

## Part I

### The Arrest

I heard a knock at the door.

I was sitting at the small desk in my bedroom, absorbed in writing a new novel. The clock hand pointed to three. It was the afternoon of Sunday, 6 September 1981.

I ignored the knock. Perhaps it was the concierge, or possibly the milkman, or the man who does our ironing. Or it could be anyone else, but if no one were to answer the door, the steps would surely recede.

When I sit down to write, it is the small household tasks, or the sound of the doorbell or telephone, which torture me. I can be rid of the telephone by pulling the cord from the wall, but the door . . . am I to rip the door from the wall?

This novel is tormenting me. I've freed myself completely to write it, letting everything else go for its sake. It's intractable, like unattainable love. It wants me, my entire being, mind and body, and if it can't have that it will not give itself to me at all. It wants all or nothing – it's exactly like me. To the extent that I give to it, it gives to me. It wants no competition for my heart and mind – not that of a husband, nor a son or daughter, nor preoccupation with work of any sort, not even on behalf of the women's cause.

I began working on this novel in the autumn of 1978. At that time, I was in Africa working as a consultant to the United Nations. My home base was Addis Ababa, but my work obliged me to travel frequently from one African nation to another. For the first time in my life, I saw the sources of the Nile in Ethiopia and Uganda. As a child, I had imagined what Lake Victoria must be like; now, its smell and the colour of its water reminded me of Egypt, my homeland, which I carry inside me wherever I go. The streams

emerging over the boulders of Ethiopia supply the water for small rivers the colour of the Nile, the tone of my skin. The features of Addis Ababa's inhabitants resemble those of my ancestors, my father and my aunts in the village of Kafr Tahla.

The second knock at the door.

I was still seated, ignoring the knocking, just as I was paying no attention to the car horns from the street below. I've travelled all over the world, but I have never seen the likes of Egyptians for exerting the same pressure with their hands on the car horns as they do with their feet on the accelerator. My flat is on the fifth floor, but the car horns still sound like screams, like a continuous wailing.

My flat in Addis Ababa, which overlooked foothills of green, was a quiet place, one of utter tranquillity, unbroken by voices or car horns. But still the novel spurned and resisted me. I could write scientific studies, draft agreements, write books on women's issues – everything except the novel, this particular novel. It is a strange business: the more I distance myself from Egypt, the further the novel travels from me. No sooner do I land at Cairo Airport, and breathe in the odours of dust and people's sweat, the car horns and pale, fly-laden children's faces, the queues of women in their black *gallabiyyas*,<sup>1</sup> and the broken, exhausted eyes of the men, than the novel comes ever nearer.

I was searching for a writer who has written a great work of literature while absent from the homeland. My mind would tell me it was possible, and I would travel.

I did not travel by choice: I was looking for another homeland. Since the winter of 1972, I had been feeling estranged in my own country. Why? Because I had written a book containing new ideas and because in one of the lectures I gave in the College of Medicine at Ain Shams University in Cairo, I had stood up and given my views on women, society, medicine, literature and politics – for I don't isolate any one of these topics from the others.

I have written only what my mind dictates to me, and I have

<sup>1</sup>*gallabiyya*: the long robe, usually of cotton, worn traditionally in slightly varying styles by both women and men in Egypt, particularly in the rural areas. The *gallabiyyas* referred to here are heavy outer robes which women wear traditionally outside the home, although now European-style clothing has replaced the traditional garb to a large extent, particularly in the cities.

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expressed only my own opinions in front of the groups of men and women students. In this instance, the lecture hall was filled with hundreds, or thousands, of them, and all were happy. The lecture ended with a profound and scientifically based discussion, and I returned home.

What followed that lecture, however, astounded me.

The Internal Security police summoned me and interrogated me. The Minister of Health had become angry. The Physicians' Syndicate had become angry. The publishing houses and the mass media were angry with me.

My name joined the government's blacklist.

When the authorities get angry with a writer, they can prevent that writer from publishing and can stifle the writer's voice so that it won't reach anyone. A writer cannot mount to the pinnacles of literature, and stay there, unless the authorities approve.

Everything in our country is in the hands of the state and under its direct or indirect control, by laws known or concealed, by tradition or by a long-established, deeply-rooted fear of the ruling authority. One day, I asked a leading literary man working at a major daily Cairene newspaper, *Al Ahrām*, 'Why do you tell me one thing and write something else?' He replied, 'If they fire me at *Al Ahrām* will you support my children and pay for their schooling?' Fearing servility, people became servile.

Most people here, even writers and philosophers, are civil servants.

It has been many years since I have read a great literary work, or heard of a single philosopher. I worked in the United Nations in order to free myself from the government, but I discovered that the apparatus of the United Nations is like that of the government, and the United Nations' experts fear for their monthly salaries just as all civil employees do. Moreover, the United Nations is led by men from the upper classes and the wealthy First World nations, while women from the Third World slide to the bottom of the heap.

The third knock on the door.

It must be the concierge, I thought, but I will not open the door for him. This concierge respects none of the residents of the building except its owner. He would never consider knocking on the landlord's door three times, or with this violence. People in Egypt

have changed. The only ones who are respected any more are those who own blocks of flats or office buildings, dollars, open door firms,<sup>1</sup> farms producing Israeli chickens and Israeli eggs, or American chewing gum.

I resigned from the United Nations in the autumn of 1980 in order to end my self-exile and return to Egypt. However, my exile not only continued in Egypt – it grew. In government service,<sup>2</sup> my exile grew too. So I wrote my letter of resignation in the winter of 1981, stating that in Egypt everything foreign had taken on greater value than anything Egyptian, even human beings.

The fourth rapping, and the fifth, and the knocking on the door went on and on. This can't possibly be the concierge. However much he scorns tenants, his audacity wouldn't go this far.

I got up and went to the door. Long black shadows behind the glass pane, and the sound of heavy breathing. A shiver ran over my body. I was all alone in the flat. My husband had left before dawn for his village, near Tanta in the Delta to the north of Cairo. My daughter and son had gone out and would not return before night-time.

Thieves, perhaps. But thieves don't knock on doors.

Hesitant and apprehensive, I did not open the door. There's no security or peace of mind these days. I spoke up from behind the door in a voice which I made sure was loud and confident: 'Who's there?'

A strange voice answered: 'The police.'

The earth spun round for a moment, and I imagined that an accident had happened to my son or daughter, or my husband as he was on his way back from the village. But the voice was hostile; it did not give the impression that this was an accident report.

With shaking fingers, I opened the little opaque glass pane set in the door. My eyes widened in alarm: a large number of men armed with rifles and bayonets were out there, sharp eyes piercing the narrow iron bars, as a rough voice said in a tone of command:

<sup>1</sup>open door firms: joint-venture companies set up under the laws instituted by Sadat during his presidency (after the war of 1973) in order to encourage more foreign enterprise in the Egyptian economy.

<sup>2</sup>From 1966 to 1972 I worked as Director General of Public Health Education in the Ministry of Health.

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'Open the door!'

A dream, perhaps? Reality mingling with imagination, the world of the conscious with the realm of the unconscious. My mind still did not believe that any of this was really happening.

'Who are you?'

'Open the door. That's an order!'

My imagination, no doubt about it. From childhood to this day, no one had ever spoken to me in such a tone of voice – neither my father nor my mother, nor anyone who had come into my life or knocked at my door.

Never in his life did my father give me a command. He discussed everything with me, even the existence of God. As for God, well, I engaged him in discussion, and God had to convince me of what he was saying.

Anger was gathering in my throat. 'What order?'

'The police!'

'You're not wearing police uniforms.'

From behind the armed band stepped an officer wearing a police helmet and a white jacket. On each shoulder, a bit of gold or brass glittered, and his white teeth gleamed in a polite smile.

'Please open the door.'

'Why?'

'We have an order to search your house.'

'I want to see this order before I open the door.'

'We don't have it with us at the moment.'

'Absolutely out of the question for me to open the door to you without seeing a warrant from the office of the Chief Prosecutor. That's the law.'

'You must open the door.'

'I won't open it until I see the warrant from the Prosecutor.'

I shut the pane. My whole body was shaking, and my heart was knocking violently beneath my ribs.

But the knocks on the door became more vehement. A nightmare, perhaps. I opened my eyes, trying to wake up, but I discovered that I was already awake and standing on my own two feet in the sitting room. The door was shaking under the violent knocking.

I managed to move my feet, forwards, backwards. I wandered

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back and forth through the three rooms, not knowing what to do.

My home is a small flat suspended on the fifth floor between earth and sky. The street is about 20 metres below – if I were to jump out of the window my head would be smashed on the asphalt. No windows look out upon the neighbours, and the houses on the other side of the street are far away, while the cars below rush along at the speed of lightning. In front of the entrance to the building were a number of police vans, and armed men, rifles raised, rifle mouths gaping, looking as though they were turned in my direction.

What had happened? Had the world turned upside down, or had my small being been transformed into a dangerous gang which was threatening the world?

I raised my eyes skyward. The sky was in its usual place, and nothing under the sun had changed. But this was a world gone missing, half absent, indifferent, comprehending nothing of those severe knocks on my door.

Leaving the window, I noticed the telephone on my desk. I raised the receiver and dialled, but I heard no ring. I dialled another number; the phone rang on and on. A third line was constantly engaged.

The knocking becomes more violent. The walls are shaking, and I am trembling deep inside. A voice in my head tells me 'Open the door for them' while another voice, emerging from a remote place inside me, from a deep spot far back in my memory, in my childhood, insists, 'Don't open it! Don't give in!'

At every stage of my life I have obeyed only that voice coming from my deepest self.

I didn't open the door. I went into my room and put on street clothes: a white dress. I put on my shoes. I placed my identity card in a small handbag, with ten pounds, the keys to the flat and car, and a small white handkerchief. I began pacing around the flat. Here was my daughter's room: her bed and desk and bookcase, and a picture of her inside a small frame. Her tennis racket, a can of tennis balls, and sports shoes. I went into my son's room. There were his bed, desk, bookcase, his photo as a child, school notebooks and coloured pens. I went out into the sitting room – a large bookcase, music cassettes, and a black wooden head from Nairobi. I returned to my room: my bed, my husband's bed, the

rows of books, his picture and mine together on top of the desk. The morning papers lay untouched on the small table. He had gone out early and had not read them. He is in the habit of reading the papers in the morning, whereas I leave them until evening. If I read them in the morning, the lies ruin my mood and I lose the tranquillity necessary for the novel.

My eyes were drawn by a large headline on page one: 'Precautionary detention measures against the instigators of the sectarian rift.' A few days before, I had read of the events of Zawiya al-Humra, a district of Cairo, where there had been a clash between Muslims and Christians in which several people had been killed. Egypt had never known sectarian strife. A hidden hand was playing with national unity. Were they doing in Egypt what they had done in Lebanon?

I heard the sound – like an explosion – of the door breaking. Their metallic boots pounded the floor in quick rhythm like army troops bursting forth in the direction of battle. They attacked the flat like savage locusts, their open mouths panting and their rifles pointed.

I could not see myself, but it seems that my appearance had changed, and so had my face and eyes. A devil must have been taking over my body . . . for I was no longer afraid. In the small sitting room, I stood before them, head held high, prepared to face them to death.

For a moment, they stood fixed, as if pinned to the ground before me. I must have appeared frightening to them, and I spoke in a voice which was also terrifying. 'You broke down the door. This is a crime.'

I don't know what happened then; perhaps my voice confirmed to them that I was a woman and not a devil. Maybe they were surprised that I was still in the flat and had not escaped.

They surrounded me, their breathing still heavy. Long, haggard faces damp with sweat. Open mouths panting. Noses curved like the beaks of predatory birds.

One band of them closed in, enveloping me like an iron chain, while another spread out in the three rooms. They searched through my drawers, and I saw one of them picking up the novel from my desk. I shouted furiously, 'That's a novel! Leave it alone, don't

touch it!’

But the man crammed it into a bag he was carrying. ‘This is another crime!’ I yelled in rage. ‘How dare you snatch my novel from me? You have no business with it.’

Another man began leafing through the private diary lying on my desk, reading bits from it, his hands toying with the small clock which I keep there.

I heard their chief saying: ‘Take her to the car, and we will catch up with you after we’ve finished searching the flat.’

‘Search the flat in my absence?’ I asked him. ‘This is a third crime! If anything is lost, you are responsible.’

We descended the five floors. All the doors to the flats were shut tight. Bewildered eyes peered from behind the small apertures. We stood waiting on the ground floor. The rest of the men and their chief – the officer – were still inside my flat, scattering and going through my papers and private belongings. Anger was collecting in my throat like a lump. One of my neighbours came near, and they pushed him away quickly with their rifles.

The officer appeared, surrounded by his men, still panting and carrying my papers. The armed procession left the building. At a distance, people were stopping in the street, gazing at the awesome parade, their eyes full of fear. A woman carrying a child cried out angrily, ‘Shame on you! Poking rifles in the face of a woman. Go fight Israel instead!’ From a distance, a young girl waved to me, and I waved back.

In a flurry, the officer ordered the armed men to get into the vans. They clambered in, rifles on their shoulders. The officer led me to one of the vehicles and requested that I climb in to sit between him and the driver. I refused, saying ‘I’ll sit by the window.’

The officer looked at me in astonishment. For the first time, I took in his face: curly black hair, black eyes, a thick black moustache. Full lips parted to reveal very white teeth as he said, ‘That’s not permitted. It’s against instructions.’ His voice was harsh, but beneath the roughness I could detect a tone of weakness, and his eyes, despite their impenetrable gleaming blackness, held a note of passivity, a sort of submission to orders, or resignation to fate.

He tried to persuade me to sit between him and the driver, but I



refused to sit between two men in this heavy heat. Two strange bodies oozing the sweat of hatred. It was absolutely necessary to impose my will from the start. I didn't know where they were taking me: to prison, or to my death? Nothing concerned me any longer except the issue of sitting where I wanted. Then let whatever would happen go ahead and happen.

The officer looked at me in the eye, and I fixed my gaze on his. I didn't blink, but he did, and looked at the ground. Perhaps he was thinking, and telling himself: even if my orders lack intelligence, I don't. There is no reason to stir up people in the street. Then, she's a woman and won't jump out of the door while the van is moving.

A look of despair came over his face. He got in ahead of me and seated himself next to the driver. I stepped up after him and sat next to the door.

The air moved as soon as the van was in motion. I took a deep breath. My will had won out. A simple matter, but as the first victory it was important.

People were still standing along the street. Some of the young men raised their hands and waved to me; I waved back. The officer jumped up in agitation on his seat, 'Please don't speak to anyone.'

'I'm not, I'm waving to them.'

The van sped off. My throat is parched, my heart is still throbbing, although heavily. My limbs feel cold, although my fingers still work normally. The leather handbag is still on my shoulder, and the shoes still on my feet. From the car window, an invigorating breeze reaches my face, and before my eyes are Giza Street and the zoo, University Street and the cars, people on the street, everything around me as it was before any of this happened.

But I am no longer the same. Something momentous has happened, and in the wink of an eye I no longer belong to the world outside the van, nor to those people walking in the street, nor to the ones in their cars going home.

Returning home seemed like an impossible feat, or like being transported from one world to another. I opened my eyes, closed them, and imagined that I would reopen them and find myself in my home, the nightmare over.

I opened my eyes and found myself sitting in a van, beside a police officer. Behind me, I could catch a glimpse of the tips of rifles

jutting out from the roof of the van. I was still unable to believe this scene. The officer removed his hat and placed it on his knees, wiped the sweat from his face and head with a large white handkerchief. 'You really tired us out, doctor.'

My eyes widened. Was he addressing me? Was I still this 'doctor'? My memory began to return . . . I'd been sitting at my desk, writing the novel, and I heard the knock on the door, followed by more knocks before the door was smashed open with the noise of an explosion.

'Who tired out whom?' I asked in amazement. 'You broke down the door. That's a crime punishable by law.'

He smiled sarcastically. 'What law? Didn't you hear yesterday's speech?'

'What speech?'

'The speech given by the President of the Republic . . . Sadat.'

'I don't listen to speeches.'

'If you'd heard it, you'd know everything.'

'I'd know what?'

'You'd know why we came to you and where we are taking you.'

'Where are you taking me?'

'Nothing at all! Just a question or two, and you'll return to your home.'

'Interrogation!'

'No, no, simpler than that. Just a couple of questions, then you'll be home.'

If that officer had told me that he was taking me to gaol, perhaps the situation would have been bearable, or at least not quite so awful. At least I would have known where I was going. Knowledge, no matter what it reveals, is less painful than ignorance.

Ignorance is like death, or rather it really is death. If we were familiar with death then there would be neither death nor the fear of it.

Ignorance is fear. Nothing terrifies a person except ignorance. The amazing journey from the door of my home to the prison took several hours, during which I experienced the strangest ignorance in my life. It was exactly like being blind; it was as if they had bound a thick black covering around my eyes to shut out the light and the road so that I would not know where I was going. Each time I asked

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the officer where we were headed he replied with 'Never mind, its nothing at all. Just an hour and you'll go home.'

I followed the van's movements as it turned off the main road and entered a small side street. The light from the elevated street lamps was reflected in the tightly shut windows of the houses. A strange calmness this was. My eyes suddenly caught a light shining in one of the windows, but it remained shut. An old man, limping, entered one of the houses. A young couple strolled, hands intertwined, opposite a massive wall. The van lamps revealed their backs, and they disengaged their hands in haste, disappearing into the shadow of a tree. I imagined that the officer would jump out of the van and arrest them, but we went on, the officer looking ahead, absorbed in following the road, and saying to the driver from time to time, 'Right, left.' 'Left, right.' Finally, he said, 'Okay . . . here . . . stop.'

I didn't know precisely where I was. The officer and I entered a small building and climbed several floors. A short, stout, balding man demanded my personal identity card. He shifted his gaze from my picture on the card to my face and said, 'You wore us out, doctor. Why didn't you open the door for them?'

'They carried no written warrant from the Chief Prosecutor's office.' He looked at me in astonishment and I noticed that one of his eyes was smaller than the other. 'What warrant? Didn't you hear the speech?'

'What speech?'

'Yesterday's speech.'

'Are the Chief Prosecutor's warrants issued through speeches now? Or is it a question of speeches cancelling laws?'

He returned my card to me, and the officer accompanied me down to the ground floor. Behind the building, we descended a small staircase and the officer ushered me into a room on the lower floor, pointing to a small wooden seat in the middle of the room. 'Sit here for a bit, and I'll be back right away.'

I sat down, looking around me: an old man appeared at the door as if a crack in the earth had suddenly produced him. I saw him lift his hand as if in greeting, and I almost raised mine in response, but I realised that his salute was meant for the officer, who had already disappeared.

The man remained in place, standing by the door, coughing violently, his neck veins bulging. He wore a chain blackened with old sweat, and under the faint light of the single bulb his jacket had a yellowish hue. On his shoulder was something resembling a stripe, and his chest bore three brass buttons the colour of rust, one of which dangled precariously by a thread. The man rubbed his eyes on his jacket sleeve and I noticed a yellow rosary in his hand. On his feet were plastic slippers.

He remained standing, facing the door, his back to me. The sound of his breathing came to me monotonously, a continuous sound like that of air under pressure escaping from a hole in the neck of a closed bottle. He moved the rosary between his fingers. Allah . . . Allah . . . Allah.

It was not his voice, though, which had uttered the word 'Allah'; rather, the sound emerged from the movement of his chest, rising and falling with the motion of his hands. His finger joints cracked audibly. I swallowed a bit of dry, acrid spittle.

'Have you got some water here?'

He turned towards me. His face was full of wrinkles. His slightly bent figure scurried over to a shadowy corner and returned with a broken-necked clay water jug. Black marks, the shape of his lips, ringed his mouth, from which a putrid smell emanated. I hesitated after the jug was already in my hand and I had brought it near to my mouth. The man rebuked me vehemently: 'Drink it, that's water from the holy well of Zamzam in Mecca. By God, the finest people drink from my pitcher.' Taking it from my hand, he raised it to his mouth and the water gurgled down his throat. Wiping his lips, he hid the pitcher in the corner, then sat down on a wooden bench and began talking as if to himself. 'Every morning, I fill it from the tank in my house. I don't drink tap water these days. In the water pipes there's . . . I take refuge in God! These days, Our Lord is angry with folks. I used to put the pitcher in the window to cool it, but everyone going by in the street drank from it and there was never anything left for me. The world has changed – I never used to have to worry about the pitcher, or about water. I used to go up to the chief's bathroom on the first floor and do my washing for prayer. But the water started getting cut off even in the chief's bathroom. He's a good man, modest, not like the last one, God's curses on

him. That one got a big promotion and was transferred from here to the Office of the Presidency. Praise be to God.'

Suddenly I heard a sound which I imagined to be a shriek of pain, a voice which rang sharply in my ear, though I could not tell whose it was: a young woman's? a young man's? a child's? My heart began to thud. I believed it to be the voice of my son or daughter. My rational mind told me that the van had carried me far from my house – more than ten kilometres – and I knew it was impossible for me to hear the voice of anyone at home, even if that voice was screaming. But I jumped to my feet, my heartbeat audible to my own ears, and the sweat on my body acting like liquid glue, plastering my dress to my skin. 'Do you think I'll be here long?' I asked the old man.

He stared at me with small red lashless eyes and turned back towards the door. 'Only God knows.'

'Is there no telephone here which I can use to call home? I want to reassure my family, tell them I'm here.'

I didn't know exactly what I meant by the word 'here', but the man gazed at me again, apparently in growing astonishment, before his lips parted in a smile which held a hint of sarcasm. 'A telephone! No telephone here.' He pressed his lips together quickly as if he had given away a secret when he wasn't meant to, and then he spoke again. 'I don't know anything here, I don't know if there is a telephone or not. These are all things which God alone knows. As long as you've come here, well, everything concerning you is known only to God.'

In the gloom, I brought my wrist close to peer at my watch, saying to the man: 'I was alone in the house when they came, and I'm sure my husband and children have returned and are looking for me. Besides, I don't even know why they arrested me, and why they leave me waiting like this with no one telling me where I'm going. They must be hiding something from me for some reason which they don't want me to know about.'

Stretching out his arm, revealing an old wound which he had bound with a bit of dirty gauze, the man said, 'They aren't hiding anything they know from you. They don't know anything, my girl, and they're waiting just like you are. Everyone is waiting, it's up to God, it's the order of Our Lord. What can a person do? Everyone

has a specific mission. In the old days, the orders used to come in written form.'

My mind was wandering, but my ear caught the word 'written' and I'd already heard him say the phrase 'order of Our Lord'. In the voice of one asleep, I enquired, 'The order of Our Lord came written?' No sooner had I heard my voice ringing out in the empty room than I realised I was awake and remembered what had happened. 'I didn't open the door for them. They didn't have a written order, no warrant.'

The man shut his eyes and said, 'The order used to come to them written, but these days time is short and everything happens quickly, and the order comes as an urgent message by telegram. It is distributed to everyone in the form of an urgent telegram. It isn't written out by hand, or typed on a machine, and no one knows who sent the telegram except the Head Director. He doesn't know either, because he hears the voice over the telephone without knowing whose voice it is. He knows the tone of voice, though, and knows it's an order which has come from above, and that he is responsible for its immediate execution. The Director rings his bell right away and gathers together his officers. The officers here are good-hearted, and this officer who came with you is a very good man, from a good family. His father was brought up in the King's palace, and his uncle is now in the Presidential palace in Abdin. They are all solid folks, people with good family backgrounds, and if one of them tells you he doesn't know something, you can be sure he's telling the truth. He's not lying. He doesn't know anything and he is not meant to know, or else the secrets of the state would seep out. This is serious business which the Head Director is personally answerable for. Even I, small man as I am, I have to answer for everything too, whether it's big or small. Here, nothing is a small matter, and I'm meant to know the small things from the big ones, but the Head Director himself doesn't know such things. The world changes in a hurry, and the small thing becomes big without anyone knowing, or having anything said to him. Nobody tells me anything, they only give me these words, exactly: "Open the room and wait for instructions." I tell my wife that I have an emergency call. I might be away for a week, or it might be a month. She used to think that I had another wife, but marriage costs money, and I, praise be

to God, have only enough to get by. I feed her and the six kids, through honest work, and they are all in school, praise the Lord. I thank God and the government that education is free, but shoes . . . One pair costs my monthly wage now. O Lord, I say, seven pairs of shoes. And plastic sandals for me. Those slippers on my feet save the cost of a pair of shoes, and I have my old shoes, I save them for special occasions, or when I go up to meet the Director. But I have a boss with three stripes who isn't afraid of God himself. He told the Director that I wear the sandals during official work hours, and the Director called me in. I went up to him wearing shoes, and I saw him sitting there in shirtsleeves. He doesn't wear a jacket in summertime unless someone from the Minister's office comes over here. God inspired me, and I told him, "Your Honour, I only take off my shoes to do my ablutions and pray, and I pray five times a day, so I wash five times a day. And it's summertime – all that heat and sweat and, begging your pardon, I get wind because of digestive problems. I'm a poor man. I rely on God's mercy. I have seven – the children and their mother – to support." '

His voice was faint and remote as if coming from below the surface of the earth. Sitting on that small wooden stool, I could feel sharp pains in my back. I got up and began walking around the room. I stretched my arms and legs and shook my head and neck.

'Where did the officer go?' I asked him. 'Don't you know what's going to happen next?' Stretching and yawning, the man replied. 'Does any one of us know what will happen to him, let alone to anyone else? These things all happen by God's hand. As long as you've come here, don't wear yourself out thinking about tomorrow. You no longer have any control over your own situation – someone else does. You have to wait, we're all waiting. Who doesn't wait? Like you, I wait so I can go back to my wife and children, and I don't know when I'll be back and neither do they. Patience is a virtue, and whoever is patient achieves his goal. Listen to the words of an old man who has worked in this place for thirty years. There is no point in thinking. Leave your mind behind you and don't think about anything. As long as you've come here you should know that there are people who are doing your thinking for you, and the less you think about your own situation, the more quickly and easily the hours will pass. As long as you believe in God