

The Slot at the Bottom of the Door

The food comes in on a tray, through a slot at the bottom of the door. Once a day, out of the heat, into the heat. I pretend it always comes at the same time; so it's like a clock, something I can set my life by. My life; if you can call it that.

I've got a pen-knife. I don't know how they missed it; I suppose my pockets are deep. It has a picture of the Eiffel Tower on its case. But it's no use. The blade is short and blunt. I use it to make little marks on the underside of the bunk, so I know how long I've been here. It's one hundred and ninety-three days now.

One hundred and ninety-three. That's a one, a nine and a three. There is one door to my cell, with one slot at the bottom, where the food comes in on a tray. And there are four walls. I know because I've counted them. I count them every day, just to make sure they haven't changed. Maybe one day I'll wake up and there'll be only three walls, and I can escape.

What would I do if I escaped? Sometimes I think I'd just run, and run, and run. Run under the sun. I'd never look back until there were miles and miles of hot sand between me and this place. But then I feel my heart, and I feel my belly, and I know I wouldn't get far. Maybe I could hide. I think there are houses nearby, because I can hear the dogs snuffling in the night. I could go and talk to someone, tell them I've been kidnapped, tell them I need rescuing. Then they'd hide me, and I could make my escape in a cart, covered by rugs.

But no. I expect the people here know all about me. I hear their sandals flipping past my window, or the soft slither of sand under their naked feet. And the dogs come and sniff under the window, but they don't tell anyone. They pretend not to know, and they leave me here in the heat of the day, in the cold of the night.

The cold shocks me. When I lived, I had an air-conditioned apartment. They said I kept it too cold, but they didn't know what cold was. This cold isn't the cold of ice, the wet cold of snow, of a highland glen in winter: no, it's dry, dishonest cold, that sneaks away with my heat, bit by bit, as the night hours drag by. Again and again it comes, sucking, sucking: stealing my dreams as I struggle with my blanket. In the Bessemer-heat of the day I pray for the evening; in the thieving cold of the night I pray for dawn.

Every day, when I wake up, I ask myself how they're going to kill me. Mostly I picture myself being shot: sometimes I'm gunned down here, where I sit; sometimes they blindfold me and lead me outside into the cool shade of a wall; and sometimes they let me see the sun again, before I die. But then, they might not shoot me. They might Feed Me To The Mob, and I'll be beaten to a pulp and pulled

to pieces. When I think of these things, my lungs hurt and my stomach aches.

But I haven't died yet. I've been here one hundred and ninety-three days, and still they haven't shot me. One, nine, three. I was on my way to work - in the world, you see, I was an engineer - when they stopped the car, pulled out Hassan and shot him. Hassan had enough blood for two men.

The lizards don't come near me now. I used to catch them by the tail. They would strain and scabble in the dust, then their tails would come off. I'd be left holding a slimy worm that flopped from side to side, squelching in my fingers. Flip, slip.

After they shot Hassan, they put a sack over my head and threw me in the boot. They drove for miles and miles. It was dark when we got here. I cried and cried and cried, curled there in the corner. I wouldn't sleep on their wooden bed, I wouldn't do as they said. The moon shone through the high window and I saw three bars silhouetted in the dust. Three bars, one window, four walls. And a slot where a tray comes in once a day.

They gave me a bucket to use. They left it here for a week, and every day it got fuller and the smell got worse. The insects filled my cell and walked all over me, over my eyes, in my armpits, up my nose. Then I was sick. I vomited all over my bunk, all over myself. They beat me, and taped up my eyes while they cleaned it all out. Now I am used to the smell, and they give me so little food I don't need to use the bucket much.

The man who slides the tray under the door is always there. He must sleep here. He doesn't say much. 'Food, English!' he says, once a day. There is one piece of bread, and sometimes there is one egg. There is also a little water. I say nothing, although once I asked him if he had any children. He said he is not to speak with me. I told him I had children, although they are grown-up now. I told him my daughter would be getting married soon. I told him one day his daughter would want to get married, and she'd want him to be there. He said nothing.

Once I tried to exercise. The room is four-and-a-half paces long, and four paces wide. I walked around the room, round and around: four-and-a-half, four; four-and-a-half, four. I stepped up onto my bunk, down onto the floor, up onto my bunk, down onto the floor. But my bunk began to creak, and I was tired. I am starved of energy for exercise, so now I sit and watch the wasps. They have a

nest in one corner of the ceiling, made out of mud. They come slowly between the bars, like an action replay, wafting into the corner and out again; they never stay long. The nest blinks at me like an eye. I hate it.

Everywhere is dusty. When I lie in my bunk and try to sleep, I wake covered in dust. If I don't eat my food as soon as it comes, I eat dust. Dust floats in my water when I drink. It makes mud in my gums and sticks my lips together, so that I cannot kiss. I feel its grittiness under my feet, see its ridges in the lines between my fingers. I have eight fingers and two thumbs, and they ache.

I shout at the tray-man. 'Ali! Tariq! Whatever you call yourself! What will they do? Will they shoot me?'

He laughs. 'Here is food, English,' he says.

The food comes in on a tray, through a slot at the bottom of the door. Maybe tomorrow I will grab his hand, and cut a finger off. Maybe it will flick first one way, then the other, like a lizard's tail. Maybe they will kill me then.

I fall asleep, counting things I call sheep: sleep sheep, not real. What does a real sheep feel like? How does it sound? What does it look like?

I wake, and my teeth hurt from chattering. There is enough dawn-light to see by: I take my knife and lie on the floor. I reach under my bunk and scratch another mark. One hundred and ninety-four. One, nine, four. There are still four walls.

Then there is a loud banging on the door, so loud that I jump, and I stick the knife into the wood.

'English!' shouts Ali. He is laughing. 'Hey, English! You eat your breakfast. They come for you today!'

'What? Who?' I say. 'What's happening? Tell me!'

He laughs, and the tray slides under the door. One piece of bread, one egg, and some water to drink with the dust. My knife is too slow to take a finger from the hand that feeds me.

I do not eat my food. What use is food? Instead I hide under my bunk, curled up so they won't see me. I can smell the old dried vomit. I am crying, wasting water. Today they come for me. Today I will be shot. Will I see the sun? I want to see the sun. Ali is still laughing.

For a long time, nothing happens. I shout, 'Come on! Come on! Get it over with!' But now no-one is there, not even the laugh of a jailer. I beat my head on the wall, I jump up towards the bars, but they

jump away from me.

Now a truck comes. I count it: one truck. I hear voices, the dog barks. I hear lots of voices, I hear laughter. I roll under my bunk and stop my ears. I push the heels of my hands into my ear-sockets, push, push.

I hear a crash. Then I feel something I haven't felt for one hundred and ninety-four days: a breeze. I feel it on the my calves, on my arms, on my neck. I wriggle out and blink at the doorway. The door stands open, and a broad bar of white light falls on the dust on the floor.

It's time. I will run, and I will see the sun before they shoot me. My penknife is still in my hand.

I reach the doorway, I feel the heat. I shade my eyes. People cheer, they clap. I hear English voices. I squint around me, the sun evaporating the sweat from under the dust in my hair. The breeze is on my legs. I blink at the sun.

I see Hassan is there: not dead after all. Why not? Someone is congratulating me. There are video cameras, and a microphone. They tell me I have won. What do you mean, I say, the words strange in my mouth. I have been in a TV programme, they tell me. A woman interviews me. Did I suspect? Did I ever think it wasn't real? I look at her. I ask her if she's kept me here for one hundred and ninety-four days just for a TV programme. She says I have won a hundred thousand pounds. I am a Rich Man, she says. But I am angry. I use my knife.

Everyone goes quiet. Now I will be taken to prison.