

558 Days - Los Desaparecidos (The Disappeared)

A play in 9 scenes

By Gabriel Schivone

CHARACTERS:

Samer

Saeed

*Salvatrucha**

*Vecino**

*Border Patrol Agent**

**Can be performed by one actor*

We see A WATCHTOWER.

Lights reveal two men behind bars. SAEED is bitter, a thwarted man of action; SAMER is simple and in the moment, though he shares Saeed's dreams to be free.

They face us, hands on the bars of a cage.

SLIDE: "1: CAGED"

They speak to each other, or to us:

SAEED
558 days in a cage.

SAMER
558 days.
Hey—do you remember the song I used to sing?

SAEED
Where?

SAMER
Gaza, when we lived in Gaza

SAEED
Before we wound up here—

SAMER
American pop songs.
I sang American songs
“All about that bass, bout that bass, no treble—”

SAEED
Stop.

558 days in this cage.
But then, we were born in a cage: Gaza.
Born in the shadow of an Israeli watch tower in Gaza,

SAMER
Do you remember?
You said there’s nothing for us there.

SAEED
And my mother said, *go*. I had her blessing.
But she said: watch out for your cousin Samer. He’s simple.

SAMER
I’m *not* simple.

SAEED
I couldn’t believe I got her blessing. It *is* a crazy idea. Most people don’t leave here, most *can’t*.
But I said I’ll be back. I just need some money. To send home. Opportunity. Freedom from that
fucking guard tower. I can stand to look at it one more second.

A sound that rushes and grows loud.

*The bars disappear, lights shift and we are inside
their narrative.*

SLIDE: “2: DEPARTURE/ESCAPE”

The whoosh of sound continues under this:

SAEED
So we ran!

SAMER
Searchlights everywhere!

SAEED
Run!

SAMER
I'm running!

SAEED
There are gunshots!

They're shooting rubber bullets

Are they shooting? They're shooting-

There's a fence then a space we crawl under

Concrete—We jump!
Duck!

Are you okay, you're hit, are you hit? Fickk
Samer Samer Samer!
And my—God—

Alive!

SAMER

There's a hole in the—

First fence wires and—

There's a space we crawl under

There's concrete blocking
We jump!

Jump!
I lost my—
Saeed! Saeed!
And we make it!
We're alive!

The sound of escaping STOPS.

SLIDE: "3: CYPRUS"

SAEED
...But we got stuck
A year in Cyprus
No work.

SAMER
No work.

SAEED
No help from the government.

SAMER
Like Gaza.

SAEED
Like Gaza.
And I said: enough!
No more of this place. We gave it a shot. Let's leave.

SAMER
But where do we go?

SAEED
Venezuela doesn't require Visas for Palestinians.

SAMER
Venezuela is far away. Venezuela is dying.

SAEED
Then *America*.

SAMER
America?

SAEED
Dawood, from down the street, did. He lives in America now. His family hears from him regularly, always money along with it. We could get a job. Send money back to our families.

SAMER
America!
I will dream about it tonight and wake tomorrow, the first day of a new beginning.

(Nodding off, singing softly) "All about that bass, 'bout that bass, no treble; all 'bout that bass, 'bout that bass, no treble; all 'bout that bass, 'bout that bass..."

SAEED
(Gently pleading) Samer.

SLIDE: "4: HALF-WAY NORTH"

SAMER and SAEED walking. They're wearing summer clothes of a humid, tropical climate. SALVATRUCHA enters. He is a cheery man, about

their age; a pistol protrudes out the top of his pants.

SAMER

Who is this guide you found to take us north?

SAEED

He's mafia. People in town have said his outfit—they call them the 'Zetas'—are the ones that control the roads north.

SAMER

Mafia?

SAEED

We can trust him?

(Shrugs)

Also what choice do we have?

SALVATRUCHA

Speak Spanish please, I don't like you talking when I can't understand.
What are your names again, my brothers?

SAEED

Saeed.

SAMER

Samer.

SALVATRUCHA

My name is Salvatrucha [pronounced *Sal-vah-trookah*], but you can call me Sal. We will be each other's company for some weeks to come on the journey north. So please speak Spanish.
Where are you from?

SAEED

Palestine

SALVATRUCHA

There is such a place?

SAMER

Some say there isn't. But I believe it's real.
Of course.

SAEED

Of course.

SAMER

We're from Gaza, both of us. We're cousins.

SALVATRUCHA

Why did you leave this maybe-it-exists-maybe-it-does-not country of yours?

SAEED

Find work. And we wouldn't stand looking at the guard towers any longer. The Israeli guard towers.

And I know, we are suppose to be strong. Steadfast.

SAMER

Samud!

SAEED

And not let them kick us off slowly.

But.

The guard towers. I hated seeing—

SAMER

He couldn't stand seeing—

SAEED

Anyway we've been traveling through Spanish countries now for nearly a year. Found work for six months in Nicaragua but—

SALVATRUCHA

(intrigued)

Is that right?

SAEED

—But then that dried up. We were in Venezuela before that when—

SAMER

How long exactly will it take us to get to America?

SALVATRUCHA

Twenty-one days, my good man. And every one of them will be an adventure.

SAMER

We'd just like to get to America as soon as possible.

SALVATRUCHA
You will find riches in the U.S.
You have made the best decision of your lives.

SLIDE: "5: INCOMPLETE JOURNEY"

Seamless: They are walking.

SALVATRUCHA
This is it. Go on up ahead.

SAMER
No no, friend, you're mistaken, this is the Mexican border, that sign we just passed.

SALVATRUCHA
Indeed.

SAMER
So we still have a week to go.

SAEED
We paid you to take us to the Mexican border with America, not with Guatemala.
That was the deal we said in the beginning.

SALVATRUCHA
This is the new deal. Change of plans.

SAEED
Come on.
(Understanding the truth)
You crook! crook You double-cross us like this?

SALVATRUCHA
Watch your tongue.

SAEED
Keep your bargain!

SAMER
Saeed—

SAEED
Fuck you! We paid you everything we have—

SAMER
Saeed!—

SAEED
No, we paid to go to America!

SALVATRUCHA starts to leave but SAEED gets in his way.

SALVATRUCHA pushes him aside with one arm.

SAEED comes back and pushes him.

SALVATRUCHA pulls out his pistol pointing it waist level at SAMER's gut, halting SAEED in his tracks. SAMER is paralyzed.

SALVATRUCHA
I was just going to leave you here. But now...give me all the money you have on you. Both of you.

SAMER
He told you! We don't have any money.

SAEED
We paid it to you!

SAMER
We did pay you.

SALVATRUCHA
I don't like being lied to, bitch.

Both start emptying his pockets, then digging in his bag for more money.

Smart men.
Now, how about I just kill you and him right here?
Haven't you had enough of this life? This hard life on the road?
Things will never change. These lives are the ones we're dealt. I'm on this side of the gun, you're on that side. Your wretched lot will never change; dirt and scum trod under my shoes.

Why don't I just do you both a favor then? Put you in a mass grave near here. Hmm. Yes. Or not go through the trouble; just leave your bodies to rot in the jungle.

SALVATRUCHA circles SAMER as if sniffing for fear. Using the gun pointing at SAMER's head, SALVATRUCHA gently flicks SAMER's earlobe with the muzzle. Then does the same with the tip of SAMER's nose. SAEED has placed his money on the ground.

SAEED
Here, here. Please. Take it all.

SALVATRUCHA
You know what people call where we're standing—the Devil's Triangle—a 'graveyard'. For those who aim to go to America. Most come from around here. You from farther away. So far away. For this. Occasionally families come looking for the bodies—will yours come? Can they? Who will come for two Arabs. Nobody, that's who. You're alone.
No matter. Migrants don't have much luck.

SAMER has taken out his money and placed it on the ground. SALVATRUCHA takes both piles of cash and backs away slowly, offstage.

SAMER
We'll get through this.

Lights fade as Saeed glares at him.

SLIDE: "6: A NEW GUIDE"

*Night. SAEED and SAMER sit cross-legged next to each other on one side of a camp-fire, a middle-aged man, VECINO (***)Perhaps played by same actor as Sal) sits on the other side.*

SAEED and SAMER are jumpy, tense. VECINO is relaxed and approachable – the opposite of Sal's persona.

VECINO

[Whistling a sweet song in Spanish—a folk song, “[De Colores](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPi2PnpYQok)”:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPi2PnpYQok>.]

SAEED

(Whisper) I told you to get directions, not another mafia.

SAMER

The directions were too complicated! I saw for myself on a map—so Vecino and I agreed on a low price to take us all the way north, through the rest of Mexico.
Dawood wired us the money.

SAEED

(To VECINO) The man before, he said it would be three weeks to the United States. We traveled during two of those weeks. Does that mean there’s one left to go from here?

VECINO

(Stops whistling)

Yup. Bout a week out, maybe a little more to be safe.
What happened. Your friend was in bad shape before.

SAEED

We got robbed and abandoned—
By one of your friends.

SAMER

Saeed—

VECINO

By Zetas?

SAEED

Yes.

VECINO

Whoever robbed you, was not my friend... My line of work is noble, and I am proud of it. I help countrymen and families get across Mexico. Mexico, my Mexico.

He whistling another line of song from the top of scene. Samer and Saeed wonder where this is heading. But then Vecino stops whistling and:

VECINO

Mexico used to be much different. And this service I do used to be different too.

It was a neighborly ferrying service.

Then the Zetas took over. They are vicious; the evil of the earth. You to pay them taxes and pay the big *coyote* Dons who work for them. All the other *coyotes* like me, or most of them, they absorb the Zetas' qualities: Selfish and greedy. Exploiters, kidnappers.

Rapists,—

SAEED

(Looking at Vecino's gun)

—Murderers.

VECINO

But that's not me. I take many people north, as many as I can. To earn a living for my own family in Zacatecas and to help people avoid the path of the Zetas.

...Where are you both from?

SAEED

Palestine.

VECINO

My heart is out to you. You must have been through a lot.

SAMER

(Skeptical)

What do you know about Palestine?

VECINO

I know that Los Zetas were trained by Israel. Everywhere you've traveled, for hundreds of miles and for many years in every direction, Israel's footprints remain. In Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, here in Mexico. My own brother and father fell among "The Disappeared" when they were cut down by Israeli rifles in the hands of an Israeli-trained army in Guatemala.

(Pulls bullet casings from his shirt pocket, inspects them reflectively between his fingers) My father and brother hid me under the floor, with my mother and sisters, the day the soldiers came. I found these on the floor in our home. They took my father and brother, and many others from our village. We never saw them again.

(Tosses one of the bullet casings to Saeed who inspects it and shows it to Samer.)

I can't read the Hebrew but I know what it says.

(With the bullet casing in his hands, Saeed glances again at Vecino's pistol sticking out of his pants.) I've seen you noticing my gun. I carry it for protection. I thank God I've never had to use it. With wits and compassion, I pray I never do. It's not even loaded—I knew I wouldn't have to load it with you both.

SAEED

(Disarmed at last) I'm sorry for what happened to your family. I didn't know that about Israel here. No wonder they're so good at terrorizing us.

VECINO

They're so good at it because they tried it on you first.

Samer

(pulling out a key, showing Vecino)

These are the keys our family had when they left Beersheeba in 1948.

Vecino

(Inspecting them) Beautiful. May they unlock you back in upon your return.

SAEED

(Curious) Why didn't you make your home north in America? Everything you've said about this place...Why not go to America? Freedom, opportunity.

SAMER

America is a country that helps the world.

Silence.

VECINO

There is an old saying here about this land: "Poor Poor Mexico. So far from God, so close to the United States."

SAMER

What does that mean?

VECINO, followed by SAMER and SAEED, starts shuffling and fashioning out a makeshift bed.

SAMER

All about that bass, 'bout that bass, no treble
All 'bout that bass, 'bout that bass, no treble
All 'bout that bass, 'bout that bass...

VECINO

What is that song you're always muttering? I've been with you two for less than one full day now and I hear you jabbering it constantly!

SAMER

American pop song. The best.

Americans talk too fast. I know how to say some of the words but I don't know what I'm saying.
Something happy, though, I know.

Lights fade. In the darkness:

'Cause I got that BOOM BOOM that all the boys chase,
And all the right junk in all the right places—

SLIDE: "7: US-MEXICO BORDER"

Daytime.

SAEED

So we walked

SAMER

North through the desert

SAEED

Walking walking

SAMER

Desert day and night

SAMER

Desert far as the eye could see

SAEED

Water mirages

SAMER

America close and yet desert and more desert

SAEED

Desert like the Sinai border, prickly *sabr* cactus like in the Nakab.

SAMER

Until we thought we'd go mad

SAEED
Until I nearly went mad

SAMER
When I saw it

SAMER
When Saeed saw it

We see THE WATCHTOWER from the start.

SAEED
That's an Israeli tower!
You took us back!!

VECINO
What? What are you talking about?

SAEED
There! The Israeli tower! We are in Gaza!

*SAMER lunges at VENCINO. The two scuffle, rolling
around on the ground.*

SAMER wins, is on top of VECINO

VECINO
OK! Yeah you're right!
I put you on a plane while you slept and transported you across the ocean because -- I don't
know -- I just felt like visiting Israel!

*Saeed realizes he was crazy. They both get up.
Everybody stands breathing heavily, catching their
breath.*

Israel is helping the U.S. catch travelers like you. That is the US. *Estados Unidos*.
That's why that tower is there. And there's many more. Israel builds the towers.
You have to avoid them. I will leave you with a GPS and a map of the routes that will steer you
around the walls and towers. You must stick to these routes. These are treacherous desert
lands, my dear friends. The walls and towers will try to lure you to your deaths. You can take
your chances through that, and there is a one or two *coyotes* I can recommend to take you
through. Or you can follow the road to a port of entry and ask for asylum.
But I don't recommend it.

SAMER and SAEED confer to the side.

SAMER
We will go on ahead, alone.

SAEED
Thank you.

*SAMER turns and walks off, followed by SAEED a
several steps after before looking back.*

VECINO
Cuidate mucho. Dios te bendiga!

SLIDE: "8: DETENTION"

Darkness. The sound of chains rattling.

*(***Border patrol can be played by Vecino.)*

BORDER PATROL AGENT
(voice in the dark) All right, you bastards, welcome to hell.

*Inside of a jailhouse detention center. Bright lights,
seeming to buzz over the sterile room, highlight a
large red, white and blue seal introducing the "U.S.
Department of Homeland Security" next to a giant
American flag draped from the ceiling.*

*SAMER and SAEED stand in front of a long table
flanked by other detainees. (**If actors available:
Resembling a 19th century slave auction, all the
detainees are chained together at the feet, waist,
and hands.)*

*On the other side of the table is a young BORDER
PATROL AGENT in a green uniform.*

BORDER PATROL AGENT
Everything out of your pockets, surrender it all. That's right. On the table. Yup. Everything out
of your pockets, surrender it all...

SAMER and SAEED give over their backpacks.

BORDER PATROL AGENT
That's right, set everything on the table...

SAMER and SAEED slowly, painfully pull out their families keys'.

SAMER
(*As though it will help*) These are the keys my family had when they left Beersheeba in 1948-

Keys are immediately snatched up, dropped into a plastic baggy.

SLIDE: "9: CAGED"

SAMER and SAEED standing up, their hands on the bars of a cage in which they've just been placed. The BORDER PATROL AGENT who just put them there holds up the key so both can see it.

Then he chucks it over his head behind him, it lands far off but within sight on stage. BORDER PATROL AGENT exits.

SAMER and SAEED sit languidly back-to-back once more. They sigh, at once of relief and tiredness.

SAEED
558 days in a cage.

SAMER
558 days.
Hey—do you remember the song I used to sing?

SAEED
Where?

SAMER
Gaza, when we lived in Gaza

SAEED

Before we wound up here-

SAMER

American pop songs.

I sang American songs

“All about that bass, bout that bass, no treble-“

SAEED

558 days in this cage.

But then, we were born in a cage: Gaza.

Born in the shadow of an Israeli watch tower in Gaza,

In the shadow of an Israeli watch tower in Gaza,

In the shadow of an Israeli watch tower in Gaza,

In the fucking shadow of an Israeli—

SAMER

Stop it.

We're *here*.

We're in America.

And there's much joy in her music.

SAEED

What? This? (*Rattles the cage with his fingers.*) The music of a rattling cage?! Fuck America!

SAMER

(*A turnaround, quick or slow; a Samer we haven't seen.*)

OK. Yes, *fuck* the America that's keeping us here.

Fuck America for locking us up for 558 days.

But we can still make a life in another America. Outside the bars. We just got to get out of here...Out of this cage...

Get us out!

Get us out!

He shakes bars.

Get us out!

He sinks down weeping. Samer is broken

Saeed tries to cheer him up.

Saeed kneels close.

SAEED

(Soft) All about that bass bout that bass, no treble
I'm all about that bass bout that bass...
Bout that bass.

Samer stands, they hold onto the bars facing us.

BOTH

All about that bass bout that bass, no treble
I'm all about that bass bout that bass...

End of play.