

J U S T  
A N O T H E R  
B O O K

I S M A ' I L A B B A S

JUST ANOTHER BOOK

*To the guys in the cage who saved my life  
and never made it out.*

JUST ANOTHER BOOK

“CALL ME ISHMAEL.”

Opening line from *Moby Dick*,  
by Herman Melville

P R O L O G U E

CAN YOU HEAR THAT? CLOSE YOUR EYES. LISTEN. GATE CLOSES. INTERCOM CHIRPS. SPORADIC CONVERSATIONS. POCK. THE SILENCE FROM LAW. MEMORIES, LIES AND NONSENSE.

They say you never forget the first time you enter into lockup. Some say no to that, but they are only lying to you and themselves. The first-time sounds, smells and sights of prison are experiences that get burned into you, no matter what you've been through. Even if you think you saw it on TV, it's not the same. To experience the reality is something all by itself.

They call me Isma'il—a name that to learned individuals has always brought mention of the first line of *Moby Dick*. I'm 14 at the time, and I've just been transferred from Spofford Juvenile Detention Facility to Rikers Island. It's 1986, and I'm a youth pre-trial

detainee for the charges of first-degree aggravated murder for hire, first-degree arson and 16 counts of first-degree endangering the welfare of a human being.

My transfer to Rikers is due to an altercation with another inmate that came with two more criminal charges: first-degree attempted murder and first-degree aggravated assault with a weapon. My opponent lost his eye as a result of the altercation, which will soon turn out to be a bit of poetic justice for me.

Upon my intake, I was a bit confused. I was being admitted to C 95 (also called the Anna M. Kross Center), which was an adult unit. There was only one juvenile unit on Rikers Island, which was C 74. At the age of 14, I should have been going there. However, at the time it didn't matter. I had three things going for me. I wasn't scared. I knew several people at Rikers who would look after me. And I knew how to fight. Those things are a must for survival in any jail facility.

I landed on Unit 6 Main, got situated and saw who I knew there. Quickly I fell into a routine, for without that regularity you would lose your mind. I was always a bookworm and loved to learn, so I signed up to study and get my GED. I joined any other group or class I could get into and made myself a regular sight in the law library. Though I had an attorney paid for by my parents, he would go home at the end of the day regardless the verdict. I was the one who would pay the real price, so I studied everything legal pertaining to my case.

Two months went by. There was an individual that from the

day I entered Unit 6 continuously watched me and paid me extreme interest. I made those I was close with aware of the situation. Through them, I found out all I could about this individual. I needed to know if I might have crossed paths with him or someone close to him and violated them in a way that would call for retaliation. As it turned out, he was a nobody. I forgot about him—a mistake I would soon pay for.

About six months had passed since my arrival at Rikers, and I stuck to my routine. I had to keep busy, because to go back and reminisce about the outside and those you used to be close to would drive you mad. The outside world and all that was in it was now a memory that, if dwelled upon, would turn into a nightmare.

It was dinnertime, and the corrections officer (CO) called out mess. The unit began to file out to the mess hall. I always tried to get there first and get out quick, because law library hours started right after dinner. I got there early so I could get as much library time as I could. I took my food and went to my corner seat in the far back with a view of the window with the walkway behind me. Just as I began to eat, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around to look, and the next thing I knew I flatlined.

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I WAS BORN in New York City—Hell’s Kitchen, to be more specific. Constantly I found myself in trouble with my parents because I loved to say “Hell’s Kitchen.” My mother would smack me

for cursing. My response to her was, “Hey, I’m proud of where I’m from!” My parents were loving, hardworking people who emigrated from Palestine. I was the middle child, with an older brother who remained in Palestine and a younger sister. I was given much attention.

As many kids growing up in the city, we were allowed outside at an early age. We were trusted to the streets, because in the early 1970s, neighborhoods were closely knit. People looked out for each other, especially mine. But at an early age, I became starstruck by the rough side of the neighborhood. Soon I was taken under the wing of a local crew and quickly became christened by them.

Initially, I was timid around the gang. I was not brought up around violence but rather education. My family were devout Muslims, and my father was a ‘hafiz’—one who knows the Quran cover to cover. He had graduated from Cairo University with a degree in chemistry. My parents were close friends with Yasir Arafat. They taught me to be proud of my Palestinian heritage.

In my youth, my father introduced me to the ideological works of Marx, Engels, Nietzsche, Mao Tse-tung and Che Guevara. At the age of 9, they sent me to stay with Ahmad Dedat, a family friend in Durban, South Africa, in order to study at the Bible university there.

I emerged as an Arab kid who was smart and friendly, though a bit on the shy side. I got along well with my friends. We explored our neighborhood like it was a new country. There was a kid in the neighborhood that didn’t like me and expressed his dislike phys-

ically. Usually I shrugged it off with a smile and tried to be nice.

There came a point, however, when I knew my being nice wasn't working. My timid behavior was not enough to keep this bully off me. One day a close friend of mine stressed that my bully's abuse wouldn't stop until I stood up for myself.

Later on that same day, the kid in question came by, pushed me and said, "Get out of my way." As he walked on, I rushed at him, which shocked him sufficiently so that he fell down. I was on him in an instant, wildly hitting at him. From outside my frenzy, I faintly heard him crying for me to stop. But instead of letting up, an impulse out of nowhere made me grab up a nice-sized rock that was nearby. With a smile on my face, I proceeded to bring the rock down on his head.

Thankfully, before the rock made contact, my friends separated us, saving us both. My abuser ran off crying. The next day in school, while hearing all the kids tell the story of that incident, a change came over me. I began walking with my head up, a smile on my face. From that point on, I learned to fight well. I worked out to stay in shape. I literally became aroused whenever I had the chance to fight.

What I didn't know at the time was that this change would change my whole life. It would take me a long time to catch myself and get back on the right track. Years would pass before I learned to quell the murderous impulse.

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Three days after I flatlined, I woke up in the prison wing of Bellevue Hospital. I was told that while sitting in my corner in the mess hall, I had been assaulted by the shady character I spoke about earlier—the nobody. He had hit the right side of my face multiple times with three solid brass window cranks secured in a pair of socks. My jaw, broken in two places, was wired shut and I'd lost three teeth—baby teeth but teeth nonetheless.

Moving up my face, my eye socket was so badly shattered they had to put my eyeball back in the socket. Poetic justice. Nobody had also shattered my right cheekbone. Mentally I was in a daze, as yet unclear about why all this had happened to me until a visit from internal affairs.

An internal affairs guy showed up and told me that the individual who assaulted me was given \$1,000 to do the job. He was paid by a CO who just happened to be the brother of my victim in the case for which I was incarcerated. Furthermore, this CO was the one who had me placed on the adult unit instead of the juvenile one where I belonged, so that the hit could transpire.

Because of his actions, the CO was charged with conspiracy to commit murder. He subsequently took a deal for five years incarceration. A week later, the individual that assaulted me was found hanging in his cell. I remained in the ward at Bellevue for a little more than three weeks. With my jaw wired shut, I couldn't eat regular food, so they fed me Ensure. I lost thirty pounds due to the liquid diet. In desperation, I went as far as to remove the wiring

from my jaw in order to eat. When the doctor found out what I had done, he X-rayed me again and then had to re-break my jaw because it was healing wrong.

Upon my return to Rikers Island, I was visited by an attorney who informed me that the city wanted to settle with my family for \$60,000 for mistakingly putting me in an adult wing and the assault. My parents accepted the money, but it put us on bad terms. I knew we could have gotten a lot more. However, my parents didn't approve of lawsuits in the first place. But they acknowledged that at least I would have the money when I came home. It might mean a new start.

Home was not on the judge's mind. He had decided that due to the heinous nature of the crime with which I was charged, he would be trying me as an adult. Among other things, it gave him the opportunity to impose an equally heinous sentence if I was convicted: life without the possibility of parole.