

Engagement

The prisons at Guantánamo are wedged between hardscrabble hills and a flat expanse of the Caribbean. The detainees have a view of neither. Instead, they have four white and windowless walls, bland food in Styrofoam containers slid through a bean hole at mealtimes and, if they're lucky, a book from the library. The detainees would count the days left until they could go home, only nobody knows how many days that will be. We the lawyers were, at a bare minimum, supposed to help them find out how many days there are left to count. Conceptual Supreme Court victories notwithstanding, we've so far failed to accomplish this fundamental task. The days have passed just the same.

My first trip to Guantánamo was in January 2005. That's when I met my fiancé Doug, who was then another attorney with a different office of the same firm. That's also when I met Ali, a young Yemeni detainee and one of our firm's dozen clients. Ali was seventeen when he was arrested in Pakistan, a hapless kid who had been involuntarily towed along in his older brother's misadventures. Recognizing that Ali doesn't belong in Guantánamo, in 2005 the U.S. government put Ali on a list of people who were "cleared for transfer" to their home countries. More than three years later, Ali still sits in Guantánamo.

Since our first meeting in January 2005, Doug, the other members of our firm, and I have made the long journey to visit Ali every few months. On each visit, we sat with him for hours, discussing his legal case, his life in Guantánamo, and his hopes for the future. These meetings have at times been painful. We once had to bear the grim news that a family member to whom he was particularly close died unexpectedly.

In his seventh year of detention, Ali is now nearly twenty-five—an age at which most Yemeni men are already married with children. While he has been in Guantánamo, Ali's two younger brothers were married in a joint wedding, leaving Ali as the only single brother. From his cell, Ali wishes for a bride only slightly less than his freedom—and were his release not a prerequisite to his marriage, the order might be reversed. Ali's mother has a bride picked out for him, the sister of his brother's wife. I met his brother's wife, and assured Ali that if his bride looks anything like her sister, he will be quite pleased with his mother's choice. At this news, Ali blushed.

Although Doug and I never told our clients of our personal relationship, Ali did not need to be told. In meetings at which I was not present, Ali lectured Doug for the better part of an hour about the importance of marriage and hinted, not too subtly, that he thought I would make a good wife. Doug managed to dodge the subject for a few months, but Ali eventually won Doug's promise that we would be engaged before our next visit to Cuba. When we returned to New York, Doug kept his promise and proposed.

On our next trip, Doug and I visited Ali together and informed him of our engagement. He smiled at first, but then shrugged his shoulders and said, "If your marriage is happy, you will go off and forget me, and if it doesn't work out, then you will say it is all my fault. Either way, it's no good for me."

Sarah Havens

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No matter what happens, I will never forget Ali. I only hope that one day soon our courtroom battles will mean that he can start counting the days until he meets his bride.