



Source: Steven Erlanger, 'For Gaza's young at play, fields can be deadly', *New York Times online*, 26/09/07.

Tags: France, Jerusalem, politics, travel
Writer/s: Joseph Rabie

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

I was led to the rear gangway of the 727, and walked down, a free man. The man who had pushed me from the first class section was chatting to his French counterparts, a snapshot of perfect chumminess among spooks. Service personnel were already preparing the aircraft for destinations further east. A bus came and took me, the only passenger, to the terminal.

I clutched my bag, which had been returned to me at Guantanamo. It was as if I only noticed it now, I had been in such a daze. What meagre possessions were still inside it? I followed a corridor, a flight of steps, and was suddenly in a queue of chatting, well-clothed people with colourful plastic bags. They had just arrived, it appeared to me, from a foreign planet. Before the customs official I rummaged in my bag and found my Oslo passport, between underwear and socks. The official scrutinised it and said that it would not do, there was no visa. He was refusing me entry, I would have to return to where I came from. And suddenly I was shrieking through uncontrollable laughter and tears, 'I come from Guantánamo!'

Four policemen surrounded me as they marched me downstairs, into a van, which followed the perimeter road running between the airport building and the parked planes. It came to a stop at a gate in the barbed wire fence. I was led to a nondescript, low building: the Roissy Retention Centre. Not a prison, but a place where people were held before expulsion from France. It was full of these unwanted, sitting, standing, wandering aimlessly about; all wearing the same, drawn features. I was made to sit, my bag on my knees. Exhausted, I slumped forward like some failed tree onto my bag, and slept. I woke up and slept. And again. I was in some sort of limbo where sleeping, I dreamt that I was awake and struggling but unable to fall asleep.

My torpor was broken by a great commotion: a black man was being dragged in through the front door by a bevy of frontier policemen, his face tinged blue. He looked as if he had gasped his last, living breath. Apparently, he had been resisting deportation, had refused to be seated in the aircraft, had struggled with such violence that they had had to throttle him. Suddenly an ambulance crew came in, and removed him on a stretcher. Now another group was brought in, passengers from the same plane who had objected to his treatment, they were being charged for insulting and resisting a police officer. They were well-off and vociferous. They claimed to have been manhandled; they wanted a lawyer. And for this they were shoved to the ground and pinned there by booted feet. They squirmed to retrieve their identity documents to hand up to the police officer.

And then again—a certain calmness fell. Outside, in what may have been a garden, some children kicked a ball around listlessly. Another was following the perimeter fence. Every now and then he would come back past. Several older people wilted into each other on a bench. I

slept fitfully, waking to the rhythm of aircraft taking off. I could see them strung in the sky. Then the wind changed direction and they came into land with the screech of braking rubber.

Down the corridor, a group of people were approaching, one man abusing the others. They had not met their targets. He had made a promise—a solemn promise before the French people—that 25,000 illegal immigrants would be deported this year. How would he look if he did not deliver? The walls shuddered to his blaring. How would he look if his subalterns were incapable of carrying out his orders? He would look ridiculous! He would hang them from a butcher's hook!

And suddenly he stood before me. I raised my eyes from where they had been following imaginary paths across the worn linoleum until I was eye-to-eye with a heavy gold belt buckle. Prada. And on his wrist, a Breitling. I shot up, a protruding blood vessel pulsated in his forehead, just above his left eye. It was the President himself, Nicholas Sarkozy. He smelt wonderful, even his breath—the perfect olfactory poster boy for the French cosmetics industry. I wanted to say to him, 'You know, we were in business together!' But that was not strictly true, we had simply both been on the Clearstream list and he had been framed by a political rival, so I checked myself.

For his part, he seemed as surprised by my sudden eruption into his field of vision. 'You! Where are you from?' he shot through bared teeth.

'Jerusalem', I replied.

And suddenly he was as smooth as honey, a broad smile, teeth flashing. No tartar, all in perfect running order. His left hand was on my shoulder, his right grasping my own. And now he would not shut up: 'What are you doing here? I'll have you released immediately! Wonderful country, Israel. Excellent police force, world class riot control. When I took over the police department in the Interior Ministry, my bumbling predecessor—a socialist, you understand—what do they know about public security? They make excuses for the criminals, no thought for the victims. Police were in a deplorable state. The Israelis sent me instructors, right from the terrain, taught us their latest techniques.'

I muttered that I was Palestinian, not Israeli at all. Did I feel shame at that moment? Instantly, the smile was wiped, hands withdrawn, eyes dark as gun steel. 'You have no business in France, I am sending you back', he said. 'We cannot take in all the misery in the world. I shall make sure that you get your state. But you mustn't be greedy, you mustn't make unreasonable demands'.

And nor would I. Going home was my only request.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Joseph Rabie.