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August 2008

“May I take a book with me?”

The arresting officer, likely amused by my assumption that detention would last no more than one book, nodded his assent.

The solitary cell was empty except for a blanket on the floor and a copy of the Koran. But I was allowed my one book and my glasses. Huddled in the blanket, angled to catch the fluorescent light coming through the small barred window of the thick metal door, I read. Sometimes it was hard to sleep, the dim light bulb high above always on, nights and days became indistinct. So I read slowly, stretching out the only source of distraction which was a link to home. But it was a bitter source of comfort, for the book I had brought with me was the *Kite Runner*, a sad and painful story of our part of the world which I would rather have finished and put aside quickly.

As it became clear that my stay in Evin prison would not be over soon, a sense of panic gradually came over me as I struggled to imagine what I would do once my book was finished. I began to dread the prospect of a vast, empty time stretching out toward apparent infinity. The stress of a solitary cell is the roller-coaster of the mind that waxes desperate with imagination in a space that is contracted, but in a space of time that is frighteningly expanded—hope, panic, optimism, panic, hope, fear, resignation, trepidation, equanimity, compete and repeat, on and on.

There were other distractions. Several times a day I would stand submerged under the rushing water of the shower, closing my eyes to become lost in the roar echoing around my skull. I washed my few items of clothing. I cleaned the rough carpeting. I paced to tire myself out. I squashed mosquitoes. After a simple yoga exercise routine, I felt more resolved and calm. But once they were over, it was me and the walls again. I tried sitting calmly and meditating as I had been taught to do—seeking to ‘empty the mind’—but in a particularly maudlin moment hazy images arose of gurus and saints of tranquil countenance being burnt at the stake. After awhile I thought, “This is a waste of time! I can't keep dread at bay this way, and I don't want to empty my mind, I'd rather fill it!” It soon became clear that the best way to focus my mind and emotions was to read, to think. I began taking notes and making a list of books that I would like to read. So I requested other books from home. Bahar sent me four or five—history and nonfiction as well as novels, mostly in English. They were inspected. They were all allowed. Even a history of the French revolution called *The New Regime*.

I began to stack my books in a row on the floor against the ‘far’ wall (three meters is farther than two)! Quietly, they began to take on the familiar quality of a bookshelf—the various sizes, colors, subjects. I started looking forward to the next book I had yet to read. And as I stared at the little library, I began to experience a most remarkable change in my

perception of time. The more books there were facing me, the more the time ahead of me began to take on a palpable, comprehensible texture. The panic of an immeasurable span of time seemed to reverse itself. Rather than too much, there was too little time ahead. The vast, unfathomable expanse stretching to the horizon began to contract.

As the line of books waiting to be read lengthened before me, every day, every minute became too short. The worst moment of each day—the moment of opening my eyes after waking—was relieved by my eagerness to read. Reacting to my request for a dozen more books, Bahar asked, “How long do you expect to stay in there? Will you really read all these books?” I realized then that the more unread books I had in my little library, the better equipped I was to overcome the helplessness, to manage the passing of each day.

Books also helped open my cell to the world outside. I must have seemed mad to request deliveries from Amazon, shipped to Paris, couriered to Bahar, then relayed to me through the prison system. But imagining a worldwide network of booksellers, all in motion to bring a book to me, was exhilarating and reassuring. I ordered a book by a French writer I had met at the New School years before, and felt in touch with my former colleagues there. In a footnote, I saw the name of a Polish intellectual I knew, and again felt less anonymous. The penciled margin notes in a book given to me by a friend took me to a cool hill station in Pakistan. If I was thinking of all of them, maybe they were thinking of me. Simply being able to have these unread books appear in my little cell in a growing row expanded space, and contracted time.

What did I read? Friends sent me Simenon, Hesse, Kazantzakis, Shakespeare, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Dostoyevsky’s *The Gambler*, *Our Man in Havana*, *Human Factor*, Le Carre. After many years on my bookshelf, I finally finished Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*—a gently running brook the length of the Nile. But I was struck by his description of the zenana (harem) as “a limited but complete world.” I did read the Koran, a taxing book to read, to say the least, especially in one sitting. The writings and speeches of Ay. Khomeini over a forty year period were an eye-opener. I also read, believe it or not, books by Fromm and Reich to learn about the authoritarian personality and the fear of freedom. A disappointing history of life in Mussolini’s Italy at least showed how banal and inefficient and rustic fascism could be. Ken Pollack’s *The Persian Puzzle* was especially surreal when he complements the Iranian Security Services for their effectiveness. A history of the French revolution that had been recommended by a former professor in New York only a few months earlier made me feel less isolated—simply because I was following up on the suggestion. On the other hand, it was less than heartening to learn that Napoleon was able to create, in less than a decade, an authoritarian system that coerced and rather efficiently administered a nation the size of France. The moral I drew from that? It can be done.

When possible, I asked that some of the books be sent over to Dr. Haleh Esfandiary, a fellow traveler. I think she found solace in them too.

Unread books are a familiar burden to most in academia (my own background). In the cell, I rediscovered the joy—as opposed to the chore—of reading. Over the course of the

four and a half months I spent in solitary confinement, I read almost everything I had, cover to cover, slowly, with care. I used the practice of meditation to help me read as an art or a calling, with focus—not as a means of mining for information. I have come to realize how poorly and how little most people read, and am shocked by the number of intellectuals and academics who complain that ‘we don’t have time to read’ and consequently read superficially, skimming more often than they would like, or like to admit.

My greatest regret is that Bahar had to endure those 140 days, pregnant with our baby girl, Hasti. I now know that it can be harder for those who are outside and that by imprisoning one person, many others might as well be shackled with the bonds of their affection. But I don’t regret the time that I spent—just one of the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, as the Bard says. Good books—those who write them, publish them, sell them—are a precious resource for each person to try to ‘become who they are.’ For the primary value of the attentive reading of the best books is to nourish the source of one’s own thoughts, to help these ideas emerge and develop, have them challenged, and be able to put together a view of life that can then be embraced.

It is one of the best things we can do with our solitude.

Dedicated to the memory of Richard Rorty