

“Welcome to the camp”, he says, turning around and facing me, “My name is Bush”. “Bush as in George W?”, I ask. “No” he answers, “Bush as in Kingston street kid with a bushy afro”.

He stands in front of me, legs akimbo, arms slightly spread out, sleeves of his T-shirt pulled up, showing his bulging biceps, his chest of a body builder, his broad and worked out shoulders. Here he is, eyes locked on mine, gaze focused, the whole man ready to hit at any sign of a false move from his counterpart. “So you’re the new one? Is it true what they say, that you’re a professor – a university professor?” “Yeah”, I reply after a while, “Guess it’s true”. He looks at me for a long time, then turns around and waves me over to the bunk beds. His eyes still firmly on me, he pulls out a book from under his mattress and tosses it into my hands. “Chomsky”, it reads on the cover, “Noam Chomsky on *Hegemony or Survival*”. “Got it from a guy who left the other day. Had a look at it and understand he’s a kind of linguistics professor, but is now talking about civil rights and foreign policy and stuff. Seems to be an okay guy, this one”. Seeing my unbelieving eyes, he queries “Anything wrong with that? You got any problems with that?” “No no”, I say, “It’s just that I used to teach Chomsky myself, you know? I am a linguistics professor too.” “No way”, Bush’s voice is coming to me, “No way. So you pull off the same kind of stuff as this guy?”, he asks. “Well, not precisely, but in a way, yes”. Now I have his full attention. “That’s cool, man, that’s really cool. Let’s walk, man, and let’s talk”.

And that is what we have been doing ever since. Walking and talking. At times we are strolling lazily, but mostly we power walk. Bare chests, shirts in hand, displaying strength, showing off determination. As much implied determination as you can muster, walking in circles – and narrow circles they are. Past the bunk beds, the showers, the toilets, all of them visible and open to view on the periphery of our circles – the tables and benches in the center. Again passing bunk beds, showers, toilets. Bunk beds, showers, toilets. Taking under a minute for each full circle, a bit less when one of us approaches one of the occupied toilets yelling “water, water!” at one of the men on the shitholes. Now the eyes of the other 50 men turn on this one guy whose intestines, having been ready to empty themselves of the stinking half-digested remains of the camp food, cramp, and the guy, flushing the toilet, hastens to get away. Better duck away, relaxation is not on offer in this food-and-lodging free summer camp. Steal away to your bunk and the crowd may or may not turn its vicious attention to another peon.

“What?”, I am shouting, “What’s that you’re saying, Bush?” Bush is walking and talking next to me, shouting at the top of his voice, hoping to be heard over the blaring camp TV – fixed overhead, so that you can see and hear it from everywhere in the hall. Loud enough to drown out the talking, horseplay, shouting and fighting of 50 harsh voices. The TV symbolizes the political and ethnic division of the prisoners. Whereas the Hispanics go for soccer and the unbearably subliminal pseudo-eroticism of Mexican soap operas, the English-speaking guys opt for American football and news on the Bush administration. Most of this is lost on me, as the TV’s volume is always turned up louder than the speakers can handle and is powerless against the cacophony of the facility. Hence, I always end up yelling “What? What did you say, Bush?” And Bush, Bush of Kingston, Jamaica, an illegal immigrant to the US for the better part of his life, explains, comments, advises and instructs. And I, myself an adviser in my former life outside the camp, subscribe to his wisdom, borne of a ten-year stint in a New York State Prison.

So, he advises: “You ever wonder why I am one of the few guys wearing an extra T-shirt? There are not many who know how to pull it off. But man, it’s the fucking Texas desert out there, and the temp is in the 120s, but inside it’s a fucking fridge, that’s what it is, a fucking fridge. So let me tell you how to get an extra shirt yourself”. So he advises me on just what and what not to say. What to display, what to hide. What to bear, what to resist, what to refuse, what to fight. From him, my man, I learn the ropes and learn to play along.

You learn to play along, though at times your attitude threatens to crack. Threatens to crack under the strain when you come back from the cafeteria or the canteen to find your bed searched, mattress turned over, toiletries, underwear, books and papers littered all over the place, and your additional white T-shirt gone. If you are lucky, the document entitling you to a white T-shirt is still around. In this case, you only have to bring it to a guard to let you apply for an appointment at the laundry. Some days later you may get to go there and they may even have a T-shirt for you. If you are less lucky, the document has gone missing. In this case, you need an appointment with the camp doctor. You apply for the shirt in writing and submit it to the one post box in the camp reserved for this kind of business and finally you may even see the Doc. So you tell your story again and you add something new to it so that he cannot send you away with the usual painkillers. “So this worked out okay”, you tell yourself. But there are other times when you come back from the cafeteria, and your mattress is torn up and the few belongings you are allowed to have are turned over again and the T-shirt, the white T-shirt which you are only allowed to wear at night is gone. Sometimes when that happens you wonder whether it is worth trying to get hold of another one. You wonder and doubt, but then

you finally realize – this is not about a T-shirt, this is about agency. A desperate and futile attempt to feel like a man rather than a bug.

Bush has now taken over the role of my personal trainer. We are entitled by law to one hour a day outside. ‘Outside’ meaning a 30 square foot concrete slab enclosed by a 12 foot razor wire fence, offering a view of a barren desert and some bleak brown hills on the horizon. Being outside means pumping iron. No warming up or stretching, just lifting. The exception is Bush. He shows me how to train one group of muscles a day, how to put the strain on the flesh, rather than on the bones. His hands on my back, on my chest, he pushes me into the right position. And he is not afraid to do the same thing with the others, the big guys. They mock him, tell him to get lost, to go back to his NY State Pen where he came from. They would not dare touch *him* though. Nor me, for that matter, as Bush is always around.

Almost always, save for this very moment when I turn around, having finished one set of reps, and face the big guy in front me. ‘Big’, as everybody calls him, and his Sudanese friend. ‘Fear no Man but God’ the runic tattoo reads on his chest. The two of them are now closing in on me and the other men smelling blood in the water join in. “Me telling you something”, Big says, his eyes boring into mine. “Tell you, you are smelling. Got me? Me talking straight and telling you are smelling, man. Hear that? Now you telling me what you doing about it cause I can’t put up with that. You now telling what you doing about it or we taking some action.”

His eyes are still on me.

Silence.

“You still with me, man?”

More silence.

Then I hear my own voice coming to me from far away, from somewhere which is both within and outside of myself. “If you think that I smell, than you better keep out of my way”. No man moves. I’m trembling inside, anticipating. Suddenly Bush breaks the silence. His face blushed and angry, he is all physical presence. But his voice is soft and calm – he is in control. “You know Big, the Professor’s from Europe. Over there, they do things differently”. He is joking now. “You know man, over there, things are not the way they are here. Give him a break, won’t you, Big? You had to adapt to things too when you first came over here, right?” So he goes on, all muscles and smiles. Finally, the men turn around and back away. At this moment, I love him as I have never loved him before. “Thank you, Bush. You saved my ass”, I think to myself, never actually saying it. “Never mind”, he silently thinks back, “It was nothing”. From this day on I am untouchable in Block C7 of the El Paso Service Processing Center.

Apre-deportation Service Processing Center is not a jail, it is even worse. It is worse for the detainees because nothing in this world has ever prepared

them for being there. Some of them, like Bush and Big, have done enough time to know what it is all about. They have amassed so many aggravated felonies that the judges finally grew tired of them and since neither Bush nor Big had the decency to get a residence permit or green card, they have now been sent to the camp for custody prior to deportation. However, these two are the exception. Most of the others have been living in the country for years, even decades working and paying taxes, getting married and putting their kids through school. In the old days prior to 11 September 2001, this was a piece of cake, I am told. You arrived with a tourist visa and then you stayed. This was the crime they committed, without ever being genuinely criminal. Not faithful to the law, no, but not criminals. Many of them are simple, hard working people who were dreaming of a life a bit less desperate than one in a Mexican pueblo. They came here against the law, yes, but they were never prepared for what they would have to face in here.

Since being here, I have seen men break, some of them on their first night, others later – some much, much later. The door of the hall opens and the guards bring in one or two new arrivals. They have been either picked up at the border or maybe straight out of their ordinary life. They have been questioned, detained and finally brought to the camp. They are given prison clothing and are led over to the blocks. They enter the block hall, wait at the guards' desk and look cautiously around. They try to look cool, but in their eyes the fear is clearly visible. Then more and more of the men notice them. One of them begins with the ceremonial newcomers' greeting, more join in and soon 50 men are shouting, yelling at the top of their voices, "Vaselina! Vaselina!", while the rookies walk across the hall and to their bunks, trying hard to fight down the raw horror welling up in them. Some of them break in this first night. Lying in their bunks, waiting for the blaring TV to be shut down and for the men to cease their shouting, they stare at the ceiling and feel the loss gripping their chest. The horrible loss of everything they ever had. They will lose their job first, then their house, then their wife and kids. They will lose what used to mean their whole life and will be sent back to the pueblos.

The next morning their eyes are empty, their shoulders sagging. Some of them never recover, while others accept and adapt. Accept that the processing center is not something out there and far away, but is now in their faces, has become part of them – the newest chapter of their life. "This is your new life buddy, so you better make something of it", they tell themselves. Bush and me, for example, we walk and talk. Talk and laugh. Join the other guys and joke with them. Trying hard to have a good time, just as you would try in any other place, at any other time, in any other life. "What are your plans for today?", we sometimes would ask each other in the morning or "What are you looking for today?" "Trying to get my fucking name on the library list", one of us would say then, or "Doing this

upper-back work-out I screwed up yesterday”, says the other. So we make plans, for ourselves and for the other. Bush looking after my growing shoulders and me developing a diet to help Bush lose some extra pounds which, to his great displeasure, he has put on over the last few months. “In the last place I was, they starved us to death”, he calls out, “and here they are fattening us”. So I tell him what to eat and what to leave behind. Advise to ignore the vending machine in our block, which the other men regularly raid for sodas and sweets.

We make plans, advise and teach each other. From Bush I learn about Rasta culture and working out, while I teach him chess and existentialism. Having finally managed to reach some friends who have sent money and books, and having been allowed to keep three of these books, Bush and I are reading Sartre and Camus. Bush asks and I explain. And then I ask, and he explains, about life in NYC and ‘going shopping’ and living in the scene. “You know, we were quite good in going shopping and always had money. We paid for all the drugs and sex was free. We wore the best clothes, the most expensive perfume, and life was a blast”. And later “But this has to be over now. I have done ten years time and that is more than enough. I want to have a real life. I want to do something. Real things, like the things you are doing. Something good”. “Doing something good”, it resonates in my head, “has never sounded more credible to me”.

“I told you of my fourteen year old daughter, remember?”, I ask. “Today, after so many futile attempts, I finally managed to get through to her on the phone. I told her that I was okay, and that although she hadn’t heard from me for a while she shouldn’t worry. That I couldn’t tell her where I was and that she shouldn’t ask, but that she could trust me that I would see her again. She was all calm and serious, and finally before hanging up, she said ‘I love you’. And that, Bush, was the first time ever she said such a thing”. “Yeah”, Bush replies, “Yeah. You see, man, this shithouse of a place can even be good for something”.

But despite how hard we are trying to hold onto some sort of life and human dignity, suddenly, and necessarily all the sharing and talking and joking comes to an abrupt end, collapsing like a house of cards under the brutality of the place. For days now, Bush has been in the highest spirits, as he finally got an appointment to see the judge. Long before my arrival he had plead for political asylum. He has a strong case. For one, being gay and coming from one of the more homophobic countries in this world, and for another, suffering from a disease which requires treatment too sophisticated to be granted in his country of origin. A strong case, if there were not his repeated aggravated felonies. So he has been turned down and has put in an appeal in return. Now, months later, he has been granted permission to see a judge. For days on end, he has not talked of anything else. He has discussed his case with me, has asked my opinion, has laid

out, considered and weighted each and every single pro and con, and balanced one argument against the other. He has despaired at the futility of his venture and then again with cautious but renewed hope, been positive and affirmative – smiling at me, beaming, anxiously awaiting the day of the decision, apprehensively cheerful.

Then, finally, after endless months in the camp, after having compiled file after file in his defence, after having handed it in for appeal, he finally meets the judge. “You know what he said?” Bush recounts, coming back from court, “I haven’t read your files, and I don’t think that I’m going to, as I will decide against you anyway. But first go back to the barracks for some more months”. “You see, Joe, that’s what the judge told me”. “Bush”, I cry out, trying to keep down pain and despair, “I have read all your files and I know that you have a very strong case. I am sure that finally you will succeed. Just do not give up, do not surrender”. “You think so, Joe?”, he asks me. “Yes, I do think so”, I lie. The brutality will not stop, as it is not incidental, but systematic. It will not stop until he is deported back to Jamaica or until he signs his voluntary departure at his own expense. That is, after all, what this whole process is designed to accomplish.

Soon after, my passport arrives to me in the mail. Now that they have my passport, Bush and I know that any moment can be our last. So we swap phone numbers of a mother and a brother. And then, one night at three o’clock the time has come. I am awake before the guard has even reached my bunk. “You’ve got three minutes to get ready”, he tells me. So I get up, grab my few things and when I turn around, Bush is standing in front of me. In the semi-darkness of the dimmed lights we look at each other, speechless, motionless. Standing. Looking. Looking at him for the last time. Looking at him and seeing the tears run down his cheeks as the guards take me away.

Away to what they call my country.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe Lekarowicz (pseudonym) has taught Applied Linguistics at universities in The Netherlands, Germany, Cameroon, Turkey and prior to his deportation, the United States of America. At the time he was arrested and detained at the El Paso Service Processing Center – “a temporary detention center for approximately 800 detainees who are waiting for their immigration status to be determined or who are awaiting repatriation” (cf. <http://www.ice.gov/pi/dro/facilities/elpaso.htm>) – he was employed by Portland State University, USA and held a valid working visa. He is now working at King’s College London, UK and can be reached at toumaii@gmx.net. Joe is in contact with his friend Bush, who has been deported to Jamaica.