

HELEN BERHANE

In her moving new autobiography, *Song of the Nightingale*, Eritrean gospel singer Helen Berhane tells the inspiring story of how she was detained for two years because of her Christian faith and her unwillingness to renounce her beliefs. Despite the brutal beatings and abuse, which included being kept for prolonged periods in a metal shipping container in the scorching heat of the desert, Helen was able to show Christ's love to her persecutors.

A single candle flickers, its flame barely illuminating the darkness. They never burn for more than two hours after the container door is locked: there is not enough oxygen to keep the flame alive any longer. It will go out soon.

Despite the proximity of so many people, it is freezing cold. Condensation drips from the roof and slides down my cheek, and when it moistens my lips I taste rust. The air is thick with a dirty metallic tang, the ever-present stench of the bucket in the corner, and the smell of close-packed, unwashed bodies.

I peer around, trying to work out where she is, the woman whose mind is gone. There, by the small window hacked roughly into the side of the container. I stiffen. Sometimes she blocks the opening by stuffing her blanket into it, cutting off our limited supply of fresh air. Other nights she shouts and wails, rocking the container so that none of us can sleep. She is worse now there are more of us; nineteen in a space that can only sleep eighteen. Tonight she is quiet, and it makes me uneasy.

But I am so tired, and so I force my body to relax against the hard floor. Abruptly the candle snuffs out, I close my eyes, and think of my daughter. Please Lord, keep her safe. The floor creaks. Someone must be getting up and stumbling across the sleepers to the toilet bucket. I try to shut the noise out. Suddenly, without warning, hands close on my neck like a vice. My eyes fly open, but it is too dark to see. Then there is a guttural snarl, and I know that it is her, the madwoman, her fingers tight on my throat. I push myself up but I have no breath to scream, and I am not strong enough to shake her off. So I do the only thing I can do: I bang my free hand on the wall of the container and kick out. All around us prisoners are waking up. One tries to pull her away from me, but now she has one hand on my throat and the other knotted in my hair, yanking it away from my scalp. I gulp down a breath and manage a scream. The other prisoners start to shout too, and bang the sides of the container. There are shouts now coming from outside, and the sound of hurrying feet, the noise of the bolts sliding back and the pop as air rushes into the container and then the doors are flung open.

My eyes burn as torchlight sears across my face, and then a guard is yanking her away from me and beating her about the head and body with his baton. I fall onto all fours, gasping in air. The guards pull her out of the container, and slam the door again.

Sometimes I cannot believe that this is my life: these four metal walls, all of us corralled like cattle, the pain, the hunger, the fear. All because of my belief in a God who is risen, who charges me to share my faith with those who do not yet know him, and who I am forbidden to worship.

I think back to a question I have been asked many times over my months in prison: 'Is your faith worth this, Helen?'

And as I take a deep breath of the sour air, as my scalp stings, the mad woman rants outside, and the guards continue on their rounds, I whisper the answer 'Yes'.