

Illegal Bible

The blood pooled around my cheek. Sweat stung my eyes but I couldn't open them. Nothing moved on my swollen face while my head throbbed with my heartbeat, ta thump, ta thump. My arms were restrained behind my back shackled with a chain to my ankles. My first thought was of where I was before I landed here.

The morning chill and the discomfort of lying on a cold concrete floor alerted me to a new day. I maneuvered myself to a spot of sun I could feel on my legs. I realized I was without clothing.

Slowly, I raised my head to shout for help, but nothing worked as my face was swollen shut. I was finally able to open my right eye to a narrow slit. The room was bare with dried feces and blood on the floor and walls. The small window at the top of the wall let in a column of light. I tried again to shout for help, my voice squeaked like a drowning rat.

The steel-reinforced door rattled as it was being unlocked. I tried to rotate my body to sit up, but the chain prevented me. Lying on my side with one eye open, I saw a small, thin man walk in with a plastic chair. He flipped the chair around and sat close to me. "Do you know why you're here?"

"No."

All the thoughts of being put in this place flooded my brain. Being grabbed at the airport and questioned in a room. For some reason, they thought I was an evangelical Christian. When I told them my wife had me bring the Bible for good luck, they grew angry as if I was making light of their law.

Now in my concrete cell the small man unshackled me and gave me a pair of shorts to wear. Still no chair, so I sat up against the wall.

Pulling up his sarong he got closer to me, and he leaned in to my ear in perfect English.
“You had an illegal Bible.”

“What? __ How the hell would I know a Bible is illegal.”

“All Bibles are illegal.”

“You’re kidding me. It would have never been opened until you did.”

“So, you have so little respect for our country that you’d break the law.”

“I already told you I didn’t know it was the law.” I coughed up blood on the floor and hacked to clear my throat. “I haven’t opened that Bible...ever.”

“That makes no matter.”

He left with his chair and a bigger man came in and put the shackles back on my ankles. Bound face down, I gasped to breathe. Lying on my stomach I turned to my side and the big man kicked me twice in the kidneys. I cried out each time and laid there groaning as he slammed the large steel door. I spent the rest of the night on that concrete floor with no food or water.

The next morning as I was trying to get my body in to a ray of the warm sunshine, my captor came in. “Tell me, who you were going to give the Bible to. Do you have a contact here you’re working with?”

“I already told you. My wife put that Bible in my suitcase for good luck. And no, I don’t have any contacts here.

He unlocked the shackles, and I sat against the wall again.

He asked, “Are you really a Christian or what are you?”

“Yes, I was baptized, but I haven’t been to church since my wedding.”

He left the chair this time, and they unshackled me. I had no way to reach my wife to tell her where I was, and I was sure no one knew that I was in this place. After a little of the swelling had gone from my face I could see out of both eyes. The inside of my nose was filled with dried blood, which was painful to the touch.

Later that evening, my captor came back with another chair. He gave me a small plastic cup of water, and I gulped it down as if it was a shot glass full. It was no surprise he knew my name since they had all of my clothes. He motioned for me to sit, and he pulled his chair close. “What will you do, Mister Roberts, if I let you go?”

“Well, I’m sure at this point I will go back to New York.”

“Where in New York do you live?”

“I live on Staten Island where I work for the zoo.”

“You know where NYU is? I went to school there for four years.”

“I thought your English was very good. Now I understand why.”

He left, took both chairs and the big man came and shackled me again. Just when I thought I was safe, he kicked me in the kidneys again. That night I broke down sobbing. Questioning my weakness.

I woke up to my captor in my cell with a child’s school desk. The big man unshackled me and lifted me onto the seat, and the little man handed me a pen, telling me I must sign a confession. I asked, “A confession to what?”

“You must confess that you were a trying to convert our nation to Christianity.”

“I wasn’t converting anyone. What is your fear of the Bible? Is there a surge of your people to convert?”

He stood and squared off in front of me. “We have no fear. We have the true religion.”

Then he shouted in anger, “Infidel.” He flipped the school desk—I was sitting in—over, and I sprawled out onto the concrete floor with a loud thud. The big man came back in and put me in shackles and kicked me in the same bruised and tender kidneys. I was tired of their games and if they were going to kill me for bringing a Bible to this country, then so be it, but if I could find a way to save myself, I would.

I had to start by following their demands, giving them no reason to beat me any further. My body couldn’t take much more. I had no reason to be in conflict with this man. Next time I was going to be smart and not antagonize him.

Even bound and laying on my smashed face, I thought I had the wit about me not to repeat anything that would cause them to beat me. When I heard the rattle of the lock, I took a deep breath and worked on my mental resolve to get out of here alive. He walked in with a single chair, so that meant I wasn’t in his good graces. After he removed the shackles, he sat in front of me. “Have you ever been tempted to join another religion?”

“I wasn’t tempted to join this one. Raised in Christianity, what choice did I have?”

I bit my tongue. *How do these words come out of me?*

“So, you’re saying you are born into the right religion?”

Why was he so ready to take offense? “I’m not saying that at all.”

“But you think you were born in the right religion. Right?”

“I’m not a religious scholar. I do know if I was born in India I would be Hindu. If I was born in Iran, I would be Muslim.”

He jumped up and left without a word. The big man came back and made me miserable again. This time he left a small cup of water that I had to figure out how to drink laying on my side. My lips were still puffed up, and I had a hard time getting what little water there was down my gullet.

That same morning the big man came and threw my clothes on the floor unshackled me and said. “Get dressed.”

The little man in the sarong was just behind him, “Maybe you should stay in the country you were born in.” He walked out.

The next thing I knew I was standing on the street watching traffic go by. I didn’t go to a hotel I decided I would go straight to the airport and fly home. I cleaned up as best I could in the airport, called my wife, and grabbed some food and waited for my flight.

I slept most of the way. Getting off to change planes I was like a zombie—just going through the motions. Once I got back to Staten Island, I found my wife’s Bible. I wanted to see what a whole nation was afraid of.