



The Way It Wasn't

by Constance McCutcheon

“Be seated.”

Everyone in the large bare room sat down again. The officer who had just entered, for whom the men had had to rise, stood facing them stonily. An interpreter, swarthy, sweating, and looking ill-at-ease, stood at his side with a microphone.

“You are here because we have substantial reasons for believing each of you is a terrorist. You have either committed crimes against humanity or we have proof that you have been engaged in activities to incite crimes against humanity.” He paused briefly as the interpreter expressed these statements in Arabic.

“You are prisoners. You will not be leaving this institution in the near future. Your stay here is indefinite.” He paused for the interpreter. “You will not be able to communicate with anyone outside this institution. We will not tell you where you are.”

As he spoke, he continued to pause at intervals for his words to be interpreted into the language of the men who ranged before him, but otherwise he appeared to be unaware of anything outside his own bright, well-washed skin.

“We have resources on the premises to acquaint each of you privately with the evidence we have against you for which you have been detained, if you so wish. Our legal advisers are available for you to consult, if you require that service. There are forms you can fill out to make these requests. They’re available from the wall-mounted stands in all the common rooms and the hallways. Or you can approach our very competent legal representative directly, Sergeant Boyle. We do not refuse requests.”

The translation of this segment caused a slight stir among the prisoners.

“You have a daily program which runs as follows: Up at eight, which is not too early, but not too late. You will have time to make up your bed, tidy your room, wash, have coffee, read a little. You will be supplied with up-to-date newspapers of your choice every morning with coffee or tea, if you prefer—or water, which you’ll have anyway.”

As the interpreter relayed this information, the prisoners exchanged involuntarily glances.

“This will be followed by a brief period of exercise outside in the fresh air where you can walk on your own or join a calisthenics group led by Sergeant Boyle, who is our best in that area. You will then have breakfast, which will be a buffet. We feel this is the best way to provide the variety that will allow you to choose what you prefer. All meals will be buffet. If the foods you prefer are not there, you can use the forms in the wall-mounted stands. Just fill one out with your request and deposit it in the slot there for that purpose. These forms are picked up after every meal.

“After breakfast, you will have time for personal hygiene activities and prayers. When ready, each of you will report to the community

center for work detail until lunchtime. The work you perform will help pay for this facility and your room and board. As it is work the outside community badly needs, your activities will contribute substantially to its welfare. If any of you objects to participating in such an activity, you can approach Sergeant Boyle directly, who will be guiding the workforce, with your concerns or fill out one of the forms, which are, as I have mentioned already, readily available from the wall-mounted stands.

“Lunch will be followed by a long break for physical exercise and sports activities. We have the equipment and personnel to conduct soccer training, practice, and tournaments—again, Sergeant Boyle is champion here—on an ongoing and serious basis. After sports and showers, there will be snacks and seminars will be conducted in Arabic on subjects of your choice, of which you can inform us directly or through the forms. You will then be granted time for private study. We have books in the common library for you to browse through and take out, classics and religious material in many languages. Again, if the desired book or language is missing—avail yourselves of the forms. After dinner, you will meet for a series of presentations on Western culture, religions, and history, warts and all, as they say. This session is mandatory. Time for relaxing, reading, guided discussion, and private conversation in the common rooms will follow. Ten-thirty is roll call, lights out at eleven.

“This regiment is published in the main hall and in the common rooms. If it all gets too dull, there are lists for you to sign up for special committees, music lessons, language courses, and the like. If any of you has general complaints or questions, you can use one of the forms or approach Sergeant Boyle, who is certified and highly recommended in the field of human relations.”

“I am the director of the institution and participate regularly in the discussions. I do answer questions about policy and program strategy. I do listen to complaints and personal problems. We have a multitude of interpreters on the premises, in case you should need them to communicate with us. That is all for this morning. Have a good day.”

The director pivoted and stepped down off the back of the platform from which he had addressed the four hundred and some prison-suited men and exited the auditorium.

“What is all this?” A man who had been standing in the hallway listening stepped out abruptly to challenge the flushed director. “Don’t you think you ought to teach them a lesson? Beat some sense into them, or just beat them! Give them something to think about!”

The director regarded him grimly, turned away to head down the hall toward his office, bethought himself, and turned back. “We do consider all objections. Just get yourself a form—they’re in the stands over there, fill it out, and hand it in to Sergeant Boyle.”

“Who is this Sergeant Boyle, anyway?” the man sneered.

“Sergeant Boyle?” The director’s eyebrows rose as if in perplexity. “He’s one heckava soccer coach. Ever confronted him on the soccer field? That’ll knock sense into anyone.” As he moved away from the irate man and proceeded down the hall, the director confided to the floor, “We certainly are counting on it.”

