Trip Diary

Susan Hu

4/26/07

Today was my first day of client meetings at Guantánamo. We met with two men from Libya today, both of whom have been here for years.

At CCR, we hold training sessions for new attorneys; we prep them on everything they might find at Guantánamo: the frustration of waiting hours for a visit that never lasts long enough, the confusion over the ever-changing rules at the base, even the depression that quietly settles in at the end of the trip. I've been to two of these training sessions and I've heard everything. I've even prepped other attorneys on what to expect. For the most part, the training was good. What I didn't prepare for—in fact, couldn't really have prepared for—was the emotional impact of a client meeting, which hit me as the door to the interview room closed and we walked out.

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Our client this afternoon was a Libyan citizen. He had been working for a Muslim charity organization and had been taken by Pakistani officials when he went to the Libyan embassy to get papers to go back to Libya. Though his feet were shackled to the floor and he could not move from his seat, he was friendly and hospitable. I could see that he was weary after five years of being separated from his family, but his eyes were warm when he talked to us, and he smiled often.

During the meeting, he told us that he was recently visited by a Libyan official, who told him his wife in Libya had filed divorce papers in court. I imagined what his wife could have gone through in the last five years, not knowing when her husband would come back, not even sure if he was still alive. I thought about a father's pain at being ripped from his family, no apologies spoken, no explanation given. Five years, and there is still no expiration date to his hell. He thanked us for coming to see him but after being in Guantánamo for so long, he is leaving his fate up to God.

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I walked out with an overwhelming sense of helplessness. How was it right to hold innocent men and rob them of all control over their life, to rob them of hope? We got on the bus and each time we drove past an American flag, I would get a little angrier at the hypocrisy of this government that flies its stars and stripes over a place for which the American justice system claims no responsibility. It wasn't until I stepped foot on this military base, operated by five branches of the U.S. military, that it really hit me how absurd Guantánamo really was: in the middle of the Caribbean sea, on part of an island owned by Cuba, it is a prison built with every intention to evade the laws of the U.S. But as I watched American soldiers standing at every checkpoint, American families eating at McDonald's and Subway, as I watched the three-foot long iguanas on this island lazily sunning themselves on the beach, completely unafraid of human beings—perhaps because they are protected by the U.S. Endangered Species Act—I began to wonder if it's really true that just a few hundred miles away in Washington, D.C., congressmen are still debating whether or not American laws really do apply in Guantánamo.

That is the debate that rages on today. The Department of Justice says that Guantánamo is out of reach of the American justice system because, despite all signs to the contrary, the land—and by extension, the mess—is not technically ours. The Department of Justice tells the lawyers who come to Guantánamo that the United States cannot be held responsible for the immeasurable damage it has wrought on their clients, that there should be no consequences for taking away five years from 760 men, for ripping apart 760 families. The hypocrisy of flaunting ourselves as the beacon of justice while dodging the repercussions of these crimes is a hundred times more acute when you're actually walking around the place, seeing all the flags high and hearing the bugle blaring *First Call* in the morning and *To the Colors* in the evening.

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Our time with our Libyan client was up after just three hours. As we stood to leave, we said the usual: "Peace be with you. Stay strong. Be well." Did those words mean anything to him anymore in a place like this? It would be months before someone else could see him again and I couldn't bear to leave—I felt like I was abandoning him. But the soldier in fatigues was outside holding the door open so I turned from the gentle and patient man still looking after us, put on my sunglasses in case the tears fell, and walked out into the harsh sun.

4/27/07

The part of Guantánamo that is owned and operated by the U.S. spans maybe sixty square miles. The area includes not only the sprawling detention center but also a movie theater, bowling alley, beaches, a golf course, schools, and streets with houses that could belong to any American suburb—all set up to support those who make their daily life on this island.

It is disorienting to say the least to step out of a difficult three-hour long meeting, emotionally on edge, and walk immediately into a grocery store a short drive away. You are preoccupied with everything you just experienced in the prison—the guards searching your notes inside the fence spiked with barbed wire, the walk through twisting hallways and layers of security, the stifling, windowless meeting room, claustrophobic and concrete—and all of a sudden you are standing in front of a display with a special sale on Whitman's chocolate truffles.

The Navy Exchange, which has all the modern conveniences of a Walmart, is usually the first stop after your meeting. Since it is Friday, we buy groceries for dinner and the weekend ahead. Today I stood in the back picking out oranges and I thought about how that simple, insignificant choice was actually huge. It was a freedom that the man we had left just twenty minutes earlier was not allowed to have and has not been allowed to have for over five years.

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Here, everything I do I unconsciously measure against everything my clients cannot do. While I still enjoy the beach, my book, making dinner, these simple daily-life things are all magnified because it is impossible to really forget what I am doing here. In the evenings, the habeas counsel crew, which includes lawyers, interpreters, and sometimes paralegals like myself, get together and talk over dinner. We talk about other things but the conversation inevitably turns back to our clients. Occasionally, when we have time, we sometimes enjoy the Guantánamo with the beaches and salty ocean waves, the warm night air and humid breezes, but we do not forget the Guantánamo that holds 380 of our clients. The bowling alley, the golf course—always off limits to us—and the Navy Exchange are discussed within the context of Guantánamo as a military prison. That is why they are significant: because in this landscape, next to what stands in the center of a national controversy and international scandal, these bits and pieces plucked from a normal life are nothing short of bizarre.

4/27/07

Besides our escorts and the guards who check us before we go into the prison, we don't interact too much with the military here, even though they are obviously a huge presence on the base. But the little interaction we do have is sometimes quite memorable. Today, our bus was stopped at the usual security checkpoint, and we were all waiting around for the army guys to get on the bus and check everyone's ID badges. As they were leaving, our interpreter, who spends most of his time in Guantánamo working with the lawyers and who's an old hand at the procedures here, said sharply, "Honor bound!" Caught off guard at being addressed by a civilian in this way, one of the army guys responded, "To defend freedom, SIR!" Our interpreter looked at our startled faces with a somewhat smug smile on his face. That phrase, usually exchanged between military

officers, is the motto of the military here in Guantánamo and is considered the equivalent of a salute. It is custom to respond with the end of the phrase whenever the beginning is uttered.

Our escorts are polite but purposefully detached. At times I got the sense that the detachment was from us *and* from the rest of the world. I asked one military official whether or not he watches the news channels, like CNN or CNBC, and what he thinks when he sees them reporting on Guantánamo. Since the coverage on those channels is typically more negative than positive, I was trying to gauge whether or not he was affected or persuaded by the D.C. commentaries. "I don't really like watching that stuff," replied the man who guards Guantánamo for his job. "I'm not very political."

4/29/07

It's Sunday, so tomorrow we begin the routine of client meetings again. I thought I would take some time today to describe what the process of getting to a meeting is like. It begins at 7:40, when we board the bus from our living quarters (called the "Combined Bachelor's Quarters," or "CBQ," for short). Usually, each person will get a room to themselves with four beds. On my visit, renovations were happening and the CBQ was already crowded with others stopping through Guantánamo, so we shared rooms with other habeas counsel. Once we all board the bus, we bump along for ten minutes until we get to the ferry, which takes us to the other side of the island, the side that houses the prison. The ferry ride takes about twenty minutes and as soon as we step off the boat we are greeted by our military escorts, who remain with us for the rest of the day. They bring us to each camp in the prison, they eat lunch with us, they drive us back in a white school bus to the ferry when we are done. They know nothing about us or our clients. Everything—what we are allowed to see, who we are allowed to talk to, where we are allowed to go—is tightly controlled. At times, I got the weird feeling that I was a part of some odd tour group, our military

escorts like paranoid guides afraid that we'll do something to disturb the native scenery, the status quo.

We stop at McDonald's for breakfast. I don't usually have an appetite, so I just have coffee. There is a long list of what we cannot bring into a meeting but we are at least allowed to bring food, so we buy bottles of water and tea for our client. Wells has pistachios, Turkish Delight, and some other candy in a plastic bag. Breakfast is subdued; attorneys fill out some last-minute request forms and review their notes. I stare distractedly at the Subway across the street, thinking about the upcoming meeting.

Back on the bus, we are told in which camp we will be having our client visits. Guantánamo is made up of several camps now, including the well publicized Camp Delta and the newly opened Camp VI, built as a permanent facility. Modeled after a supermax prison, Camp VI is punishing in every respect, a windowless gulag that rises up behind imposing razor wire. Detainees are kept in steel cells for twenty-two hours each day, sometimes all twenty-four hours if the guards don't take them out for their recreation time. Because they are completely isolated from one another, the men spend their time pacing their rooms, reading and re-reading their Qurans, staring at the wall, and pacing their rooms some more. The only way to communicate with another person is to crawl down to the food slot in the door, the one opening in the room, and yell out to other detainees. We met in Camp VI on my second day. Our client stared at the floor for most of the meeting. Though I did not see the cells, the chilling oppressiveness and loneliness of the place was penetrating and it weighed on me like a stack of bricks, even though I was there for only a couple of hours. Some men have been there for quite some time.

When we get to the camp for our meeting, we get off the bus and wait to go through security. It is painfully hot outside as the sun beats down. Men can wear short sleeves into the

meeting, but I wear a long skirt and a shirt that covers my arms. My hair is tucked into a head covering. Though we are not required to, I do this out of respect for our client. It is a small gesture, but in an alien place where guards spit on the Quran, flush it down the toilet, and scream obscenities at our clients for their religion and their culture, I hope that my covering at least makes them a little less uncomfortable. We are only allowed to take legal documents and blank paper into our meetings. Staples, paper clips, and papers with the names of other prisoners are all forbidden. Photographs of family members, a newspaper article on Guantánamo, a letter from a father or a daughter—all must be submitted to the military for review before we can show it to our client.

After we clear security, we are escorted through the prison to the door of the meeting room. Behind the door is a man whom we'll be seeing for the first time. We don't know what he looks like, how he will react to us, or if he will even look at us. All we know is that his feet will be chained to the floor. Our interpreter pushes open the door and extends his hand in a handshake almost immediately. I take a breath and walk in, rehearsing the only thing I know in Arabic. Salaam Aleykum—Peace be unto you.

4/30/07

Today, the third day, was our last day of client visits and it was especially difficult and frustrating. The military told us that one of our clients has refused to see us. Experience has taught the lawyers to question these refusals but nevertheless, the anxiety and uneasiness has lingered all day.

We get only two and a half hours in the morning and in the afternoon we get three and a half hours. It is so ridiculous it is almost funny: two and a half hours every three or four months, sometimes every year or even every five years. As I sit in the room with our other client, I wonder

what he may have gone through for this short meeting. A soldier may have woken him up at five or six in the morning, shackled and hooded him and roughly pushed and dragged him to this room, where he may have been waiting for two hours. They may have told him that he was meeting with interrogators, so immediately our presence is suspicious. If he was moved from one camp to another for our meeting, he may have gone through an even longer process, just to sit across the table from us while we talk about what's happening in the courts in D.C., occurrences so remote and unconnected to his daily life of frustrations and indignities. Who knows? I wonder—is it all worth it for these men to have this brief time with us? Are we helping? Or should we not be surprised anymore at what we learn at Guantánamo?

In general, a meeting goes well if our client talks to us, looks at our faces, if we find out from him that he is not sick, is doing "okay." But doing okay in a place like Guantánamo, in a cell as suffocating and isolating as the ones in Camp VI, does not actually mean anything. How can you convey in shorthand how you feel to a stranger sitting across from you except to say that you are doing okay, that at least you are not yet hospitalized, dying, utterly depressed, or going crazy from being held in isolation for over two years? Unclassified notes reveal from other visits that one attorney's client tried to commit suicide during his meeting; another's client has been on hunger strike and has suffered a feeding tube being inserted and yanked out twice a day every day for a year and a half; another's client is beaten by guards almost daily because he talks back to them—the only defense he has against their riot gear, their mace and their clubs.

So when a client sits across from you and says he's okay and he seems lucid and maybe smiles once or twice, you feel a tiny bit of relief. But then you walk out of that meeting and think about it some more and it seems *insane* to feel such relief because no matter what they tell their attorney, it's hard to believe that anyone who has been down in Guantánamo for five years is

"okay." When you think about it, the "I'm okay" response is almost disturbing because it suggests resignation and acceptance for those conditions, conditions which, for everywhere else in the world are *not* okay but rather, unthinkable and appalling. There are those, however, like our client from the first day, who are at peace with their situation. There are those who still smile, laugh, and crack jokes during meetings. Their spirit and their strength are an inspiration, and all you can do is admire their unbeatable character, hoping that Guantánamo will never take that out of them.

4/30/07

As we drive out of the prison complex, I look back at the fence encircling the place. There are various signs advertising the military's presence, signs that say "JTF-GTMO" (short for Joint Task Force- Guantánamo, because Guantánamo is jointly operated by all five branches of the military), signs alerting the visitor that they are entering a certain camp, and of course, the ubiquitous sign, "Honor bound to defend freedom." There is also another prominent sign that informs the visitor of Guantánamo's "Value of the Week." Last week it was "PRIDE." Once out of earshot of the military, I pointed out that ironically, pride was also one of the seven deadly sins. This week, I notice, they chose to go with "DUTY," fortunately a less controversial value.

5/1/07

I am at the Fort Lauderdale airport, having survived my flight from Guantánamo in the tiny, sputtering, ten-passenger charter plane. When I land in New York and when I get back to my apartment, friends will ask me how it was, and I'm still trying to figure out what to say.

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It has been such an experience being in Guantánamo, seeing clients face-to-face and hearing the stories that never make it into the lofty academic rhetoric against this prison. These stories of our clients and the daily suffering they endure are just as compelling reasons for closing down the prison as any legal argument. You don't need to understand constitutional law to know that there is something deeply, deeply wrong with holding human beings in such a place.

In Guantánamo, I had little access to internet so I feel especially cut off from what is happening at CCR. In D.C. today, almost a hundred attorneys representing detainees are congregating on the Hill, meeting with senators and representatives to urge them to support a bill that could restore some rights for our clients. That would be a tremendous victory. In Guantánamo today, that important meeting does not exist. Hunger strikes continue, isolation continues, punishments and abuses continue.

To the prisoners, their world goes on in parallel with our world out here and, like oil and water, the two do not converge except for the briefest moments when we are able to make it down to the base. CCR's goal, the goal of the hundreds of attorneys who have come to Guantánamo and who have seen the devastating effects of this prison, *my* goal, is to make those worlds converge. Our goal is to make it so that the condemnation of Guantánamo, the condemnation of the treatment and conditions of the men still languishing at Guantánamo, is actually *felt* in Guantánamo and effects change within its walls. To make Guantánamo and its abuses transparent is the first step to penetrating the bubble that seems to surround the whole of the military base. We hope that if our voices out here are strong enough, the world's disapproval might crack the foundation and finally bring down the walls of this nightmarish prison in the middle of the calm Caribbean Sea.

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