

Joy I dreamed of for 14 years: Guantanamo Brit Shaker Aamer reveals the moment he was reunited with his family
Britain Shaker Aamer, 48, was held at Guantanamo Bay for 14 years. He's given a series of world exclusive interviews, the first since his release. He recalls the moment he went from hell to an ecstatic reunion with family. Son Faris, 13, met his father for the first time as he returned to England. By DAVID ROSE FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY

The private Gulfstream jet from Guantanamo Bay crossed the British coastline shortly after noon on October 30. Inside, Shaker Aamer "still dressed in his prison garb" was attempting to comprehend two utterly extraordinary truths: that he really was about to set foot in England a free man and that within hours he would be seeing, and embracing, his family for the first time in 14 years.

Even now, he couldn't be sure he was almost home.

"I was in the aeroplane, talking to a policeman and someone from the Home Office," he told The Mail on Sunday during the course of an extraordinary series of interviews "his first and only since his arrival back in Britain. "But still there, in the back of my mind, I was wondering: is it really true, is it really going to be England, am I really going to be meeting my family?"

He still feared "that small percentage of possibility that it could have been a trick " it could be Saudi Arabia, it could be anywhere". He was, after all, used to disappointment. He was still reflexively trying to protect himself: "Just in case. I didn't want to be shocked, I didn't want to be surprised."

But as the plane dropped through the cloud and descended towards Biggin Hill Airport, and he gazed through the window at an unmistakably English landscape of green chalk downs and autumnal woods, he felt confident. "We landed and at last I was sure: I saw England. And I thought, my God. I really am back."

As the door opened and he stood on the threshold, he was struck by the deliciously cool and damp English air: weather very different to the tropical heat of Guantanamo. "As soon as they opened it, I said to the Met officer next to me: "That is my first breath of freedom." Everything looked British. I was overwhelmed."

His emotions were in turmoil. Although he had known for several weeks he was finally set for release, he hadn't been told when he would leave Guantanamo. When the day finally came, he was given just an hour to take a shower, gather his meagre possessions and prepare for the journey ahead.

"I walked down the steps, and I was just so happy, because I knew I really was free. Yet I also felt apprehensive. I was worried that they might take me somewhere to ask me questions. But the Home Office guy who had come to meet me had this huge smile on his face. Everybody was telling me, "welcome back", the



officials, the one who came with the fingerprint stuff, they were actually happy to see me! they had tears in their eyes.

But that was as nothing compared to the emotion of what he knew lay ahead: to be able to gaze once again upon the faces of his wife and family, and to hug and hold them. Terrified of getting it wrong, of saying or doing something that would cast a shadow over their future relationships, he choreographed their reunion with care.

That evening, after an exhaustive medical check-up, he was finally re-united with his wife, Zinneera “though not yet his children” in the privacy of a friend’s London apartment, so no one would know where they were. At last that moment I’d dreamt of came and she came through the door. That instant washed away the pain of 14 years. It washed away the tiredness, the agony, the stress. It was like it no longer existed. I hugged her, she hugged me, and we just wept.

I stayed with her that night and we couldn’t sleep actually, we were just talking and talking. I was scared to meet the kids at first: I told her, I just wanted to be with her because I needed to know who these kids are “ I can’t just see them, I don’t want to do something that will make them fear me. So I saw Zin only.

She reassured me. She said, “Don’t worry, they are very strong kids, they are very beautiful kids.” I asked her about who they are, how they feel, how they do things, and we kept talking about them all the next day, morning till night. And then, in the evening, they came.

Daughter Johaina, 18, sons Michael, 16, Saif 15, and Faris, 13 “born the day Aamer arrived at Guantanamo, February 14, 2002, and who had consequently never met him” came to the apartment late in the day after Aamer’s return to England.

To their father’s utter dismay, that first meeting was awkward.

The years of his absence could not simply be erased. When they entered the room, he said, “I just wanted to hug them and kiss them. But they were standing stiff. It tore my heart. They are shy kids to begin with. But they were looking at me and looking away. It was hard.”

In truth, he realises now it could have been no other way. They needed time; and slowly, after Aamer returned to the family home in South London, the distance between them melted away. “The week after I got home, I made a barbecue in the garden, even though the weather was a little bit cold. They loved it: they could see I hadn’t lost my touch as a chef. Now I’m a hard-working man at home, doing the dishes, cleaning the house, and I love cooking for the kids. We’re getting used to each other. I take them to the mosque. When the weather gets better, we’re going to get bikes, go on weekend rides.”



BRIBED WITH HIS KIDS'S PHOTOGRAPHS...FOR CONFESION

Any long-term prisoner with a wife and family will find separation painful. But for Shaker Aamer, the deep isolation of fortress Guantanamo made this agony far worse.

All forms of intimate communication were impossible in the jail. The rare letters the authorities allowed were censored and strictly monitored.

Aamer's wife Zinneera sent him family photos, only for his interrogators to use them as a weapon: "They refused to give me my kids' pictures for years, but they put them on the walls in the interrogation room. Imagine if you did not see your kids for four or five years, and then one day they take you in for interrogation.

I go inside and I see pictures all over the wall, big pictures, small pictures, everywhere. I will not forget that day, because I left them when they were little kids, and I could see they had grown up. They wanted to break me down, and they told me, if you want your kids' pictures, you have to talk to us. But this meant one thing " to confess to terrorist crimes he had not committed.

Aamer refused, insisting as ever he had done nothing wrong, and that he had no information that could help the fight against terrorism. Eventually, "guards came to pick me up. I went and kissed the pictures by the door. The guard asked me why I was doing that, and I told him: "these are my kids, and they refused to give me their pictures".

One day in 2009, after more than seven years in Guantanamo, Aamer was told without warning he had a phone call: "They wouldn't tell me who, but they said it's really something important. I thought my mother had died. I sat down in a room and they gave me the phone and then I found it was my wife. I thought she would be crying, but actually I was the one who was crying. I was crying like a baby on the phone, truly.

"I also spoke to my daughter Johaina and I was crying with her, too. A lot of men are too scared to cry " because they think crying is weakness. I don't believe that. When these tears come out, I think it's your heart, it's what makes your heart alive."

In 2012, the family was allowed the first of several video calls, using Skype. Aamer cried then too: "I can barely describe what I was feeling. It's happiness mixed with fear, mixed with anger, mixed with everything. Love and hate together."

Two weeks ago " three weeks after his release " they were ready for that most British of family outings: the big shopping expedition, to which I was invited. Shaker rang me and asked if I would meet him at Bicester Village, the upmarket outdoor shopping mall near Oxford " his first family outing for 14 years. As we sat having lunch in a branch of Pret a Manger, it was easy to see that the early



tensions were dissipating.

Shaker was beaming: "I'm finally living. I'm here with my kids, trying to learn to be a father. His sons, like all teenagers, were staring at their smartphones – new models brought as gifts by Shaker's nephew, who was visiting from Saudi Arabia.

He had one, too: "I haven't mastered it yet. Not even one per cent of what it can do. This is one of the biggest changes since I went away. People spend so much time looking at them!

He mentioned other changes that had struck him: "London seems richer: when you see all the new buildings, the cars. And the people are different, too. Before, when you walked in the street, you heard only English being spoken. Now if you go out, you will hear ten or 15 languages, from Eastern Europe, China, everywhere. London is truly becoming a cosmopolitan city.

While Johaina and Zinneera hunted for bargains, Faris described to me the moment he saw his father for the first time. A tall, well-built boy, who loves to sketch buildings and would like to be an architect, he said: "It was so amazing. Even now, my senses are telling me that he's back, but in my brain, I still can't believe it. When I was younger, I used to think he might possibly never come back. Yet now he's here.

Shaker added that when he first met Faris, "I told him, I don't expect you to love me straight away. I just want you to trust me, because it's hard to love someone when you don't know them.

Michael, 16, was just two when his father was first detained. "I have no memory of him then. Mum used to tell us that our dad was in school, but his teacher wouldn't let him come home. Then one day a letter came from Guantanamo. My sister read it and we started researching what was happening on the internet. That's when it hit us that he was a prisoner, that he was gone, and that he might never be coming back.

"There were a few times when we thought he might be coming, but he didn't. But when other detainees were released, I was happy, because I felt he might be next.

Freedom, Aamer said, has brought other, simple joys: above all, something almost everyone takes for granted – that of "being treated like a normal human being.

"A few days ago, I was with my daughter, using our Oyster cards to go through the gates on the Tube, and there was this guy in a wheelchair. He asked me for help, to push him to the bus station. He was a clean-shaven white guy and I'm an Arab with a beard. I said, "Of course I will help you, and I'm so happy you asked me."

“It was a little bit uphill and I pushed him all the way and I was talking to him. Fourteen years I’ve been controlled, 14 years I haven’t talked to a normal human being, and here is somebody who will talk to me, who isn’t scared. I was so happy because I felt like, yes, this is it, I’m back.”

On another occasion, Aamer went to open a bank account. He sat with a teller, going through a form, “And then we came to, “OK, Mr Aamer, where did you live three years ago?” I said I was living in America. He said, “Beautiful, for how long?” I said for the past 14 years. He goes, “OK, could you please give me the address?”

“I’m not going to lie to my bank, so I looked at him and I said, “I was in Guantanamo for 14 years.” His response was shocking. I thought he was going to say, “Can you wait a minute I need to speak to my manager.” Actually he just took my hand and said, “I am honoured to talk to you.” He said, “Listen, just come here anytime if you need any help.” That’s what makes you happy: an average, normal person in the street who knows you have really had a great injustice, but now they are going to try to help you.”

Aamer said he knows the road ahead will not be easy. At first, he was scared to discipline the children. One night, after his sons had supposedly gone to bed, he found they were still up, playing on their phones: “I said, “Guys, please, don’t make me take all these phones away. My fear was they would think, “He’s a stranger, why should he do anything to us, why should he take our things?” I don’t want to do something that makes them hard for them to accept me. I feel I am walking on eggshells here. I don’t want them to think, “This guy came only yesterday and now he is controlling everything.”

His solution was to talk to the children, to explain his difficulty: “I said, “Listen guys, I need you just as much as you need me, I’ve been 14 years away and I did not practise my fatherhood, so please let me.” I told them, “Talk to me, or send me a letter if you cannot talk about something.” I gave them an example: if you see a girl and you think you like her, tell me, don’t be shy, because that’s normal, that’s your age, and I will explain to you what’s the difference between love and just when you’re a teenager.”

But he feels they are all making progress: “Michael, yesterday I’d been out and when I came back home, he opened the door and he hugged me. I said, “Your mother told you to do that,” and he said, “No, no, I want to do it.” I was so happy because he really hugged me himself, he wants to do it.” He said he recognises he will never get over Guantanamo entirely: the wounds run too deep. “It’s always going to be in the back there in my mind, it’s going to be sitting there, coming back from time to time. It’s a long period of experience and it can’t be just gone.”

Yet throughout our days of interviews, it seemed clear that Aamer is just as determined to rebuild his life as he once was, not to be broken by torture. “You cannot forget it, but you try to seal it, and put it where it’s not really bothering you. The way I grew up with my family, we give trust a lot, and you have seen me,

dreamed of for 14 years: Guantanamo Brit Shaker Aamer reveals the moment he was



you know me by now, I trust people still. You get along much better if you do. You can't live your life being careful, having doubts about everything. You must embrace it. [SOURCE: Mail on Sunday](#)