

THE CHAUKA

I had heard a lot about Chauka, the famous torture room. Dozens of people had experienced the taste of torture in Chauka over the past 18 months. M*, Mu*, B*, Reza. A*, and many others had spent several days in that ghastly solitary confinement while being tortured psychologically. More than this, many of them were often clobbered, beaten, in that remote and secluded place.

Chauka is outside of the main camp. It is located in a demolition site where useless and dilapidated containers have been stockpiled. The camps are like a city and the slum of the city is Chauka. It is divided into two parts. Each container is approximately six meters in length and two metres in width with a hole in the middle - the entrance.

Four cameras hung over our heads. There were no cigarettes to smoke, just a little food to eat and white walls waiting for us to look at them for a long time. Staring at those white walls was all we had to do in Chauka. The architecture had been designed to evoke a negative feeling. It was impossible to feel comfortable there. I am confident that Chauka was designed to torture people psychologically. This was the only reason for its special form. I do not doubt that psychologists have played a pivotal role in designing that place. Those psychologists are part of the systematic influence of the Australian immigration regime. Whether intentional or not they are involved in torturing detainees.

We had been put onto a minibus. Our numbers were called one by one. We got off the minibus and, after answering some medical questions, we entered Chauka. My number was called. I got off the minibus and passed through the tunnel made by officers, and their intense gaze. A small tent had been erected, there was a chair inside. I sat on it and answered the medical questions, signed the form and was transferred into Chauka.

We were told to lock our hands behind our waist. We had been arrested while committing no crime. The cost of our peaceful protest ended with us in this prison of 7 elongated, high containers placed next to each other in a thoughtful form.

B was also there in Chauka.

B, a twenty five year old officer who looked like a forty five year old person with a disgusting pot-belly and a red sharp beard. I named him piglet. Whenever I saw him I immediately started thinking about his dad, trying to imagine his dad. I was sure that his dad was also a dirty pig.

B was not even a racist. It was impossible for such an extremely worthless and mindless person to be racist since being racist needs cognition and thought but he was one of the nastiest people imaginable. I am sure he was assigned to work there in order to irritate and infuriate desperate detainees.

Chauka was full of small and big rules: taking a shower, going to the toilet, sleeping, eating - all activities had to be done under loads of rules.

So our life in Chauka began. Every half hour, with a rough beard and piggy eyes, Bradley caused disturbance. Once when I asked for shampoo, he replied with derision attempting to start a fight: 'Come on. Come on, let's fight', he said. 'You always act in a threatening manner, come on, come closer! I want to knock the living daylight out of you! Come closer! Rootless!' It was clear that he was in charge of offending people and if anyone had dared to respond he would have informed all of the ERT forces with his scary walkie talkie. They would have gathered in a second and something terrible would have waited for me, something similar to what they did to MKurd and others in that terrifying solitary confinement.

While I was in Chauka, I crossed swords with Piglet many times, however I was aware of his capacity. I tried to drive him insane and humiliate him, but whatever I did was useless. He was always a winner. He was definitely a filthy piglet who seemed happy even after my words.

Accompanied by M, A and S, I crept into one of the containers, stunned and worn out. We stared at each other and the white walls that surrounded us. After half an hour we were given food. I thought about asking the others to continue our hunger strike even at Chauka. It was too late. Everyone had started eating their food before I even began talking. It seemed they had been waiting for that moment for so long. What is done cannot be undone! I had no choice but to get some of the food. I scoffed all of it in a few seconds.

When dusk of the first day fell, the Chauka bird began screaming on top of a mighty tree whose name I did not know. I felt deeply worried by its sound. The horrendous solitary, or in other words the dreadful torture room had been named after that strange bird.

The Chauka is a rare bird that only lives on Manus Island, not in any other place in the world, not even on the rest of the Papua New Guinea Islands. It is a small bird about the size of a starling. It makes such different types of sounds, mostly like a scream. The bird is the symbol of this beautiful island and locals have created many myths about it. Locals do not eat its meat. That is to say that Chauka is a totem for locals and many important beliefs are attributed to it.

Based on the Chauka's scream, locals set the time. I have been told by many that they usually wake up and sleep with the sound of Chauka. According to locals there are several reasons for the scream of this beautiful bird. One belief is that the scream indicates that something bad will happen or someone will die if the Chauka turns up and shrieks close by at sunset. These beliefs caused me to be scared of Chauka's sound that night as out of nowhere the bird appeared in the sorrowful darkness and began screaming. I was sitting on a chair at that moment and staring right at the tree - the tree whose name I did not know.

Another local belief is that the sound of the Chauka is not always ominous and does not necessarily bring death. When the Chauka sings near a village it indicates that two people are making love in the vicinity. The lovemaking results in the birth of a beautiful child. A strange contradiction to the first belief.

The third interpretation? Chauka can be a sign of a lie. If Chauka approaches people while they are talking and it screams, it is believed that one of them is telling a lie. The liar will be filled with the deep sense of shame - a concept of truth.

Chauka and its strange sounds are like a cone, a cone made of death, birth, love and truth. Eventually these qualities attracted me and I came to like the beautiful and strange bird. During the first 18 months here I had the chance to see the Chauka and listen to its sound only seven or eight times. But that night I was deeply affected by its scream. I was gripped by fear and the night was filled with a feeling of constant dread.

_ Behrouz Boochani

Translation by Moones Mansoubi & Janet Galbraith