the top of the cell. me:

'What do you think of third flag?' Matt asked, pulling me by my beard and spitting in my face. 'This is the only flag on the moon,' he continued, 'So, rise and salute America's high station'. I was in an awkward position,

so they held me up while Matt asked 'How many stars are there on the American flag?' I did not reply, for I was on the verge of passing out, so he would shove me back into my previous position.

The two female soldiers would resume their teasing. The chubby woman started pricking me with needles in sensitive areas of my body saying 'His blood is purple' while the blonde smoked and calmly blew it into my face and compelled me to kiss her, then she pinched my cheek, saying: 'I can't let this body get away from me without etching a fine tattoo on it.' She placed her cigarette to the right of my navel and pressed hard while I silenced my pain. I did not wish to be weak in front of a loose woman. Woe to prostitutes!

As soon as Matt declared the first harassment session over, the big woman stood up and spat in my face, telling her friend: 'He stinks'. The blonde replied: 'But he's better than the Egyptian we had sex with last night.' Finally, all left letting out bursts of contemptuous laughter while I remained tied on the bed in a wretched condition till the next morning when another guard came and said in a manner that carried much regret: 'I'm Sergeant John, I've come to apologize on behalf of Matt for he forgot to free your arms and legs. He's sent you this apparatus and asks you to enjoy the Rolling Stones.' He switched the machine at full blast and placed it in a corner of the cell. He left me tied up and left without uttering a single word. As soon as one loud song ended

another started until I suffered from a serious headache and began screaming from the acute pain: 'Stop this shit. Stop it,' but no one answered. Then I was not the only one screaming, for in every cell there was respect for humans. They had become masters in the art of torture: sadists relishing the performing of evil. They did not belong to the human species, for hatred shone in their eyes like sparks in a cold night. Everything was done openly, as if they had been ordered to do so, for had it not been that way, they would not have been boasting about it. On some occasions, doctors would accompany them. One could tell they were doctors from their way of speaking as they ausculted us to gauge the capacity of ever one of us to withstand particular forms of torture. I did not understand why I always was the one to be chosen whenever they wanted to use electricity. It may be that the report from the secret prison concluded that I had a strong body capable of withstanding high voltages. They used to tell me that the Indian Mushtaq Batel could not bear electricity and Jawed the Afghan lost consciousness whenever he saw the electrical wires.

On a Friday, Matt came to my cell and cast a skin magazine into my lap, saying: 'Whenever this day comes, you take out your Quran from under the pillows and start perusing it. Wouldn't it be great for a change to browse through these magazines. Look, all the women are gorgeous and you wouldn't see their likes in

Paradise.' He stepped forward then came back : ' And, don't throw them as there're people waiting their turn.' Their psychological torture was harsh, and I was about to tell them I'd sooner be thrown me the Niagara falls tied with electrical wires with a million kilowatts than see my dignity being destroyed.

8

That situation lasted for six months. That was hell. I would wonder whether the people who had destroyed the twin towers had been right or if they had merely added oil to the fire o American vanity. Was what we were subjected to a natural reaction. I was at my wits' ends. All the questions about the Universe gathered in my head, and I became incapable of deciphering anything. What brought me to Afghanistan? had been told that Paradise was in Peshawar and I found hell in Guantanamo. I would even consider suicide at times. I have heard that a detainee was found dead and that another was discovered at death's door. If a day went by without torture, our bodies would feel the happiness of kids on Eid day. But we would till be anguished by what was in store for us, because a day's rest meant the birds of death were at the door. Norman, the lean soldier, took me out to the gravel yard on a hot day and said in a very calm fashion: 'Don't put the sole of your foot on the stones, for they'll bleed. Try putting one foot on

another, and I pretend I can't see.' I had never before seen a soldier conspire with me. AS if he hated the job, or that his conscience pricked him every evening, or that he was one of those religious folks that the prison officials did not like very much. I told him : 'That won't change much. For we're two inches from death, and what will America gain from killing us? Will that bring back the dead of New York?'

'And it will never resurrect the dead of the Vietnam War.'

'I've noticed that you're a good guy, different from the other soldiers.'

'My father was killed in Vietnam and my elder brother lost one eye in Somalia, that 's why I know the meaning of war.'

'I hate war, just like you.'

'And Jihad?'

'That's not war, that's the defense of the right of faith.'

'Is there anyone who forces you to espouse a particular faith?'

'But there's someone who imposes war on you.'

'I understand from your words that both parties stand to lose.'

'If we hadn't been losers, i wouldn't be tied to you.'

'In your opinion, what do Che Guevara, Castro and Bin Laden have in common?'

'All of them hate America.'

'I thought you were going to say that they all have a beard!'

'Don't you like the detainees' beards?'

'It seems to me they grew them out of fear from Bin Laden.'

'What do you want from the world?'

'We want to see it walk on sharp stones like you're doing now.'

'If this is the way it is, when will I be put in a cell instead of this cage I've come to hate?'

'This won't happen before investigators interrogate you about your role in New York and in Al Qaeda.'

'When?'

'Maybe in a month or two, or two years. I don't really know. And now you can walk barefoot.' Back in my cage, I pondered Norman's words carefully. I concluded that some soldiers did not accept violence against detainees, on religious or humane grounds. Or maybe they had lived through tragedies in their families. Every time, I would realize that terror in Tora Bora was no different from that of Guantanamo and that they had in common the demise of moral values and the collapse of mankind. Whenever it was Norman's turn to torture me, I would be pleased for he granted you a measure of safety, and would converse with you on the prison and its dwellers. He would even mention the names of new detainees, all the time saying that he felt ashamed at what they were doing, for the world had stopped believing them when they talked about human rights. I remember him asking me one morning whether I had any relationship with Al Jazeera,. I was taken aback

by the question. He explained that a detainee by the name of Samy Hajj had been in the prison since the day before, not very far from me, and he advised me not to engage in conversation with that detainee to avoid any suspicion of association with him.

'Are you against Al Qaeda or Al Jazeera,' I asked Norman.

'If Al Jazeera serves Al Qaeda or Taliban, then it'd be engaged terrorism.'

'Which means you're afraid of the truth.'

'The only truth for America is that Bin Laden is the perpetrator and whoever is around him is also responsible.'

'Even Al Jazeera?'

'Of course Al Jazeera, too. Look at CNN; two days after 9/11 they issued a brief announcement in which they said that America was in danger and that they were part of America, and that they had no alternative but to put themselves at the disposal of the White House. Al Jazeera, on the other hand, put itself at the disposal of Al Qaeda and Taliban.'

'It's a matter of choice.'

'There's no comparing between Paradise and Hell.'

'When I was young, I loved 'Apocalypse Now', the movie about Vietnam.'

'Because it depicted Americans as humans.'

'Maybe.'

'Ford Coppola was lying to us.'

'So, Al Jazeera wasn't wrong.'

'Do you know who has been wrong all along?'

'America, of course.'

'No, neither the former nor the latter. You were wrong in choosing Bin Laden and I was wrong when I chose to work in this prison.'

'I don't get it. You say one word in my favor and another in theirs.'

'After all that has gone between you and me, you still don't understand me.'

I remembered what my Yemeni friend had told in Tora Bora: every single thing was a registered trademark of American intelligence, including Al Qaeda, Al Jazeera and Taliban. I could not fathom the reason behind Norman's attraction towards me, why he had not hesitated to tell me his life story while pacing the corridor between camps India and Delta. I heard him say that his father was of African descent, from Liberia who had started life as a waiter in a bar in New Orleans. He then joined the American army and married Maria, my mother, one of the so-called Hispanics and a secretary in a company that traded in cigarettes. She bore him Mike, my elder brother, who also chose a career in the army. The career did not last more than six years as he lost an eye in combat in Mogadishu in 1993. He now worked in the veterans' office. My father was the fiercest attacker of Muhammad Ali, after the latter refused mobilization and the Vietnam war. My father considered himself more American than the Irish

whites who ruled America, and he went to Vietnam and never came back. I was three years old when the news about my father's death reached my mother. She devoted herself to raising us without thinking of remarrying. When I was sixteen, I started thinking about many things. First of all, I wanted to become a professional singer and actor and to marry the beautiful Farah Fawcett. But every time I tackled the matter with my mother, she would say that I couldn't possibly more than my father. The result was that I enlisted in the army and married Maggie, a kindergarten nurse, who bore me no children, but who loves me passionately. She knew I did not cheat on her, as my father used to do. Military service made one patient; it also made you tough with yourself and hard on the others. But what makes me so quiet, which incidentally bothers my fellow soldiers, is that I knew Hamidullah, an American of Indian ancestry. Our conversation was always laced with the right of humans to life. I also learnt a verse from the Quran which says 'Whosoever killeth a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind, and whoso saveth the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind.' And I don't wish to cause the death of a detainee. I'm not like Rumsfeld. I'm only staying here to prevent the killing of people. Their reckoning doesn't rest on me. This man can not be American, or he is an American with an Indian soul.

In Guantanamo, there were no soldiers like Norman, and I feared for him, because if he contaminated other soldiers, he would be signing his death warrant.

Norman stopped his storytelling to inform me that I would be transferred to an isolation cell in two days' time. Investigators would be interrogating me regarding Al Qaeda and Taliban. They might even query me about Al Jazeera and Habibullah. That was what the situation was like in daylight. The night was Matt's realm. He would come with his forced smile and ask me which torture I preferred at night and I would laugh and tell him to ask my body to see if there was any part of it that could still bear torture. He would bring a spotlight and order me to keep my eyes open and not close them until I was give permission to do so. If only this took place during the first part of the night. No, it usually started at one or two in the morning, when sleep sneaked to your eyes. As soon as I opened my eyes for the spotlight , I felt as if my eyes had been cast into an oven.

The intense heat would make me scream, and a soldier accompanying Matt would pour water over my head and body. He would repeat the operation nine or ten times until my eyelids collapsed and could no longer keep my eyes open. Matt would then kick me with his thick fee, saying : 'We've spilled lots of light in your eyes so you'll tell us the truth tomorrow.' Then, he would go away laughing, leaving Abu Rashid's body exhausted,

strapped to a chair hopeless but for crying and praying. On that very quiet night, except for the screams of new detainees receiving their Guantanamo meals, no one paid me a visit, not even Sergeant Matt came anymore. Maybe , he had been detailed to some other wing, or been given a leave for services rendered. It was not extraordinary for a detainee not to be tortured for two or three days, prior to appearing before investigators, to avoid embarrassment for the jailors. The prisoner would appear innocent, free of any guilt, like the day he was born. I spent the night not in the cage but in a cell with an overwhelming stench and no water, with traces of blood on its walls. The names Al Juhani and Al Awqhan were carved on the walls. This might have been the cell where a detainee had been killed by the guards and his death covered up as a suicide. The investigators' report must have gone down the drain, and the killers' feet and sticks did not change. I made a point of reading some of the Quran and recall the faces of Dallal and my daughter Amina. I spent nights whining and groaning from the intense pain, hoping to see her, praying to God to allow me to see that day. Though I could not see anything outside the walls, I could still feel qs if I was strolling through the streets of Yarmuk camp and eating Basboosa and Mhellebia, reading the morning papers that reported on Khomeini's revolution and the Shah's flight, President Boumediene' disease, the boycott of the Moscow Olympics and the assassination

of Sadat. I am not a poet, but I used the walls area to align words I firmly believed were poetry. I wrote:

"In this remote spot
 I don't see the sun and don't hear birds
 My body is a map open to ache
 In my eyes fly memories
 Yarmuk camp, the Bekkaa and Jordan
 And the woman I loved told me not to leave
 But my heart was in Azzam's hands and I went
 Dallal called my name
 I told her to wait and she waited long
 And did not say a thing as she loved me
 While I loved Tora Bora
 When I dreamt about them
 I waved my hand but she ran away from me
 When I woke up my blanket was an orchard of oranges
 And a large board with 'Guantanamo' inscribed on it
 Cursed be the graffiti in a cell that vomits the history of
 man of illusion.

At dawn, I woke up to the clicking sound of cell keys, and the guard very politely told me while untying my hands: 'You may go to Camp India to meet the other detainees and pray with them.'

I did not think about anything, I just shuffled ahead of him with legs shackled. At the end of the corridor and on the right side, there was a large room with iron bars accommodating more than forty prisoners, watched by many armed guards. I was so happy, I forgot it was

prayer time, and I started staring at the faces that drowned in the orange color: where were those that had been with me in Tora Bora, in Khost and the secret prison. While some detainees were waiting their turn to perform the ritual ablution, I could not wait to meet one of them. Suddenly, I could see Mohammad Nadheer the Yemeni seated in a corner, with scars on his face. He was silent, not looking at anyone, so I squatted near him and put my hand on his shoulders, my forehead near his : 'You're here, damned man !'

He raised his head, tried to speak then beckoned towards his broken lower jaw. All the while he was talking to me with his eyes and with signs I could decipher. He reminded me of some situations we had been through in our journey through Afghanistan, and would every time stop at Habibullah, mimicking the two horns on his head, the symbol for the devils' friend. I recounted what I had been through since my arrest and he smiled and told me with a gesture of his hand that I had not suffered a tenth of his ordeal. After the prayer, the doors were opened so that every one went back to their cell, while five or six detainees remained seated as though they had gone through the first stage of torture and were waiting for the next. One of those was Jumua Al Dosary, one of the first to be arrested and transferred to Guantanamo.

In a place such as this, one could not think of escaping, for in front were electrical wires and mines and paths

that led to the sea. Think about a cell with a larger area so that you might feel a smaller area of freedom in your head. I had not heard of anyone thinking of escape. The ceiling of escape from Guantanamo was suicide. As far I was concerned, I did not consider any such thing, for I longed to see Amina, and to apologize to Dallal for telling her one day so peremptorily 'jihad has no homeland'. I am the one afflicted with my suffering self; I was repeating what Muhammad Maghout once said « if freedom was snow, I would sleep outdoors'. I was sleeping alone in a grave that was too small to contain my postponed dreams.

Half an hour after reaching the cell, the door opened and I was led away blindfolded and shuffling my feet to an unknown destination. One thing was sure; I did not cross the foot-bleeding gravel courtyard. The guard stopped me near a building in which I did not hear the sounds I had been used to in the corridors of death. The guard was engaged in an exchange with others regarding my name and cell number, the date of my arrest, and other details. Suddenly, I heard a voice that sounded very much like that of Farraj the Libyan's insulting those around him : ' God will punish you, sons of ...'. The guards were beating and shoving him, but he did not stop. My guard shoved me towards the metal staircase without removing my blindfold, and I could hear only the screeching sound of the shackles that bound my feet. As soon as I had reached the door,

the black blindfold was removed and I could see a glass partition and three investigators, two military and one civilian. In the corner sat a man with Arab features. I stepped ahead and remained standing until one of the two officers invited me to sit down. The chair was not far from them, so I watched them whisper while the interpreter greeted me with a nod of his head but without speaking. One of the military officers signaled the guards to leave. He then wore glasses and started shuffling through a thick pile of papers in a portfolio on a table around which the investigators were seated. Next, the officer turned to the interpreter then to me and said:

'Mr. Amin Burashid, we're investigators. My name is Marshall, this is Officer Chris and this is investigating judge Williams. We'll ask you questions but you have the right to refuse to answer.'

'Why should I refuse? Back home, they say what a corpse can do when it's in the hands of the mortician.' They laughed, while the interpreter grinned.

'How are you?'

'As you can see, I have a new house for which I pay rent every evening.'

'Do you mean that you've been tortured?'

'I mean something that looks like torture.'

Williams intervened: 'You're rights are guaranteed if you've been tortured or been subjected to psychological harassment...'

I interrupted him 'Do you mean sexual?'

'No, that's allowed in here. The prisoner loses his freedom but not his pleasure.'

Chris added, laughing: 'what use is taking Viagra if you don't experience its effects?'

Marshall proceeded with the interrogation: 'You grew up in Damascus, studied in Aleppo and joined Palestinian Resistance in Lebanon. You then moved to Amman and became a member of the Moslem Brothers Organization. From there you travelled to Peshawar and Afghanistan and stayed there nearly fifteen years. What's your relationship with Osama Bin Laden?'

'My relationship with him is like yours with me.'

'You mean you don't know him.'

'Yes.'

'But you know the Al Qaeda outfit.'

'All Afghan Arabs are affiliated to Al Qaeda. The existence of political parties for the Afghans has forced the Afghan Arabs to found their own political and military entity.'

Chris said: 'Al Qaeda's mission is not to rule Afghanistan but to fight America.'

'You should have tried to pinpoint the reason that led you to turn against them after you supported them against the Russians.'

'You are the ones that turned against America.'

'Because America supports the Jews and besieges Iraq to destroy it.'

Marshall said while turning pages in the portfolio: 'What do you think of Saddam Hussein?'

'We hate Saddam and love Hussein.'

'Are you a Shiite?'

'I've never been to Iran or Iraq.'

'Why does Saddam hate Israel?'

'Why do you love Israel and protect it?'

'Is Saddam a prophet?'

'In Iraq, maybe.'

'Can you explain the word 'jihad' to us?'

'To die in the path of God.'

Marshall, still shuffling his papers, asked: 'Where were you on September 11th?'

'I was in Khost trying to find a television to watch the collapse of the two towers.'

'Were you moved by what you saw?'

'Unfortunately, a lot more towers remained standing.'

'Did you know some of the perpetrators?'

'No, but where are their pictures?'

I thought Marshall was joking with me, but he pulled out from his briefcase photographs of those involved in the attacks on the twin towers and the Pentagon. As a matter of fact, I dwelled on the pictures of two of the suspects but chose to deny knowing them. Chris intervened: 'Didn't you wish you had been one them?'

'I may have been asked to repair Bin Laden's car or Mullah Omar's bike, but to be entrusted with flying a plane and crashing it on the White House one would

have to have been a follower of Habibullah.'

'Who do you think killed Habibullah?'

'Was he killed?'

'Oops, it slipped our minds to present our condolences to you.'

'He started as Habibullah and he ended up your friend. His deeds killed him. It doesn't matter whether it was Taliban, Al Qaeda or Pakistani intelligence.'

'Have you ever met with Pakistani intelligence people?'

'No, never. The Pakistanis and the Afghans all look alike, and you never knew whether you were sitting with an intelligence officer or with a cleric. I know Jordanian intelligence very, though.'

'Have you ever visited the USA?'

'No.'

'Any European countries?'

'I visited Cyprus for two days during the siege of Beirut.'

'Why?'

'The Palestine Liberation Organization was thinking of sending us to Libya or Algeria, but then changed its mind as circumstances were not adequate.'

'Did you get to know any women in Cyprus?'

'No, because we didn't leave the boat.'

'Were you linked to the hijacking of the Achille Lauro?'

'I was then in Amman, as for Abu Al Abbas I only saw his picture on the papers.'

'Have you visited Libya?'

'No.'

'What do you think of Kaddafi?'

'He's given you trouble and you've paid him back in kind.'

'How are connected to the Lebanese Hezbollah?'

'I have no connection to them whatsoever.'

'And with Hamas?'

'I have sympathy for them, for I'm Palestinian and theirs is a just cause.'

'And the terrorist movements in Algeria?'

'What they have done will incur God's wrath upon them.'

'Do you believe that Syria has weapons of mass destruction?'

'You're asking an ordinary person.'

Williams barged in when he notices the silence of the two officers: 'Sometimes, wisdom come from the simple folks.'

'If I was wise, I wouldn't' be in this cursed place.'

'Do you regret what you did?'

'To be honest, when I remember Dallal I 'm nagged by regret, because she advised me against jihad and I didn't heed her warning. But, when I remember the assassination of Abdullah Azzam, I wish I had died with him.'

'Do you or do you not regret? I want a straight answer.'

'In Afghanistan I did not regret any thing I did, but here my feelings are numbed and I no longer understand the meaning of regret.'

'You didn't answer my question.'

'Write down that I regret, I regret...'

'What do you regret?'

'Joining jihad.'

'And fighting against America?'

'You're asking me what you should be asking a billion Moslems. Don't you realize that you're the black sheep of the world?'

'You stayed in Tora Bora. What did you see?'

'I saw people moving about, blue-eyes men who did not speak, and I saw Bin Laden and his companions...'

'I know that. I mean were there laboratories for manufacturing chemical weapons?'

'How do you want to know, I was one of the rank and file.'

'Didn't you see suspicious boxes, or rooms that were off limits to the likes of you?'

'There were many caves, and I didn't go beyond the second one.'

"Did you suspect the presence of anything out of the ordinary?"

"The only thing that attracted my attention was that Osama went away for a month then came back with people I had never before seen in Tora Bora and quickly disappeared,."

"Maybe, he went to get medical treatment."

"You do know that."

"Do you know the mountains of Jitral in Pakistan?"

"No."

"Did you listen to Osama's speech in which he claimed responsibility for the 9/11 attacks?"

"No. I"

"Then, listen carefully." The interpreter pushed a button on the recorder and I could hear Osama's hoarse voice say "at those terrible times, a tidal wave of feelings swept over me that I could not explain, but they generated an overwhelming sentiment that refused oppression. An unwavering resolution was born in me that revenge should be made on the oppressors. While I was looking at those destroyed towers in Lebanon, a spark flashed through my mind that suggested we should punish the oppressor in kind and destroy towers in America, so that it gets a taste of some of what we had tasted, to deter it from slaying our women and children..." This was followed by another excerpt in which Osama stated " we agreed with the senior Emir that all attacks had to be executed in twenty minutes, before Bush and his administration realized what was happening. It had never occurred to our minds that the supreme commander of the American armed forces would leave fifty thousand of his fellow-citizens in the two towers to face alone that terrible upheaval at the time when they needed him most. It seemed to him that being engrossed in the girl's description of the goat and its butting was

more important than busying himself with the planes that were butting the skyscrapers. That afforded us three times more time than we needed to carry out the attacks, so praise be to our Lord." At first, I had doubted that Al Qaeda had been responsible for the attacks on the towers, but to hear Osama justifying the attacks sounded odd to me. The investigators realized that I had been deep in thought, so they all fell silent and I told them: "He's saying this, what's that got to do with me?"

Marshall laughed and said: "You're a sinless angel. Listen to the rest of the speech."

Osama's voice came to life again spilling that man's glee at the Americans' suffering "You should carefully review the last wills of the thousands whom you lost on the eleventh of September while they were waving in despair, as they are testaments that are worthy of being the topics of research."

I did not retort, but Chris said: "This is the way the caveman behaves with the antion of skyscrapers."

The place was filled with the silence of a tomb/graveyard. Marshall closed the file, signalling that the interview was over, and then asked: "If we released you today, what would you do?"

"I'd walk barefoot to Havana, sleep seven days and nights on Revolution Square and tell Castro "Thank you" for hating the Americans."

Chris, who was clearly annoyed, said: "How about sleeping for seven years in India camp, which is reserved for VIP visitors to Guanmo?"

"Thanks for the invitation, and I have an idea about the rent!"

Marshall rang a bell and the soldiers appeared again to lead me back to my cell. I remember that Williams told me while I was about to leave: "Clean your tongue and we'll be waiting for you."

"But before you must revise the rent, because the issue is in the heart not the tongue."

"Be advised that your wife knows you're in Guantanamo. You can send her a letter or more."

"Whoever says you're merciless is a liar."

I did not know whether the soldiers deliberately chose not to blindfold me or whether they had forgotten, but I was looking in all directions, gazing at the sky, noticing that it was still blue just as I had left it. The trees too were green in this prison, but the orange color was no different from that of the yellow cabs in major cities. I ambled for ten minutes like any absolutely free man, but for the shackles on my feet. I crossed the corridors of the collective cells and the isolation cells and I could hear people call my name "Abu Rashid", so I would look to the direction from which the sound came but I could see nothing. Ten minutes of freedom is equal to a lifetime on rent. I got to the isolation cell and everything faded, freedom exiting through the keyhole. The soldiers strapped me to a chair then left without uttering a single word. What would I tell Dallal? Whatever I wrote, whatever justification I aligned, I would tell her "I hurt you, good woman." I would tell Amina "Spit

on my face, because I didn't hold you as fathers do. I would whisper in an angel's voice "You're a pretty girl."

9

Seasons passed and the new detainees took their share of American evil, while our voices rose to the sky of Cuba besieged with the wire of death and shame, but there was no one to hear us. On some occasions, we could not understand what was going on in the prison. On a stormy night, Private Jeremy opened the door to my cell and said: "Don't worry, you won't pay rent tonight. I've got a pleasant surprise for you."

"A surprise?"

"You'll see in a little while."

"A pleasant surprise in Guantanamo? I can't believe it."

Jeremy started pulling me like a meek dog, without applying the black blindfold. He led me into a building which at first I thought was the gatehouse, but turned out to be a communications centre. Two detainees were seated in the centre while a third one was shouting into a handset in "Do you hear me, Bashir? I can hear you. I miss you very much. Say hello to Hassan, Thuraya, Abdulkader...What did you say about Iraq?", then the line went dead. Who said that Guantanamo did not allow detainees to get in touch with their relatives? One could tell that the dark-skinned prisoner was Tunisian from his accent when he was greeting his family and tribe members one by one. I even counted

them and found that there were nineteen of them and he had forgotten some others. As soon as he had finished his call, he shuffled out glad to have heard his kinsfolk back in Tunisia. He was crying because he couldn't believe that his voice came back from Doomsday to tell his folks "I miss you very much". I waited my turn, as if I was sitting on a bed of embers. The detainee who was called was not lucky, for the line was out of service and he would have to wait for a month or a year. The man could not control himself, so he started screaming in a hoarse Pashtu tongue "everything is against me, even the phone." The person in charge of calls laughed and remarked: "He may speak to his relatives when I retire." There was no one left in the room except me and the guards, so I was called. Everything was well organized. The communications man asked me: "is your wife's name Dallal Aouamra."

"yes."

"Don't worry; you'll speak to her right away."

He dialled the number as if he had been used to it. Who knows, these people are capable of anything. I watched his fingers and the handset, barely holding in place, yearning to hear anything. I had not heard Dallal's voice in four years.

"Hello, Ms, Dallal Aouamra..." He had barely finished his sentence that I snatched the handset from his hand and started crying. The comms man did not seem annoyed and he warned me: "You've got fifty seconds left." I heard Amina's shouting in the distance. "Dallal, this is Amin from Guantanamo. I'm

fine. How are you? How's my aunt? How are our relatives in Damascus? I'm fine. How's Amina? Say hello to her. I'm dying to see her. Does she look like me or like you?"

Although the voice came through discontinuously, I heard Amina crying. Did she hear my voice coming from several thousand kilometres away? I sensed that Amina wanted to say something but a hand had snatched the handset away from her. "Amin, this is Hatem, Amina's brother, everything is fine, but Iraq has been occupied by the Americans." The call was discontinued. The receiver fell from my hand, not because I had Dallal and Amina's voices and those of all of my relatives in Amman, but the sentence pronounced by Hatem had stunned me. The Americans planned on humiliating us, they wanted us to hear about the news of the fall of Bagdad from our relatives. The Americans were not eager to have us speak to our loved one. I remained mesmerized in my chair while the soldier accompanying me was shoving me, but I did not feel a thing. He placed the black blindfold over my eyes and dragged me like a wounded dog, while I was mumbling to myself: "I cannot believe that the Americans have occupied Bagdad. Some treason must have taken place. There's no love lost between us and Sadam, but we were sure he would never be a traitor."

The soldier sneaked in two Arabic words: "May our Lord sort things out."

"Do you speak Arabic?"

"A little bit. I learnt it while in Saudi Arabia. I'm one of the

few survivors of the attack that targeted American soldiers in Khobar a few years ago.”

“How about Iraq?”

“Have you been told?”

“I’ve been told America has occupied it.”

“Not exactly. A week ago Saddam and his army disappeared and our troops entered Bagdad.”

“You’ve entered Bagdad and you’re telling me not exactly.”

“I mean, we haven’t occupied all of it.”

“If Bagdad has fallen, then all Iraq has, too.”

“You’re wrong. There’s resistance that our soldiers can feel and the world isn’t pleased with what we’ve done.”

“In Afghanistan we heard that you were looking for chemical weapons.”

The soldier suddenly noticed that I was discussing topics that were beyond him, while he replied spontaneously and candidly, so he closed the topic and advised me: “There are terrorists in this prison. You’re a good guy, so stay away from them.”

“I’ve been in a cage alone for several years, paying rent every night, I hear without seeing and you’re telling me keep away from the terrorists. You say this to all prisoners, which means that I’m a terrorist.”

“We’ve reached the cell. Have a good day.”

As usual, they strapped me to the chair, poured some water into the dirty utensils, and honoured me with thrilling American music. The soldier said: “Americans love Whitney

Houston. You too will love her because I read once that Osama Bin Laden was in love with her. Enjoy.”

I started reading the Quran, then would stop and read the previous chapter again. There was no way of killing the impact of the music on my ears. That was torture with the fine instruments of beauty. You did not live through what we had experienced in Guantanamo. You cannot feel the moment when we endeavoured to enter the world of spirits and faith through the Quran, but music would penetrate everything in you, and you would resist long until you collapsed. We heard no news about Iraq, but we were counting the days to hear the news of Bush’s defeat in the upcoming election, which would mean our leaving the prison to go back to our countries. Some words would slip from the soldiers or the new detainees, and we would use them to imagine what was going on outside Guantanamo. We had heard that the Americans were looking for Osama Bin Laden and had prepared substantial sums of money for his capture, but had so far failed in their enterprise. They had also engaged funds to capture Saddam and they take him from his underground hideout, with his unkempt beard. Bush had won once more and hope had died in Guantanamo. Norman hated working in Guantanamo, but he had no intention of leaving for the years he had spent in service were not enough to secure a comfortable retirement. He was trying to strike a balance between his duties and not to ill-treat detainees that had not stood trial. He did not hesitate to tell me, while leading me to

the infirmary after my tooth had decayed: "Adam with his army and intelligence has been captured in a hole, and not Bin Laden hiding in a cave."

"Do you really believe that they haven't caught him?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. But, I sometimes wonder whether Osama is so powerful he can build a city below ground without America knowing. I stayed in that city and I could see blue-eyed men move around it."

"Blue eyes don't necessarily belong to Americans."

"And not necessarily to Taliban or Mujahedeen from Yemen."

"Let's leave that to history to sort out."

"I'm not interested in the verdict of history but in that the verdict of a court."

"History may outrace the court."

"the only thing in which I find comfort is that I'm a prisoner in a land that hates America."

Norman smiled when he realized that he had gone too far in his discussion with me, winked at me while securing my straps, threw some sweets on the bed, then looked the door and left. I looked at the sweets then put them in my bag, who knows I may need them some day. Months passed while my situation was no different from that of people stranded in the Tora Bora caves. Whenever I remembered Habibullah, I would think "May God pardon the man who wanted to win everybody, but who became a traitor when he decided to extend his hand to the Americans." In the summer of 2005,

the news of the release of some detainees penetrated the walls of the cells as if it was an eclipse. All prisoners were jubilant that a happy end was at hand. It was as if the walls of Guantanamo had collapsed. But whenever we heard of detainees being sent back to their countries, the insane guards would become raving mad, for some of them had got used to living a sadist's life. I waited my turn, my hope of return to my homeland growing every morning. One of the things I would never forget was what Norman related to me on New Year's Eve. He was on edge because he had not been allowed to spend the day in New Orleans. So, he leaned on the cell's door and addressed me with much pain: " Even the house where I kept souvenirs about my father had been destroyed by the hurricane Katrina. Five months have passed and the lives of the people there have not changed. Maggie has moved to her parents' house, Bush goes on lying to us, between his promises of capturing Bin Laden and restoring New Orleans to its former glory and the world believes him. They turn down my request to spend New Year's Eve with my distraught family. If the waters of Guantanamo Bay was wine, I'd drink all of it in a toast to all my frustrations."

He fell silent for a while, then looked at me and said in a broken voice: " You know something, BuRashid, you're my only solace in what I'm suffering. I'm the real prisoner, as for you Guantanamo will only be a small part of your memory."

Tears welled up in his eyes. He went away and with him my

Guantanamo days trickled away. Sometimes, we would pay rent, some other times the shop owner would be too busy with something else, so we would sleep in the honey of the cells.

I sent letters to Dallal to ask about her and about my daughter Amina who was then six years old and who had learnt to read and write and to say that her father would come back. I had sent eleven letters and received only one letter with a picture of Amina in her school uniform. On the back of the picture she wrote in her handwriting "I miss you, daddy". I spent many days and nights crying, sometimes even hitting my head against the wall thinking "Man, you have chosen jihad, why did you father a child that will live an orphan's life?"

In Dallal's letter, many words had been blacked out, maybe things the Americans did not want me to know, but they kept the greetings, the awaiting for the release, the requests sent to the International Red Cross, that my uncle Ahmad had succumbed to disease, that my relatives in Syria were always asking after me.

In the second half of 2007, we started sensing that the prison administration had become more relaxed in dealing with us. Physical torture had become a less frequent occurrence, giving way to psychological torture to which we had grown accustomed, and to the provocation that no longer shocked us, and it had become possible for Delta and India camps to get in touch. We had been allowed to discard our orange attire, practice sport in small enclosed areas. Some detainees played football and traded jokes.

The news of detainees being released no longer moved us greatly. What went on outside the prison was no longer totally unknown to us, as if our release was close at hand. Maybe the worst memory was that of the disgusting pictures from Abu Ghraib prison that a black soldier had shown us. It turned out that the soldier had left the Army and converted to Islam. This did not find favour with American intelligence which started a harassment campaign against the black soldier. Two months before my transfer to Amman, I told Norman: "Are you pleased with what your soldiers did in Abu Ghraib?"

He replied with a big statement: "Our soldiers rape Iraqi detainees, but America's politicians blemish the honour of their Army. America has become a professional prostitute all in the name of 9/11."

When I met Muhammad Nadheer, I found that he was able to speak and he told me that he had received two letters from his family through the Red Cross. The prison administration. He had received a promise to be released within a few weeks. They had also told him that the reason behind their trial was the hard time the investigators had with high-calibre detainees, like Khaled Sheikh Muhammad and Ramzy Abu Sheiba and the hunger strike that others started. The prison years had not changed a thing in the Yemeni, nor had they affected his sense of humour. I said: "Did you hear that Habibullah had died a violent death?" "And did you hear that it was his son Mahran who killed him then disappeared in Afghanistan's narrow alleys?"

"Mahran, the elder son He did not say much and had a foul character. He had close ties to Taliban and was married to a relative of Mullah Omar."

"He killed him, took all his money then burnt the house down."

"There's no God but our Lord. This is the way traitors end up."

10

I was looking at my face's reflection in the mirror. My features had undergone great change and I no longer enjoyed that prettiness which had aroused the two female soldiers some years back. White had crept onto some areas of my beard. I had left Amman 22 years before, full of the vitality of youth. Will people be able to recognize me if the Americans release me? I don't think so. In this place, people did not believe in weather forecasts, even if we were visited by lawyers we did not know, or representatives of the Red Cross and human rights organizations. At times, we would believe that America took one step ahead then one step backwards. Maybe the solution lay with Barack Hussein Obama. Some detainees said that the man was a godsend, because he had not said as bush had, that whoever was not with us was against us. He is a citizen of the world, not an American as is believed. In the fall of 200_, Matt arrived unexpectedly, for I had thought that he had been transferred to some other place. He was laughing and

shrugging his shoulder, then he removed his cap and toyed with the door, all the while looking at me: "If you were in my shoes, you'd be behaving this way: torture is an occupation too. You have to be perfect or choose to be a fisherman. You'll remember me because I made feel the pain that mothers suffered by mothers that had lost children in the destroyed twin towers. You'll remember me because I did not kill you though I could have, and people would have read an item of news about the suicide of a detainee and that would be the end of it. But, you'll remember most because I've come to tell you that you won't be paying rent as from tomorrow. You'll be leaving for home. As for me, I'll be collecting the rest of the rent."

I was so happy I almost hugged Matt, the cruel soldier, but I pulled myself together and burst out laughing. I cried because I was going to forget everything, carry Amina high above my head and tell Dallal "Please, forgive me". I cried and cried, long and hard. I'm crying today in front of you, thirty days after, because I believed that forgetting can free a man from the ache of memories, this is why I'm here relating to you the biography of Abu Rashid the Afghan. No, the story is not over, yet. True, I feel some burning in my throat, because Norman, the kind soldier had committed suicide on the day of my release, so I had not been able to say farewell. It's as if he chose the day of his death. If only all those in Guantanamo came to express their condolences to me on this bereavement. Norman told me the last time we had met, when I was drying my

white clothes:" Sometimes I wonder why you wear white shrouds in your death. Is death black?"

"Death is colorless."

"In this case, I'd ask Maggie to buy me an orange shroud, so that people don't forget Guantanamo."

I hope his wish reached Maggie. I said the prayer of the absent on his soul.

They said that they had found dead near the beach in his pocket a slip of paper on which he had written" Please forgive me all of you. My life is not with you. Norman who loved you."

It was five o'clock in the morning when Marshall, the officer who had interrogated me, arrived and handed me a leather folder, saying: " All your papers are here. And there's also a photo of you with Norman."

"What?"

"We knew he was interested in you. Don't let your imagination wander too far: he committed suicide. Get ready to be transferred along with two other detainees, an Algerian and a Yemeni."

I bid farewell to Cuba, put Guantanamo behind my back, and prayed to God for the release of the rest of the prisoners. I walked on without looking back. I did not care where I was headed. What mattered most at that moment was to leave the poisoned orange orchards, to get away from that hell. Oh Amman, the beautiful rock city, I am coming to you like Abu Dhur from his exile in the Rabdha Desert. I am coming to you with naught but the debris of a man whose half life has been

consumed by the mountains of black dust, with the rest of whose life having been gnawed by the cells of Guantanamo. But he is like the Phoenix; he is born again from dust.

When my head poked out of the plane, I said: "Thanks be to our Lord, here I am Amman." I looked down and saw that they were all there: Muflih the smart one, Mansoor, the moustachioed, Mazen, the one who never stopped smoking, Abdulshakoor, the husky, and Basim, dubbed Ghawar, so much was his resemblance to the actor Drid Laham. No one was absent. Just like I had left them. They will never change. Who said that intelligence services ever change. I trudged down the escalator, not out of fatigue or fear, but because I felt safe. All of them kissed me, and Abdulshakoor said: "Thanks God for your safe return."

"Where are my wife and my relatives?"

"You'll meet them shortly, but you'll be staying with us a day or two."

"When I saw u you, I understood everything. What can a corpse do when it's between the mortician's hands?"

They led me to an office that was not very far from the terminal. Mansoor said: "Fortunately, you arrived at five in the morning, because if newsmen knew of your coming, people would have thought that this was the visit of a famous politician or an artist of the calibre of Michael Jackson."

"How about my family?"

"We didn't wish to inform them before your arrival so that that doesn't become public knowledge. They're waiting for you."

Basim noticed that I did not carry any luggage, so I told him while

looking at my leather pouch: "This is all I have. A pile of papers, most of which issued by your service. I hoped to carry a toy for my daughter, but in Guantanamo they only had harsh toys for adults.

Abdushakoor opened the door and asked me to come in. I went in and saw Dallal and her brother Hatim, her uncle Abdaljaleel and his wife Lamiss, and Hussein, Dallal's cousin and a policeman.

I rushed towards Dallal, the woman who had waited for ages because of my stupid behaviour, and she hugged me.

I kissed her on the head saying: "Please, forgive me."

"Amina had waited for you until midnight then fell asleep.."

"I'll wake her up. Rather, let me look at her."

I moved her head to the right and to the left, telling those around me: "Almighty God, she looks like an angel. Look at her, doesn't she resemble me a lot?"

Mansoor stepped forward and contemplated Amina: "Almighty God, she looks like both of you."

I could not bear seeing her asleep, so I awoke her. As soon as she opened her eyes, she was startled and started crying.

My looks struck awe in her, especially my unkempt beard.

Dallal told her: "This is your father. He'll shave off his beard tomorrow and will become handsome again." *

Amina was not convinced and kept looking at me in fear while I tried to get close to her. Then, I slid my hand into

the pouch and gave her some sweets. That was all I had left from Guantanamo. Amina looked at the sweets and told me in an unforgettable infantile tone: "Sweets? Where's the toy?"

"Tomorrow, I'll buy you twenty toys." She jumped into my lap, started kissing me saying: "Your beard stinks."

"I'll raze it tomorrow and wear a perfume you'll like."

I suddenly realized that I had not greeted Salem, Hussein and the others, so I apologized to them, but they understood the situation. I spent at least half an hour with them, promising to tell them what I had been through during the hellish years from Tora Bora to Guantanamo."

At this moment, Abdulshakoor intervened to reassure the family: "Bu Rashid will stay with us a day or two, in his own interest and for his safety. Don't worry, Dallal will get her toys tomorrow."

11

People of Askram, haven't you gone to bed yet?

I believe my confession here will send you to bed early. I did not imagine that the stories about Tora Bora and Guantanamo were no different from those told by survivors of the Titanic.

I know you're interested in the story of Abu Rashid the Afghan's other life, appearing in front of you today, as he appeared before Marshall and Chris and Williams and others, thirty years ago.

I told Dallal: "If I had scissors, I'd cut off the bitter past part of my life."

She placed a plate of soup in front of me and said: "The issue is not in deleting the past but to face the future."

I cut off all ties with jihad and the fatwa that poured in from all corners of the world talking about the missing obligation. Even those that belonged to Iraqi Resistance and had been wounded in Fallujah paid me visits and relate their battles against the Hummers and the Drummers. They enjoyed those stories in which were mingled things that were hard to believe.

The time when angels fought alongside them was over.

Abdulshakoor brought me a book enshrining the reviews of some religious matters conducted by members of Islamic groups in Egypt, and the fresh interpretation of religious texts away from violence, coercion and declaring all of society apostate.

I understood that Abdulshakoor planned to help me give up Afghan jihad thinking. I said to him: "I thought things over before they did. One single verse was enough to lead me back to the right path. God says: "Are you the one that coerces people to be believers?"

I am no prophet to have followers and disciples. I have a wife and two children and God only knows who I am. I had to start a new life, but my pockets were empty and the mechanics industry had seen many improvements. The likes of me had no place among the new generation of mechanics. Hatem suggested that I sell my history

to a publisher in the Gulf who had found in the former Guantanamo detainees and Al Qaeda fighters subjects that promised substantial profit. I hesitated at first, then I asked Dallal's opinion. She had no objection in my opening Abu Rashid the Afghan's archives after three years of silence, nor in my earning a living away from Peshawar. I spent more than a month with the writer of my memoirs. Whenever I recounted an event, he would ask me where Bin Laden, AlZawahiri or Mr. So-and-so was, whether I had known Al Zarqawi. He would ask for greeter detail, to the point where I grew fed-up . Two months later, the publisher released a book entitled "A Man in Bin Laden's Shadow". The book sold so well the publisher paid me forty thousand Dollars, which was enough to lay the foundations for a new life.

I opened a restaurant in AlWahadat camp to which I gave the name of "Toranamo", blending Guantanamo and Tora Bora, in which I offered Afghan dishes. Before the year was over, I had entered the world of business. My beard became a thing of the past, and everything I earned I put in Dallal's hands telling her jokingly "so you don't have to pay rent". I travelled to Dubai and Damascus where I smelly the scent of youth at the Yarmuk camp and the Hamidia market. I became a partner in a shop that made children's clothes in Aleppo. In Turkey, I got acquainted to a businessman that traded in perfumes who licensed me to sell a hundred brands. I suggested that we start making two types of perfume, Guantanamo and Tora Bora on the

twentieth anniversary of the 9th of September attacks. The sales of the perfumes reached astronomical figures and ever since God had bestowed his beneficence on me and people started calling me Hajj Amine. I was extremely happy when God willed it that Dallal bear me a son I named Azzam just as I had intended. If it had not been for fear of people believing that I had gone mad, I would have given him the name of Norman. Amina would take me aside and ask me to tell her some of my adventures with the Yemeni. I would tell her and she would have fits of laughter, asking me why I wouldn't visit him in Yemen and see how he was faring. I would answer that I was afraid my visits would make people think he was still dealing with Al Qaeda elements. I would say to leave it to destiny. It may happen that I would meet him away from black dust. Though I had forgotten the pebbles that had caused my feet to bleed and torture with lit cigarettes, I had not forgotten Osama Bin Laden's testament. I know you are still waiting for me to continue my story to know the secret of the testament that I hid under a pine tree in Sarkai, near Khost.

The Armies of America and its allies waited for long for the Taliban storm from Panjsher to abate, to no avail, but they saw other Taliban emerge from Siwat Valley. So, those armies packed up and left and people said "if only we had been like Somalia, where they destroyed everything, then came back to rebuild everything."

I waited for the day when I would go back to Khost to unearth Osama's testament. That came true in the year 2021 when I

went to Pakistan during the presidency of Belawal Zerdari, the elder son of Benazir Bhutto, the woman that had been assassinated by the Taliban. I crossed the border into Khost at night with three Afghans I had known in Dubai, where they had been trading in perfumes and incense, but they reeked of opium. They drove me to Sarkai, then disappeared after promising me to exfiltrate me at dawn to Pakistan. The place was as I had left it, the ruins of the bombed fortress unchanged, except for the stray dogs, famished and barking, while I was contemplating the tree with its rotting branches. There was nothing to suggest that any human had passed through this place, even the houses nearby were abandoned. I was alone facing a secret that Osama had entrusted to me twenty years before. I leaned on the pine tree, closed my eyes and allowed my repressed memory to travel back in time putting back together the pieces that scattered in the corners of terror and torture. I envisioned Tora Bora naked without the caves, from which plumes of black dust rose, and I saw the RPGs melting like wax, and Bin Laden a mere picture blowing in the wind. I opened my eyes and started raking the place where I had hidden Bin Laden's testament and the silver ring and the metal rupees. The soil was rock-hard and I used a sharp blade to dig until a rupee appeared, then another, then the ring. I was afraid the piece of paper had been worn by time. Bones decay, how can paper survive? I gingerly removed the dust with my hands so as not to scratch the paper, part of which appeared, which boosted my morale. But as

soon as I tried to pull the slip of paper, a part of it came off, so I continued removing the dust with extreme care. Out of the fear of seeing it torn up, I convinced myself that there was no option but to read it without pulling it out fully. I proceeded in that fashion until I extracted it glued to a pile of soil and started opening it using a sharp tool until faded letters that could still be deciphered appeared. I started reading: "In the name of God, the Most Merciful, and the Compassionate. Peace be upon the noblest of God's humans, Muhammad, the trustworthy and on his honorable and blessed Companions.

This is the last will and testament of God's slave, Osama Bin Laden, One of the mujahedeen in God's path, to his brothers stationed in the land of Islam.

I urge you to fear God.

Tora Bora shall not be the graveyard for God's Mujahedeen as the Americans believe and as their brag.

Tora Bora is the onset of the war that never ends with the crusading enemies of our nation.

I urge you to do what might cause injury to your hearts. I advise you to have more patience and to be even more steadfast in jihad.

Be advised that I may die and have no known grave. Be advised that they will spend years lying to people by producing my lookalikes and say that Osama has stated this and that, and the naïve will believe them, so try not to be one of the naïve. Be advised that if I disappear, that will be a form of jihad which is beyond the ability of the

swaggering Americans and their allies. Be advised that I see in each one of you a new Osama.

They will tell you that Osama was an American agent that he was made by their intelligence services. Don't believe them and don't trust them if they publish pictures of me attending their meetings. Refrain from saying that the man has betrayed us. Don't entrust your lives to them as they will sell you in the slave market at cheap prices. My recommendation to you is that you should execute what your brothers failed to do in the New York attack. Ours will be a protracted war with them. Our intention is to seek God's pleasure.

Twenty years on, Abu Rashid appears to read the testament of the man who has been missing and has not been spotted by the lenses of the invisible cameras, the man with no known grave. You know the man has disappeared, and that he is either in a tomb or enjoying life in a castle. The media have continually published pictures of him in different locations. Al Qaeda is like a company that has gone bankrupt and whose workers have been laid off.

I buried the testament. What use is wriggling the knife of regret in the wound of the past? I bid farewell to Afghanistan, then pulled the picture of my kids, Dallah and Azzam from my pocket, kissed it, then walked on without waiting for dawn and the opium traders to return me to Pakistan. I know the way.

I have something else to tell you. When I thought of visiting Algeria to see the sights of the Ahaggar, my prime motive

was to see what had become of Ikrima, I mean Rasheed the Algerian, had fared. The last time I met him was in 1994, when he decided to join the armed groups, and I had not heard from him ever since. I believed he had been killed or jailed, or that he had joined some other jihad in Chechnya, Somalia or any other place. As soon as I arrived in Algiers airport, I took Azzam by surprise by telling him that I wanted to go to Bousaada to look up Ikrima. Despite his initial hesitation, he decided to go along with me. Two and half hours later, we reached the city which Azzam used to describe for me insisting that the French painter Nasruddine Dinet had resided in it for a considerable period of time. His description was genuine. The question remained of how to find Ikrima amidst thousands of faces. The taxi driver suggested that we should try Hamza mosque, where we might find some of his acquaintances. The idea sounded great, so we entered the Ottoman-style mosque, said the asr prayer then approached the imam who seemed young, probably Assam's age, well-spoken, happy at meeting us. He offered us coffee and dry dates in his loge. As soon as I mentioned the name of Rasheed the Algerian who had fought in Afghanistan, his features changed, and I felt that he was embarrassed and that he had not expected the question. He pulled himself together, smiled then said: "He's still alive. He owns a shop where he sells perfume and cosmetics which is run by his son Khalid. He only meets people rarely, so I'll send someone with you to lead you to his home, which is not very far."

I said to the imam: "you seemed embarrassed when I said his name."

"This is a long story. This is not the time for me to tell it. May God forgive past deeds."

"Thanks."

One of the prayers led us to a shop bearing the sign "Paradise for Perfumes and Incense". We went in and saw a young elegant man, with shaved-off hair. He made out from our appearance that we were foreigners, so he briskly came towards us to greet us and made us sit near the shop's entrance. Without even asking who we were, and that was their custom, he took our leave to fetch tea and coffee and swiftly returned, for the shop was attached to the house. A few minutes later, a grey-haired man with a white cap on his head appeared through the back door. Across his right cheek ran a large scar. That was him, Rasheed the Algerian, with his son standing behind him. Ikrima stopped near the counter and stared hard at us, holding his chin with his right hand, then said: "I know this face."

"If you didn't, you wouldn't be Ikrima."

"Don't tell me..."

"Who you are, old man."

"You're Abu Rashid. This is impossible! Only mountains don't meet."

Then he hugged me and started crying. I said: "This son, Azzam."

"My Goodness, he's a man."

"Back then, we had no kids. This is my son Amin, I named

him after you.”

“How are you?”

“Not better than Jalalabad.”

“Don’t say that. Bousaada is a nice city and Hamza mosque alone makes it even more beautiful.”

“Wow, you’ve become an expert on the mosques of Bousaada, then. And you’re praying behind...”

“Behind who?”

“I’ve had an adventure with this imam that I’ll tell about once we’re inside the house.”

In the large house reserved for guest, Ikrima had hung pictures of himself with Afghanistan veterans, most of whom are missing or jailed in Guantanamo. I asked him about what happened to him after his return to Algeria, so he replied: “I don’t want Azzam to hear what I’m going to tell you, because Amin my son has not heard this from me.”

I beckoned to Azzam and Amin to leave the room, and so they did. I stayed alone with Rasheed, recalling the days that were not part of the history of our children, and we did not want them to be.

Ikrima proceeded: “before I tell you about the past, I want you to know that the imam at Hamza mosque is my wife’s nephew. His father was a soldier and was assassinated in an ambush by the Islamic groups in Laghouat where he worked. My wife’s nephew never accepted his aunt’s marrying a terrorist. He was hen thirteen. Our relationship has never changed up to this day, and I have never prayed

behind him, as I prefer to stay home. As for the past, even if I keep speaking until the next century, I won't finish. It was a tough journey. May God pardon us. I chose the wrong path, and I don't know whether regret alone is enough to atone for our sins. If I didn't consider you as a beloved brother, I wouldn't open the box of memories at all. But, in a nutshell, after my arrival in Peshawar, I met six Algerians preparing to return home. Saeed the Afghan, who was from Tebessa, told us that the group in Algeria was waiting for us at Debdab, a border city in eastern Algeria, from which we would be driven to the Mitidja region, where most of the group's activities took place. Initially, I joined the Zbarbar, a range of mountains that surrounds Algiers from the east, along which were spread the teams of the Armed Islamic Groups. Not a day went by without us raiding army barracks and police stations and kill as many of them as possible and seize weapons to beef up our firepower. We usually set up fake roadblocks and we would kill whoever we suspected of being an agent of the government. That was a general rule in the Group's activities. We did that every single day, without tiring. On the contrary, some of us had grown addicted to killing, to the point where murdering the closest persons to them, their father or their mother, became an offering for entering Paradise. The fatwa we received from the jihad scholars prompted us to do anything, even children were slaughtered. I don't want you to feel disgusted Burashid, what we did was the implementation of a divine covenant, and killing children

meant preventing them from living in the environment of the infidels, that's what the fatwa people said. We were no longer interested in what the politicians were doing, for they were all infidels, and toppling the regime was no longer our goal, as our problem was the infidel society. Did you know Burashid that what was happening in Afghanistan was a mere drop in the ocean compared to what the terrorists were doing in Algeria?

Curiosity drove me to interrupt Ikrima: "The terrorists? Your language has changed." Ikrima laughed, then said in a tone laden with regret: "They gave us names such as Ikrima, Abu Al Baraa, Talha, Zubeir, Abu Dahdah. We carried the names of dozens of the Prophets' Companions and Followers, we became emirs, while all we were doing was a distortion of the forefathers' legacy. What we did had absolutely nothing to do with Islam. Yes, we were terrorists, we lived to kill. Even when Antar Zouabri chose me to be the emir of the Ain Defla area, I was informed about the existence of a splinter group that called itself "Those angry with God" went on the rampage, to get their revenge on God, because he failed to support them with armies of Angels in their war against the infidel ruler. They had cut off the forefinger to deny testimony and faith in God, shaved off their eyebrows, and would at night howl like wolves before attacking families in far-off places and torture them, cast babies into ovens. The Nazis must have been more merciful. True, we used to say there may be things in our religion that justified that, then we heard about the amnesty program calling us to give up

armed activities so grew even more insane; we no longer chose who to kill and apply God's Law on him, we turned to mass murder in order to have the people rise against the infidel ruler. We killed foreigners and priests, and every time our violence grew more terrible, we felt we were getting further from our goal. The year in which we joined the armed groups saw the breakaway of hundreds of prisoners from the Lambese prison, one of the most famous prisons. Some of those joined us, but we also felt stronger resistance from the veterans of the Algerian liberation war and armed civilians called the Patriots. The Islamic Salvation Army was not our ally, which made it more difficult for us to move to hit as many high-value targets as possible. The caves in which we sheltered were not immune from strikes by the Algerian army. Did you know that we have caves in Zbarbar like the ones in Tora Bora? Anyway, the first years were like a hell whose fuel was us, the army, the people, the patriots, the trees and the stones. No news reached us about proposals by politicians to lay down arms. We were not interested in Abbassi's affairs, for we were managed by fatwa while they managed their political matters. I moved along the western border, to the mountains of Sid Ali Bounab, and stayed a full month in the region of Al Arbaa and Ouled Allel. The seven priests of Tibhirine were slaughtered in order to turn the Christians against the Algerian regime. When the mass murders of Rais and Bentalha took place, I felt we were deviating from jihad towards crime and, without revealing that, I asked to be transferred to the Boutaleb region, of

which I was the emir for two years, thinking of visiting my family, but later refraining from it, because the issuance of the amnesty decree known as "Civilian Concord" made many of us think of surrendering. But, I'm sorry to tell you Bu Rashid that I used to feel too proud to give up arms, me the Afghan veteran, and you know the status of the Afghans in the armed Islamic groups. We were full-fledged emirs, getting whatever we asked for in terms of money and women. God, please forgive me my sins. I don't know how news reached my good mother Laarem that I had been moving around for five years, killing, raping and insulting the infidel ruler, and eliminating anyone suspected of disloyalty to the group. When I read my mother's letter that Yazid Al Samie had brought me, I cried, because she warned me that she would die very angry with me, and that I would not enter Paradise as they had promised you. She said I was a criminal because you killed me when you murdered Nasser the gendarme, the son of your aunt Fatiha in the month of Ramadan, at the time of breaking the fast; that she would die with her heart filled with anger at me till Doomsday. She died before I could see her and ask her to forgive me. I visited her grave the next day, knelt down and asked her to pardon me because at that moment I felt that I had incurred God's wrath and that there I had no option but to repent. Mother, if you can hear me, you should know that your son who lived a lifetime of blood, was no more than a terrorist with no goal besides killing people, because Paradise had been painted for him in blood. Please, forgive me, for I am

today addressing the dust that covers you, while you used to cover me with your love and never told me “no”. You hoped to see me become a doctor and were happy when I gave you half of my wages for the first month on my new job. You hoped to see me marry before my elder brother Abdulhamid, and boasted about me in front of women, telling them that it would be a lucky woman who married Rashid. If only I could hear your voice coming from under the round to tell me “I forgive you, my son.” I headed for the barracks of the Gendarmerie nearby and turned myself in at one o’clock in the morning. I made a full confession. I spent three years in the jail of Berrouaghia before benefiting from the provisions of the amnesty program called “the Charter of Peace and Reconciliation” and returning to my first home. I was only a shadow of myself. I started praying through the night beseeching God to grant me his pardon for I had been seeking revenge against Him unwittingly, I had murdered human beings deluding myself that I was doing jihad. I had been a terrorist whose grave was outdoors. I suffered this scar on my cheek when my former mates in the group did not accept my surrender and came to eliminate me, but they missed me and the bullet only grazed my cheek. This was God’s will; He wanted me to live a second life, while I never gave anyone a second chance. I haven’t left Boussaada ever since. A few years ago, after a long time of quiet and leading a hermit’s life in the shrine of El Hamel, I opened a shop to sell traditional perfumes to earn a living. I now have three children. This was part of my memory, Bu Rashid.

I told Rasheed the Algerian some of I had been through, which made him cry. He then told me: "I wish I hadn't met Brother Messaoud and you hadn't met Sheikh Azzam. We should have realized just one simple thing: we weren't the guardians of other people, nor tools in the hands of the princes of death."

I spent two days in Ikrima's home, and when I decided to leave for Tamanrasset, Azzam asked me what I thought of sealing his engagement to my friend's daughter. I replied that we would think it over after our trip to the Ahaggar. I did not expect to be paying rent from my wounded memory.

How fascinating the desert is! And how tiresome what I recounted has been!

That was my confession.

Cursed be who pays rent in return for an illusion.

The audience gave Abu Rashid the Afghan a standing ovation, while he stood grinning; greeting the audience with both hands like a political leader. Hausmann, on the other hand, approached him saying: "I hate terrorists, but allow me to give you this rose and tell you that you won't be paying any rent as from today, except for the Askram Palace where you'll be offered a fifty per cent discount."

Azzedine MIHOUBI

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ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

1979: Arts School, Faculty of Arabic Language and Literature. University of Batna.

1980-1984: National Administration Academy. Major: General Administration.

2006-2007: Postgraduate Degree in Strategy. Algiers University

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

1986-1990: Chief of El Chaab daily newspaper Regional Bureau in Setif, Algeria.

1990-1992: Editor-in-Chief, El Chaab.

1992-1996: Manger of a private media company (Assala for media and arts production)

1996-1997: Director of News Algerian Television.

1997-2002: Member of Algerian parliament.

2006-2008: Chief Executive Officer of Algerian National Radio.

2008-up to date: Minister of Communication in the Algerian Cabinet.

OTHER POSITIONS

March 1998: Elected Chairman of the Union of Algerian Writers. Reelected for a second term (2001-2005).

2002-2007: Member of the Council of Sages of Al Babtain Foundation (Koweit).

1998 to date: Deputy Secretary-general of the General Union of Arab Writers

12/2003- to date: Chairman of the General union of Arab Writers

PUBLICATIONS

1985: "In the Beginning was Aures" (poems)

1997: The Quatrains (poems)

1997: The Hangman and the Sun (Operetta)

1997: Curse and Redemption (poems)

1997: The Palm-tree and the Oar (poems)

1997: Posters (poems)

1997: Eternal Ladies (Play)

1997: Sitifis (Operetta)

1997: Haizia (Operetta)

1998: "A Candle fro My Country" (translated into English)

2000: "Caligula Paints Guernica at Rais" (Poems, translated into French and English)

2002: "Globalization of Love, Globalization of Fire" (2 editions)

2003: "The Hearses" (A novel)

2003: Offerings fro the Birth of Dawn" (Poems)

2006: "But the Earth revolves" (articles)

2007: "Tassilia" (Poems)

2007: The Soul's Exiles" (Poems)

2007: "Tam City's Confessions" (a two-part novel)

2007: "No coercion in Freedom" (Articles)

2008: "Angels` journeys" (Poems)

2009: Askram's Confessions" (A novel)

ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS

1984: "Folk songs of the Homeland". Operetta produced by Algerian Television.

- 1993: "The Martyr Said". Operetta produced by The Culture and Information Centre
- 1994: "The Algerian Odyssey". Co-production. The Culture and Information Centre
- 1995: "Haizia". Operetta produced by The Culture and Information Centre
- 1995: "The Sitifis Odyssey". Produced by the House of Culture in Setif.
- 1995: "Sarajevo". Operetta produced by Dar Assala, Damascus, Syria.
- 1995: "Loyal". A musical to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the 8 May 1945 massacres.
- 1996: "The hangman and the Sun". Operetta about Larbi Ben Mhidi produced by the Regional Theatre in Annaba.
- 1996: "8 May 1945". A play produced by the House of Culture of Setif.
- 1996: "Lyric of the Sad Rice"
- 1997: "Zabana". A play in honor of the martyr Ahmed Zabana. The regional Theatre in Oran.
- 1997: "The March". Operetta produced by the Theatre of Setif.
- 1998: "The Grapevine". A play produced by the Regional Theatre of Batna.
- 1998: "Horizons". A musical produced for the seventh Congress of Algerian Moslem Scouts.
- 1999: "Massinissa". A Play produced by the regional theatre of Constantine.
- 1999: "Curse and Redemption". Operetta produced by the Al Maraya Company in Oued Souf.
- 1999: "AL Fawara". A Play produced by the AL Qalaa Company in Setif.
- 1999: "The African Lyric". Produced by the Arts and Culture Company.

2003: "Smart Hama". Play produced by Al Madina Company, Oran.

2003: "The Henna Willow". Produced by the Arts and Culture Company.

2003: "Virgin of the Mountains". A historical serial about Lalla Fatma Nsoumer's life and times. Coproduced by Algerian Television and Mediterranean Artistic Production, Syria.

2005: "Amjad". A Song about the Arab League Summit in Algiers.

2005: "Tsunami Aissa". A Play produced by the regional theatre of Constantine.

2007: "Hamma the Cobbler". Produced by the Al Madina Company in Oran.

AWARDS

1982: The first national prize for poetry (for the poem "Homeland")

1986: The first national "8th May 1945" award for poetry.

1987: The first national prize for the operetta "the Martyr Said".

1987: The first national "5th July 1962' award.

1987: Presidential commendation.

1999: Medal of the city Bisgilia (Italy) , the Mediterranean festival.

2000: The poetry contest in Sayyada, Tunisia.

2000: Engraving on marble on the Greenwich Meridian (England) of the poem "My Country", along with poems from 21 other countries .

MEMBERSHIP OF PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND HONORARY POSITIONS

- Member of the National Council on Human Rights (representing the Senate.)
- Member of the Committee on Judiciary Reform
- Member of the Council of Sages of the Babtain Foundation for poetic creativity
- Member of the Council of Sages of the Salah Kamel Awards for Arab Creativity in Sports
- Member of the Scientific Council of Ferhat Abbas University, Setif.
- Founding member of the Algerian Association of Spots journalists
- Founding member in the Moufdi Zakaria Poetry Foundation
- Regional representative of the Algerian Thought and Literature League
- Deputy chairman of the Golden Fennec Cinema Awards
- Expert on the Arab Sports Tribunal

THE AUTHOR`S NAME HAS BEEN CITED IN :

- Al Babtain dictionary of contemporary Arab poets
- Anthology of Arabic poetry by Abdelkader Djabali (in French)
- Algerian Memory, by Achour Chorfi (In French)
- Algerian Anthology, by Achour CHorfi (In French)
- Encyclopedia of Arabic Poetry, Cairo

TRIBUTES TO AUTHOR

- 05/1997: Bestowal of Honors by Ibdaa League.
- 1998: Cultural Man of the Year (The Literary Days of El Eulma)
- 02/1998: Tribute by Al Ikhtilaf Book League.

- 0/1998: Tribute by the district of Annaba.
- 04/1998: Tribute by Union of Algerian Writers and National Library
- 2000: tribute by the district of Batna.
- 06/2001: Tribute by the district of Constantine.
- 2004: Voted Cultural Man of the Year in Al Massaa poll.
- 2003 and 2004: Voted one the best sixty Algerian personalities (Algeria News poll.)
- 2004: Chosen as one the world's 500 most noteworthy people in "Who's Who".
- 2005: Tribute by the city of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia.
- 2006: Gold medal awarded by the American Biographical Institute.
- Chairman of several literary boards of examination, member of some.

MISCELLANEOUS

- Some of the author's poems have been translated into French, English, Italian, Norwegian, and German.
- Author's works have been published in national and foreign newspapers and magazines.
- Author's works are course and research material in Syrian universities.
- Author's works have served as research topics in Algerian universities.



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Tora Bora

Confession

Omar ZIANI, a graduate of Edinburgh (Scotland) and Essex (England) has taught linguistics, phonetics and the English language extensively at the universities of Sétif, Batna and Bejaia in Algeria. He has also been a language instructor at King Saud University (Riyadh) and King Faisal University (Dammam) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He is presently working as senior technical translator at Groupement Berkine, a Sonatrach-Anadarko joint venture headquartered in Hassi Messaoud.



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