

## **Land of Irony** Shawn Nolan

It was our first visit to Guantánamo, the land of irony. Cristi and I were quite apprehensive walking into the prison that morning. We had both been to countless prisons even more countless times as public defenders for years. But this was different. Not the typical local political hacks we ordinarily find working at the jails, jails that have become the main, and sometimes the only, source of employment in the depressed towns around this country. Here, there were eighteen and nineteen year old fresh-faced kids. They signed up to fight for their country and got saddled with the jobs of jailors. We were respectful to them and they to us. But there was an uneasiness in the air. They didn't want us there but were doing their jobs. We didn't want our clients there but were doing *our* jobs.

Cristi and I made it through the obligatory searches easily and quickly. As I said, we've been going in and out of prisons for years. We know the drill. Masud was our interpreter, quite experienced in Guantánamo, which helped us relax, if only a tiny bit. The three of us started into Camp Echo after the searches. We had only empty pads and pens, some water and coffee for us and our never-met client, Hakim Bukhari.

The teenaged-looking guard opened the door to the cement shoe-box that was our meeting place. Mr. Bukhari exploded with "Welcome to my American lawyers!" Addressing the young army personnel, he boomed, "Get some coffee for my very important American guests!" She looked shocked and had no idea what to do or what he was talking about. Then he laughed. He always laughed. He called himself "The Riddler." He loves riddles.

We started by introducing ourselves, trying to explain how we got involved, attempting to convince him that although we were federal defenders, paid by the same government that was holding him, we were there to help. A two-hour civics lesson ensued, but all he wanted was

cigarettes.

You see, the interrogators give him cigarettes whenever he talks with them. He talked to them all the time so he could get cigarettes. You could see the addiction in his eyes, his quivering mouth and shaking fingers as he asked us over and over for cigarettes. Of course, we are not permitted to bring cigarettes. We spent the entire morning trying to talk to him about his life, his capture, his jailing by the Taliban, his awful existence in Guantánamo, but all he wanted was tobacco. He made us promise that we would ask over lunch to bring him cigarettes. We did; they said no. They know. The psychosis from isolation was all over his face and everywhere in his behavior.

Every time I have returned to Guantánamo I think about that first crazy day. I think about it because of how strange and wonderful it was, but there is another reason I cannot forget it. Just before going to Guantánamo for that first visit, my uncle died. I went to California for his funeral. He had cancer and died younger than he should have. I took the red-eye back from California the day before I left for Guantánamo. I arrived on the base apprehensive and exhausted. That first night, the Portland FPDs were there and offered me a couple beers, which I gladly accepted—which turned out to be a mistake. I should have gone right to bed.

Cristi and Masud were waiting for me out front the next morning. It was getting closer and closer to 7:40 a.m., the time for us to catch the school bus to the ferry to get to the other side. I awoke with a start at 7:37, a weird ringing in my ears (actually the phone). I jumped up, got dressed and brushed my teeth as I ran down the hallway. I made the school bus by seconds. No brush through the hair. Now, every time I return to Guantánamo, I am rewarded with the same identification photo from that same morning. Always makes me think of Hakim.

I am a musician and have always traveled with a guitar. How could I possibly go to Guantánamo without one? I never have. After grueling days at the jail, habeas counsel typically get together for dinner back at the CBQ. There are attorneys from all over the country, from all walks of life and from all types of practices. We usually hang out at night, share legal and life experiences and decompress. We have a client from Uzbekistan and had an incredibly difficult time finding a translator. Finally, we found a young man from Ohio, Christian, recently returned from working in Uzbekistan with an NGO, who was willing to apply for a security clearance. He was approved months later, and we planned our second meeting with our young client, Komol. We made all of the arrangements for our trip and were ready to go. About two days before, Cristi and I set up a conference call with our interpreter to go over some details of the trip. Toward the end of the call, he said, “Okay, I have a weird question.” We waited and he asked if he could bring a guitar to GTMO. We laughed hysterically. On that trip, we truly had GTMO hootenanny.

One Saturday we blew up the beach. There are no flights out of Guantánamo on Friday night or all day Saturday. So if you see your clients on a Friday, you can’t leave until Sunday. We had one of those trips with Christian. We saw our young Uzbek client on Friday. We requested permission to see him on Saturday, since we had to be there. We got the same response we always get when we request something—we have carefully considered your request and regret to inform you it is denied. So we had a day to kill Saturday—not allowed to see our client, who we were appointed to represent, and not allowed on the Windward side of the base at all. There is very little on the Leeward side, by the way. So we decided to go down to the beach and have a barbeque. We stopped by the small store on the Leeward side hoping for cigars. No Cubans—only Dominicans—seriously. We took some charcoal leftover from the previous evening’s cookout and headed to the beach.

There are these weird cement structures on the beach—only the military could screw up a perfectly beautiful Caribbean beach with these things. The structures contain grills for cooking. But it's pretty damn windy on the Leeward side. We tried and tried to light the charcoal with no luck. Finally, I had a brilliant idea to move our little cookout into the cement changing room attached to the weird cement structure to block the wind. We got some rocks and set them on the ground in order to hold the grill off the cement floor. Lo and behold, it was easy to light without the wind off the ocean. We started to cook some chicken and sausages. I was manning the grill and playing guitar in between. I heard some popping sounds, but thought it was just the sausages. (They plump when you cook 'em.) We got the food off and had a nice lunch. Halfway through it, BOOOOOM!! A very nice member of the military, picnicking in the weird cement structure next to ours explained it to us (between playing a couple songs for us on my guitar) that you can't cook on cement or it explodes. It holds water—which expands. Duh!!

Later that afternoon we were attacked by an Iguana—well almost. There is a giant Iguana that hangs out there at Chapman Beach. We had some leftovers, and I thought it would be nice to share. I was in the weird structure next to ours and started throwing some chicken over to the Iguana. He started charging. I thought I heard screaming from next door and ducked around the back of the “hut.” Cristi and Christian were standing on the table yelling—mostly at me to stop the feeding.

The land of irony is what we like to call Guantánamo. It is an absolutely fascinating place. It's beautiful. It's the Caribbean. Cristi almost always sees the sunrise because she swims then. I've seen it a few times. It's magnificent. So there we were, watching this awesome sunrise over the mountains on the edge of the sea. It was inspiring. Several hours later we were locked in a cement room, six by eight at the most, talking to a chained Arab. Land of irony.

Our clients don't want to be there. It is horrific for them. The isolation is mind-numbing and beyond what any of us can ever imagine. We have seen clients go slowly crazy because of the isolation. We have no idea why they are there—the government won't tell us—except that it appears that the U.S. government paid a bounty for each of them. We have two clients left, an Iraqi and our young Uzbek. They can't go home and have nowhere to go. The government has told us that each is "eligible for transfer." In other words, if they could go home, they would. Can you imagine how difficult it is to find asylum in some country for someone who the U.S. has said—albeit falsely—is a terrorist and has held for over six years? This is the plight of our two remaining clients. It is a nightmare. Land of irony.