Ramzi Kassem

Imposture

Urban Virginia. The secure facility where the U.S. Government keeps what passes for evidence against the men imprisoned at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. After reviewing classified documents in some of my clients' cases, I stepped out into the cool fall night and immediately spotted a band of men in bright orange jumpsuits merrily crossing the street. A moment of initial shock, then a sobering thought set in—this was Halloween night, and "Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantánamo Bay" had scored a box office smash earlier in the year.

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Combined Bachelor Quarters, Leeward Side, U.S. Naval Station at Guantánamo Bay. Motel-grade lodging where the volunteer lawyers are housed during base visits to meet with detainee clients. Accommodations far less frugal than the name conjures. I go for a walk at dusk wearing short sleeves, forgetting that at GTMO, the night belongs to ravenous mosquitoes. On a dimly lit, dusty pathway leading to a small, secluded and picturesque Caribbean beach, I'm approached by two haggard-looking men. In rapid-fire Spanish, they ask if I'm Cuban, tell me they're refugees from the other side of the island, that they want people in the United States to know they're stuck here at the base. They abruptly walk away when they see the oncoming headlights of what might be a military police vehicle.

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Aboard the morning ferry crossing the bay. The prison camps are on the other side. One of the lawyers asks me why I'm wearing a suit in the dense tropical humidity. Another attorney answers that he thinks he should start wearing a suit as well. After all, he wears one for his clients States-side, why not follow the same protocol in Cuba? A third lawyer jokes that as an Arab I have to wear a suit, lest the military guards mistake me for a detainee and refuse to let me out of the prison camp at the end of my client meeting.

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McDonald's, Windward Side. The lawyers are purchasing the usual heart-hostile, Muslim-compatible fare for their clients who are not on hunger strike. This typically consists of egg 'n cheese biscuits, hash browns, apple pies, coffee and juice. Our military escort is going around informing attorneys which of their clients agreed to meet with them and which ones declined. Todd is his first name, though he is under orders not to share it with detainees' lawyers; his Velcro nametags have been removed from his uniform.

Todd approaches me and asks in a hushed tone how my client ISN 87471 is doing. He asks me to let ISN 87471 know that Tarek sends his regards. Todd explains that back when he was on cellblock guard duty, he tried to treat the prisoners decently. My client and the other detainees had

fondly renamed him Tarek. Now that he's been reassigned to escort duty, Tarek often worries about how the detainees are faring with the other guards.

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Sally port, Camp Five. The sun is blazing bright. This is where inbound attorneys and interpreters are frisked and wanded down by military guards before entering the prison camp's perimeter. We are informed that contraband comes in numerous and unpredictable guises. Its avatars have included such disparate items as straws, socks, human rights reports, thermal underwear, and spoons (but sporks are okay). Accordingly, bags of food are searched and their caloric content inventoried; legal papers are scanned one by one.

A high-ranking officer passes by on his way out of the camp. As he is saluted by the guards who were searching me he says, "Honor bound" and they respond "To defend freedom, sir!"—thereby completing the Guantánamo detention operations group's motto. On this island, freedom has become the jailor's salutation.

Though the rest of the lawyers have been dropped off at other camps for their meetings and I am alone, a sally port sentinel asks if I am an interpreter for one of the attorneys.

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Camp Five entrance, inside the wire. A guard, his name tag covered with black masking tape, meets me at the entrance point to the imposing grey concrete structure. The guards cover their names and use call signs amongst themselves to prevent prisoners from learning their true identities. The authorities say this is necessary to forestall future retaliation by the prisoners after they are released; some of the more cynical lawyers say the guards are ordered to cover their names to avoid liability for abuses perpetrated.

The guard asks me for my call sign. I look befuddled. He asks which agency I represent. The head guard intervenes and clarifies that I am habeas counsel, not U.S. Government. I am ushered on to another guard, stationed inside the entry point. The prison is kept uncomfortably cold. That guard leads the way to a thick steel door and then turns around and asks at what restraint level I'd like the detainee to be placed. For a split second, I am tempted to request the usual, just to see what that might be. The head guard's voice crackles into my escort's earpiece—the guard nods: habeas counsel.

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The man they call ISN 87471 is seated on a steel chair in the middle of a small, brightly lit room surrounded by barren walls and under the constant gaze of a surveillance camera. He is shackled to a steel loop jutting out of the floor and is wearing an orange jumpsuit which, at Guantánamo, denotes punishment status. Such privileges as a mattress or thermal underwear have been taken away from him because he has persisted in his hunger strike in protest of his indefinite

imprisonment. He has explained that he will remain on strike until the U.S. Government ceases to refer to him an enemy combatant and returns him to his homeland.

The years on hunger strike have taken their toll on my client—he is emaciated in the extreme and bruises are still visible on his face from a recent run-in with the riot squads routinely deployed at Guantánamo to intimidate prisoners.

ISN 87471 prefers to go by his given name or by Abu Aisha—father of Aisha. His mother's name was Aisha and, when the thought of freedom finds its way into his cell, he fantasizes about marrying, begetting a daughter, and naming her Aisha in honor of his mother.

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In our initial encounter over two years ago, Abu Aisha was wary. Prior to meeting me, the last Arab-American he had seen was in the Bagram prison in Afghanistan. My client had been taken there following his abduction in Pakistan and rendition to the U.S. military, in exchange for the usual hefty ransom. The Arab-American man spent their first two meetings pretending to be a humanitarian aid worker interested in my client's conditions. He subsequently revealed himself to be an intelligence agent and oversaw interrogation sessions too numerous to count where Abu Aisha was beaten and otherwise tortured. The agent relished threatening to send my client to Egypt or Israel, "where they like to use men like women."

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Today, Abu Aisha recalls how not so long ago Guantánamo interrogators would tell him and the other prisoners that their attorneys were "Jews and homosexuals." The idea was that devout Muslims would not wish to deal with such people. Abu Aisha paused, then scoffed—"So what if they're Jews?"

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Abu Aisha and I conclude our meeting shortly before prayer time. Before we part, he tells me that most Guantánamo prisoners only kneel twice during prayer in Cuba because they consider themselves travelers in this land, individuals here transiently who will soon return home. Abu Aisha confides that he has recently reverted to the default practice of kneeling four times.