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Wilting Dreams At Gitmo

A Detainee Is Denied A Garden, and Hope

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I brought flowers to the isolation cell when I visited Saddiq this month. He likes to draw roses and often asks for gardening magazines.

Saddiq is one of the many mistakes at Guantanamo Bay. In 2005 our military admitted that he was not an enemy combatant, but the government hasn't been able to repatriate him. (By a curious irony, Saddiq's opposition to Osama bin Laden makes him too hot to handle in his native Saudi Arabia.) So he lives behind razor wire in Camp Iguana, with eight other men whom the military cleared long ago but who are nevertheless forbidden newspapers, visits from loved ones, English-language dictionaries -- and flowers.

For some time we lawyers have been asking the military for a garden. Gardens are commonplace in prisoner-of-war camps, and these men aren't even enemies. They live in a pen, but it has a small patch of ground. Why not? The military refused.

I was trying to explain this to Saddiq, along with other inexplicable things (such as how it is that innocent men can be held for years in an American prison), when he said, "We planted a garden. We have some small plants -- watermelon, peppers, garlic, cantaloupe. No fruit yet. There's a lemon tree about two inches tall, though it's not doing well."

"The guards gave you tools?"

He shook his head.

"Then -- how do you dig?" I was struggling to grasp this.

"Spoons," he said. "And a mop handle."

The soil in Camp Iguana is dry and brittle as flint. And I've seen the spoons they give our clients.

"But the spoons are plastic -- aren't they?"

Saddiq nodded. "At night we poured water on the ground. In the morning, we pounded it with the mop handle and scratched it with the spoons. You can loosen about this much." He held his thumb and forefinger about a half-inch apart. "The next day, we did it again. And so on until we had a bed for planting." He shrugged. "We have lots of time, here."

"But the seeds?" I asked. "Did they give you seeds?"

After four years at Guantanamo, Saddiq rarely smiles, but his face seemed to brighten then. "Sometimes, with the meal, they give us a bit of watermelon or cantaloupe to eat. We save the seeds."

One day the sordid history of Guantanamo will be written. There will be chapters on torture, chapters on the how the courts turned a blind eye, chapters on cruelties large and petty, on the massive stupidity and uselessness of the place. Many pages will illustrate the great lie of Guantanamo -- that it is a "terrorist detention facility" -- with accounts of goatherds and chicken

farmers and stray foreigners sold by Pakistani grifters to the United States for bounties. Saddiq may have one of the oddest chapters of all: jailed first by the Taliban as an enemy of its regime, then by us.

For all that, as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things." Maybe the History of Guantanamo will have a few uplifting footnotes. America denied them seeds and trowels and they created life anyway. We tried to withhold beauty, but from the grim earth of Guantanamo they scratched a few square meters of garden -- with spoons. Guantanamo is ugly, but man's instinct for beauty lives deep down things.

When our meeting was over, the flowers had wilted. Saddiq picked up the little nosegay. "May I take these back to CampIguana?"

But flowers are contraband. He wasn't allowed to keep them.

The writer, a Boston lawyer with Bingham McCutchen, represents Saddiq Ahmad Turkistani, who is about to begin his fifth year of imprisonment at GuantanamoBay.