

Thirty-six

Pilgrim Soul

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Jenny was being drawn more and more into her work with detainees. The next afternoon, she found a free moment to continue to explore the old reports. She desperately wanted to understand the circumstances behind the detainee system in Iraq and its handling of inmates. She read testimony made by Major General Antonio Taguba before the Senate Armed Services Committee. His report on the U.S.-run prison complex at Abu Ghraib found numerous “sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuses,” and its release created worldwide outcry. As she scanned the report, she learned that he found our government’s policies tragic and devastating to America as the beacon of democracy. Not surprising, soon after, he lost his job because of his forthrightness.

In one of the U.S. government’s periodic memorandums to the U.N. Committee Against Torture, Jenny learned that Dick Cheney played an early role in revamping the torture rules permitting interrogators to go well beyond the human treatment guidelines set forth by the Geneva Conventions. She read that Rumsfeld had said he didn’t consider U.S. soldiers who *see* inhumane treatment of detainees to have any obligation to intervene to stop it. She was appalled, and relieved that Rumsfeld was gone. Further down in the report, she learned that Rumsfeld admitted that, a few months after the war began, he had ordered military officials to detain a senior member of Ansar al-Islam without listing him in the prison’s register.

Several members of this administration right up to the top should be tried for war crimes, Jenny thought.

In visiting with many of the detainees and their families, Jenny had learned that the practice of holding detainees in secret, with no contact with the outside world, created extreme hardship on their families as well as placing the prisoners outside the protection of the law. They had no access to lawyers, doctors, or even their families. They were unable to challenge their arrest or detention, and the lawfulness of it was not assessed by any judge.

The secrecy of their detention allowed the concealment of all further human rights violations they suffered, including torture or ill treatment, and allowed governments to

evade accountability. It was obvious to Jenny that any deprivation of liberty, even when carried out in accordance with international humanitarian law, inevitably caused some degree of mental suffering to the internee and his family. But *indefinite* detention was horrific, especially for those who had been held for more than two years. What bothered Jenny was that these so called “ghost detainees” were being hidden to prevent even her and fellow Red Cross workers from visiting them. And when she learned that much of the detainee interrogation had been carried out by private contractors who were exempt from all prosecution, she became even more outraged.

When Karima entered the room, Jenny looked up from what she was reading.

“We have to do something about these injustices,” she pleaded. “As part of the Red Cross, we are supposed to be able to help protect these prisoners.”

Karima told her that the Red Cross had tried to intervene by submitting regular reports to the coalition forces. “We described the situation in detail and we actually got the attention of the secretary to the U.N. He was extremely concerned about the prolonged detention of so many without due process. But somehow the U.S. always manages to override the United Nations and convince it that detainees have full access to lawyers and their rights are being met under the Geneva Conventions.”

“I understand now why when detained Iraqis are lucky enough to finally be released, they come out angry and wanting payback.”

“Yes, if they weren’t hostile toward the United States before being detained,” Karima said, “it’s an absolute guarantee they will be when they come out.”

“I don’t understand,” Jenny said. “*We’re* here. Why don’t U.N. representatives just come over and see what’s going on for themselves. Why all the protocol?”

“Believe me,” Karima said passionately, “they’ve tried to get into Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantánamo Bay on what they call fact-finding missions. But every time they’ve been denied entrance to see any detainees held by U.S. forces.”

While making visitations to prisoners, Jenny befriended one of the USAID staff. Like herself, David Liberstein was idealistic and an avid believer in human rights. A New Yorker in his mid-forties, he had dark hair and a protruding chin that accentuated the determination in his face. From David, she learned that five independent experts of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights had tried for the past three years to visit prisoners arrested and detained for alleged terrorism.

“I had assumed that last year’s ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court regarding Guantánamo Bay would’ve had a positive effect on the detainee system,” Jenny said to David as they walked out of Camp Cropper, the central booking for all detainees in Iraq.

“When the Supreme Court determined that the president had overstepped his bounds in Guantánamo Bay, it seemed likely that this would spill over into the detention centers in Iraq, but it hasn’t had much effect,” David said, expressing his anger at the Bush administration for maintaining that the Geneva Conventions don’t apply. Even so, he was relieved that the justices declared that the military tribunals are not properly constituted and cannot go forward. “Calling the detainees ‘enemy combatants’ rather

than ‘prisoners of war,’” he added irately, “is a game of semantics to avoid compliance with the Geneva Conventions.”

“Here another year has passed,” Jenny pointed out as she looked around at the beleaguered surroundings where they were standing, “and the question still remains what to do about the 400 detainees at Guantánamo Bay and the thousands here. Some are guilty and should be tried somewhere, but according to our records with the Red Cross, close to ninety percent of the people being held are not guilty and were picked up in random U.S. sweeps.”

“Jenny, it’d take a person of deep faith to forgive America for the treatment they’ve received after leaving one of our detention centers.”

“I just don’t understand. It’s as if our country has grown numb,” Jenny replied, sadly recognizing that the same point had been made repeatedly by her Red Cross teammates. “For a short time, when the treatment of detainees first got exposed, there was a public outcry but, without continued media coverage, the atrocities are forgotten to those back home.”

“Yes, when we see Americans or Brits taken hostage or mistreated, there is widespread outrage. But how many understand we’re doing the same and worse to the Iraqi soldiers?” David said. “What ever happened to the ideals of our founding fathers, who wanted nothing more than life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for everyone?”

“I see that same wide-eyed look in many of the young men when they first come here. They’re barely through their adolescence, and some not even,” Jenny said, thinking of Hakim and Gabir. “And they’re all just thrown into this war zone for believing fully in their respective causes.” Her sadness was not just for the Americans as she realized that the frontline of battle was youth fighting youth, regardless of what side they were on.

. . . “Some accept the killing and maiming as part of what they signed on for,” David said. “Others, like this young man, find it devastating.”

“That’s true of all sides fighting in this war, isn’t it?” Jenny asked. “Sometimes I think back to the early pilgrims who were escaping religious persecution. Has America forgotten what started this great country of ours? How did we go from being the persecuted to becoming the persecutor?”

“Crusades were fought in the name of God. Wars break out to achieve peace,” David said. “And the funny thing is that each side always believes it’s right.”

“Isn’t that always the way? We all want to believe we’re the ones who are right.”

“You have a lot of idealism, Jenny. Of course, I guess we all do or we wouldn’t be here.”

“Working here makes me feel that we’re all like the early pilgrims striving to establish true freedom for this country.”

“I can see that pilgrim soul in you,” David commented.

“I’ve been told that before,” Jenny replied with a smile.

Waving goodbye to David as the armored car arrived to take the Red Cross workers to Camp Cropper, Jenny walked into the facility with her team, angered by the very ambiance of the place and the senseless detainment of so many innocent civilians. The

vast majority of the detainees were, according to the records, no guiltier than the 3,000 victims killed in the World Trade Center.

Upon their arrival at the camp, Jenny and her fellow workers went through their usual ritual. They presented the purpose of their visit to the detention authorities; they inquired about internment conditions, population and movements of persons deprived of their liberty. The International Committee of the Red Cross was particularly interested in releases, arrests, transfers, deaths, and hospitalizations. After touring the prison, the volunteers were permitted to hold private interviews with various inmates of their choosing. At the end of each visit, the delegates held a final talk with the detaining authorities to inform them of the ICRC's findings and recommendations.

The following week, an armored car drove Jenny's team along airport road as they headed toward Camp Sather, a temporary base at Baghdad International Airport. Going through a similar ritual as before, Jenny had an opportunity to meet with Ali, the brother of the man with whom she had corresponded by email. He was an exceptionally bright and well-spoken Islamic detainee. Although only in his forties, he appeared much older. With a graying, overgrown beard, he reminded her of the elderly Hindu man she'd met in Bali. His eyes revealed his despair as he told Jenny how worried he was about his wife and whether she was able to keep the family together in his absence. His boys were teenagers, and he was concerned that they would be dragged into the sectarian warfare. He explained that he believed his brother was doing all he could, but he was allowed so little information from the outside world. He would just like to know that his loved ones were surviving without him.

Jenny felt his pain and assured him she would contact his brother and his wife for him. Perhaps, Jenny suggested, she can serve as an intermediary so they can communicate better. After learning more details about his family, Jenny inquired how he got here.

"I was a member of the Ba'ath party that was thrown out of office. I guess you understand that belonging to the party was mandatory to preserve our jobs under Saddam then. I was a community analyst. My job was to evaluate the needs of each ethnic group and determine how our government could best accommodate them. Believe me, I was way down in the pecking order but because I was a part of Hussein's government, the U.S. military must think I know something of value to them. I don't. I'm glad Saddam is gone, but I'm distraught at what has transpired since he was taken down. The overall condition of our country is worse now. I never thought that could happen."

"What do you think it will take to bring peace to the Middle East?" Jenny asked.

Ali took a deep breath as if exasperated by the question. "For starters, you need to close down your military bases and get the hell out of here. The desire for democracy has to come from us. You can't use a bomb to force it on us. The factions here have to decide for themselves whether the differences that separate them are greater than the bonds that could unite them."

"So, Ali, how would you suggest that our troops make their exit from here?"

"Obviously, the U.S. needs to maintain some kind of presence here. But as soon as is reasonable, your country needs to begin withdrawing its combat forces and replace them

with peacekeeping forces. I can almost guarantee you that hatred for the U.S. is at such an all-time high in the Middle East that if America would simply take a back seat and serve in a training capacity, it would quiet down some of the insurrection.”

Jenny moved her wooden chair closer to the table so that she could take notes on a yellow pad. The setting was the same bleak environment as the meeting room at Abu Ghraib, only smaller. Ali was wearing nondescript prison garb, but she noted that his eyes were beginning to exude more life as she drew him out to share his views.

“Many Americans, particularly my Republican friends, feel that a reduction of our troops will declare victory for al Qaeda. They think this so-called ‘failure’ in Iraq would endanger America for generations to come. So how would you respond to them?” Jenny asked.

“You see, it’s going to require the coalition leaders to try to understand the al Qaeda movement. From where I sit, it doesn’t appear that anyone has ever really tried to do that. Al Qaeda’s overall strategy is to bleed the U.S. and its allies in a series of quagmire wars in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, and maybe Somalia. It’s obvious that, since Sept 11, al Qaeda has gone on the offensive and their most successful plans have been in Iraq.”

“President Bush would say that’s why he declared war here—to fight al Qaeda and bring an end to terrorism.”

“No, it’s the other way around. Your ambitious president decided to come here first . . . for his own political reasons. *Before* 9/11, it was a well-known fact that America planned to invade this country. Bin Laden merely responded by urging his followers to go to Iraq and prepare a trap for the occupation. Where your leaders were blindsided is that al Qaeda has been successful in precipitating the Sunni-Shiite war which now grips our country. Don’t you see that the continuance of the Iraqi war supports the overriding goal of the al Qaeda network?”

“You’re saying that we are playing into their hands by staying and that by leaving we will thwart their plans?”

“Exactly! If the American troops go, two things will happen: they will leave the Shiites to dominate our country, which would ruthlessly repress al Qaeda and, even worse, America will leave the historic trap al Qaeda set up for them, thereby depriving them of the opportunity to destroy American forces.”

Jenny was fascinated. “Americans who still support this war—and they are declining by volumes every day—believe that by keeping the war here, they are keeping it from being fought on our own turf.”

“That’s what I mean, ma’am. America simply hasn’t taken the time to try to understand bin Laden and the al Qaeda network. They don’t want to fight on your soil. Their intent is to fight long battles in Muslim countries where they have all the advantages—fighting on their home turf and fighting where they think their intelligence will be better than America’s and where they will weaken the United States’ will to fight back.”

“But they are planning to attack us,” Jenny protested as she flipped some straggling hairs behind her ear. “Last August, had their plot been successful, we would have seen the downing of ten simultaneous aircraft over the Atlantic.”

“These are what they call raids—as in the bombing on the U.S., London, and Madrid—and they’re useful in that they take the war to the far enemy from time to time but that is not the central point of al Qaeda’s strategy. They know they can never conduct a raid that is so devastating that it will destroy the West. They want to entice the U.S. into these quagmire wars so they can defeat you on *their* own turf.”

“I must say, Ali, you have a fascinating insight into the innuendoes of this war.”

“You would too, my dear friend, if you were imprisoned as long as I’ve been with nothing more to do than to analyze this situation and pray for some solution.”

Jenny felt drawn to Ali. He was wise beyond his years. Perhaps his imprisonment had made him so. She thought how Father Mike would have been in complete sync with this so-called enemy combatant. The fine man across from Jenny was anything but an enemy or a combatant. He was expressing Mike’s basic philosophy of life.

“If America only understood,” Ali said wearily. “What motivates Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda network is not to turn Westerners into Muslims but rather to end a century of what they see as Western domination—the widespread plundering, pillaging, and raping of the Muslim world.”