PARADISE

by Anant Raut

It was the part of the afternoon that pops the thermometers in Guantánamo from "Sweltering" to "Broiling," yet that hardly seemed to faze the female soldier jogging past our van.

"Around here, we call it the '2-9-2,'" yelled our escort from the front, struggling to be heard over the noise of the van willing itself up the steep road to the prison camps.

"What's that?"

"Girls who are '2's on the mainland are '9's here, but go back home and are '2's again."

"Fascinating." Scrub and cacti sloped down in all directions. Off in the distance, the blades of three wind turbines spun lazily, cranking out some small fraction of the base's energy needs.

"Yeah, me and a couple of buddies were thinking of printing up T-shirts that said, 'You're One Plane Flight Away From Being Ugly Again.'" He snickered and slapped the steering wheel.

"I can't think of any possible downside to that plan."

A stern look from the more senior soldier sitting behind him sobered him quickly, but laughed he had, because when you're barely twenty, twenty-one, that kind of stuff is funny. These are the boys we send to fight and die for our causes.

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"You know we don't hate all of the guards here," Abdullah had told me during our last visit.

I leaned forward in my green plastic lawn chair towards the card table that separated us in the interview trailer. "You don't?"

He shook his head. "The ones that treat us with respect, we treat with respect. They're just doing a job. We understand that."

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With a grateful screech, our van pulled over to the side of the road. They were moving prisoners around in Camp Echo, and needed us to stand down for about fifteen minutes.

Our translator tapped me and my colleague on the arm and gestured to a rustle of brown by the side of the road.

"Hey look," said our more senior escort. "It's Stubby."

An iguana darted out onto the roadway, stared down the van, and then walked cockily over to the other side. Where his tail should have been dragging was a stump followed by mystery and folklore. Hence the name.

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I rocked back and forth on my heels, trying to generate a breeze, as the guards at the camp entrance went through my bag. I nodded at a guard standing cleverly in the shade; she nodded politely back.

"How's it going?" I called out.

"Fine, sir."

"How long you been in Paradise?"

"Too long, sir."

"Watch the Super Bowl last night?"

"I don't care for football, sir."

A glance at the Velcro patch where her name should have been, and I remembered that the guards were expressly instructed not to reveal any personal information, not to the prisoners, not even to their lawyers. Idly, I wondered how far I could take it. ("Is that the ocean?" "I can neither confirm nor deny that sir." "Does November come before December?" "Never cared much for calendars, sir." "Do the planets move in elliptical orbits?" "I don't subscribe to Keplerian motion, sir.")

"Who are you here to see?" asked the guard with the clipboard. You knew a guard was important if he was carrying a clipboard.

"Abdullah al-Anazi."

The guard looked up at me with exasperation. I knew what was coming next—I provoked it every time.

"We only go by numbers around here."

"514."

The guard began looking down his sheet once more.

"The double amputee."

* * *

"Yeah, Stubby's an ornery one alright!" our driver chortled.

"Look at the way he looks at you, look at him," said the second escort, watching him saunter nonchalantly across the road. "He ain't afraid of nobody."

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"This one's real peaceful," the guard told us as he unlocked the door. "You won't have any problems with this one."

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"Our paralegal Nicole was down at the beach one time and one of them came right up to her and ate all of her grapes," said my colleague.

"They love sugar," said the older escort. "They can smell it. One time, I had a butterscotch in my mouth. Stubby chased me clear cross a parking lot for it."

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"Can you still walk on those?"

Abdullah had hiked up the khaki legs of his prison uniform. His prosthetic legs were held together with duct tape, and showing more signs of cracking. They were the same broken pair he'd had for three years. They had never been fitted properly.

When he'd asked, he was told he could get new ones "through [his] interrogators."

"Not all the time," he said. "But I can manage. Thank Allah, they keep me in a ground floor cell."

"We submitted the affidavit from Dr. Nicholl," I told him. After I had described the condition of Abdullah's prosthetics and confinement to a UK physician, he had written an extensive affidavit on his own volition, laying out the basic health and exercise requirements for new amputees, none of which were being provided to Abdullah. "Predictably, there's been no response."

Abdullah unfastened one of his prosthetics so that I could get a better look. New cracks were beginning to form around the outer lip. I was pulling it closer to my face when I felt it go rigid in my hand. I looked down. The leg shackle fastened around the plastic ankle was pulled taut.

I handed Abdullah his leg back so that he could reshackle himself. "The DOD says that you all are getting two hours of exercise a day. Is that right?"

He laughed. "It's more like two two-hour blocks every three days. And you never know when you'll get it. Sometimes they'll wake you up in the middle of the night to go exercise."

He continued. "It's basically a wire mesh cage. You can walk back and forth inside of it. If you say anything to any of the guards along the way, they'll take you back to your cell. If you touch any of the wire mesh walls while you're inside the cage, they'll take you back to your cell."

"So what do you do?"

"You walk back and forth."

"For two hours?! You can't do anything else?"

"Sometimes there's a ball."

"Oh, that's nice."

"But the ball can't touch any of the wire mesh walls, or—"

"—they'll take you back to your cell. Got it. What are you supposed to do with the ball, then?"

"Look at it, I suppose?"

* * *

"So what did you do?" asked our translator.

"I gave him the butterscotch and he went away," responded our escort. "I had to."

"You can't touch these bastards," said our driver, shaking his head in disgust. "They're a protected species." Iguanas are protected by the Fish & Wildlife Service under the Endangered Species Act, which is rigorously enforced on the base. Violations can result in criminal penalties of up to $50,000 or imprisonment for one year. "Now they're freakin' everywhere."

"Even if you accidentally run over one of them, it's still a ten thousand dollar fine," added our driver.

We looked at the rock where Stubby was sitting. He was ugly and brown, his scales the color of aged parchment, stained with asymmetric dark blots. A long, snaked tongue occasionally slithered in and out. He didn't make a sound, hardly even moved but for the rhythmic swelling of his torso, but his beady little black eyes fixed us with a look of pure malice.

"But what if you just ran over one in the middle of the night?" asked our translator. "Who's going to know?"

"No sir," countered our driver. "If you failed to report it, you'd be in even bigger trouble."

"Oh, c'mon," cajoled our translator. "How's anyone ever going to find out?"

The older soldier dismissed that thought with a violent shake of his head. "The law's the law. They take that stuff pretty seriously around here."

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"I mean—well, in a nutshell, they're saying the new law says that you have no rights in the courts, not even the right to argue that you don't deserve to be here. And we're arguing that's unconstitutional, and so we're right back to where we were in 2004." I flipped in frustration through the stack of cases in my hand, searching for something more intelligent to say.

Overhead, the air conditioning unit in our interview trailer droned soporifically. A cockroach scurried by my foot.

Abdullah was the first to break the silence. "Do you want to hear a joke?"

I looked up. "Sure."

"This one is very popular among the brothers right now. There's a contest, okay, between Israel, England, and the United States, to see who can go into the jungle and bring back a lion the fastest.

"England goes first. Two hours later, they come out with a lion. Israel goes next, and one hour later, they come out with a lion.

"Then it's the United States' turn. They go into the jungle. One hour passes. Two hours pass. Three hours pass. Night is beginning to fall, and the judges are getting worried. So they go in after them to find out what happened.

"Fifty meters in, they find the Americans. Two of them are holding a donkey, and the third one is beating it until it confesses that it's a lion."

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"Look, I feel bad for some of these guys, I really do," said the Staff Judge Advocate, oblivious to my previous ten minutes of facts and figures. It was the previous day, eating lunch at one of the tables outside of the Naval Exchange, where my colleague and I had chanced into a conversation with him as he stopped to say hello to our escort. "The guys who have been cleared to leave but whose countries won't take them back, I feel bad for. But I have no sympathy for the rest of these guys."

"If they hadn't done something wrong, they wouldn't be here."

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Abdullah was caught fighting coalition forces in the Tora Bora mountains, injured during a bombing raid, and subsequently shipped to Guantánamo. At least, that's what the government says he did, when forced to file some sort of allegations with our judge.

But the curious thing is, they don't have any corroborating evidence. Not one iota. All they have is the word of the warlords who picked him up off of a hospital bed as he was recovering from the first of two amputations engendered while seeking refuge in a neighboring country at the wrong time, the same warlords whom the U.S. paid $5,000 and never saw again.

In fact, the main reason Abdullah is still there is a psychological "evaluation" by someone of unspecified qualifications, who wrote that the loss of his legs makes Abdullah an ideal candidate for suicide bombing recruitment.

Which presents an interesting end game. Because either the U.S. intends to hold Abdullah for the remainder of his natural life for falling victim to a U.S. bomb.

Or they're waiting for his legs to grow back.

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"Well," I said as we gathered our papers and collected our trash, "I'll file another motion with the Magistrate Judge, and follow up with the DOJ about why you're not getting new prosthetics. . ."

Abdullah cut me off with a wave of his hand, as if to say, Fine. Whatever makes you feel better.

We exchanged farewells in Arabic, and then I knocked on the door. It opened just enough for me to make out the face of the shade-favoring female soldier.

"Prisoner transfer," she said in clipped tones. "You'll have to hang out here for ten minutes." She then pulled the door closed tightly. A moment later, we heard the bolt slide back into place.

Well, this is terribly awkward, I thought. We had finished saying our goodbyes, yet there we all were again. Abdullah waved the translator over and whispered something in his ear; our translator laughed.

"What did he say?"

"He wants to know, are you being held here without charges too?"

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Under intense pressure from habeas attorneys, Guantánamo officials did create a (short-lived) camp for those prisoners whom they realized were not combatants, but had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. These prisoners were given more freedoms, too; they could walk around their fenced-in yard, stare out at the ocean, and even watch movies. Rather than admit

outright error, they kept the camp a little ways off from the other camps. That way, the inhabitants still looked like prisoners, but prisoners with considerably more privileges.

The name of the camp?

Iguana.