

Patricia Bronte

It was supposed to be a birthday celebration. My client—I'll call him Ali—was turning twenty-nine, and I timed my visit so that we could celebrate together. It was Ali's sixth birthday behind the razor wire at Guantánamo.

Ali's father died about twenty years ago, so his mother raised Ali and his brothers and sisters on her own. But five and a half years after Ali arrived at Guantánamo, his mother was diagnosed with cancer. Ali's siblings did not want me to tell Ali at first, so I explained the situation to a sympathetic JAG officer at the base and requested a phone call between Ali and his mother. The officer did what he could but was unable to relax the government's requirement that the mother travel to the U.S. embassy in Riyadh so that the call could be placed on a secure phone line—an impossibility, given the mother's weakened condition.

Just before I left Chicago for the birthday meeting, Ali's brother told me the sad news: Ali's mother had died. I told the guards I had sad news to impart, and they allowed me to meet with Ali through the lunch hour. My translator considerably abstained from the meeting so that Ali—who has taught himself English and several other languages during his tenure at Guantánamo—might feel less awkward expressing his grief. Ali and I spent five hours together, sometimes talking, sometimes not.

About three weeks later, I received an angry letter from the Department of Justice accusing me of "rais[ing] security concerns" and violating the court's protective order by telling Ali about his mother's death "without providing advance notice to Guantanamo Bay staff or obtaining their approval." So not only was Ali prevented from saying goodbye to his mother (or knowing why the U.S. has held him since January 16, 2002). According to the government, Ali had no right to know that his mother was dead, unless and until his jailers approved the message.

Ali remains philosophical and—amazingly—friendly with his American guards, interrogators, and lawyers. Who among us could behave the same way in his shoes?

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