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# The Cleaner

TOHON



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

“Am I a suspect?” I ask the police detective as he directs me to the chair on his right. “No, at this stage we have no suspects and no one has been charged. However, as part of the investigation, we have to talk to the guys who work at the site and run the necessary background checks.” This is the first time I have been to a police station. I feel nervous, although I know I have nothing to do with the disappearance of a priceless relic from the old-prison museum. I was expecting to see a police officer but, to my surprise, I am met by a man in a business suit. He shakes my hand, introduces himself as Detective Steve Martin, and then leads me to a windowless chamber furnished with a desk and two chairs. The only other curious object I notice is a window-sized mirror panel embedded in the opposite wall.

The detective asks me if I would like a drink—tea or coffee. I say that a glass of water would be fine for I anticipate that the meeting may run for a while.

As a child I grew up with fear of a few unknowns. One such thing was a fear of policemen. I am not sure why. Probably it was an instinct like a chick's fear of a predator it has not yet encountered.

Fortunately, the detective does not look like a policeman. Even though tall and imposing, the detective with his business clothes attire, youthful looks and polite gestures makes me feel comfortable. As we get ready for the session, he alerts me that the conversation will be recorded.

The detective turns the recording device on, makes an introductory comment and then asks me to state my full name including any aliases, date of birth and address. Having done with the preliminaries, he delves down into details regarding my background, career, family and current status. As my response progresses, he jots down a few things on his pocket-sized notebook and, finally, when I am done, he looks at me with his penetrating eyes, giving me an uncomfortable feeling that he did not quite believe everything I had said. He takes a sip of coffee, regains his composure and begins to speak in measured words.

“So, Mohammad, as I understand it, you migrated to Australia in 1987 and are now an Australian citizen. You are originally from Bangladesh and travelled to the USA to do your Master's and PhD in petroleum engineering. You then worked internationally for several oil and gas companies. You are married and have three kids. The kids have all finished their studies and are now working professionals. Your wife also has a PhD and currently holds an academic position.”

“You have summed it up correctly, Steve,” I reply, nodding.

The detective continues, “Well, Mohammad, the only bit that I fail to grasp is that last year you quit your job and then, not too long ago, you started working as a voluntary cleaner in the old prison, from where a valuable item has gone missing.”

“Yes, that's correct, Steve. And yes, I agree, outwardly my new job may appear unusual—sort of a disconnect.”

“Well, Mohammad, we will be done here as soon as you can explain to me this 'unusual' bit.”

“I am not sure how to explain it, Steve. All I can say is that I am a born cleaner. It is to do with my fate.”

“Mohammad, you are an engineer—a practical man. I am sure you are aware of the seriousness of the matter we are dealing with and understand that vague answers won't do you any good. As a senior detective I am doing a responsible job for the Australian Federal Police and

I have this case to solve. It puzzles me why a well-established engineering consultant would take up a cleaning job and why, of all places, you choose to work in a prison. I need to understand your underlying motive.” The detective's high-pitched words rebound within the closed walls.

I respond calmly, “There is no motive, Detective. Like a river, my life simply runs its course. I have nothing to do with the missing object.”

The impatient detective interjects,

“Yes, I understand all that. I am asking you to explain the 'disconnect'—switching from a professional career to become a cleaner in a prison.”

“Well, in that case I will have to tell you my inner story.”

“Okay. Let's do that. I am here to listen.”

I take a sip of water to wet my dry throat and then look at the detective eye to eye. I ask myself: How on Earth do I explain to him that my life goes far beyond just me? How do I make him understand that I belong to the distant past?

I clear my throat and begin my story. “Steve, if you ask me, of all things, what is it that I love doing the most, I'd say: raking dry leaves. And next? I'd say cleaning in general. Since my childhood I have been voluntarily doing these chores in and around our home, wherever we have lived.”

“Well then, you must have been your mother's favourite child!”

“Yes, you've got it right.”

“Yet, it is unusual for a man to have passion for cleaning.”

“I agree, Steve. I believe, like many of my other traits—good and bad—it is a genetic inheritance.”

“Did your parents make a living as cleaners?”

“No, neither of them. I believe that it probably came down to me from one of my earlier ancestors.”

“So, you gave up engineering for cleaning.”

“No, it is not like that. I quit my job for personal reasons and then the cleaning thing came up.”

“What about the prison?”

“Well, Steve, it is to do with one of my other genetic traits.”

“And what's that, Mohammad?”

“Since my childhood I have been agonising over the suffering, pain and cruelty on this Earth. I suffer for those who suffer: the disadvantaged and starving; men, women and children confined in detention centres, prisons and remote torture facilities; parents who have lost their innocent children; victims of invasion, rape, genocide and war, natural disasters and famine—you name it. While outwardly I was a happy child, deep inside I always felt this suffering. Firstly, I suffer for the victims; secondly, I suffer for the offenders and condemned; and thirdly, I suffer for my inability to help any of them. And then, to make things worse, I also suffer for my own shortcomings, weaknesses and the negative tendencies I was born with, like anger and violence. So, behind my outer, sunny disposition, my life is nothing but a reflection of and a reaction to my inner—at times gut-wrenching—pain. It is an invisible battleground where I have been battling on many fronts for many years.”

“But, Mohammad, you have done very well with your education, vocation and family,” the detective responds, still confused.

“Yes, that maybe so, but I have been defeated, miserably, in my hidden battles.”

“So, what brought you to the prison?”

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“Well, again, I did not quite go to the prison. It came to me.”

“Mohammad, you seem to be telling me that things come to you—you do not earn them.” The detective looks sceptical.

“Yes, Steve, that's correct. When you look at a tree, please tell me what parts it earned: the trunk and branches; the leaves and their colour; the spikes and their sharpness; the flowers and their fragrance; the fruit and their sweetness; the seeds and their genetic inheritance; or something else? Months ago, when I toured the prison just out of curiosity, I felt at home. Yes, outwardly, I did visit the prison, but, in reality, she came to me. Believe it or not, Steve, I could sense that she had been waiting anxiously for me to come.”

“Does your work in the prison help?”

“It does in some ways. I now know what a dark, airless, seven-by-ten-foot, solitary confinement cell looks like.”

The detective continues, “What else do you know about this old prison?”

“Well, I learnt that this prison is one of Australia's oldest remaining colonial public buildings and is currently an iconic heritage site. Unfortunately, the prison also stands as a symbol of the country's grisly past. At its peak, the prison accommodated some 440 inmates. During nearly 150 years of operation, 300,000 men, women and children passed through its gates. By 1976, when the federal government abolished capital punishment, 45 condemned prisoners—including one woman of 25 and the youngest inmate as tender as 21—had already been hanged. There were four execution sites in the prison—one of them outside the main gate for public viewing and spectacle. Two permanent hanging facilities are still in existence as archived sites.

“By English law and tradition,” I continue, “the corpses of the condemned belonged to the state and therefore the dead bodies were buried in two separate areas within the prison precinct. However, the first 11 graves remain unidentified and unmarked. Based on a number of unexplained sightings and paranormal incidents since the prison's closure in 1988, some believe the prison is haunted.”

“Okay, thanks. Now, Mohammad, if I may ask, which particular areas of the prison do you actually work in?” The detective now wants to know the specifics.

“Certain areas within the prison are out of bounds. I have no access to those sites. I generally cover the outdoor areas—both inside and outside the prison walls—and the prisoner utility areas, such as the activity rooms and yards, the chapel, the library, the women prisoners' rehabilitation centre, the newly admitted prisoners' induction facility, the surgery, the canteen, the toilet and shower blocks, the telephone booths and the visitor centre. And then, of course, I not only work in the museum but also at the other archived sites. I also attend to the wardens' areas, the

watchtower, the 'Hanging Tower'—one of the permanent hanging facilities and the two grave yards. A large part of my job involves cleaning the corridors and cells pertaining to a number of prison blocks located in segregated yards. There are several different categories of cells that I clean: the standard cells; the remand cells—for offenders during trial; the 'fridge' cells, with specially designed, double-heavy doors—for the violent inmates; and the 'condemned' cells—high-security lock-ups for the prisoners on death row.”

“Please tell me, Mohammad, what is it like cleaning the cells?”

“After turning the key in the heavy lock, I use both my hands to pull open the creaking, thick, heavy wooden door that seems to have been sealed for eternity. The rusty metal hinges squeak as if they are complaining at being woken up from a deep hibernation. I feel uneasy



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

as I glance inside the ghostly, dark cell, filled with stagnant, dust-laden air. The dead, eerie silence overwhelms me. Alone in this unnerving atmosphere, I wait for my vision to adjust as the outer light invades the darkness. I then go inside the cell and start moving the lighter items—clothes, a towel, a pair of shoes, a hat, a Bible, bed sheets, pillow and blanket, a rusted toilet bucket, a water pot and a pan—out into the corridor and begin to dust them off one by one. It appears from the layers of dust that these items have been untouched for years. After I am done with these articles, I re-enter the cell to dust off the floor, walls, desk, cot and mattress. Once it is all done, first I make the bed and then I put all the items back in their proper places.”

“And then what?” The detective wants to know more.

“As I work through the cells one by one, I take time to look at the engravings on the wooden desks and marks on the

door and walls. There are all sorts of drawings, words (some are swear words like FTW, FYAH, etc.), names, dates, tally marks, symbols, and so on. I try to understand the signs and marks, but it is impossible for me to grasp what they all mean, what was going through the occupants' minds, who they were, or what crime they might have committed to suffer this painful existence for years or perhaps the remainder of their lives.”

I take a moment and then add, “I work only in the mornings. Even then, at times I find the work physically exhausting and emotionally draining. I find it particularly hard when I work in a cell where the condemned spent their last night and took the last meal before they were taken to the gallows.”

I look at the detective. He seems to be absorbed in my account. “Yet in the midst of my inner commotion,” I continue, “somehow, my tormented soul

I feel as if he is looking for the inner man behind my outward appearance.

The detective gathers himself and then continues, “I spoke to the prison manager, Andrea. She told me that you are a very likeable person; you work tirelessly without a break and always do a perfect job.”

“She is very kind and caring, Steve. But the strange thing about my voluntary prison labour is not the love I receive from the people who work there but something much deeper.”

“And what's that, Mohammad?”

“The deepest sorrows can bring sublime peace, and unclean work can cleanse an impure heart.”

The detective pauses a while, probably trying to grasp the meaning of my words, and then says, “Like all mortals, you may have negative tendencies, Mohammad, but I have no doubt that deep inside you are a compassionate soul.”

“Thank you, Steve. As I have said, my inner life has been a battleground almost from the dawn of my birth. I have been battling for so long. But all it did is make me despair. Now, at this old age, the prison brings me solace. To me, it is like an anxious mother comforting her distressed child who, after being away for years, has returned home from a lost-battle.”

“Have you shared your story with anybody else?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I am an introvert.”

“Maybe you should write it down.”

“Maybe. But for now, I am happy that the priceless relic has gone missing.”

“Why is that?”

“Because it has led me to a man who cares to listen to my untold story and, thus, helps me to relieve my heavy heart.”

Steve sighs and shakes his head. “In my job I end up meeting a lot of different people, Mohammad. But you're probably the most uncommon man I have ever met. I am deeply moved by your account.” Steve's wet eyes bear witness to his emotional words.

“Thank you, Steve.”

“I am done, Mohammad. Any questions at all?”

“Just one.”

“Please go ahead.”

“Am I off the hook?”

“You have never been on the hook! I knew all along that you had nothing to do with the missing piece.”

“Why is that?”

“You have only been at the prison for a couple of months. The item went missing at least a year ago, but nobody noticed until last week.”

“How do you know it has been missing for that long?”

“As a cleaner, you will understand it. It is to do with the 'layers of dust'.”

“That's clever,” I reply, smiling at him.

Steve stands up, thanks me and offers a handshake. He then leads me out to the front door.

Tohon is the author of *The Jihadi (Revised Edition 2016) and The Landscape of a Mind (Revised Edition 2015)*, New Generation Publishing, London.