

Habeas on the Gate:
The Unlikely Friendship Between a Guantánamo Detainee and a Park Avenue Lawyer
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“We’ll be watching,” the sergeant said, pointing at a video monitor inside Camp Echo’s guard booth, “for your protection.” The monitor showed a grainy image of a table and chairs in a small room. To one side was a tiny cell, partially hidden behind a steel mesh wall. I was about to have my first meeting with a Guantánamo Bay detainee in a room just like that.

“You have any questions before you go in?” the sergeant asked. I certainly did. Donald Rumsfeld had said that the detainees were “among the most dangerous, best-trained vicious killers on the face of the Earth.” President Bush had said that they had been “trying to kill Americans.” The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had said they would chew through hydraulic cables to bring down airplanes. I didn’t buy that kind of rhetoric wholesale, but it wasn’t hard to imagine that there were at least some nasty characters among the Guantánamo prisoners. It was impossible not to wonder if I was going to meet one.

These questions had been on my mind ever since my corporate law firm had agreed to represent six Bahraini detainees several months earlier. According to a document the government provided to us under court order, the client I was about to see had received military training in Afghanistan, had gone to Bosnia to fight and had been arrested in connection with a bombing in Saudi Arabia. A day earlier, on the small prop plane that ferried us to Guantánamo from Fort Lauderdale, I read news stories from the Internet, describing this man as an al Qaeda recruiter. For a moment, I pictured myself sitting alone with a big, bearded, menacing Arab who would reach across the table for my throat.

Figuring that the sergeant was just asking if I had questions about logistics, I said I was ready. A military guard escorted my interpreter, Karim, and me away from the centrally located

guard booth, and toward one of a series of small wooden buildings that were spread out around Camp Echo's gravel compound. The buildings were on short stilts and, despite resembling low-rent beach cabanas, they housed interview rooms and cells like the one on the monitor. Beyond the buildings, and surrounding the camp, were several fifteen-foot-tall chain-link fences, each topped by razor wire and covered with green tarps, evidently to keep people from looking in or out. We walked up to one of the buildings, where a guard held the door slightly ajar. I nodded to him and, more tentatively than I might have liked, went inside.

Jumah Al Dossari sat at a table, flanked by guards. He saw me and his face broke into a warm smile. As I walked toward him, I sized him up, a habit I had developed as a kid on public school playgrounds in New York City. I guessed he was about five feet, six inches and 140 pounds—not exactly a gladiator's build. I started to feel a little stupid for having worried about meeting a vicious killer. Besides having a short beard, Jumah didn't match my overwrought mental image at all.

One of Jumah's ankles was shackled to a bolt that was attached to the floor. He struggled to get half-way to his feet. We shook hands. "Assalamu alaikum," I said. Having exhausted my Arabic, I looked to Karim for help, "I'm Josh Colangelo. I'm your lawyer. It's very good to meet you."

"Hello, I am Jumah," he said in heavily accented English, before shaking hands with Karim and switching to Arabic.

"Thank you for coming. I have been waiting for your visit. Please sit," he said, gesturing to the table. Jumah was doing his best to be a gracious host despite his shackles and our surroundings.

Once we sat down, the guards left.

“Do I understand correctly, then, that you received my letter?” I asked, referring to correspondence I had sent two months earlier. Jumah nodded.

“As I said in my letter,” I continued, “I’m a lawyer with a firm called Dorsey & Whitney. I work in New York. Your brother, Khaled, asked my law firm to represent you. When did you find out that you would be seeing me today?”

“This morning they told me I was moving, but they did not say why.”

“I’m sorry about that. Do you normally stay somewhere else?”

“Yes, I am in Camp 5.” Jumah gestured to the cell that sat two feet away from us, sealed off from the rest of the room by a steel mesh wall. “This is worse than Camp 5.”

The cell next to us couldn’t have been much smaller. The main section of it was as long as the concrete slab that served as a bed and no wider than five feet. The cell had another small area for a shower, but it was locked off by a heavy steel door. As there was nothing in the room except the cell and our meeting area, anyone spending a night there would be completely alone—except for the remarkably loud drone of an air conditioner that must have been on its last legs.

“I’m sorry that you have to stay in a worse place than usual just to see your lawyer.”

Jumah smiled and waved his hand as if to say that I shouldn’t worry about such inconveniences—again, the gracious host.

One thing I had been worrying about was whether Jumah would be able to trust a thirty-something, white, short-haired American who showed up at Guantánamo claiming to be his lawyer. It seemed likely that the only people fitting my description he had seen over the prior thirty-two months were guards, interrogators and the like. Maybe he would think that this was just some CIA agent’s ruse.

I attacked that issue first. “I thought it might be hard for you to believe it was really Khaled who sent me here. So, I asked him to tell me a few personal details about you that only people close to you would know. Do you mind if I share those details with you?”

“No, please tell me.”

“Khaled said that when you were a child, your favorite beach was Half Moon Beach.”

Jumah smiled as if savoring a memory. “Yes, Half Moon Beach,” he said in English.

“Khaled said that he can’t wait to go there with you when you get home.”

“Please tell him that I look forward to doing the same.”

“Khaled also told me that you loved the movie Jumanji.” Jumah smiled again. “I am a little embarrassed to say that I asked if it was from somewhere in the Middle East, and Khaled had to tell me that it’s an American movie.”

Jumah laughed. “You don’t know this movie?”

“No, I’ve never seen it.” I had Googled the film and learned that it starred Robin Williams and was about kids playing a board game. It wasn’t my kind of cinema, and it had struck me as an odd favorite for a supposed jihadist.

“You should see it,” Jumah said, “it’s very good.”

“You’re not saying that just because the title sounds like your name?” I was surprised to find myself teasing Jumah—even gently—considering that I had just met him and, moments earlier, I was worrying he might attack me. Jumah’s manner was so friendly, I had started to feel at ease almost without noticing.

Jumah laughed, “No, I promise it is good.”

“I’ll have to watch it when I get home.”

As we spoke, I wondered what personal details I would tell a lawyer if my younger brother were detained thousands of miles from home by a foreign country's army. Maybe it would be that whenever we played the card game "spit" as young kids, the loser accused the winner of cheating.

"Jumah, unless you have questions about what Khaled told me, I would like to explain why we agreed to represent you."

"Yes, that would be good," he said.

"I don't need to tell you that the government has classified you as an 'enemy combatant.' The government claims it can hold anyone it calls an enemy combatant in jail forever without a trial. The government claims that enemy combatants do not have any rights at all—but I guess you know that already. Now, you might disagree, Jumah, but personally, I don't think that's right." Jumah chuckled and nodded.

"If someone might be in jail for life," I continued, "I believe the person deserves at least a fair hearing to determine if he has done something wrong. My law firm feels the same way, and that's why we agreed to represent you. It's really as simple as that."

"I am very grateful to you and your law firm," he said.

"You're welcome, but we believe that we're obliged to provide legal help to people who would not have it otherwise. We call it pro bono work, which means that we aren't paid for what we do." For a minute, I felt like I was trying to sell an idealistic law student on the idea of working for my firm because it had a social conscience. I felt a flush of pride, reflecting on the fact that I was actually telling the truth.

"I am still grateful," Jumah said. "In your letter you said that there was a court case for the detainees. Can you explain this?" he asked.

“Sure. In June of this year, the Supreme Court—the highest court in America—ruled that detainees at Guantánamo can bring court cases. Specifically, the Supreme Court said detainees are entitled to bring habeas corpus petitions. A habeas petition is made by someone who is in jail. The petition requires the government to produce evidence in court, showing there is a legitimate reason for holding the person. The person can respond to the government’s evidence and submit his own. Then, a court decides if the person should be held in jail.”

“But isn’t the Supreme Court part of the government? If the government says we have no rights, how can the Supreme Court say something else?”

“Wait,” I said with mock exasperation. “Are you asking me hard questions already? Nobody told me I’d have to answer hard questions.”

Jumah laughed. “Yes, I have many hard questions.”

“Okay, let me try to answer. You’re right that the Supreme Court is part of the government. But if I say the government claims you have no rights, I’m actually talking about the president. The Supreme Court and the president are both part of the government, but they’re separate. Under some circumstances, the Supreme Court can tell the president what to do.”

Not knowing how much sense this would make to someone who grew up in a Middle Eastern monarchy, I drew a diagram, trying to illustrate the separation of powers doctrine. The visual arts have never been a strong suit, but Jumah seemed satisfied.

“I can make one of these...petitions?”

“Actually, we’ve already brought habeas petitions for you and the other Bahrainis.”

“Thank you. What evidence has the government shown to the court about me?”

“Well, nothing yet. We still have some preliminary issues to resolve, but we hope to have hearings relatively soon.”

In fact, the government had just made a motion to ask that our petitions be dismissed, arguing that the Supreme Court decision was simply a formality that did not give the detainees any rights. I decided against trying to explain motion practice just yet because we had already covered some nuanced ground and I didn't want Jumah to think we were stopped in our tracks before even starting.

"I'd like to explain some other things about our work. In America, anything that a lawyer and client talk about is confidential. The court has ruled that the right to confidentiality applies here. I will do everything I can to preserve that confidentiality, but unfortunately I can't guarantee it."

I pointed to the camera that was mounted on the ceiling. "The military said the camera records only visual images, but I have no way to verify if that's true."

I gestured toward the impressive collection of wires that were attached to the walls of our meeting area. Some led to an intercom, some to a telephone and some to a light fixture, but the purpose of others was harder to determine. "I've been told there is no listening device here. Without wanting to be paranoid, I can't be sure of that either.

"Also, the government says anything you tell me is considered classified because it could relate to national security. If information is considered classified, that means it cannot be disclosed to the public. It's secret."

"Anything I say is secret?" Jumah asked.

"Anything."

"Even if I just tell you that Jumanji is good?"

"Your movie reviews are secret."

"What if I say that my foot hurts?"

“Yeah, that’s secret too,” I said.

Jumah looked amused. “I must be very important to have so many secrets.”

“Now, because everything you say is classified or secret, if I write down your words, my notes become secret. At the end of our meeting, I will be required to hand over my notes to the military. The military is not supposed to read them. They are supposed to send them to what is called a ‘secure facility’ in America, where I will be able to review them. But, again, I cannot guarantee that my notes won’t be read. So, if you want to say something that you don’t want me to write down, please tell me.

“There may be times when I will want to disclose your words to the government of Bahrain or your family or maybe to the press. To do that, I will have to ask a special government team to review my notes to determine if they really are classified. That team is not supposed to share anything it sees with the lawyers who are representing the military in your court case. But, again, if there is something you don’t want me to show to the special government team, just let me know.”

He wasn’t fazed. “I have nothing to hide.”

I looked down and noticed a plastic bag near my feet that I had forgotten about entirely. It was filled with items from Sahadi’s, a Middle Eastern specialty shop in Brooklyn.

“Jumah, I realize it might threaten national security, but they actually let us bring in food. Would you like to eat something?”

“If you eat with me.”

I took out pastries, dried fruit, cookies and other things that had seemed likely to survive the day-long trip to Cuba. I motioned to Jumah to eat. He motioned to Karim and me to eat. The stand-off lasted for a moment. Then, we all grabbed stuff and started passing it around.

It seemed like a good time to find out if Jumah would be willing to tell me about himself.

“Jumah, if you don’t know it already, you are going to find out that lawyers can be really boring. I’m sorry to say that your lawyer is no exception. Sometimes, I ask very annoying questions until I get all the information I need. I don’t do it to make people miserable. It’s just that lawyers need to be very precise sometimes in what they say about their clients. How would you feel if I asked you some of those boring, annoying questions now?”

“Tell me what you want to know.”

“Would you tell me about your family?” I hoped letting him know he had control over our conversation might distinguish me from an interrogator. I also hoped that talking about family would be a safe place to start. It was.

“My grandfather was a tribal chief in Bahrain,” Jumah said. “My father had a construction company in Saudi Arabia, where I grew up.” Jumah had joint Saudi Arabian/Bahraini citizenship. Bahrain sits off the coast of Saudi Arabia and the two countries are linked by a causeway. “I have several brothers and sisters. One of my sisters married a Bahraini prince. I was married when I was twenty-one, but we were divorced in 2000.”

“I apologize for my ignorance, but is divorce common in Saudi?” I asked.

“Before it was not, but it is more common now. My marriage was not good. I was very young and there wasn’t enough feeling in it.”

“Divorce is hard.”

“Were you divorced?” he asked.

“No, I’ve never been married, but my parents made everyone pretty miserable when they got divorced. I was a young kid.”

Jumah nodded and said that he had a nine-year old daughter named Noora. He looked at the table for a moment or two, evidently thinking about her. Looking back up and with plaintive irony he said, in English, “Don’t worry, be happy,” before going quiet again.

The absurd image of Bobby McFerrin handing out buttons with smiley faces to detainees flashed in my mind.

I remembered something else that Jumah’s brother had told me. “Jumah, Khaled said you like Molokia.” It’s a traditional Egyptian broth made from leafy greens that is eaten over rice and chicken.

He smiled, “My mother makes great Molokia.”

“My girlfriend’s family is Lebanese, and that’s my favorite dish at their house.”

“One day, we will eat my mother’s Molokia together,” Jumah said. “It may be different from the Lebanese style.”

“I look forward to it. Thank you.”

Jumah thought for a moment. “Joshua is a Jewish name. Are you Jewish?”

The question caught me by surprise and I had a sinking feeling that things were going to get anti-Semitic. It’s not that I would have abandoned the case or anything—I have heard well-heeled, paying clients say racist or sexist things—but I always lose a little enthusiasm when a client shows that side of himself.

“No, I’m not. Joshua was just a popular name in the neighborhood where I grew up.”

“Oh,” he said, sounding slightly disappointed, “I heard the best lawyers were Jewish.”

Quickly, and obviously for my benefit, he added, “But I’m sure you’re good too.”

It was approaching noon, when our meeting was to end. I was slated to see Jumah the next day, but I resisted telling him we were almost finished for the morning. We had been talking for

several hours, and Jumah seemed to be soaking up all the human interaction he could get. At around 11:50, I said I would have to go, but I would be back the following day. A minute later, a guard knocked on the door and yelled that our time was up. Jumah, Karim and I kept talking until the guard opened the door and came in.

As I was stepping outside, I looked back to reassure Jumah that we would see him the next morning. He flashed a crooked smile and, in English, said, “See you later, alligator.”

It was as if I’d been struck dumb. I know that phrase, I said to myself, and I know that there’s something I should say in response. But hearing a “vicious killer” at Guantánamo Bay say “see you later, alligator” proved too much for me.

After waiting through two beats of my stammering, Jumah almost nailed the punch line, “after a while, crocodile.”

The next morning, two other lawyers from my firm (there to see other clients), our military escort, Gunny, and I arrived at Camp Echo. At the main entrance, Gunny spoke into an intercom: “Habeas on the gate.” I had heard this phrase the day before, but hadn’t given it much thought. Now I understood what he was saying. We had filed habeas corpus petitions for our clients so we were “habeas.” It sounded strange, but undoubtedly they could have thought of something worse to call us.

We passed through a sally port and into the main area of Camp Echo, the gravel making a now-familiar crunching sound under our feet. Walking toward the building that had been designated as an attorney waiting room, we passed a twelve by twelve cage with a cement floor that sat in the middle of the compound. It had been empty the day before. Now, a bearded man was trying to exercise by running around the cage as fast as he could. The problem was he had to

make a hard turn to his right every few steps. He looked up and caught my eye. I looked away immediately.

A few minutes later, Karim and I walked into Jumah's room. Jumah smiled broadly and shook our hands.

"How bad was your night?" I asked.

Jumah smiled, suggesting an appreciation for my choice of words. "I was okay. How was your night?"

I wondered if there was an appropriate answer. "It would have been better if you'd been with us, but it was fine."

I put some food on the table, including candy bars Jumah had requested. We chatted about nothing in particular while eating. Jumah had just rebuffed my first attempt to have him eat some fruit when he said, "I want to tell you my story."

I had not expected this and reached immediately for a notepad.

"I was trying to get home from Afghanistan. I went to a checkpoint on the border with Pakistan and asked to be taken to the Bahraini Embassy. The Pakistanis laughed and took me with other Arabs to a prison.

"I was in the Pakistani prison for sixteen days. They served food in a bucket and the bread was inedible. I had shackles on my legs. They were not connected to each other with a chain like here, but with a steel bar. It was very painful.

"I was interrogated by the Pakistanis many times. There were no beatings, but there were threats. In the last few days there, two American men questioned me. One of them spoke Arabic fluently, but not as a native speaker. They did not use violence, but they did use abusive language. One cursed in Arabic.

“On our last day in that prison, the Pakistanis put us in blue uniforms, handcuffed us and made us wear blindfolds. We were taken to a military airport, where there was a plane with an American flag.”

“How did you see the plane if you had a blindfold on?” I asked.

“The blindfold was not very good. You could see through it. And they took it off to put sacks over our heads. They shackled us to the floor of the plane with chains around our thighs, waists and shoulders. The chains were pulled so tight, they pushed us forward. It was very painful to my stomach. I had surgery on my stomach six years ago because I was obese—I weighed about 115 kilograms.

“There are tubes in my stomach now, and I tried to tell a soldier that the chains were hurting me. He hit me in the stomach, and I vomited blood. After a couple hours of flying, they took us off the plane in Kandahar.” Kandahar is a city in Afghanistan where the U.S. had an airbase.

“The soldiers at the American base put everyone on the ground. We were connected to each other by a wire that was around our arms.”

I glanced up from my notes and saw that Jumah had pulled himself away from the table—away from us. He wasn’t looking in our direction anymore either, but off to the side of the room.

“The soldiers were walking on people. It felt like someone urinated on me. They beat people. One of them hit my head into the ground. Someone put his boot in my mouth. This all went on for over an hour.”

Jumah’s voice had become quieter.

“We were taken to a tent that had barbed wire around it, but no sides. It was open to the elements and Afghanistan in winter is very cold. The soldiers continued to hit people. If you screamed there was more beating.

“I was taken somewhere else, where there were many soldiers and a translator. I think he was Lebanese. He cursed at me very badly. He called me ‘al Qaeda, terrorist, dog.’ They tore my clothes off and put their fingers in my anus. They took photographs of me.

“The next morning they took me for an interrogation. They made me walk barefoot on barbed wire to get there. They hit my head against a metal hangar and said it was an accident. They pushed me to the ground, where there was broken glass.”

Jumah pointed to a scar on his knee and looked in my direction. “This is from the glass.” He looked away again. “The interrogator was black. I told him that I would sign anything and there was no need to beat me. He said that beatings were not allowed and left. A soldier called me a terrorist and poured hot liquid on me. I said I needed to see a doctor. The soldier spit on me and said, ‘We brought you here to kill you.’”

“Another soldier put a cigarette out on me,” he said, pointing to a small circular scar on his wrist. “The soldier said that he did it in the name of God and Christ.

“I was in Kandahar for two weeks. One night, they took me to another tent with my hands and legs tied, and a sack on my head. They plucked some of the hairs of my beard, and they shaved my moustache. They used a scissors to cut off my clothes and took me to a different tent with other naked detainees. They put us in orange clothes and tied us with chains. I had to crouch for hours with my hands tied in front of me. It was very cold.”

Jumah’s words came more slowly now, but in an unrelenting rhythm.

“At 11:00 p.m., they put very tight goggles on me through which I could not see. They placed something on my ears so that I could not hear. They took us to an airplane and chained us to the floor. I said that the chains made my stomach hurt. Beating was the response. When they saw that I was in great pain, they brought me sleeping pills.

“Somewhere, after many hours, they dragged us off the plane as if we were little boxes. They put us on a second plane. It seemed we were on that second plane for a whole day. The goggles were so tight that they made my nose bleed. They gave me more sleeping pills.

“When we arrived in Cuba, they tied us together on the ground for many hours. They took me to a concrete building in which they took off my clothes and took photographs of me. They gave me a very cold shower and very tight clothes.

“They took me to Camp X-Ray.” Camp X-Ray was the original detention facility at Guantánamo, which had been built in a matter of weeks. There were photographs showing that it consisted of a series of open-air cages. It looked like a kennel.

“We were forbidden to move. We had to sit still. If you even turned around in your cage to look at someone, there would be a punishment. Sometimes we were forbidden to pray. Later, they allowed us to pray, but not to face Mecca. Then we were allowed to face Mecca. But, whenever there were new detainees, we were again prohibited from looking at each other or praying.

“We had rats, snakes and scorpions in the cages, but no bathrooms. When we left the cages to use the bathroom, they always chained us and pushed our heads down hard. It was too painful and the chains caused injury. We refused to get chained to go to the bathroom so they gave us buckets to use in the cell. I was in X-Ray for three months. At the end, I tried to kill myself by breaking a metal piece from my cell and swallowing it. I was in the hospital for three days.”

Jumah put his elbows on his thighs and his face in his hands. He pulled back even more from the table, although the shackles kept him from going far.

“When I came back from the hospital, the head of shift took everything out of my cage. He pushed me on the floor and cursed me. I yelled at him and he told the staff sergeant to get the IRF.” Jumah pronounced IRF as if he was saying it in English. IRF was shorthand for Immediate Response Force—a team of five soldiers, wearing helmets, facemasks, chest protectors and shin guards, tasked, supposedly, with subduing unruly detainees.

“A lieutenant came and told me to get on the ground. I went down and put my hands on my back. I saw the IRF coming, but it had six people instead of five.” Jumah was crying softly.

“The staff sergeant opened the door and a very big guard, wearing all of his gear, ran in. He jumped in the air and landed on my back. He held my neck and two others held my legs. A female guard hit my head on the floor repeatedly. The staff sergeant said, ‘Don’t leave until he bleeds.’ The guard kept choking me, and I thought I was going to die. Blood gushed out of my nose and I lost consciousness. Other detainees told me later that the female guard held my face up for the camera.” I had read that all IRF interventions were videotaped.

“I woke up in the naval hospital—the one that they use for the military, not for detainees. I saw the same staff sergeant holding a video camera. They gave me an IV and a CAT scan. While I was in the hospital, a female interpreter, who said that her name was ‘Alin,’ came and asked me about the incident. It was the first beating like that. Everyone knew about it.”

Without making eye contact, Jumah raised his head and pointed to a scar on his nose. “I have this from the beating.”

He buried his face again in his hands. He choked back tears. Karim was ashen and looking down. His eyes were wet.

A moment or two passed. Jumah kept his face in his hands and didn't say a word. We didn't have tissues, so I put a few napkins in front of him.

"I am so sorry to hear about what you experienced," I said very softly as Karim translated. "I cannot imagine how painful that must have been—I cannot imagine how painful it is now. No human being should have to endure those things. I don't know if you've ever been able to tell those stories to anyone who cared. I want you to know that we care very much."

I paused. Jumah didn't move.

"We will do everything we can to make sure those kinds of things never happen again. I promise. You are not alone in that way anymore."

Jumah didn't respond. The world seemed to have fallen silent around us.

"I am so sorry. Nobody should ever be subjected to that kind of abuse." I couldn't help repeating myself. He still hadn't looked up.

Karim leaned over and whispered, "May I speak to Jumah in Arabic?"

I nodded. Karim spoke in words I didn't understand, but with an unmistakably gentle tone. Jumah remained silent and motionless.

I worried that the trauma Jumah was experiencing as we sat there might not let go of him. He had already tried to kill himself. He would be spending the rest of that day and the night alone in his cell. For the first time—but certainly not the last—I wondered if Jumah would be better served by a therapist than an attorney.

"Jumah, I would like to ask you some questions. I just want to make sure I understand everything you've told us. Is that okay?" I asked very quietly.

I hoped to bring him back to the present, which seemed crucial, without making it appear that I wanted to ignore what he had told us, which I certainly didn't. The lawyer in me also needed more details.

But, there was something else at work that I didn't want to admit to myself. I don't trust people easily, especially when I don't know them. To me, there's nothing worse than trusting someone who later takes advantage of that trust. There had been conviction behind each of Jumah's words. His pain and horror were so stark that they seemed to take on a physical presence in the room as tangible to me as his shackles. But what did I really know about Jumah after one day? How could I know if he was or wasn't some kind of bad guy? Was he telling me the truth or just using me to spread anti-American propaganda?

Still, it felt right to be purely compassionate with Jumah. It also was the right thing to do as an attorney who was trying to develop a relationship with a new client under the worst conditions.

Jumah looked up and wiped his eyes. "We can talk about your questions."

"I appreciate that very much. I can only imagine how difficult this must be. I just want to make sure that I understand everything that happened." He nodded. I continued, "Do you know the name of the head of shift who called for the IRF?"

"Collins," he said, very quietly.¹

"Do you know the name of the staff sergeant?"

"Williams."

"How about the female guard who hit your head?" I spoke as calmly as I could.

"She was Thomas."

¹ The names of the individuals who took part in the IRF beating were disclosed in a report by former British detainees. Further, my interview notes, containing those names, were deemed unclassified. Nonetheless, Guantánamo authorities often talk about the possibility that detention camp staff could be harmed if their identities become known. Without commenting on the merits of that notion, I have used pseudonyms to refer to such staff.

I stayed quiet for a moment and so did Jumah. “You said that Williams told the IRF, ‘don’t leave until he bleeds.’ I assume he said that in English. How did you understand what he said?”

“I am able to speak some English and I could hear that he said something like that.” I wasn’t entirely surprised. At times, Jumah seemed to laugh at my jokes—weak as they were—before Karim translated them completely.

“Is your English good enough that we can talk without translation?”

“It has gotten better since I’ve been here,” Jumah said, “but I am not always that comfortable with it.”

I looked through my notes for other questions. How did you know that you were in Kandahar when you got off the plane there? Did you ever sign a statement in Kandahar after you said you would? What did you mean that you and the other detainees were connected by “wire” that was around your wrists in Kandahar? Do you know what date you arrived in Cuba? Where were you when you had the surgery on your stomach?

As Jumah answered, his voice became stronger. He started looking me in the eye again. I nibbled on a biscuit, hoping he might follow suit. He did, although not with the same gusto.

Jumah said the surgery had been performed at a hospital in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

“I have to say, it’s really hard to imagine you overweight, Jumah.” I would have called him gaunt.

“I was fat.”

“Amazing. Does that mean I shouldn’t bring food here? I don’t want you to lose your figure.”

“I am on the Guantánamo diet.” His expression eased somewhat. “You have to bring food.”

“Okay, I promise.”

It was nearly noon and we had to leave. I very concerned about how Jumah would manage alone in his cell.

In a now familiar ritual, guards knocked on the door, abruptly. I gathered my things. Karim and I both gave Jumah little hugs. Guards surrounded him, shackling his hands. He looked very small.

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In March 2005, I was back in Guantánamo for my next visit. When I walked into my meeting with Jumah, he greeted me with a warm smile and our rapport was immediately easy. After putting baklava and other snacks on the table, I brought Jumah up to speed on our litigation efforts. He was excited that a federal district court had just found that he and the other detainees were entitled to a fair hearing, rejecting the government’s argument that no one at Guantánamo had any rights at all. That excitement faded quickly when I said that the court decision had been appealed and the appeals process could take months. In any event, there were things that he wanted to tell me about.

Jumah reminded me that since May 2004, he had been held in Camp 5, which was Guantánamo’s only maximum-security facility at the time. I had seen the prison from the outside, and it was a severe, imposing building of steel and cement, surrounded by fences and razor wire.

Jumah said that unlike the steel mesh found in most Guantánamo cells through which he could see other detainees, the walls in his Camp 5 cell were made of solid cement blocks. The back wall of the cell had a thin, frosted window that allowed for some natural light but was impossible to see through. There was another thin window in the cell door, but it was like one-way glass and often covered. As a result, Jumah said, he rarely saw other detainees.

He said that the only way to talk to other detainees from inside the cement cell was to shout through a food tray slot in the door or through a tiny gap between the bottom of the door and the floor. However, the slot was often closed and guards frequently turned on large fans in the hallways that were loud enough to make it almost impossible for the detainees to communicate with each other.

Jumah said that during most weeks he was allowed out of his cell for two exercise sessions, each of which lasted thirty minutes to an hour. During these sessions, he was kept alone in a small cage. At times there were detainees in adjacent cages, but sometimes these detainees were Afghans with whom Jumah did not share a language. Apart from exercise and the occasional interrogation, Jumah was alone in his cell always. And other than his Quran, a few censored family letters and legal correspondence from me, he had nothing in the cell to occupy his mind. Interrogators had told him that he would live like that for the next fifty years.

Jumah's words seemed to suck the air out of our little room. I tried to imagine how it would be to live day after day sealed in cell alone with nothing to do. How would it be to live if your only human contact came through a food tray slot? How would it be never to talk to your mother or brother or daughter even on the phone? How would it be to think that you might live like that forever?

My theoretical musings rang hollow as Jumah looked me straight in the eye. In a quiet and plaintive voice, he asked, "What can I do to keep myself from going crazy?"

There was no good answer to his question. I certainly had no power to change his daily life. There was mental health staff at Guantánamo, but interrogators had told Jumah that the "psych doctors" were involved in interrogations, so there was no way he could trust them. What could I possibly tell him?

“Jumah, if you’re alone and you feel like you really need to talk, tell a guard that you have to write to your lawyer. When he gives you paper, I want you to put down everything you would say to me if I were right there with you. Just pretend that you are talking to me. I promise that I will read every word you write, and I will write back to you. I also want you to remember that in any moment when you feel alone, there are people thinking about you and praying for you. In Bahrain, in Saudi, in the United States. So, really, you’re never alone.”

Did I sound like a bad Afterschool Special? Maybe, but I couldn’t think of anything better.

Jumah remained in Camp 5 over the summer and into the fall. He still spent each day alone in his cell. His solitude was punctuated only by the occasional shout to other detainees through his food tray slot. And other than a single soccer magazine I was able to get cleared by the military, he still had nothing to read beyond the Quran. His life did not change at all, but it did become more unbearable simply by the fact of continuing.

On October 15, 2005, I was at Guantánamo again. Jumah’s normal energy and gallows humor were notably absent during our first session. He said that he had been at the detainee hospital after my prior visit in June because of participating in a hunger strike. At the hospital, he had been able to convince other hunger strikers to voluntarily accept nasal tube feeding. The alternative was to be restrained and painfully force-fed. In a nod to these efforts, a major had told Jumah that if he ended his hunger strike, he would be moved from Camp 5 to Camp 1. That meant going from solitary confinement to a camp where detainees could see and talk to each other. There was nothing Jumah wanted more, so he ate. The military sent him back to Camp 5 anyway.

The isolation in Camp 5 was so unbearable that Jumah had talked to a psychiatrist. “Please, I need help,” he had pleaded. “I’m a human being.”

I had seen Jumah depressed, but now his affect was almost nonexistent. He could barely smile, let alone laugh. At the end of our first day, I said, “I don’t mean to sound stupid, considering where we are, but it seems like you’re in a really bad mood.”

“I am,” he replied, looking as tired as I’d ever seen him.

The next day, I met with Jumah again. After about an hour, he gave me a sealed envelope and said it had something in it that he wanted talk about, but he needed to use the bathroom first. “Give me ten minutes,” he said.

To get Jumah into the bathroom was anything but routine. I had to call guards who would shackle Jumah’s hands, unshackle his ankle from the bolt in the floor and move him to the tiny cell next to the meeting area, where there was a toilet. The cell was separated from the meeting area by a steel mesh wall that, although very solid, could be seen through. After the guards came, I went outside to give Jumah privacy. The guards came out as well after moving him.

In pouring rain, I chatted with one of the guards about nothing in particular. We waited to hear Jumah yell that he was finished. Several minutes passed. Running out of small talk and noticing a vague anxiety in myself, I decided to check on Jumah. I cracked the door open a few inches, hoping just to hear him say that he needed a minute.

The first thing I saw was a large, dark puddle on the white floor. My mind was scrambling, trying to make sense of things. Within a split second, I realized it was blood. “God,” I thought, “Jumah made himself throw up blood because he thinks I didn’t believe him.” He had told me about a few episodes in which he had vomited blood, and maybe I didn’t react strongly enough. But then, I looked up and saw something hanging from the cell side of the steel mesh wall. Whatever this thing was, it absolutely did not look like Jumah.

I took two steps and was at the mesh wall. I saw that the hanging figure was Jumah. His body and face were covered in blood. There was a gash in his arm. His eyes were rolled back in their sockets. His lips and tongue were swollen. He looked demonic. I yelled Jumah's name but he didn't respond. He was unconscious and did not seem to be breathing.

I was an inch or two from Jumah, but I couldn't reach him because the mesh weave is tight and the door to the cell was locked. I yelled for help. Guards arrived quickly. After initially trying the wrong key, they were able to get into the cell. One started hacking at the noose around Jumah's neck. I yelled to the second to hold Jumah's body up to ease the tension; he did. Within seconds, the guards had cut Jumah down and laid him on the floor in front of me. Jumah still didn't seem to be breathing. A guard ordered me out of the room. I didn't want to leave but realized that an argument was the last thing Jumah needed. As I walked out of the room, I thought I heard Jumah gasp for air.

I walked in the rain across Camp Echo's gravel compound to another hut with a cell and meeting space, which served as an attorney waiting room. Karim, the interpreter, was already there, having left the area around Jumah's cell when he heard my yell for help. We exchanged looks of shock. I paced around the room, flush with anger—not anger at Jumah, but anger at the circumstances that had driven him to do this. I cursed under my breath a few times —“motherfucker”—then stopped so that Karim wouldn't think I was cursing at him.

I remembered the envelope that Jumah had given me. I took it from my bag and began to open it, sickly certain that I was about to see a suicide note. I pulled out several pages of Arabic writing that were marked by dried blood. I felt chills as I showed the letter to Karim, not really wanting him to read it. He looked at it and just said, “I can't.”

I wanted to see what was happening across the compound, so I cracked open the door even though this blatantly violated Camp Echo rules. After a few minutes, corpsmen walked toward Jumah's cell with a stretcher. Ten minutes later, they carried Jumah out on the stretcher, which was now bloody. I closed the door and waited.

Two officers came into the room and said they were with Behavioral Health. "Do you have any idea why he would do this?" one asked. Was this guy serious? Did he think this was a college campus where a normally cheerful student inexplicably had taken too many sleeping pills? This was goddamned Guantánamo Bay. There were a thousand reasons why someone would try to kill himself here. Instead, I said, "Isolation can do terrible things to people." The officer nodded with more sympathy than I had expected—maybe I had misjudged the question—and that was the end of our conversation.

Next a beefy colonel, who I knew to be the head of day-to-day operations at the camp, came in. He said that Jumah had been taken to the hospital for treatment, and they expected him to be okay. I asked if I could see Jumah later, and the colonel said it shouldn't be a problem. He seemed genuinely concerned.

A military lawyer offered Karim and me a ride to the ferry. "That's not how you want your client to greet you, huh?" he said to me with a smirk, as we walked out of the camp. As we drove he said, "I've seen the files on your clients. It would be a mistake to think that they're goat farmers." I wanted to spit in his face.

By the time we got to the Combined Bachelor's Quarters—our Motel 6-style lodging—it was dark, and the rain was coming down in sheets. Karim offered me scotch, which I don't drink. Still, I gladly accepted, in part for medicinal purposes, but also because the idea of sitting alone in

my room made me a little sick. We worked our way through a couple of glasses and talked a bit about what had happened.

When I finally went to my room, I immediately turned on the TV to break the silence. Despite my best efforts to focus on whatever show was playing, the picture of Jumah's hanging body and bloodied, unconscious face came into my mind time after time. I also imagined that face was lurking just outside the darkened windows that were being battered by the rain, waiting to look right at me.

At 10:00 p.m. the telephone rang. The military lawyer who had given me a ride told me that Jumah had undergone surgery on his arm and was sedated. When I asked if I could see Jumah, the lawyer said that might be arranged if Jumah woke up and asked for me. Perhaps, I suggested, someone could ask Jumah if he wanted to see me. The lawyer would not promise anything.

I turned off the light late that night and only for couple of hours of very fitful sleep. By 4:00 a.m., I was writing a statement about the incident as I'd been asked to do by the military lawyer. At 6:40, I got on the bus to go to Camp Echo for a day of meetings with other clients.

Throughout the day I asked the military about Jumah, including whether I could see him. All I heard was that he was still sedated. At the end of the day, I turned over my client interview notes and Jumah's suicide note to my military escort as is required at the end of each trip; the escort would send them to the "secure facility" in the States where classified information relating to the detainees is kept. The next morning, I flew back to New York.

Several months later and after a fair amount of wrangling, I was able to get Jumah's suicide note declassified. When people ask me why Jumah tried to kill himself, I usually just show them the letter:

Josh...I feel very sorry for forcing you to see—it might be the first time in your life—to see a human being who suffered too much dying in front of your eyes. I know it is an awful and horrible scene, but there was no other alternative to make our voice heard by the world from the depths of the detention centers except this way in order for the world to re-examine its standing and for the fair people of America to look again at the situation and try to have a moment of truth with themselves...

Josh...I hope you will always remember that you met and sat with a “human being” called “Jumah” who suffered too much and was abused in his belief, self, in his dignity and also in his humanity.

When you remember me in my last gasps of life before dying, while my soul is leaving my body to rise to its creator, remember that the world let us and let our case down. Remember that our governments let us down. Remember the unreasonable delay of the courts in looking into our case and to side with the victims of injustice. Remember that if there were people who are actually fair and who defend justice and defend the victims of injustice and if there are judges who are fair, I wouldn't have been wrapped in death shrouds now and my family—my father, my mother, my brothers and sisters, and my little daughter—would not have to lose their son forever.

Take some of my blood, take pieces of my death shrouds, take some of my remains, take pictures of my dead body when I am placed in my grave, lonely and send it to the world. Send it to the judges, to people with live consciences, to people with principles and values, “the fair-minded.”

Josh...At this moment, I see death looming in front of me while writing this letter... Death has a bad odor that cannot be smelled except by people who are going through the agony of death.

Josh, farewell. Farewell with no hope of your seeing me again. I thank you for everything you have done for me, but I have a final request. Show the world the letters I gave you. Let the world read them. Let the world know the agony of the detainees in Cuba.

Prisoner of Deprivation
Jumah Abdul Latif Al Dossari
Guantánamo Bay, Cuba
Friday, 10/14/2005

Epilogue

To do justice to Jumah's full story would require far more pages than are available here. Suffice it to say for these purposes, though, that in the final months of 2005, Jumah attempted to kill himself two more times. In March 2006, he made another attempt, slashing his leg and throat

with a razor. At the time, the military was holding him in the “Mental Health Unit.” There, the detainee in the cell to one side of Jumah was a Yemeni who believed he was Jesus Christ and ranted to that effect constantly. The detainee in the cell to the other side spent most of his time running around his cell naked. Jumah was kept in his cell for twenty-two to twenty-four hours a day.

I visited Jumah every few months and we would sit together for seven hours, often not taking a single break. We always battled his despair. I offered Jumah every argument I could think of as to why he should stay alive, invoking God, family, philosophy and anything else I could think of. Always, I spoke to him about the efforts that we were making to pressure the government of Bahrain to bring him home through a diplomatic agreement; such agreements had brought several of our clients home already and were the only clear way out of Guantánamo. Sometimes my words seemed to sink in and other times Jumah said politely that the reasons I offered for staying alive were simply not good enough.

In June 2007, I saw Jumah in Guantánamo. He said that his cell had started to feel like a hole in a mountain of ice and that he could not go on. Jumah was in obvious physical discomfort, and I stood up to get a better look at him. He had cut an inch-deep gash in his stomach in an attempt to reach his femoral artery. Knowing that Jumah was in desperate straits, I told him about a then-recent report from the Bahraini government that promised he would be home by Ramadan, which was to begin in September. I hoped the information would buy us a couple of months. It was all I had.

I woke up on July 16, 2007 to my cell phone and blackberry buzzing. Jumah had just arrived in Saudi Arabia (where he also had citizenship) and his family was on their way to see him. He had been released through a diplomatic agreement of the sort that I had agitated for during the

prior three years. He was home. I felt light-headed and wasn't able to stop grinning. I had worried about Jumah, literally, day and night for nearly three years and now—without any forewarning—he was home.

On July 29, 2007, I had my first chance to call Jumah in Saudi Arabia and we spoke for over an hour. No guards watched us. Nobody wore shackles. After twelve visits at Guantánamo, it was astounding to talk under such circumstances. Jumah's voice was strong and the truest aspects of his personality—warmth, a love of people, humor and compassion—were clearer than I had ever heard them.

Jumah and I have stayed in regular touch, even adding e-mail to our repertoire. So far, we have not been able to see each other because I can't get a visa to Saudi Arabia, and he is not yet allowed to travel to Bahrain. Yet, neither of us has any doubt that if we were able to get him out of Guantánamo, we will be able to solve these bureaucratic puzzles and sit together in person as brothers and friends sometime soon.