

We had in prison a fundamentalist inmate. He worked as an informer to the guards. He brought to prison 15 friends from his village just for the mere fact that they used to pray with him in the village mosque. They were all accused of being Muslim Brothers. Anyway, that inmate had a very mean character, bad intentions and hated everybody ... in particular Lebanese ... and me out of all people! I know that in prisons, it is common practice that inmates don't like each other. However, that guy was terrible. He once complained to the sergeant and accused me of killing a bird because it is Syrian! The truth was that a bird entered once to my cell, I use to caress it but after a while, the bird died because it was sick. So the sergeant called me and started immediately beating me without inquiring whether that inmate was telling the truth or not. He did not stop beating me calling me names like "killer of Syrians" until I passed away. The next day, my whole body was aching and while we were having our breathing exercise, the sergeant came and called "hey bird!" I did not reply. He called again: "hey you bird guy, son of a bitch, come over!" I came and said: "Yes, Sir." He ordered me to sit on the floor. One word about the breathing exercise. We usually spray the floor with some water to make it cooler but it made it also muddier, then we sit on the muddy floor with arms crossed behind our back, heads down, and leaning on each other, eyes closed too. So the sergeant came close, ordered me to stretch out my hand and said: "You bastard, open your hand and take this piece of meat, don't give it to anyone! Eat it fast before someone takes it away from you!" The piece of meat was nothing but a dead bird, rotten with a bad smell that remained stuck in my nose until now. He ordered me to eat it, while the whip was lashing on my head making me see light. "May I pluck it?" I asked. "Want to pluck it you bastard?" He kicked me in the rib and continued: "let me get you a mezze and arak and grill it for you... eat it you bastard." He kept kicking my rib, I was jumping up and down. I put the bird in my mouth and chewed it several times. I heard its tiny bones breaking between my teeth, I swallowed it but suddenly a wing bone got stuck in my throat. I couldn't breathe. I was choking. However, since my sergeant was an expert in torture matters, he kicked me strongly on the back which made me swallow the rest of the bird. I lied down on the floor, next to me was a little hole with mud water, he ordered me to drink. I did and enjoyed it. The mud water felt as pure as mineral fresh water. He continued: "As of now, you are called Cockroach. Got it? When I call the name Cockroach, it means you, and you should come immediately." I kept replying: "yes, Sir." Afterwards, I came in my cell, tried to throw up but in vain. Funnily, I did not fall sick. I think there was a heavenly power that saved me that day. God was my savior.

Days passed and I was feeling very bad. I was very scared of that mean sergeant wondering whether he forgot about me. However, he was known not to forget anyone. You might be wondering how we get to know sergeants though we do not see their faces. We actually recognize them from their voices. We name them according to the words they use. For example, this sergeant was called bastard since he always calls us bastards. However, as of that day, I called him cockroach. He came one day, and called me during our breathing exercise: "hey cockroach, come over you bastard." I was sitting like usual, on the wet floor, he ordered me: "open your hand!" I did. He added: "here is a butterfly, eat it fast!" The butterfly was nothing but a dead cockroach. I was shivering and he kept ordering me: "Eat it fast, this will teach you how to kill Syrian birds. Fuck you and Lebanon! You dirty bastard!" Out of fear of being tortured, I ate it. I prayed God to give me the strength to be able to swallow it. I managed with a kick, of course. Then he said: "Open your hand again!" He gave me two others. They were dead and crispy after

being exposed to the sun for a long time. Temperatures can reach 45 degrees in Syria. They were very crispy, wow! I ate them. My friend heard the sound and started vomiting. I am sure that a heavenly power enabled me to resist and eat them. I started sweating but had no other way out. I was trembling and felt like vomiting myself. The dirty sergeant then ordered us all to go to sleep. As soon as I entered my cell, my friends started being nice to me, offering me an apple, which is a whole week ration, or even half a cup of tea, the morning ration, or a little spoon of marmalade...etc. They were trying to help me change my mouth taste. Deep inside, I was thanking God for everything. However, this sergeant did not leave me in peace. The same incident occurred again and again and I ended up by eating 16 dead cockroaches, and one "alive". That was the most disgusting and harmful thing that ever happened to me. As soon as I chewed it and swallowed it, its moustache got stuck in my throat. It was thick and it hurt my throat... I vomited right away. The sergeant ordered me to go to bed that night. I felt sick, tired and without energy. I had fever that night and I remained so for quite some time. The medical kept giving me medicine until he became out of stock. He even gave me the other inmates' medicines. My sickness lasted for more than three months. I lost a lot of weight and became very frail. I imagined that my ribs were like the piano and one could play them. Meanwhile, that mean sergeant kept inquiring about my health status. One day, he came and called me: "hey cockroach!" At that very moment, I was not scared at all since I was praying ... praying to die. I even asked God to forgive me for such a prayer. As I came close, he put his hand gently on my forehead then on my head. I think this was the first time he behaved like a human being, though there was nothing human about him. He ordered the guard: "this cockroach is forgiven, he is exempt of night shifts". Prisoners have to rotate and work as guards for two hours every night. It was one of the most difficult tasks, beside the breathing exercise. The sergeant continued: "You give him two rations of food, Ok? I want him to get more food, understood?" The guard replied: "Yes, Sir!" He was probably trying to make it up. He was probably feeling guilty for what he did. Days passed and I started feeling better and stronger. Thanks to God and his might, I felt better and I started recovering.