

Prison Break

As Faruk shaved the last section of his pubic hair, he accidentally cut himself with the double-bladed, disposable razor that was standard prison issue. The blood ran bright red through the remaining shaving foam, down his leg and into the plug hole of the gunmetal grey shower.

'Herşey boktan ,' he said out loud.

He turned the tap to cold and splashed fresh water over the cut.

'Today, four months down and six more years to go,' he thought to himself.

He had received his sentence on account of four counts of GBH, the procurement and sale of £100,000 of cannabis and cocaine, and for assaulting a police officer on the day he had been arrested. His young wife, Aruba, had decided to stand by him. Their two boys were too young to understand why dad wasn't at home any longer. Separation from his wife and family, not incarceration, had been so far the greatest punishment for his crimes. And the only reason never to re-offend.

He wrapped himself in his towel and opened the shower door, his black hair still wet and smelling of artificial apples. The prison officer took him back to his cell. He was actually looking forward to more time alone. He was neither philosophical nor a loner, but being locked up had provided him with the paradoxical freedom that comes with prison. It had given him the first opportunity in his adult life to slow down and to take stock of who he was, what he wanted and where he was headed.

The door of the cell next to his was, surprisingly, wide-open and two inmates wearing overalls, face-masks and rubber gloves were scrubbing the floor with stiff brushes. The noise of the brushes gave him goose-bumps.

'Where's Joe?' he asked his accompanying prison officer.

'Gone,' came the indifferent reply.

'Gone where?' asked Faruk.

'At the moment, we are not allowed to say,' he replied, slamming the green metal door in Faruk's face.

Faruk lit a cigarette and puffed the smoke up through the bars of the small window. He had smoked since he was eleven, yet he still hated the smell of stale cigarettes in his clothes or in his room.

'Where the fuck is Joe?'

'Why were they scrubbing the floor?'

‘What could have happened to him?’

He stubbed out the *Lucky Strike* and lay down under his bed covers. More as a result of boredom than sexual desire, he forgot about Joe and began to masturbate. He looked up at his cork board where there was a large, glossy calendar photo of a wet, topless woman on a white, sandy beach. She reminded him of Aruba.

As he was nearing ejaculation, he heard the spy-hole flick open in the door. He stopped masturbating and the door opened. It was *Gay Boy*, the youngest prison officer on their wing in Block G. The deal was two packets of cigarettes for a quick blow job in the toilets, so everyone said.

‘Pack your things. We are moving you to a double cell. We are obliged to take account of the Corporate Manslaughter Act in your case, in other words, fear of self harm or suicide,’ announced the young warden.

‘What?’ complained Faruk.

‘Why?’ he queried.

No answer.

His imagination flashed back to the courtroom at the moment of his verdict. As well as the prison sentence, the judge had pronounced immediate, compulsory extradition back to Turkey. Faruk had ripped open his shirt, taken a razor blade that he had hidden beneath his wristwatch and slashed it across his bare chest.

‘You send me back to Turkey,’ he shouted with blood dripping down his abdomen, ‘and I will carry on until I bleed to fucking death!’

But this emotive display had nothing to do with suicide. It was a hot-blooded response to the thought of being forcefully separated from his wife and children. On his admission to prison, the psychologist had confirmed that he was not a danger to himself, and he had proven that beyond any reasonable doubt during his first four months inside. In fact, his behaviour so far had been impeccable.

Faruk got out of bed and stood up. *Gay Boy* stared at Faruk’s waning erection, still visible through his tracksuit trousers.

‘Is this what you’ve done with Joe too? Moved him to a double cell in case he tops himself?’ he asked.

‘Pack your stuff. I’ll be back in ten minutes,’ ordered the prison officer.

Faruk grabbed the black Adidas hold-all from the top of his double wardrobe and began putting his towel and clothes in the bag.

As he took down the photos from his cork-board, he paused for a moment to contemplate the photo of his father. His father had died from sclerosis of the liver when Faruk was only sixteen. Of course Muslims were not allowed to drink alcohol, but the prohibition had been a provocation

to his father's addiction. The shame in the community made confession impossible. The fact was, everyone knew anyway.

'I will give up when...' his father used to say to himself as he hid yet another 250 cl bottle of whiskey behind the *Moulinex*. The biggest problem with his drinking had been his dramatic mood swings - 'bipolar' as Faruk's sister used to call it - as he would switch from being the kindest man in the world to an angry animal. He never hit Faruk or his sister, but he would sometimes throw their toys out of the window in a rage. He would for some reason rip framed pictures and the children's artwork off the wall and hurl his boots around before putting them on and then slam the door as he went out of the house at night to drink some more. Always alone.

Yet Faruk loved his father. He respected him unquestioningly. He could still smell his nicotine breath and feel his warm arm around him when he told him exciting bedtime stories about the Ottoman soldiers winning valiant battles. One night his father had even sneaked into his bedroom before bedtime and hidden weapons around the room. As he later told Faruk one of his Ottoman bedtime stories, Faruk had to get up and find the real weapons and props that his father had hidden in his room. Such moments were among the most important in Faruk's life: a feeling of complete affirmation, destiny and security. Something that went even deeper than words. Faruk was sure that, if his father had lived, he would not now be spending the next six years in prison.

As Faruk placed the photo of his father on top of the things in his bag, he noticed a piece of paper under his bed, next to the leg. It was school exercise book maths paper with 0.5 cm squares on it - the type that Joe always used for sending him messages under his door or via their adjacent windows. He picked up the paper and unfolded it into a larger rectangle.

Dear Faruk,

I have to go away for a while. Remember the things we talked about and look after your wife and children. I need to do this in order to protect you and some of the others. I will make sure that we get to share a two-man cell together when I come back. Then we can talk some more. And look after Antonio when you meet him. He's a good kid, really, and shouldn't be here.

Yours,

Joe.

Gay Boy came back and led Faruk up three flights of stairs to his new double cell.

As he unlocked the door, there was a strong gust of sweet-smelling shower gel and *Lynx* deodorant. Standing to the right the window was a tall young man smoking a cigarette. His black hair was shaved at the sides but long and thick on top, combed back from his side parting - at that time the favourite style of many professional footballers. His eyes were an unusual, intense grey and he had a large, wide-bridged nose. He nodded towards Faruk. The door slammed shut behind him.

'Hi. I'm Antonio. Most people call me Tony.'

'I'm Faruk. You can call me Faruk.'

Tony looked uncomfortable.

'Mine's the bottom bed, right?' asked Faruk.

'Yes,' replied Tony, 'though we can swap if you want to. I'm really not bothered. But you should have the left-hand cupboard because it's got a padlock. Not because of me. But because the screws nick your stuff here. Here's the key.'

Faruk began unpacking his hold-all.

'Cigarette?' asked Tony.

No answer.

'Oh, if you don't smoke,' he went on, 'then I could...'

'Yes,' said Faruk, 'I'll have one. Do you have a light?'

Tony gave him a cigarette, lit it for him with his silver *Zippa*, turned on the TV and climbed on to his bed, really in order to give his new room-mate some space. Before Faruk could finish pinning up his pictures, the bell rang for lunch and two officers came and escorted them to the canteen.

One of the only advantages of sharing a cell was that you could get to eat with other prisoners instead of in your cell on your own.

The canteen was already very full and as loud as a football stadium five minutes before kick-off. Some of the younger men from the joinery were shouting obscenities at one another across the room. Although it was against the rules, they all wore their blue dungarees undone over their shoulders so that their straps hung down from their waist. A tribal act of rebellion to demarcate them from the older generation.

Faruk lined up behind Tony and gave his new meal card to the employee in white overalls serving the lunch. He served him up a large metal tray of pork casserole with rice and peas.

Maybe he hadn't seen the large letter 'M' on Faruk's meal card?

'I'm a Muslim. No pork,' he uttered.

The man in white overalls scraped the casserole off the plate back into the stainless steel chafing dish, and then scooped up a large portion of chick peas in tomato sauce and plopped it down where the pork had been. Then he spat over the chickpeas and passed Faruk the plate.

'There you go, Osama, it's kosher now,' he sneered.

As they walked to the table, Tony commented, 'Don't take it personally. He's a racist screw. He's always like that with Arabs.'

'I'm Turkish,' said Faruk.

On their table there was a heated conversation about what had happened to Joe.

'He topped himself,' confirmed Karim. 'Fayez and Amir had to clean up the blood but they were told not to tell anyone.'

'Crap,' retorted Ben, who knew Joe better than most. 'He just got sick and they moved him to the hospital wing.'

'Why are they keeping it quiet, then?' asked John. 'Something weird's going on. They've moved Faruk into a double cell, haven't they?' he added, staring at Faruk. 'He was in the next cell to Joe.'

Faruk nodded.

'I've got an idea,' piped up Steve. 'One of us gives *Gay Boy* a blow job and he tells us what happened to Joe.'

A few of the men laughed, nervously. Steve then emptied his glass, laid it on its side and began to spin it in the middle of the table. Faruk got up in disgust and walked away. He hated queers nearly as much as he hated child molesters. In Turkey they used to have the death penalty. There were no queers or child abusers then. Now Istanbul Ankara were full of them. They should bring back the death penalty.

He sat down at another table where there was only one inmate. A fat South-American-looking man with a long, grey ponytail. The man had his eyes shut and seemed to be whispering something.

'What the fuck is the matter with you, Chief Malawalawallah?' intruded Faruk.

The man opened his eyes and looked at Faruk very calmly, as if he had not understood the insult.

'I'm a Buddhist,' he said. 'I'm saying a mantra. Giving thanks for my food and praying that this soul of the pig will be reincarnated into a better life.'

'Why?' asked Faruk.

'One of the chief goals of Buddhism is the avoidance of suffering,' replied the Buddhist.

As Faruk wondered how much Chief Malawalawallah's victim must have suffered, there was suddenly a loud cheer from the other table where Tony was sitting. Evidently they'd found their volunteer for the act of oral sex.

'I thought that Buddhists were vegetarians,' Faruk went on.

'No, I can eat meat and fish so long as it wasn't killed especially for me personally. Murder is wrong.'

'So what happens if you tread on an insect when you go for a walk?'

'I say a mantra regularly over my sandals. Do you have a religion?'

'I'm a Muslim. In Islam, murder is a sin. So is eating pork.'

A bell rang and the prisoners were escorted back to their cells. Faruk threw all of his dinner in the bin. He looked at the man in white overalls who had served him his lunch.

'Inside, I can do nothing. Outside, I'd kill him,' he said to himself, and he quickly thought of six methods he might use. Prison doesn't rewire you. Nothing can. It just channels the power through alternative parts of your circuitry.

Back in their cell Faruk asked Tony whether he played chess.

'Yeah,' he answered, 'but not very well.'

'Doesn't matter,' commented Faruk as he took his portable chess set out of his wardrobe.

'I used to play chess with Joe,' Faruk went on, 'mainly at night after lights out. He would slip me a note under my door on the end of a piece of cotton with his next move, like knight to C3, and I would send it back with my next move until the game was over. He always won.'

'Did you know him well, then?'

'He was a bit like a father to me. He would listen, give advice, you know. I could be honest with him. Though I always felt that he knew me much better than I knew him.'

'What do *you* think has happened to him?'

'I'm not sure. But there's one thing for certain.'

'What's that?'

'He's coming back.'

'How do you know?'

'He told me so.'

The two new room-mates played chess, and Faruk won.

Soon afterwards they both fell asleep with that exhaustion that comes from doing nothing.

It was Friday, so at least they would be allowed in the gym for an hour at 5 pm. This was the third best highlight of the week, after visits and warm showers.

The gym was poorly equipped and dirty. The inmates who went there all had large biceps and triceps but most of them were overweight and had enormous beer bellies. But getting fit is not the main purpose of a prison gym. The main thing is the non-competitive camaraderie. The men often worked out in pairs, helping and encouraging one another. Muscles, politics, the screws, women and release dates were the prescribed topics of conversation. The inmates would communicate in their indigenous language until men from other countries arrived. Then everyone would speak in English. It was like the Tower of Babel in reverse.

After the gym and the usual rushed dinner, back in the cell, Antonio lit cigarette and turned on the TV. Channel 4. There was a documentary about a 12-year-old boy born with Butterfly Disease. His skin was so sore that he couldn't even stand the pressure of a cotton shirt against the

red, sleeping wounds that covered his entire body. His parents had to bath him three times per day, then gently massage him with medical cream and finally wrap him in bandages. The explicit agony of this helpless human being and the tireless dedication of his parents drew Faruk into the programme with an irresistible, morbid curiosity.

'Poor kid,' said Tony, lighting another cigarette. 'That's no life. He should never have been born.'

'In Islam we believe that God is punishing the sins of his parents when a child gets sick like that,' said Faruk.

'Do you really believe that?' asked Tony.

'Yes. As long as something like that doesn't happen to me.'

It was now almost time for lights out. Faruk cleaned his teeth, got changed and lay down on his bed. The slight ache in his upper body muscles felt reassuring. He was no way going to let these six years be a waste of his life. He was going to get fit, eat more healthily and give up smoking.

He didn't mean to, but when Antonio got changed next to the bunk-bed, Faruk caught a glimpse of Tony's large, circumcised penis.

'I wonder if he's a Jew,' Faruk thought to himself. He never had been able to get his head around why God decided to mark his chosen men by cutting off their foreskins.

Throughout the night, every two hours, Faruk heard the spy-hole in the door flick open and a bright halogen light suddenly floodlit the entire cell. Suicide prevention. 12 o'clock, 2 o'clock, 4 o'clock. Then, at about 5 am he finally fell asleep, exhausted, for 45 minutes. As he lay awake, he could hear the haunting screams of the men coming off heroin in Block D.

At 5.45 am, the bell rang. Prison officers banged on the doors shouting aggressively, as if they were preparing the inmates for a war that was never going to happen. Faruk had a pee in the stainless steel toilet and rushed to breakfast first as he didn't want anyone to start thinking he was screwing Antonio, especially not *Gay Boy*, who was in a really good mood today when he escorted Faruk down to the canteen.

Faruk sat down at a table with *Dr Death* and the *Chaplain*. *Dr Death* was a German medical doctor who had, so said the screws, deliberately killed eight of his patients. He got eight years, one for each life.

'It wasn't murder,' insisted the doctor. 'I simply assisted eight patients, who were terminally ill and in unbelievable physical and psychological pain, to die. They wanted me to. In my country this is permitted by law. But here in Great Britain I am imprisoned for it. Euthanasia is one area where even animals are treated with more dignity than human beings.'

He repeated this justification verbatim to every new inmate.

His breakfast companion, the *Chaplain*, was an evangelical pastor. He had received a two-year sentence for killing two pensioners in a car accident when he was driving his car at 70 mph on a dark country lane while three times over the limit. The truth was, again according to the screws, he had swapped places with his inebriated wife before the police had arrived at scene of the accident. So he had taken the rap for his wife's crime. Two months later his wife had filed for divorce. Maybe it was for that reason, out of bitterness, that the *Chaplain* was often angry and looking for an argument.

Antonio came and joined them for breakfast. For the first time, Faruk noticed multiple rows of heeled scars on Tony's wrists. Further up his arm were lots of small circles where someone had stubbed out cigarettes on his skin. Tony realised that Faruk had seen them.

'Pressure from my parents as a teenager,' Tony explained. 'Attention seeking. They wanted me to be a doctor but my grades were useless. I don't blame them any more. They were good Italian Catholic immigrants to the US. My dad ran a restaurant in Colorado. I was born and grew up in the States until the business went bust. My parents got divorced and my mum brought me to live in London. My grades got even worse and they said I had Special Educational Needs. This young woman assistant teacher used to sit next to me in some lessons. I never learnt anything from her, but when I was in Year Nine we had a great sex. We used to do it at lunchtime in the modern languages stock cupboard. Typical teenage Italian boy: great at football, sex on the brain and totally thick.'

Faruk smiled at Tony's frank self-analysis and admitted, 'I thought you were a gay Jew.'

'You're not thick,' pronounced *Dr Death*. The doctor and the *Chaplain* had evidently been listening to every word.

'What you mean is that you didn't fit into the academic system that is deliberately constructed by the social elite to ensure that their offspring remain in the upper echelons of our capitalist society. Being academic has little to do with intelligence.'

Antonio listened intently but didn't understand a word of what the doctor was saying. It probably would have made more sense in German, Tony consoled himself.

Faruk, keen to stop the doctor from giving another lecture, changed the subject.

'Would you *really* top yourself, though?'

'Would *you*?' asked Tony.

'Of course not. The screws just wanted an excuse to move me out of F wing. Joe has gone, then they moved me, and *Gay Boy* told me this morning that they are moving Charlie into the psychiatric wing from today.'

'Really?' asked Tony, rolling his shirt sleeves down over his scared arms and wrists.

'And no,' he continued. 'I wouldn't really top myself because it's an unforgivable sin.'

'I thought the Christian God forgave every kind of sin,' asked Faruk.

'Antonio is a Roman Catholic, not a Christian,' interjected the Chaplain. 'Strictly speaking, there is a significant difference. The only unforgivable sin is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.'

'What's that then?' asked Faruk, who wasn't at all interested until he heard the answer.

'It's denying that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Saviour. For that you go to hell. "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. *No one* comes to the Father *except* through me." John Chapter 14, verse 6.'

'So, according to you, all Muslims go to hell, right?'

'Not according to me, but according to the Bible. Yes,' replied the chaplain.

'And all the Buddhists?'

'Yes.'

'And Hindus?'

'Yes.'

'And children born with Butterfly Disease?'

'Ah, that's more of a grey area. You need to study Romans Chapter 2.'

Faruk had had enough. He gestured to a prison officer that he was ready to return to his cell.

'What he is saying is completely illogical,' interrupted *Dr Death*. 'Whichever God we may have come from, we must have all come from the same one.'

'Faith is not always logical,' blurted the *Chaplain*.

'Faith is not wanting to know what is true,' snarled the doctor.

'One day you will answer before Almighty God for that demonic comment,' announced the *Chaplain*.

'Why, didn't you know?' replied *Dr Death*, 'God is an invention of the devil.'

On the way back to his cell, Faruk glanced out into the sunlit courtyard where the drug addicts were enjoying some free time. They walked around more like the empty shells of human beings rather than like real people.

'Poor bastards,' Faruk thought to himself. 'Things could be worse.'

Back in his cell, he sat down at the small, square table and lit a cigarette. He was curious to know what crime Tony had committed. Apart from being young, he was just so normal and, well, stable and polite. *Mr Nice Guy*. Maybe there had been a miscarriage of justice or a bureaucratic error? And Joe had written that Tony shouldn't even be in prison.

Antonio returned ten minutes later and sat down opposite Faruk.

'How old are you?' asked Faruk, looking at some spots on Tony's face.

'Twenty-two.'

'And what did you do? Was it money? Drugs or what?'

'I killed a man. I got home early from work one night and found some guy in bed with my wife. I couldn't believe it. I completely lost it, went into the kitchen and got a knife. I mutilated the bastard - slit his balls open - and then I stabbed him and slit his throat. Blood everywhere. My wife ran and called the police. Seemed no point in running away.'

'How long did you get?' asked Faruk.

'Twelve years.'

Faruk was impressed.

'Now the bitch is filing for divorce,' added Tony, 'but she needs a special dispensation from the Pope because Catholics can't normally get divorced. I don't give a damn any more about her. She's a slut. But she is trying to stop me from seeing my daughter. I haven't seen her for two years.' Tony's upper lip went stiff and his voice started to tremble.

'Obviously the court sides with my wife,' he went on, 'because she is a woman and I am a violent murderer. As if I would harm my own fucking daughter? This system here makes you even more violent and screwed up than you already are. That's what they want, you know, in prison. They try to *break* you.'

Tony's eyes welled up with tears. He looked like a little boy who was being bullied in the school playground. Faruk's being impressed changed to feeling sorry for the 22-year-old.

He didn't know what to say, except something dumb: 'Things will get better in the New Year. You'll see.'

At lunch time there was a degree of excitement because *Gay Boy* had indeed given away what had happened to Joe, after a longer-than-usual blow-job.

Hannibal Lecter got the privilege, so the glass had made a very appropriate choice. *Hannibal* was a male gay nurse who was into the sadomasochism scene. The screws let it be known that he had accidentally killed his lover by hand-cuffing him to the bed-frame and injecting him with a lethal overdose of heroine. When the boyfriend died, *Hannibal* panicked and chopped up the body, cooked it and ate it in an attempt to dispose of the evidence. He ran away and the police finally arrested him two years later in Sierra Leone, where he was working in a hospital caring for children with the Ebola virus. None of the inmates really believed this story, partly because he only had a two-year sentence.

But prisons, like any other social institution, need myths. They are the stuff with which we interpret and order our social construction of reality.

Hence, *Hannibal*, who worked in the prison kitchen, remained the butt of endless jokes about Silent Lamb Stew, Heroin Hotpot, Toes in the Hole and, of course, Spotted Dick.

A group of inmates, including Faruk and Antonio, gathered around *Hannibal* to hear the latest news.

'Gay boy told me that I am not to breathe a word to anyone, but he said that Joe hanged himself in the night. They had to scrub the floor to get rid of the blood. They took his body away in the night. The governor wants it all kept quiet until after the autopsy and until Joe's family have been told. At the moment they can't find anyone. Seems like he was a real loner.'

'You see,' said Tony, more to Faruk than the others, 'I told you that's what they do here. They try to *break* you.'

'He is right,' said *Dr Death* slowly. 'In your country prison is not about justice, but about ignorant revenge. In my country prison is one-third punishment, one-third protection of society and one-third rehabilitation. If there's no rehabilitation, the former two will achieve nothing. With the vast majority of normal criminals, you have to ask questions about beyond punishment.'

'Then maybe you should go back to Germany?' suggested the *Chaplain*.

Faruk got up to go. It was now Saturday afternoon. He was not at all convinced about Joe committing suicide.

'Why didn't I hear anything?' he wondered as he was being escorted back to his cell. 'It wasn't easy to hang yourself in a cell. He must have had to set everything up first. And why would Joe write me a note saying that he would be back? It makes no sense. And why did they move me? And now Charlie?'

His frantic deliberations were replaced with thoughts of his family. Saturday afternoon was visiting time for the inmates of G Block. At 3 pm a prison officer came to collect him and escorted him to the visitors' room.

In the corner of the room was a large Christmas tree decorated with coloured baubles, tinsel and flashing lights. There was a face of an illuminated, over-jolly Father Christmas and some silver candles, reindeer and stars hanging in front of the windows. If it hadn't been for the endless advertisements on the television, Faruk would have forgotten that he was about to spend his first Christmas - and birthday - in jail. Time has a different currency when you are incarcerated.

Aruba, Faruk's very pretty wife, was already sitting at a round table, baby Bari was on her lap and Abbas was waiting as impatiently as ever.

'Dad!' he shouted, jumping on to his father's lap and throwing his arms around his neck as he sat down. Faruk took Aruba's hand and smiled lovingly into her steel-grey, leonine eyes. They were not really permitted to hug or to kiss. And today, it seemed as if there were prison officers everywhere.

'Good to see you,' said Faruk.

'I've brought you some Coke, some Mars Bars and tobacco. It's all in the bag,' replied Aruba.

'Dad. When are you coming home?' asked Abbas as if he were expecting to hear 'Tomorrow'.

'Not for a while yet, son,' replied Faruk.

Faruk switched from brief disappointment, his cute eight-year-old face all scrunched up, to a look of wide-eyed excitement.

'I've done you a picture,' he said. 'You can put it in your bedroom.'

Abbas took a piece of white A4 paper out of his coat pocket, unfolded it carefully and gave it proudly to his dad. Faruk stared at the child-like painting. On the right hand side there was a mosque and on the left, a church. In the middle in the foreground was what looked like a group of children and adults holding hands in a circle. From a round, golden ball in the sky shone beams of yellow sunlight in a triangular shape down over both the mosque and the church.

On the cupola of the mosque Abbas had painted the familiar half moon, but on the spire of the church, Faruk noticed that the cross had a rather deformed shape. Weirdly, it actually looked more like the cock and balls you see drawn in marker pen on the walls of public lavatories.

'Very good, son. Did you do this at school?'

'No,' said Abbas. 'I did it at Kidz Klub with Joshua. This is our family and his family together,' he added, pointing to the group holding hands in the foreground.

'He's been going there for a couple of weeks now,' added Aruba, somewhat defensively. 'It's just a church club for kids.'

'I don't want him going there any more,' said Faruk, clearly irritated. 'I want him brought up as a Muslim. What would my father say?'

'Oh, dad, please. *Please* let me go! Joshua is my best friend.'

'No,' said Faruk sternly. 'You are not to go any more.'

The stress over the Kidz Klub at first cast a dark shadow over the family visit. Nonetheless, Abbas soon lightened the atmosphere with funny tales of what had been happening both at home and at school.

When it had been Abbas' turn to look after the class hamster, he 'accidentally' trod on it and killed it while cleaning out its cage. His mum, who remained convinced that Abbas had killed the creature on purpose, nonetheless managed to buy another one from the pet shop. It was identical except for a largish black patch of fur that was on the opposite side of its body from the dead one. But the teacher never noticed, so Abbas managed to get away with his premeditated accident.

Abbas had also managed to swallow 'by accident' a twenty pence piece. After a visit to the doctor, his mother had to examine all his stools for the following week until she found it. When it finally emerged, she washed it and Abbas put it in his pencil case and took it to school for *Show and Tell*.

As Abbas told each story, his arm wound tighter and tighter around his father's neck as if this would make up for the Kidz Klub incident. Abbas respected his dad and would do anything to avoid hurting his feelings. After just four months, it had already begun to feel normal that he had

to visit his father in prison. For he still loved his dad, no matter what he had done. And when he told his friends at school that his dad was in prison, he was actually quite proud about it. It seemed to give him a certain kudos.

Faruk apologised to Aruba for being a bit snappy. He was very tired from the constant interruptions of the night before. He didn't want to hurt her. She mattered more to him than anything else. He couldn't always articulate *what* something was or *why* it was, but he could always tell you exactly how it felt.

A bell rang. Visiting time was over. As Aruba stood up, he risked giving her a kiss. That taste and texture of her moist lips. What he would have given for just one hour alone with her. She put the baby in the pram and Abbas gave his dad a big hug and said, 'See you.'

Faruk forgot the bag with the Cola, Mars Bars and tobacco. By the time he was allowed back to fetch them, a screw had already stolen them.

Faruk pinned Abbas' picture up on his cork-board when he got back to his cell.

On 17th December, there was a Christmas Carol service in the prison chapel, an ecumenical service with Roman Catholics and Protestants celebrating together. Tony decided to go along and he asked the Chaplain whether he was going. The incarcerated *Chaplain* was furious about such a treacherous theological compromise and refused to go.

'When Martin Luther exposed the poisonous doctrinal errors of the Catholic Church, hundreds of Protestants died for the truth of the gospel,' he ranted.

'And Luther's poisonous anti-Semitism laid the foundations of the Holocaust,' countered *Dr Death*, speaking deliberately with a stronger German accent than usual.

'You think you know it all, don't you?'

'No,' replied *Dr Death*, '*you* do! You think you have a direct line to God.'

'I do.'

'I had patient once like you in Germany. She told me that whenever she prayed for a parking space, God always gave her a perfect slot just in front of the entrance to the supermarket. A few years later, when she developed an incurable brain tumour, I concluded that God must have got tired of finding parking places for her and gave the tumour so that she could get a handicapped plate instead.'

All of this was irrelevant to Tony. He sat on the front row and enjoyed the simple, reassuring message about the angels' 'Fear not!' and his interest was especially aroused when the Anglican vicar made a comparison between Jesus and the missing inmate, Joe.

At the end of the sermon, you could take the bread and wine, but Tony declined as he had not been to confession. Religion runs deeper in our veins than we often realise. Instead, Tony sat and listened.

‘The body of Christ,’ repeated the Anglican vicar as he gave the bread to each inmate.

‘The blood of Christ,’ repeated the Roman Catholic priest as he offered them the wine.

There was something so ingenuously reassuring about the repetition of these words.

Then Tony knelt down on the wooden board and prayed, flanked by two child sex offenders. On his right, in the aisle, was a very old prisoner in a wheelchair. He had no legs and stank of body odour. On his left was the large Buddhist who Faruk had called Prince Malawalawallah, smelling strongly of incense.

Tony prayed that he would be able to see his beautiful daughter at the beginning of the New Year.

When they concluded the service by singing his favourite carol, ‘Silent Night’, with the words ‘Holy infant so tender and mild’, Tony truly believed that God was already answering his prayer.

When Tony came back to their cell, he told Faruk straight away about the preacher’s reference to Joe. Faruk decided to write a request note to meet the preacher. He could do so under the pretext of needing some spiritual guidance.

Two days later, after two more nights with very little sleep, Faruk received his invitation to an appointment with Reverend Doctor Peter Dyer. At 11.00 am, a prison warden arrived to take him to the cleric’s office. Faruk knocked on the door, and a very loud, confident voice beckoned him in.

‘Good morning, Mr Acar,’ bellowed the vicar cheerfully. ‘Please take a seat. What can I do for you?’

‘To come straight to the point,’ replied Faruk, ‘I’d like to know what has happened to my friend Joe McIntyre from Block G. He was a good friend of mine. I’d like to know the truth.’

‘Ha, ha,’ replied the chaplain. ‘The truth, Mr Acar? Do you really believe that we can know the truth?’

‘Yes,’ replied Faruk, ‘if you ask the right question to the right person.’

‘And assuming I am the right person, what is your question?’

‘I’ve already told you,’ said Faruk, ‘*What* has happened to Joe?’

‘Do you mind if I smoke?’ asked the vicar, already lighting a cigarette.

‘Yes, actually. In enclosed spaces ...’ began Faruk.

The preacher lent forward and carried on smoking. ‘And *what* makes you think that I know, or, if I *did* know, that I would be at liberty to tell you?’ he asked.

'Because I think you do and I believe you will. You mentioned him in the Christmas service a few days ago,' asserted Faruk.

'Very well, then,' replied the vicar, 'but you are to keep it to yourself, for the next few days at least.'

'Go on.'

'When Joe was being escorted back to his cell the other day, a rather disturbed inmate from the psychiatric wing pounced on the young officer who was accompanying Joe and started attacking him with a kitchen knife. There was a struggle and Joe got seriously injured in an attempt to stop the inmate from killing the prison officer. In the end Joe and the officer managed to gain control of the situation. There was quite a lot of blood on the floor of Joe's cell, which is why they had to clean up the mess. Joe has been taken to hospital for treatment. He was not too bad to start with, but in the last 24 hours, his conditional has become critical. We are now not even sure whether he is going to make it. It's a bit of a delicate situation all round, which is why no-one is saying anything very much at the moment.'

'Mmm,' uttered Faruk. He was ready to leave now. He needed time to think. He wanted to understand how this all hung together. He needed to be sure that the cleric was telling the truth.

'Do you have a faith, Mr Acar?' asked the vicar.

'I'm a Muslim.'

'A practising, five-pillars Muslim or a cultural, nominal Muslim?'

'I believe in God, pray to Allah and try to live by the values of Islam that my parents put into me.'

'And your crimes?'

'I prayed to Allah before I committed them and asked for His forgiveness. A bit selfish, I know, but ...'

'Ah, you needn't be embarrassed about that, Mr Acar. All religion is essentially selfish because it plays on our most basic human fear: the fear of death, the dissolution of our ego. When we accept religion's offer of the salvation of our soul, we are admitting that the world ultimately revolves around *me*. Religion owes its ongoing existence to this pitiable flattery of personal vanity.'

'But our Imam teaches from the Koran that ...'

'Mr Acar,' interrupted Dr Dyer and inhaling deeply on his cigarette, 'you must surely realise that it is not about the text, but about the *interpretation* of the text, whether it be the Koran or the Bible. At the end of the day, there exists no-one with a monopoly of interpretational correctness. The truth will always remain subjective.'

There was a knock at the door. Their time was over and a warden had arrived to take Faruk back to his cell. As much as Faruk admired the vicar's apparent openness, his initial reaction was

skeptical. Why should Faruk trust a preacher who didn't seem to believe his own message? And how had Joe found the time and energy to write Faruk a note if he had been badly injured in a fight?

As he left the vicar's office, Faruk noticed a poster on the back of the door. It depicted a mountaineer standing jubilantly on the summit of a mountain with his arms outstretched towards the sky. He paused to read the accompanying quotation: 'The biggest cause of atheism in the world today is people who honour God with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their life-style.'

'Spot on,' thought Faruk, and he walked through the door.

When he got back to their cell, Tony had received a letter from his wife's lawyer. Whatever it was about, he didn't want to talk about it and it certainly got him down. He spent the rest of the day lying on his bed. Faruk didn't know what to say to him. He lit a cigarette. And said nothing.

Over the next few days Antonio became more and more withdrawn. He went to the prison doctor and returned with some tablets. He slept not only at night but also during much of the day. He didn't even want to go to the gym. Faruk asked him if he wanted to talk.

'No thanks, it's all right,' replied Tony.

The following day was Saturday, not only visitors' day but also Faruk's birthday, New Year's Eve.

At 3 pm Faruk was collected and escorted to the visitors' room. The Christmas decorations were still there, though no longer illuminated. Aruba and the boys were already waiting.

'Dad! Happy birthday!' shouted Abbas as he ran up to his father and cuddled him.

'Good to see you,' he said placing one hand on Abbas' head and the other behind Aruba's neck. He gently pulled her towards him and kissed her on the lips.

'Dad, when are you coming home?' asked Abbas as if he were again expecting to hear 'Tomorrow.'

'Not for a while yet, son,' replied Faruk, placing his son on to his lap.

'How's Bari?' he asked.

'He's doing really well. He can feed himself now. Bit messy of course,' replied his wife.

'Dad. I've got you a birthday present,' enthused Abbas. 'And did you put my picture up on your wall?'

'Of course I did,' sighed Faruk, in order to suggest that the question had been superfluous. 'Is it another drawing?'

'No,' said Abbas, getting the present out of his rucksack.

'Sorry it's not wrapped.'

Faruk took the small, wooden box out of his son's small, tawny hand. It was obviously home-made as the hinges were out of alignment and the clasp did not close properly. The sides of the box were painted with different clashing colours of streaky gloss paint and on the lid were beach pebbles set in a thick, uneven layer of off-white plaster. It smelt like a DIY store.

Faruk thought hard but had no idea as to what it was for. Behind Abbas' back, Aruba pretended to smoke a cigarette.

'Ah great! It's for my cigarettes, right?'

'Yes. You always complain that they get squished in your jeans pocket,' replied Abbas proudly.

'Thanks, son,' he said, giving him a kiss on his forehead.

Faruk looked again across at Aruba. Apart from the dark rings under her grey eyes, she looked stunning. She was half Turkish and half Burmese, a fusion of the most beautiful features of these two peoples. He imagined her naked for a moment.

'Seni özlüyorum,' she said in her soft voice in Turkish.

'Guess what?' interrupted Abbas. 'I was the narrator in the school Christmas play. Mum tested me on my lines and I knew them all, didn't I, mum?'

Aruba nodded with an artificially proud smile.

'But on the first night, with all the parents there, I forgot what to say. I was so nervous that I just ... well, I just farted out loud and everyone heard it!'

'It's true,' confirmed Aruba. 'Most of the parents were in hysterics! He was the star of the show.'

'All of the cast got a present from Father Christmas,' added Abbas. 'I got a torch on a key-ring.'

'Father Christmas?' queried Faruk.

'Don't worry, dad. He only exists if you don't believe in him.'

The rest of the hour went by very quickly. Abbas told more funny stories, Faruk cuddled his baby son and Aruba stroked her husband's leg under the table, occasionally managing to touch the end of his penis. They kissed and said good-bye.

When he got back to the cell, Antonio wasn't there.

'He must be in the shower,' thought Faruk.

He began very carefully placing his cigarettes in his new box. It was about 1 cm too wide, but that of course did not matter. It was to remain one of the most special presents he ever received. He lit one of the cigarettes and stared up at his cork-board. The naked-woman calendar with the dates

crossed off, his mother, his father, Aruba, Abbas and Bari, and of course Abbas' painting. The weird, deformed cross on top of the church tower bothered him more and more, though he couldn't exactly say why.

Antonio returned and after dinner he told Faruk that he'd got him a birthday present.

'Really?' asked Faruk.

Tony put his hand down his pants and produced four small, transparent plastic bags filled with weed.

'For after midnight,' he said, almost in a whisper and with a cheeky wink.

On New Year's Eve lights out was exceptionally at 1 am. Tony seemed less tired somehow. He was like a naughty schoolboy waiting for the teacher to go out of the classroom.

At about 1:30 am and after the fireworks had died down, Tony began rolling a spliff. When it was ready, he gave it to Faruk to light and they spent the next half hour talking and sharing two joints in a row, becoming more and more chill. Faruk was pleased to have Antonio as his cell mate and he got into bed feeling that his first birthday in prison had actually been quite enjoyable.

That night - New Year's Day - the prison officers responsible for Block G were also celebrating. They had too much whiskey and so didn't check the cells. Faruk fell asleep, like a child after a day spent at the swimming pool, and for the first time since the start of his sentence, he slept right through the night.

During his sleep he had a wet dream. Antonio had climbed down from the top bunk during the night and had given Faruk is the most amazing blow job. Tony, on his knees and with his boxer shorts pulled down at the side of the bed, gently sucked Faruk's glans and slowly twisted his hand up and down the shaft of his penis with the professionalism of a prostitute. Faruk reached out and began masturbating Tony's rock-hard penis. They both ejaculated at the same time with the suppressed groans of macho men in orgasm.

When the bell rang at 5:45 am, Faruk was still in a deep sleep. A little disoriented, he thought for a few moments about his illicit dream, then he sat up and put his feet on floor. He felt a thick, slightly sticky liquid under the soles of his feet.

'What the fuck?' he said out loud.

But it was blood. Faruk looked up. There was Tony's arm sticking straight out, perpendicular to the edge of the bed, his wrist slit and dripping with blood.

'Tony!' he shouted. 'Tony! What the fuck, man?'

He shook his friend's body in panic and then felt for a pulse in his neck.

'Yes!' He was still alive. Faruk saw that he was still breathing. Tony's chest was moving up and down. Faruk ran to the green metal door. He banged and shouted.

But by the time the prison officers arrived to open the door, Tony's heart had stopped. He was dead.

Later that morning, two police officers arrived and took photos, made measurements and notes and interviewed Faruk. It was pretty clear that he was under suspicion of murder.

'We will have to move you into a single cell,' one of them grunted.

While he was once again packing his things into his hold-all, two inmates wearing overalls, face masks and rubber gloves came into his cell and began scrubbing away at Tony's congealed blood.

In the days that followed Faruk lived on his own in his new single cell in a kind of trance. Downstairs in the canteen the conversations about Joe were replaced with conversations about Antonio. Conspiracy theories abounded. One of the favourites, of course, was that Faruk had killed him. He had Tony's blood on his hands and feet, and a few of the prisoners had a read in the newspapers about the razor blade incident in the courtroom. And, after all, he was Muslim.

Although Faruk was no longer under suspicion of self-harm, the officers still checked on him every two hours during the night. He couldn't sleep properly. Awake in his bed, he spent hours and hours trying to piece everything together. In vain. He was more perplexed and frustrated than ever. By the time the bell rang at 5:45 am each morning, he was exhausted and longed for even just a few hours' sleep.

One morning, a few days after Tony's death, Faruk was without warning escorted to the governor's office. He didn't even have time for a shower. The office itself was incredibly warm and smelt of the forbidden comforts of life outside prison: books, fresh filter coffee and women's perfume.

The governor introduced everyone with typical British politeness. Behind the desk sat DCI Regina Starkey, to the governor's right, and a pretty Indian secretary taking notes of the meeting on his left, and opposite the desk in a semi-circle were Faruk, flanked by two prison officers, and two uniformed policeman on the outside.

'Let's get started, then,' said the governor. 'Mr Acar, you will understand that this is a relatively informal interview, for internal purposes. Were things to go to the next level, of course you could have a lawyer with you, you understand?'

Faruk nodded. There followed a presentation of certain facts surrounding Antonio's death and a barrage of questions to Faruk. Nearly all of the questions were loaded with the inference that Faruk had killed Antonio. The police had even found evidence of drugs under Tony's mattress. And a very sharp stone removed from the lid of Faruk's cigarette box that had been used to slit

Tony's wrists. Faruk had to concentrate really hard to answer the questions clearly, all the time fighting his tiredness and the stifling warmth of the room.

Finally the interview seemed to come to an end.

'Do you have any questions, Mr Acar?' asked the governor.

'Actually, yes,' replied Faruk after a short pause. 'Though not about me or Mr Vigneri. I'd like to ask you what happened to Joe McIntyre. He was a friend of mine.'

The governor looked at the DCI.

'Am I at liberty to tell him?'

'Yes, you can now.'

The Indian secretary left the room. The governor moved position in his large, leather chair. He then lent forward and began a long-winded account of what had really happened to Joe.

'About 15 years ago,' he began, 'Joe was brought up by his parents in Middle East ...'

As the governor went on, Faruk was overwhelmed by tiredness. He began to discern only individual words and phrases: 'educated ... trained ... exile ... information ... prison ... trial ... death ... blood' as he fell into a deep sleep, five seconds long. Then he awoke again with a jerk as his head fell too far forwards.

'So that is why we had to scrub the floor and keep things under wraps for a few days, you understand of course?' concluded the governor. 'You must excuse me, I have another meeting now.'

Two months later the police and the legal authorities concluded that Antonio Vigneri had committed suicide as a result of clinical depression. Neither his wife nor his daughter attended the funeral. Faruk was cleared. Yet the rumours never went away. His fellow inmates remained convinced that Faruk had slit Tony's wrists after a dispute about drugs. Sometimes in life it is harder to believe the truth than anything else.

Faruk was released two years early on parole on account of his impeccable behaviour. During the week before his release the Imam who visited the prison once a week invited him to brief interview in the prison chaplain's office.

The Imam wanted to know if there was any way that he and the local Muslim community could support Faruk in his family after his release. He also wanted to extend his best wishes and prayers. Faruk had not been evil, he had been weak. Now he needed to be strong.

'Freedom is what you make out of what's been done to you,' commented the Imam.

'Thank you,' said Faruk as he walked towards the door. The poster with the jubilant man on the mountaintop was no longer there. Neither was the chaplain: all of his books and belongings were gone.

An hour later Faruk collected his bags, paperwork and some cash from the payment desk and walked outside the main gates of the prison. There are no words to describe that feeling of being released from prison back into normal society. It's something you have to experience for yourself.

He walked towards the bus stop, smiling. And he kept on smiling, all the way home. It takes a while for the feeling to wear off.

Aruba, Abbas and Bari were all excited to have Faruk back at home. Four years in prison definitely had a significant effect on Faruk. He was the same man, yet he was also stronger, calmer and more in tune with his sub-conscious. He spent more time with Aruba and the boys and had even stopped smoking.

With the help of his probation officer he eventually found a job working in a five-star London hotel where he came across a number of famous guests, including the England football team. Faruk managed to get all their autographs. Faruk was so proud of his dad and so impressed that he kept meeting all these famous people. At school he had even more kudos.

Aruba started talking about another baby. Neylan was born a year later. Abbas and Bari loved having a baby sister to play with.

Yet, as sadly happens to over 70% of men imprisoned in the UK, Faruk was to return to Her Majesty's Prison in Maidstone soon after the birth of his daughter.

While Faruk had been in prison the first time, Aruba had secretly allowed Abbas to continue going to the Kidz Klub with Joshua. She thought she'd got away with this deception until, just after Neylan's birth, there were accusations that the club leader had been sexually abusing some of the young boys. Abbas fatally admitted to his father that the club leader used to cuddle him a lot.

The club leader denied all charges and was released on bail pending investigation. He told his congregation that he planned to move to the north of England to make a new start as soon as he was cleared. But a few days before the club leader's trial, Faruk got a kitchen knife and killed him in cold blood on the steps of his church. He mutilated his genitals, then stabbed him and slit his throat.

Faruk received a fifteen-year sentence and was escorted directly from the courtroom in a windowless security van back to his former prison. Aruba was in the courtroom for the verdict. She broke down in tears, staring at the man she loved so much being taken away. It felt as if the truth was making her heart bleed.

After the initial paperwork, urine test, breathalyser and body check, Faruk was taken to a cell in Block A, the building designated for the most dangerous criminals.

'Due to a shortage of space,' said the prison officer, 'to start with you'll be sharing with another prisoner.'

The green metal door opened and Faruk saw a man standing to the right of the window, looking up at the leaden sky, with his back towards him. The door clanked shut and keys rattled as the warden turned the lock.

The man turned round and looked at Faruk. It was as if the eyes in his familiar face pierced right into the depths of Faruk's soul.

'Hello, Faruk. You seem surprised to see me? I told you I'd arrange for us to share cell when I got back. Did you not get my note?'

'Who the fuck *are* you exactly?' asked Faruk.

'Now that, Faruk, is a *really* good question. Fancy a game of chess?'