

Liberating the Free

The plane landed smoothly in Washington-Baltimore Airport. That was the last smooth aspect of my travel to the nation, which claimed to be free. I was invited, expected and there was a reception committee in the airport, though not from the University which had invited me. I was travelling on business-class, which means that somebody else was paying the ticket, and I was leaving the plane pretty early. Just as I emerged from the plane, I was surprised to hear a man saying, "Welcome to America, Dr. Strange." He did not even ask if I was the man he searched for.

There were five men, all in plain clothes and of course all with a tie, which all men appears to sleep with in North America. All had greasy, dark hair and were clean-shaven and two of the five were wearing their sunglasses in-door. They were as anonymous as taken out of a spy film. I did not need to go through the custom, another of them said, if I would just follow them – which I, of course, did while other passengers from my plane looked filled up with envy to this individualised treatment. They should have known what followed, once I was out of their sights.

"What about my luggage?" I nervously asked.

"We are taking care of that," the leader of the group explained.

A modern airport has walking distances that makes you wonder if the plane landed too early. The peculiar thing was, that after stretching the leg, which you could accept after staying a whole day in the transatlantic flight, we arrived to an elevator leading upwards, not down to a waiting limousine, as I had started to hope for. The elevator demanded a key, provided by a third man of the reception committee. As the door slammed behind us, I got the feeling that the broad smile on the faces of all men disappeared, and that simultaneously. Soon, my own smile would fade away for a long time to come.

We stopped at the fifth floor, where a sign explained that we were now in the auspices of Homeland Security. Here we entered a strange office – no, interrogation room is a better designation. There was a new person present, the first one to mention his name, though not in a friendly tune and without the elsewhere obligatory handshake.

"My name is Donald Chimey, or DC, like our capital." Pointing to a telephone on the table he added, "Perhaps you want to call your wife and tell her that you have landed safely?" Except the telephone, there was just a lamp at the table, not a single piece of paper.

I utilized the offered possibility. We took occasion that we talked some languages at home, a possibility not considered for an Englishman calling home somewhere in Europe. My wife is Danish, and we used to train that language, too, for the purpose of the children being multiple language-masters. I gave her a concentrated thorough message that I had landed in Baltimore and was now in custody of 'HL sikkerhed,' which she would definitely associate with 'Homeland Security.'

DC looked surprised of the unknown language and barked, "You are only supposed to speak English!" Upon this unfriendly shouting, I simply cut the connection, to which DC surprised uttered: "But you were supposed to calm down your wife!"

"Do I have any reason to?"

"Maybe not," he admitted. "Can I please see your passport?"

I gave him my Swiss passport. That, too, confused him. "But you showed your British passport in the European airport."

"You are well-informed, except that I have a valid visa for multiple entries stamped in this one, and I prefer to show that here." The argument that I had entered the United States without a valid permission melted away, apart from not having had the occasion to enter the normal way.

"This passport does not fulfil the American requirements for biometrical data."

"Neither does my British passport. Perhaps my next one."

"May I see that, too?"

I hesitated. Some noise made me aware that the other five persons were still present and I turned my head.

"Either you give it or we take it," DC added in a less polite manner.

I did not want to create any violent scenes and decided for the first alternative. DC compared the two passports briefly, then put them inside his own pocket. Surprised I demanded them both back.

"Where you go now, you don't need passports."

"What does that mean?"

"You are under arrest – as a terrorist suspect," he said in a low tune.

That was a shock. "But I have been invited as a guest at the John Hopkins University Hospital."

"I know. We have arranged that invitation ourselves."

"But why?"

"A terrorist suspect has no right to information about the ongoing court process. But ransacking your memory, you may recall some unfriendly pamphlets against our elected government – your computer hard disc is full of them."

"I know that the NSA has been spying on computers worldwide since we had broadband Internet connections but I doubt that you can cite that for an American judge what has been carried out in Europe and is there fully legal. But I shall gladly defend it here if you want, after all, it reflects only the truth."

"We did not get you into this trap to give you another occasion to spread your propaganda further but once and for all to put an end to it. The only question that remains to be solved is, if you are considered having entered the United States or not, which you undoubtedly realize can be argued about."

"And that means?"

"Guantanamo or New Mexico, that is the question."

In this moment, the telephone rang. DC presented with his abbreviation, heard someone speaking and then, without a word ended the connection when he had heard enough. "You are lucky. New Mexico," he grunted. "Previously, people like you had been summarily executed before a firing squad."

"If you had reintroduced that principle for the 200 Israeli spies in 2001, rather than summarily expelling them, I would perhaps not have been here."

DC blinked. "I don't know what you are talking about – and I don't want to know."

There was no point in losing more wind towards these stubborn men. I knew – actually, I had written about it – that the new America did not warrant any persons justice who were labelled 'terror-suspects.' "Terrorism is such a vile crime that innocence is no defence," Michael Rivero, a potential terror suspect, once said. I could only hope that Elisabeth, my wife, would sound the alarm bell after my shocking call. Perhaps she would expect another call explaining some misunderstanding in the airport but when this did not appear in a few hours, she would not hesitate. She had connections both in London and Berne, the governmental seats reflecting my two passports. The British might not be particularly important, giving their servile attitude towards their big master, once part of the British Empire; the Swiss, however, would require another kind of answer.

In the meantime, I had to admit that I had walked into an open trap. I was clad in a blue overall and my civil clothes stowed away together with my hand luggage. I never saw my suitcase but had no doubt that it was taken care of. "So, off to New Mexico," I said in an undisturbed way, knowing that this was the only attitude that could shatter my counterparts.

"You appear so self-certain, as if you had expected this outcome," DC now said. Three of the anonymous agents had in the meantime disappeared but there were still enough if I should demonstrate resistance – I have not seen enough films to vast my energy for that purpose.

"Be surprised!"

"So what have you prepared?"

"It shall be a surprise, as I just said."

DC roared but decided that it would be better not to ask further. A suspected terrorist should not shatter the process of American justice. "You have a single-room accommodation here in the airport arrest until a judge formally decides about where to store you for the years to come while the process against you is being prepared."

"So when shall I see the judge?"

"Not this time – perhaps never. There are also no lawyers involved at this stage. Anyhow, lawyers are not permitted to see evidence that has been connected to a security risk."

"Then how can you know about New Mexico, if the judge did not yet decide?"

"That was an administrative decision. The judge shall only confirm it, which is a formality. They always confirm our administrative decisions."

"Shouldn't you have said something about my legal rights to remain silent?"

"First, this is no film. Second, terrorists have no rights in the United States."

"What a rapid advancement: before I was only a terror-suspect, within minutes I have progressed to a fully matured terrorist; and that for a respected Doctor in Switzerland. But I always wanted to see one of your concentration camps from within."

DC was obviously shattered from my statements. If he had some kind of artistic features, he might enjoy the variation. Instead, he was a man of standardised expectations, getting annoyed when someone did not live up to the norm.

"Take him away," he snored.

The two watchdogs suddenly regained life. They grasp me in each arm, but at first not to take me away, no, they were going to handcuff me, hands on the back. Remind me to get this measure registered as a means of torture. In itself, it may not be, but with a little clumsiness added, there is pain to the wrists and pain in the shoulders. I once had a dislocation of the right shoulder and from time to time, when I forget to be cautious, it slides out again, though less painful than the first times and I learned to put it back. This time, it was to me a surprise suddenly to get my arms pulled down and the shoulder dislocated right away. There was no possibility to settle the harm done and the two agents had obviously no idea, what they had caused. But even if they had, it would have filled them with pleasure.

No, I was wrong, they knew what they had caused, because one of them said: "It seems that your shoulder hurts. Is it *that* shoulder?" and then he slapped on the dislocated shoulder me in a way, which you would not describe as torture under normal circumstances. This was a highly abnormal one.

"Such things are not practised in the free World. Send them to Iraq or Afghanistan," I wheezed to DC.

"That's where they learned it," he responded, totally untouched. "Take him away, as I said," he repeated.

"Yes, take me away from that idiot," I answered. I never saw him again. Unfortunately, there were many other idiots.

The airport arrest was one stock below, so I was entitled to another elevator drive. It was a large hall split in 12 cages. As I later counted, we were 15 inmates, so in three of the cells were two prisoners, including mine. At first, however, I had only thoughts for my aching shoulder and the first I did, once the bracelets were removed, was to restore its integrity. Although I still felt slight pain, it was a great relief, and I enjoyed the next couple of minutes, before I looked at my cell companion and nodded as a greeting.

He was a coloured man, probably in his twenties, with a short beard around his mouth. "Arthur Jones, speed-trap victim," he introduced himself.

"Jack Strange, terrorist," I answered. My cellmate stepped back.

"I have nothing with such persons to do," he cried. "Hey officer, one thing is to throw me into a prison cell because I am black and drove 15 miles too fast, but take me away from that terrorist there, I did not deserve that!"

One of the guards was apparently deeply moved and approached the cell. "You are right, that is too hard a fate." Then he took poor Mr. Jones out and put him in another cell. "This is a comparatively harmless cell-mate for you, Jones. Bill Wright is accused of having raped twice – two men, by the way."

The average age among the other prisoners appeared to be around 20, so I was by far the oldest, having just completed the first half-century of my life. I had spent my second quarter in hospitals and could now look forward to spent the third one in prisons. I could hardly get started.

"When am I finally going to New Mexico?"

"Why are you in such a hurry to go there? It is our answer to the Devil's Island"

"Oh, I'd love to see an American concentration camp from the inside. I have seen pictures from the outside, showing watchtowers and barbed wire. You know, I had an uncle who died in a concentration camp in Poland."

"You cannot compare our prisons to the holocaust," the guardsman said with empathy.

"What's the difference?" I asked but was interrupted by the rapist who claimed, "He was killed as he fell from a watchtower in a drunken state."

The guardsman shivered from the comparisons and left us to continue reading his torah.

The meal they brought us would in Europe fit the description as a prisoner's eating. It did not taste bad, it did not taste at all and thus fitted description I had previously used for the preservative-filled eating I had received from the microwaves of leading restaurants here in the States. For the purpose of survival, I ate it all.

The night was disturbed twice by the arrival of new loud prisoners. The next morning, we were 16 human wrecks in the 12 cages but around noon, a lawyer arrived and told the rapist, that he was now free on bail. One by one, most of the other prisoners were let away for interrogation of short or long duration. Nobody wanted to know anything from me, I was stamped as a terrorist, and they knew all what was stored on my computer, so why ask me?

The third day in jail, I was starting to get annoyed but decided not to show it. They obviously did not want to know anything from me and I decided not to ask any questions, being certain that they would be at best ignored, at worst ... never mind.

Suddenly, a guard I had not seen before came across to my cage and said, "the transfer to New Mexico has been postponed. It seems that the British have raised some obstacles." I concentrated on keeping a relaxed and careless expression in my face, though I was thinking that Elisabeth was at least successful for stirring the gringos' plans. I wondered if the University was totally inactive – whatever they might have done was nothing that reached my cell's metal bars. And then there were still the Swiss government, who should react to its sovereign being held in jail.

The fifth day proved to be crucial in one of two ways:

I was still deeply asleep as the leading guardsman came in, pressing my hand and saying, "Congratulations, Dr. Strange, you are now a free man, though not in the States you arrived to last week. Here are your clothes, but you should better leave the country immediately. There is a plane for Zurich leaving from this airport later today; it is dangerous to go to any of the big cities at the moment. Much has changed here now. The President, his Vice-President and several of the ministers have been carried out in tar and feathers, the complete congress has been dissolved after it was proved that the vast majority of the members of both chambers have been corrupted by a foreign power, among other corrupting factors. There will be a new election in three months, only by paper votes, and both Democrats and Republicans are forbidden to participate – therefore we need some time for new parties to be formed. They are working on systems to prevent the superrich from being the only ones qualified. We the people have raised – yes, also I have my definite sympathy with the occurrences. The billionaires have driven their game too far away from realities. There will be peace in the World, our soldiers will come home – and the prison in New Mexico will be used for the corrupt party bosses until a legal process can be made. Please put on your clothes and rest for a while, we still have some arrangements to make for your departure. I shall, of course, leave the cell door open.

So I took my own clothes on and, while it was still dark and the night as usual had been interrupted, went back to sleep.

I was still deeply asleep as a guardsman came in, saying, "I don't know if you had any part in it, Mr. Strange, but the prison in New Mexico will be filled up by other inmates. There has been an uprising against the legal government, but it has fortunately been crushed down and there are many casualties. Besides, your Swiss government has

obtained your liberation and reserved a place on the plane leaving later today. The security people who brought you here will bring you back to the departure area of this airport – you have thus never entered the United States.”

It was now daylight and I was slowly realising that my experience as a prisoner had come to an end. I swore never again to leave the free world in Europe on whatever occasion.

Shortly afterwards, the same brutes, who had dislocated my shoulder arrived and brought me to the place announced – only this time, they were completely civilised and one of them even carried my hand luggage – my suitcase had been checked in already, he claimed and gave me a certificate allegedly confirming that. ‘I don’t care about my suitcase,’ I thought, ‘the main fact is that I am on the plane.’

There were still 6 hours until take-off, so I took a nap in the lobby, to which I as business class had access. Perhaps two hours disturbed sleep later, I suddenly woke up and recalled the two events – were they experienced or simply dreams, one or both of them? Perhaps it was all a dream and simply Elisabeth who had managed to get me out of this prolonged nightmare. Elisabeth! I must call her and tell her that I am coming.

I found a phone booth and made the call. I was cautious not to make any reference to the events, simply mentioning which plane I was going to take. The rest would be detailed later, and not too short in the circles of the family when back on safe grounds.

I bought a paper but it did not mention any civil uprising. Never mind, the news media in the United States are known to be fiercely controlled by the ruling class.

Suddenly a man approached directly to me. “Dr. Strange, am I glad to meet you here. I enjoyed your lecture on amnesia in John Hopkins last Friday. Hewitt is my name, Dick Hewitt. Peculiar that you spent the weekend here – why didn’t you go back straight away? How can anybody spend a Sunday here by his own free will, if I might be so indiscrete to ask?”

“I would gladly tell you, but my experiences are covered in amnesia. Perhaps my next lecture shall bring the revelation?”

Mr. Hewitt laughed. “You are right, there are questions that one shouldn’t ask. Pardon me, my plane to San Francisco is leaving soon.” And he left.

I thanked his plane for leaving precisely. I needed some solitude in trying to reconstruct the last five days.