

Essay written by: Noor Elashi

I will never forget sitting on that cold, solid wooden bench in the very back of the courtroom. As my eyes watered, I looked up at the judge, who started to look like nothing more than a mirage. Then, as I slowly turned my head to the double doors, I became almost blinded by a color more orange than the fruit, itself. It was the color of my daddy's jumpsuit. Two officers escorted my dad as he took small and careful steps to the front of the room to avoid tripping over the chains between his ankles.

At this point, I remember feeling as helpless as a lonely and young gazelle, just confronted by a ravenous cheetah. My father looked like a criminal, only his crimes were being the chairman of a Palestinian charitable organization and being an Arab-American.

I will also always remember the day he was arrested. In fact, every Tuesday morning I wake up terrified. I try to wipe the sweat off my palms as I shiver intensely from head to toe. Am I waking up from a nightmare, I ask myself. Suddenly, I hear a strong fist hit my front door. I jump out of bed and run to see who it is. "Who is it?" No answer. I open the door and there is no one there. This is when everything becomes awfully familiar.

I hear the same loud banging, I open the door and here it goes. A memory that even haunts me in my dreams. The red and blue lights are still flashing in my eyes. The 7 a.m. mist is still sticking to my skin. The words, "Sir you are under arrest" are still pounding in my head.

The setting in front of my house remains fresh in my mind. It feels as though it happened yesterday. After I woke up abruptly the morning of Tuesday, July 27, 2004, I ran towards the curtains. As I peaked through them, about a thousand thoughts surrounded my head like flies on dead flesh. I knew it was our turn, yet I could not bear with it.

Nearly fifteen agents, some in suits and some wearing yellow and black FBI jackets, lined up on the freshly cut grass in my front yard. Next to them stood about ten men in navy blue Richardson police uniforms. Right behind them were up to 5 tinted caprices and another five flashing police cars. They all stood in front of my house as though it was a murder scene.

By now, my father had woken up. The red veins in his eyes made the hazel stand out more than I have ever seen before. His complexion was always a dark pink, yet this day it seemed more like a light red. His short grey hair was out of place as were the white hairs on his small beard. Never dressing too casual or too formal, my father got dressed as he would have any other day. He managed to slip on a pair of khakis and a plaid buttoned-up shirt.

As he walked towards the front door, I followed. So did my sister and my mom. "This can't be happening to *us*," my fourteen-year-old sister said. I remember my mom's words clearly. "What gives them the right to shatter families," she said. Because my father knew his rights as an American citizen, I knew he was thinking one thing: I need to call my lawyer. And he did. As he was leaving a message for his lawyer, a strange voice yelled from behind the door, "Mr. Elashi, if you don't open the door now, we'll have to kick it down."

This moment remains most vivid in my memory. As he was unlocking the door, three agents slammed it open. Then, another agent grabbed my dad's arms and twisted them behind his back as if he was trying to escape.

As I was growing up, my dad has shown my family and I nothing more than protection and kindness. He has worked day and night to support us. He has always taken time out from his mornings to cook breakfast for my siblings. He has also taken time out from his afternoons to pick up my brothers and sisters from school, and at night he has always made sure to tuck my siblings in bed.

My dad—oldest of six—was born in Palestine in 1953. He, along with his parents and siblings, was forced to move out of his house due to Israeli occupation in 1967. They left their country and migrated to the United States for the reason that most people do: to enjoy a better life. It was nearly 27 years ago that my dad's airplane touched American soil. Soon afterwards, in 1982, he graduated with a Master's of Science in Accounting from the University of Miami and got married. He and his brothers began their own family business and each had their growing families.

As some agents took him to the car, others blocked our front door. I tried to follow my dad because I guess I thought I could somehow help him. But then I was confronted with reality when an agent stopped me. "You're not allowed out of your house now," he told me. I could not believe what I was hearing. I was restricted to stand in front of my own front door. I stared into the agents' eyes for nearly 10 seconds and then ran after my dad. This time, he did not stop me.

I ran several steps, then stopped. Suddenly, I felt as though my body had frozen. I was trying not to let it sink in so fast. My eyes watered as I stared at my dad being taken. Then our eyes met. He managed to stop to say these few words of hope, "It's okay hun, keep your head up high because your father did nothing wrong." And then he was in the car. I ran back into the house and stared out the window. I watched every last agent and officer fasten their seatbelts and drive off oh-so-proudly as if they had just solved an unsolved mystery.

My dad stayed in jail for 10 miserable days after which he was released under the conditions of house arrest. This was actually the second time he was arrested. My dad, along with his four brothers, was arrested nearly two years before this one. The government's claim, in brief, was that my father and uncles "willfully" and "intentionally" shipped a printer to Lybia—a country that was on America's list of terrorists. This made them a big threat.

My father was released a week later. Unfortunately, however, he was the only one released. My uncles remain behind bars until this very day. They have been there for more than two years now. Twenty of those months, they have spent in solitary confinement. What is going on with them, everyday I wonder. Every now and then, I receive a lengthy letter of wisdom and optimism from one of my uncles. My day is brightened when I read inspirational words like "never be ashamed of your uncles and father, consider us as your heroes." And I do. I do because they struggle day and night to live a life they don't deserve. Everyday, they are lined up for the morning inmate count with murderers, drug dealers and frauds.

However, despite being categorized as criminals in prison, everyone has a high sense of respect for them. The guards and even the other inmates always tell my uncles not to loose faith. Every chance I

get, I try to remind my cousins and siblings that our fathers are true American heroes and that will hopefully one day be realized.

I remember my uncles, their fatherless children and their mother. I remember my dad, who is still restricted to go beyond the borders of the Dallas/Fort Worth area. I remember the arrest, and then I remember the day I saw former attorney general John Ashcroft on television. It was the day he called my father a “terrorist.” A little while after Sept. 11, my dad and his brothers were among the thousands who were racially profiled. My father and his brothers came to America for a pursuit of happiness. In that pursuit, they became victims of our country’s “war on terror.”

I have spent my entire summer of 2004 and parts of my spring of 2005 contemplating in the federal courtroom in Downtown Dallas. Like eight-year-olds listing several good reasons why their father should buy them a valuable video game, I have observed government lawyers ramble to the jury about how the Elashi brothers have intentionally conspired to perform acts of terrorism. And like those naive dads who bought their sons those video games without even asking if they could somehow be harmful, the jurors have convicted my father and uncles on most counts.

Sentencing is set for mid-August 2005. Experts say my father and his brothers will serve between two and six years. Every time I think of the injustice my father and uncles are going through, I remember the Germans and Japanese in World War II. Day and night, my mind is occupied with hopeful and hopeless thoughts. During my college exams and as I eat supper, I try to convince myself that maybe there is a way I could open Uncle Sam’s eyes and spread Lady Liberty’s torch of tolerance throughout my nation.

Then, during the most random moments, I start to cry. What can I do to free my dad and uncles from this situation? What can I do to wake up America? *Nothing*, I think to myself. However, as months pass, I learn to become stronger. I learn to grow prouder and I reassure myself. I know my father is innocent, and that his only crimes were helping feed Palestinian orphans and being an Arab-American.

But then fear slips in my heart once again. Fear that I might have the same nightmare. And fear that I might hear the same banging this Tuesday morning. Only this time, I fear they will come for me.