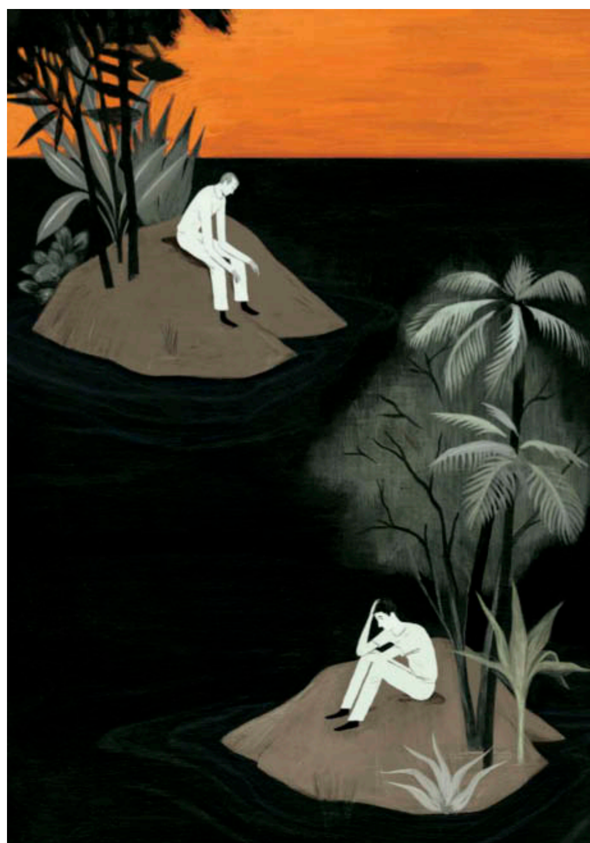
LIFE AFTER GUANTÁNAMO

A father and son's story

By Pardiss Kebriaei



In 2008, I became the lawyer for Abdul Nasser Khantumani and his son Muhammed, two men who were being held at Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, in Cuba. When the United States took them into custody, in 2001, Abdul Nasser was in his forties; Muhammed was still a teenager, with a year of high school left. There's a picture of him as a boy in Syria, not long before his life changed. He's at the beach with his younger cousins, their arms draped over one another's shoulders. He's skinny and soaked, his wet hair plastered to his forehead.

On December 20, 2008, Muhammed cut one of his wrists in his cell. He smeared his blood on the walls, writing COUNTRY OF INJUSTICE IS AMERICA. Once his wounds had been treated, he wrote me a letter in which he listed the reasons for his act:

> 1. Being in this place, having been arrested when I was 17 years old
> 2. The continuous psychological pressure and the torture that I currently endure
> 3. The torture endured by prisoners in general
> 4. Being apart from my father
> 5. Current general torture

In another letter, he wrote diagonally, in all caps,

> I SAY TO AMERICA DO WHATEVER YOU WANT THE PRISON HAD MADE MY HEART SUCH AS THE STONE FEEL WITH COMPLETE HOPELESSNESS I DON'T KNOW IF SOME PEOPLE KNOW THAT.

Muhammed had learned English in high school, and he had practiced it with the guards at Guantánamo and with his lawyers from the Center for Constitutional Rights, where I work. (I've corrected Muhammed's misspellings and condensed some of his correspondence.) When I first met him, more than seven years after he was detained without charge, he had given up hope that he would ever be released. It took him a long time to change his mind.

The Khantumanis' path to Guantánamo began in 2000, when Abdul Nasser left Syria after years of struggling to earn a living as a cook in his hometown of Aleppo. He ended up in Kabul, Afghanistan, where he didn't need a visa to start a business, with the hope of opening a restaurant. In the summer of 2001, he called for his family to join him: his wife, his mother, his grandson, his brother, his in-laws, and his children—sixteen people in all.

Following the attack on the World Trade Center that September, word spread that the United States was planning to invade Afghanistan. Abdul Nasser gathered

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Illustration by Caroline Gamon

his family and drove east toward Pakistan, the closest border. When they stopped in Jalalabad, locals there told Abdul Nasser that it would be safer for the family to split into smaller groups before crossing the border. Everyone else made it out of Afghanistan and back home to Syria safely. Muhammed and Abdul Nasser, however, were arrested once they arrived in Pakistan.

They were not alone. In the aftermath of 9/11, the United States gave bundles of cash to Afghan warlords and to the Pakistani government for assistance in capturing suspected Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters. The Pakistani authorities turned over hundreds of men to U.S. custody, often with little or no evidence of wrongdoing.

The first round of questioning was conducted by the Pakistanis. The Americans joined them for later sessions, when the Pakistani interrogators broke Muhammed's nose and tried to get him to say that he and his father were Al Qaeda. He points to his nose, which is still slightly crooked, every time we talk about what happened back then.

From Pakistan, Muhammed and Abdul Nasser were transferred back to Afghanistan—to Kandahar, where the United States had turned the city's old airport into a temporary prison to dump and sort through its captives. The first night, guards knocked Abdul Nasser to the ground, put a boot on the back of his head, and bore down. They fractured his forehead. It's still slightly indented.

Muhammed and Abdul Nasser were held in Kandahar for a month while American interrogators decided whether to ship them to Guantánamo. The criteria for detention at Guantánamo were broad. All captured Al Qaeda, Taliban, and foreign fighters, along with anyone "who may pose a threat to U.S. interests [or] may have intelligence value," were marked for transfer. "I'm sure we'll find that the first sort wasn't perfect," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld remarked in an interview at the time.

The flight to Guantánamo was long, and Muhammed said it was hard to breathe through the hoods the prisoners were forced to wear. They were ordered not to speak, but the plane was still loud with voices. Men were shouting, "Oh God, oh God, oh God." Muhammed would hear someone get kicked, then, "Oh God, oh God, oh God," then another kick, over and over.

Muhammed and Abdul Nasser landed in Guantánamo in February 2002, just a month after the detention camp opened. Guards hustled the hooded prisoners onto a white school bus, which was ferried across the bay to the prison side of the U.S. naval base. More than 300 men were already being held there, outside, in six-by-eight-foot cells made of chain-link fencing.

When Muhammed's hood came off that night, two months after his arrest in Pakistan, he was inside a cage, under floodlights, surrounded by the green hills of Cuba.

In late 2004, Muhammed and Abdul Nasser prepared long statements for their Combatant Status Review Tribunals, improvised military panels that had been created by President Bush to circumvent the Supreme Court's decision, made earlier that year, to allow detainees to seek court review of their detention. At the time, father and son were in separate cells but within earshot of each other. Abdul Nasser had never gone to high school, so Muhammed helped him with his statement, at the risk of being punished for talking.

I have audio recordings of the hearings. Muhammed tittered nervously at odd moments during his testimony, as when he talked about getting his nose broken in Pakistan, or when he described being shocked with electric cables, threatened with rendition, and told that his family had been killed. Like other Guantánamo detainees, he hadn't spoken to anyone but interrogators, guards, and a few other traumatized prisoners for years, so he felt strange in front of the panel, with press and other observers in the room.

On the recordings, Abdul Nasser's voice sounds thin and emotional. He is five foot seven and 160 pounds, an inch taller and an inch wider than his son, with a gray beard and a receding hairline. When we first met, I tried not to show surprise when he told me his age. (He was forty-nine.) Muhammed said that even though he always felt fear in Guantánamo—of torture, of separation from his father—there was a different torment for men like Abdul Nasser who had left children and a wife behind. A few times during his hearing, Abdul Nasser's alto voice went even higher than usual, as when he asked the members of the panel if they thought he would have brought his sixty-seven-year-old mother and eight-month-old grandson to Kabul if he'd known the September 11 attacks were coming.

I recently asked Muhammed about one of the tribunal members who sounded troubled by his testimony. "Yes, that person was sympathetic when I talked about my torture," he said. "You could see it on their face. I felt like their hands were tied."

The tribunal determined that Muhammed and Abdul Nasser were properly considered enemy combatants and ordered their continued detention. The government reached the same conclusion in almost all of the cases it reviewed.

Muhammed thinks that he started to crack sometime in 2005. That was the year he and his father were moved into separate camps. Interrogators learned early on that proximity to Abdul Nasser was a "comfort item" they could manipulate to try to make Muhammed talk. After Muhammed became uncooperative, they relocated him as a form of punishment. It would be years before they would hear each other's voices again.

Muhammed started smearing excrement on his cell walls. He kicked a guard, and bit another. In late 2006, his "noncompliant" behavior got him sent to the base's newly constructed supermax prison—Camp 6—where he would later cut his wrists. In Camp 6, Muhammed was held in a windowless concrete-and-steel cell for at least twenty-two

hours a day. He stayed in solitary confinement almost continuously for the next three years.

After Muhammed cut his wrists, I spoke with him on the phone. "*Please do something*," he screamed. "I can't be patient anymore." I filed an emergency request asking for him to be moved from solitary confinement to his father's camp. It was denied. Prison officials said that Muhammed had narcissistic traits and had cut himself to get attention. A few years earlier, an official at the State Department had called three alleged suicides at Guantánamo "a good PR move."

In January 2009, after the Obama Administration took office and ordered Guantánamo's closure, the government formed a task force to reevaluate the status of each detainee. Of the 779 men who had been held at the prison, the Bush Administration had already released more than 500. When President Obama took over, 242 detainees remained. The task force completed its work within the year, unanimously concluding that the continued detention of 126 men—more than half of the population—was not necessary for national security. In May, Muhammed and Abdul Nasser were told they were approved for transfer.

The Khantumanis could not return to Syria; they feared that the Assad regime would assume they were terrorists and torture them. Muhammed wrote a letter for me to give to the foreign ministries of several countries, asking for asylum:

> Me and my dad are looking for a country to live in with no risks or hazards. Please if you like to offer some help don't wait because seriously I can't endure any more. I've seen the hell and I'm still in the beginning of my life.

A delegation from the Portuguese government came to Guantánamo to meet the men who had been approved for transfer. To help Muhammed and Abdul Nasser prepare for their interviews, I was allowed an hour-long phone call with each of them. "Put yourself in their shoes," I told Muhammed. "They've never met anyone at Guantánamo. They've only heard what the United States has said about everyone here for years. Tell them you were a high school student when you were detained, that you've been through things most people can't imagine. That you're working on your English and your vocabulary is getting better than mine. That we talk about your dad's cooking and your love for fried potatoes, which is so great that you once told your mother you love fried potatoes more than her. That you haven't heard your mom say your name in seven years."

Muhammed had just ended a two-week hunger strike, and he said he'd been given a pill that made him vomit up blood. He couldn't sleep because of constant noise from the guards on his cellblock. "He's in terrible condition," I wrote in my notes. We spent at least half the time talking about his hunger strike and his vomiting.

My prep with Abdul Nasser went better. "God willing, wherever they put me, I want to live a quiet life with my family," he said. For months, I'd been trying to send him orthopedic shoes for his foot pain, but the camp authorities wouldn't deliver the package. "Don't forget to bring me my shoes in Portugal," he teased before we got off the phone.

The next conversation I had with Muhammed was more difficult. "I have good news and hard news," I told him. "The good news is, Portugal is offering you resettlement. The hard news is that they are offering only you resettlement right now, along with another Syrian man. They are undecided about your father." Muhammed was silent for a long time.

A few days later, he wrote a letter to his father that explained Portugal's decision and made clear his distress about what he should do. When I gave the letter to Abdul Nasser, he didn't hesitate. "Tell him he can go," he said. "Go, and don't be sorry."

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I asked the prison authorities to allow Muhammed to see Abdul Nasser so that he could hear his father's blessing for himself. We got them an hour together, with one embrace at the beginning, one at the end, and no touching in between. I would not be alone with them in the room; a few guards would be joining us.

The afternoon of the meeting, Muhammed was already waiting when I walked in. He was sitting on the edge of his seat, across from an empty chair. I'd brought food from a Syrian bakery in Brooklyn—stuffed grape leaves, kibbe, and baklava—plus the usual staples from the base: pizza from Pizza Hut, salad from McDonald's, fruit from the Navy Exchange. I spread it all out on paper plates as if we were getting ready for a party. Muhammed would be seeing his father for the first time in four years.

We heard the clinking of shackles outside the door. It opened a moment later and there was Abdul Nasser, in his baggy white-is-for-compliant T-shirt, elastic-waist pants, and flip-flops, a head shorter than the guards gripping his elbows on either side. He let out a choked laugh when he saw Muhammed, his eyes crinkling and filling with tears. The guards shuffled him over for the first embrace. He reached for his son and buried his face in Muhammed's shoulder. They stood clasping each other, laughing, softly greeting each other in Arabic, while the rest of us looked down, or away.

Muhammed and Abdul Nasser sat down, faces shining, ankles shackled. An hour to reunite, say goodbye, seek forgiveness, give strength, imagine the future. They started with food. A salad, some fruit. At one point the rules slipped away, and Muhammed passed a plate of blackberries to his father, then to one of the guards. Not bad, the guard said, leaning forward to take another.

The meeting ended with the second embrace. "This isn't goodbye," Abdul Nasser said.

Muhammed had a list of twenty questions about what awaited him in Portugal, including "Are we going to get a home," "In which city are we going to live," "Are we going to be able to bring our family," and "Is there potatoes enough or not." He also wanted to ensure that he wouldn't be sent back to Syria or to the United States or to "any other country that we may face risks or torture there."

The U.S. government wouldn't give me details about what Muhammed could expect in Portugal, so I gave him a picture book—*Living in Portugal*—and an Arabic-Portuguese dictionary. Muhammed told me he tried to memorize some Portuguese words in the days before his release, when he was still in solitary confinement, but he couldn't do it.

Abdul Nasser asked me to give Muhammed a parting message. "Tell him to pursue his studies—computers or English," he said. Muhammed asked me to tell Abdul Nasser to take care of his health, and that we would send news once he got to Portugal. "Tell him things are going to get better soon," he said.

It was late one night in August 2009 when guards came to Muhammed's cell and told him it was time to go. He was hooded and shackled—the same way he was hauled in seven years earlier—for the ride to the air terminal. We'd bought civilian clothes for his arrival in Lisbon: a button-down shirt, pants with a zipper, shoes with laces—all novelties.

When the plane reached Lisbon, Muhammed and Moammar Badawi Dokhan, the Syrian man released with him, were taken to a government villa on the outskirts of Lisbon. They were luckier in the resettlement lottery than the men released to Slovakia a few months later, whose reintegration to civilian life began in a quasi-detention facility.

A group of caretakers from the Portuguese government lived with the men 24/7, but that was fine with Muhammed. The government provided everything he needed, even if it controlled everything he did. He didn't want to be alone anyway. The caretakers were warm to him, and he grew to like them. "They're like Arabs," he said.

Muhammed gave me dozens of pictures from his first few weeks to take back to Abdul Nasser. Muhammed squatting by a plant outside the villa. Muhammed standing in the kitchen next to a counter stacked with food. Muhammed in sunglasses, posing on a beachfront next to a tour bus. Muhammed after a swim, pale, sprawled on a lawn chair, eyes closed, face tilted up to the sun.

Articles in Portuguese and international newspapers that announced his arrival momentarily broke his reverie. They mentioned his suicide attempt, called him unstable, and labeled him a terrorist. The Portuguese caretakers joked with him and the other man, trying to put them at ease. One of the articles said that Dokhan once shook bin Laden's hand. "Which hand? Can we take a picture?" they asked. Muhammed wasn't consoled. He wrote a letter and asked me to give it to the Portuguese government.

> Dear gentle. I don't know how to thank you regarding whatever you had done to us. Let me introduce myself to you. I am Muhammed and my father is Abdul Nasser. I was born in 1983.
>
> Sir what has been done by the news journalists is all untrue. I like to assure you that me or my father or the guy who lives with me now are not terrorists or have anything to do with them. America itself said that and cleared us from any terrorism problem and you know that already.
>
> When I met with the Portuguese delegation I told them look I know America had told a lot of surreal information, so please feel free and ask me anything that you like to know, nothing will be hidden from you. I spoke with them about many things and I specialized which information was real or not.
>
> So sir be sure that we are innocent and the days will prove that to you. The media as you know needs to work to get money. So even if we say not true, not true, every day we are going to hear new and new things from them. But I prefer to close my ear to it, especially for someone like me who was in G.T.M.O. under the legal age.

In late November, Muhammed graduated from the villa to an apartment in Lisbon. The Portuguese government rented another apartment

across the hall, for his caretakers. He had a stipend but no plan for self-sufficiency, and his immigration status was still unresolved. He began learning Portuguese, got his eyes and teeth checked. He was allowed unlimited free calls to his government team thanks to a "friends and family" calling plan, but had no way to be with his real family.

Once, when he went to buy dinner plates at a housewares store, the shopkeeper thought he looked suspicious and called the police. An officer interrogated him on the street. Where is your I.D.? Where do you live? Muhammed walked him back to his apartment and called the caretakers to explain to the nice officer why he had no legal I.D. "Don't leave the apartment by yourself again," the team told him, "at least for now."

It took Muhammed weeks to locate his family in Syria. All of his eight-year-old phone numbers had new owners. Finally, through a former neighbor, he made contact. More than a dozen relatives got on the landline in his sister's house, one after another.

He gave me a long list of messages to take back to Abdul Nasser: *Your nephew who was fourteen when you saw him is studying to be a lawyer. Your daughter had a baby girl who is four years old now. Your wife cried for a few minutes when she got on the phone. She is still patient and waiting for you. I told her that I was living in a house, cooking, and washing dishes, and she didn't believe me. She said I never washed dishes when I was in Syria. I told her that I would try to find you a wife when you are released. She said she would cut me to pieces if I tried.*

Muhammed spent a lot of time cooking for no one in particular, with his laptop open on the kitchen counter so that he could chat on Skype while he worked. His main Skype buddy was a former detainee named Mahrar Rafat al Quwari, a Palestinian who had been resettled in Hungary just after Muhammed arrived in Portugal. Al Quwari had been cleared to leave Guantánamo even earlier than Muhammed—in 2007, under the Bush Administration—but because he was stateless, he had stayed in prison during the three years it took the U.S. government to find a country that would take him. Half the time he and Muhammed didn't even talk. They just went about their business while Skype was open so they could hear the sound of someone else in the room. Once when I visited, we all had dinner together—Muhammed and I at the table, al Quwari on the laptop. We held Muhammed's dishes up to the screen to show al Quwari what he was missing.

Muhammed tried to stay busy in other ways. He and Dokhan took Portuguese lessons together. He went on a mission to find the most cost-efficient calling card to Syria. He made daily trips to the housewares store, buying a few items at a time to increase the number of outings. He played soccer with an amateur league, though he dropped out after a while: he didn't want to tell his teammates about his past. He let his aunt try to set him up with a girl back home, but that went nowhere; there was no chance that the Syrian government was going to let her travel to Portugal—it had already rejected his family's request to visit him. All the while, he held on to the hope that his father would soon be with him, even if his mother couldn't be. He took pictures of himself dining alone that he asked me to give to Abdul Nasser. "Let's see who is the better cook when you are here," he said in a message to his father.

By early 2010, after it became clear that Portugal was not going to allow Abdul Nasser to join his son, Muhammed wrote a letter to the Portuguese authorities:

> Greetings to whom it may concern
>
> The purpose of this letter is not to blame you for what happened to me, and I am neither seeking to share with you that feeling of sadness that has been haunting me.
>
> When you sent your delegation to meet with me in Guantánamo, even though I was still imprisoned and was suffering from torture, it made me feel as if I was already released from prison, because I met with human beings

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who have that sense of humanity. I also felt that the brutality which had been inflicted on me for the last 8 years was just about to end; and indeed, it ended. I felt optimistic when I was told, "Come now and if the program goes well there will be a great chance for your father to join you."

I was truly very enthusiastic about building my future despite the trauma I suffered from being separated from my father. What made me even more enthusiastic was the amount of assistance I received from the Portuguese government. In fact no one can deny nor ignore what you have done for me.

Yet now that I have crossed half the road I feel day after day that things are going backwards. I am physically free, yet I feel like I am mentally imprisoned. This is the worst kind of detention.

You too are all fathers and mothers and you can feel what I feel. You may choose to live away from them, but I am sure you can visit them and they can visit you as well. In my case I can't visit them and they can't visit me, and you all know that.

It is very easy for the U.S. government to use a political argument to separate me from my father. It's easy for a country to do such a thing when it claims to be the beacon of humanity, to be against torture and against human rights violations, yet it does it solely through slogans and words. However, what is really stunning is when an E.U. country like Portugal condones America's actions when we all know that Portugal is considered the second country in the world following Sweden when it has to do with protecting families. I'm not trying here to dictate to Portugal what it should do in this case, yet I feel I should tell Portugal that it shouldn't have taken me without my father, because it was for humanitarian reasons that they decided to take me.

I sincerely say that what the Portuguese government has done for me was magnificent. However, I will not live here without my father and he cannot lead his life without me either. No one should ask why someone would make such a request. Nevertheless, I will mention some of these reasons:

1. This is my basic right and it is based on Portuguese laws that stipulate that after spending one full year in Portugal a refugee is entitled to bring a family member to the country.

2. My father is an older man and needs to be taken care of, and no one but me could offer him the care he needs. One might say that he is not that old and my response would be, "Don't forget that he has been in jail and tortured for close to nine years."

3. My father has little reading and writing capabilities and that will make it hard for him to live alone.

4. My father does not speak a foreign language which is an important thing. Look how difficult it was for you to find me a language instructor who is fluent in both Arabic and Portuguese. I am willing to take care of teaching my father Portuguese.

5. We cannot reunite with any of our relatives. I am all he's got and he's all I got.

6. We don't have any relative who lives in a foreign country and who could go and live with him.

7. It is not going to be easy for him to find a job because of his age and the time he spent in prison.

I will not accept to live without my father, and no decent person would accept to turn it into a political matter. If the reason is financial I am willing to give up everything and in return be reunited with my father. If the problem is the purchase of the airline ticket, Albania, Palau, and Bermuda are much poorer than Portugal and still took close to 10 men.

Finally, I don't want to leave Portugal if you bring me back my father who is all my life, yet I don't want to stay here if my father can't come to live with me. When they took my father away from me in prison I felt like I don't have anything left in life, and when he was brought back to me I felt like I became life itself. I will never give up my father, and if I'll ever have to do it that will mean that I am ready to give up my life.

I apologize for taking too much of your time but I am asking you to put yourselves in my shoes.

Thank you very much.

In 2010, Cape Verde, a former Portuguese colony off the coast of Senegal, agreed to take Abdul Nasser. I showed him where it was on a map, drawing a line from Cuba to a small archipelago in the Atlantic. "It's another island?" he asked.

Muhammed thought it sounded like a terrible idea. He wrote out a numbered list and told me to give it to his father:

1. It is going to be so hard for you to speak the language
2. You are going to be transferred alone
3. You are going to a country that you didn't ever know or entered it before
4. There is no one from your family can join you because they are not allowed to travel
5. It may be like another Guantánamo but with small shape
6. There is no guarantees from any side—American or Portuguese—that they are going to gather us in the future

So please think completely and don't do anything before consultation.

Abdul Nasser wanted assurances that he would be able to reunite with his family. But he had also spent nearly a year in Guantánamo since Muhammed had been released. And the threat of congressional restrictions on transfers was looming. By the time Cape Verde made a concrete offer, Abdul Nasser had made up his mind. "The matter is out of our hands," he said. "I've had enough. Let me get out of this hole."

Abdul Nasser was transferred to Cape Verde on July 19, 2010. A few months later, Congress passed its restrictions. The Obama Administration abandoned its efforts to close the prison for the next three years. Dozens of men cleared for release were trapped in Guantánamo.

In the days leading up to Abdul Nasser's transfer, Muhammed had shared more wisdom with his father.

Try to speak with the military before you leave the block. Tell them, I don't want you to hood me or cover my ears. Be patient, they may search your genitals.

In the airplane try to ask for restroom, they will allow it. They won't leave the door open.

Try to ask for a walk inside the plane every hour. Tell them, I need to walk. They will allow it.

When you get there, there will be a car waiting with a few people. When you get in the car, ask for a call with me directly.

Don't be shocked when you get there. Remember to shake people's hands. The man with me forgot to say hello and shake hands.

The first week, you will be amazed at the little things. Don't be surprised if you sleep and you cover your head, and you think, am I allowed to cover

> my head? It is crazy when you remember where you were and where you are.
>
> All of the family sends you their best, best, best congratulations. They are just waiting to hear your voice.

I visited Abdul Nasser a few weeks after he arrived in Cape Verde. An official from the government picked me up from the airport in Praia and drove toward the mountains on the outskirts of the city. Eventually we arrived at the only house on a rocky strip of beach. We were 1,850 miles from Portugal.

I had brought Abdul Nasser his orthopedic shoes. He laughed and held back tears when he saw me take them out of my bag. I stood in the kitchen while he cooked a lunchtime feast for us of fish and fried potatoes, in honor of Muhammed.

A few weeks later, when I was back in New York, I set up a conference call with Muhammed, Abdul Nasser, and their family in Syria.

"Who's the next person?" I asked Muhammed.

"My aunt," he called out over seven excited voices having three separate conversations in Arabic. "I gave you the number."

We had ten people on the call, one from Lisbon, another from Cape Verde, seven from Aleppo, and me. The family's first reunion after nearly a decade apart. They were laughing, whooping, crying, talking over one another. I stood for a moment listening to the party before I left the room to let them have their privacy.

The family conference calls continued for nearly another year. Portugal and Cape Verde, perhaps under pressure from the United States, wouldn't permit Muhammed and Abdul Nasser to visit each other. Syria still wouldn't permit the rest of the family to leave the country.

Abdul Nasser probably needed the calls the most, since he couldn't communicate with anyone around him. He didn't have his son's knack for languages, and the island didn't have the infrastructure to help him learn. He depended entirely on an interpreter—an Arabic speaker the government found abroad and flew to Cape Verde—to be his voice at the market, at the doctor's office, at meetings with his government contacts.

In March 2013, Muhammed got permission to fly to Turkey to see his family. They had fled the civil war in Syria four months earlier and were living in a refugee camp near Gaziantep. By then Muhammed and Abdul Nasser had lost nearly a dozen relatives in the violence.

Traveling with Muhammed to meet his family for the first time was his wife. She and Muhammed had met two years earlier and had just gotten married. When he saw his family at the hotel in Gaziantep, he had to stop himself from sprinting across the lobby. There was his eight-month-old nephew, now twelve, and his niece, now seven years old, who almost knocked him down when she hugged him. Standing behind them was his mother, who held him for a very long time.

Muhammed told me that their faces were dusty from the refugee camp. It was shocking to see them, he said. They had all aged so much.

Abdul Nasser wasn't allowed to leave his island for the reunion. Muhammed took many pictures of their tear-streaked faces to hold up for Abdul Nasser over Skype. He has gotten used to documenting his life in photographs for his father.

Two years later, Abdul Nasser remains alone in Cape Verde. The rest of the family is still in Gaziantep. But not too long ago, I got an email from Muhammed.

> Well, I am a little bit angry at you because I emailed you last week to share in my happiness, but you didn't see it or receive it. But I like to tell you that you have been an aunt since the Valentine day.
>
> My dear daughter was born on 14th of February and here she is.

He attached a picture. Muhammed's daughter is a fuzzy bundle nestled in the crook of his arm. He's holding her up, looking into the camera, touching his cheek to her forehead.

It had been nearly five years since his release. He didn't look like a former prisoner. He looked like a new dad. ■

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