

# **Hitchhiking To Baghdad**

**(or, *Hummus To Hamburger*)**

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(First Draft Manuscript – Project Abandoned, at least for the next decade)

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===== *Kuwait City*

*--- Intro*

I told a friend I would check in on his family; see how they were doing, and help out how I could. And I wanted to see, for myself, what it was like. After all, as my mom once told me, one should visit a warzone every ten years, just to keep things in perspective.

She wasn't happy to hear I was going, however.

The plane lands.

The captain's hand flips switch after switch as Kuwait Airlines #205 slowly pivots its huge mass into gate 12. Four men stand below, waving neon batons in the air. The voice tells us that the local time is 10:25, and thank you for flying with Kuwait Airlines. The beeps and lights tell us when to stand and where to walk, and as the crew and passengers disembark, the only thing left for #205 to do is to be refueled and wait for the tide to turn so that her departure will again become her destination.

We all file into our respective lines for our respective identity checks and though only thirty or so people stand in front of me the process seems, as it always does, interminable, automatic, and impersonal.

Hussam, the cousin of a friend of mine, has my visa. Two weeks ago I got an email from him, telling me that he'd pick it up from the consulate and meet me at the

airport. But how he's going to score a visa for an American tourist in Kuwait (while Americans are invading Iraq a mere missile's launch north) is a stunt to be seen.

We've never met but he'll be here in the airport, *inshallah*. I couldn't get good information; I was in the jungles of South-East Asia, I'd been there for three months, and now, in the Kuwait City Airport, I figure that if I can't find him or he doesn't have my visa I'll have to sleep here for a day or two until I can get a different plane out. I'm not sure what will happen and that is always the best way to live. In fact, I'm not sure why I've come in the first place. The things in life that are most worth doing are the things that we least understand.

The Kuwait City airport has been on a high-speed spin cycle for months and the threads are starting to show. Between the American military clogging the runways and the fear of attack from on high, the airport hub is beginning to wobble. Employees carry little bags of luggage under their eyes. A woman in a Kuwaiti Airlines uniform sobs on her friend's shoulder. Two or three hundred Sri Lankans (about three times more people than the plane will hold) wait to take the plane back home. A security guard with a rifle on his chest is trying to ignore the guy screaming in his face. Four cops are dragging a woman out a door. A girl runs up to a woman dressed in full Muslim regalia (I can see only her eyes), and the girl is laughing, holding flowers. The airport is functioning in muffled dementia. The insanity of the war is having an effect on patterns here, but like a full moon pulling the tides, the lunacy is felt nonetheless.

Beneath the feet of these hectic crowds is a white marble floor. There are gold lines of geometry making big diamond patterns across the walkways and tall glass walls

separate these causeways from the shops that are selling expensive items. They are selling watches and jewelry, laptops and DVD players, and barristas pour out coffee and juice for lines of businessmen and people with every skin color from every clime. A raffle for a sports car is taking place. The car is on a round pedestal that is slowly rotating so that, like a runway model, everyone can get a good long look.

The airport is designed to be luxurious and open, regal and opulent, but it all looks a bit like Las Vegas with its symbols of wealth trotted out so often they look fatigued and threadbare.

But all this is on the other side of a wall. These white marble floors are simply a sight distant seen from where I stand, in line, waiting to be processed, stuck in paper, waiting get past customs and submit to the process of questioning. First I have to show proof of myself.

At the counter is the man who will decide my fate. He's a short brown version of a *Geheime Staatspolizei*. He's got gloves, a beret, a moustache, and pants puffed at the thigh. I'm the only Westerner in sight, I'm clearly American, he's clearly pissed, and he's about to take it out on me.

We begin the session by opening my trunk. He sifts through my clothes, my papers, a couple of books, pencils, paintbrushes and finds my precious little bottle of coconut liqueur — called Arrack — which I brought as a present for Hussam. Liquor is a safe bet no matter where you go; everyone likes a sip now and then. And even if not, its customary.

*Staatspolizei* quickly confiscates it and shakes his finger in my surprised face like a French Grandmother before he gives me a lecture on morality as long and burnished as

his knee-high boots. This is illegal material, like a weapon, he says, and you can be arrested for this, Bad Man. Kuwait is proper, here in Kuwait we do not engage in such sin as this.

. “Shame on you for bringing contraband into our country. You damn people. Do you know that this is the problem with so many Western countries, so many foreigners, all the army guys? The drugs guys? The violence and mob guys? Many bad things. You know it is people like you and people from your countries that are making this place so bad these days. I’m writing a book right now about people like you. This is how bad you are and this is just another example of the...”

I watch the bottle disappear into a trash bin as my lecture gradually changes into a pop-quiz on where I’ve come from, where I’m going, how I’m going to get there, when, for how long, and why. Inquisitions and lectures ask for the same response, and that is stupidity, and so I do my part to act as stupid as I can manage. Nodding and repeating “Yes sir, okay” doesn’t hurt as much as thousands of other inconveniences and injuries this man could commit, and anyway, I’d rather that, *Staatspolizei* feel like he’s done his job and that he’s made the world a better place for it.

The process takes about 45 minutes and by the time I manage to get past *Staatspolizei* all the other passengers on flight #205 have long since left the airport.

He brushes me disdainful and I step through the sliding doors, out among the watches and the spinning car (the raffle prize), taking my first step towards Baghdad. As the automatic door hisses open I’m hit with a cool wind. This part of the airport is air-

conditioned and the smell of cleaning detergent and jet fuel is brushed away by the dry scent of money.

A man about my age, carrying a baby on his hip, walks towards me, smiling. He's the last person waiting and I'm the last person leaving.

I expected him to be wearing a turban or carrying a rifle, hawk-nosed and with beard, but he's dressed in a t-shirt and blue jeans. He's just some guy like you'd see on the streets of Chicago. He introduces me to his son, Meshaal. I shake Meshaal's tiny hand (small and round and soft) and his eyes (the same as his hand) carefully and briefly study me, looking for some mystery that cannot be named, but which babies know, and which we all forget after we turn six.

Hussam used to be a hippie. That was after he was in the military and before he returned to Kuwait. He spent ten years traveling in Cuba, France, South America and North America before getting married and convincing his wife (who's French) to raise their baby in Kuwait City. He's fluent in English, Spanish, French, and at least two dialects of Arabic. His extended family is woven through the Middle East, stitching Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, France, and the United States into a patchwork family fabric of rich tradition, intense passion, and one that is currently being torn and stretched by the wars that are setting here from overseas. Hussam is American, Kuwaiti, French, and a curious blend of Spanish and Cuban. He's neither a nationalist nor a patriot.

The things that are important to Hussam are as follows: His wife, his son, his extended family, and his old friends; late to bed and late to rise; keeping his cell phone near him at all times; smoking on the beach during sunset; the diving board at Aqua Park; keeping sand out of his shoes; cursing at other drivers (driving at high speeds, and most

especially late at night, on the highways). These are the things that ‘Sam holds dear. He has a heart as broad as the Arabian sky and his roots go twice as deep.

He lives in a quiet suburban neighborhood named al-Jabiriya. He lives with his wife Florence, and their son, Meshaal. Meshaal means “Flame.”

As we walk to the car and I apologize for the disappeared bottle of Arrack, Hussam kindly points out that anything can be brought into Kuwait, it’s just that it has to be done correctly. Pork, booze, and pornography are not allowed on the street, but that doesn’t mean they’re not allowed inside the house. The day before I arrived two Kuwaitis were arrested with thousands of bottles of single malt they were shuffling in from Scotland. They tried to sneak their bottles through customs by wrapping everything in plastic bubbly shipping material and labeling the box, “Packing Material.” If the security guards look inside, the smugglers reasoned, all they’d see is packing material. Reasonable, maybe, but since the box full of packing material weighed several hundred kilograms the guards dug around, found the bottles of booze, packed them all back in, released the box, told the smugglers their box had cleared customs, pulled their guns, and waited by the door. Hussam tells me that if I want to bring alcohol into the country it should be put into a Coke bottle.

We drive out of the shadow of the parking garage and into a world that is white and hot and sprinkled along the shimmering edges with shards of glass. My eye sockets ache in this world. It is a harsh world of fast black asphalt, bleached white sand, and a leering sky as bright and as big as God’s gold-capped teeth. The highways are no backwoods rickety cart and donkey trail footpaths where camels stare and chew creosote

bushes. These are five-lane imperial-style super freeways, black serpentine children of the American Nightmare, linking the oil refineries with the shopping malls with the mosques with the secret rooms in the suburbs where hooded men wear sunglasses and sip their imported liqueurs in the *diwaniyas*.

The ache in my eyes tells me that there are things nearby that will be hard to see, that will hurt to see. This is world of pain, and of many sorts. And from above, the Arabian sun's sober stare is so hot it is burning the sands and the asphalts and the smoking hoods of the coughing cars that slowly make their way, like a tiny river in the desert, up the black vein of a highway into the city called Kuwait.

### **--- *McArabia***

It's the middle of the first day of the first week of May, 2003. At least by the Christian calendar. Hussam and his childhood friend, Mahmoud, take me out for an afternoon drive into the desert. We're going out to see a part of the Shaayba Oil Reserve.

Hussam is dressed in his standard jeans and t-shirt. He and Mahmoud are both wearing baseball caps. Mahmoud is wearing a red one. It doesn't have anything written on the front; just a cotton baseball hat. It's just your standard ball cap, but unlike the corn jockeys and petrol cowboys of America he keeps it strikingly clean. He pulls at the brim a lot and he talks fast. His eyes dart from left to right when he's thinking, then when he has something to say he opens his wet lips and prefaces whatever is about to come out with, "*Shouf, shouf*," ("look, look"). He's arguing, no matter what he says. Maybe he's

just got something to prove, but he's good-natured and wiggles his sizable mid-thirties middle-eastern belly like a Buddha on methamphetamines. Their Arabic is different from what I've heard before and even if they were speaking English it would be too fast paced for me to get since I not only have bad hearing but I'm constantly distracted by what I see nearby. He wears jeans and a t-shirt with his ball cap, like Hussam.

I ask what there is to see and Hussam leans close, as if someone might overhear, and hisses, "The McDonald's In The Desert."

One drives fast in the desert. We rip past the Ahmadi Refinery, where one of their old friends, Khaled, works. I will meet Khaled, they tell me, while I'm in town since he knows all about the oil business and all about politics and, according to them, about many other *important things* as well.

Khaled and Hussam have also been friends since they were boys. Khaled was going to marry Hussam's sister, but Hussam's father, Mr. Talal, objected to the marriage since Khaled is Bedouin and Bedouins are, by their own custom, allowed to have multiple wives. Khaled wasn't married yet but it didn't matter to Mr. Talal. Later on, Khaled married a nice *Bedou* girl, and they had a couple of kids, then, three years later, when Khaled's cousin turned 24 (and still hadn't married) Khaled was obliged to marry her, too. This is the way it works. Hussam doesn't tell me what his sister thought of the whole situation.

Hussam looks at me to gauge my reaction.

He's traveled enough to know that people are not 'just people' but that everyone is different with different thoughts and values. My cousin is over 24. I neither talk with her

often, nor do I want to marry her. Marrying her would be strange. But, if you think of them properly even something that everyone has, like ears, are strange. So maybe marrying your cousin because she is 24 and unmarried may be a survival technique that a civilization develops, much like a rabbit might develop large ears.

The road to the Shaayba Reserve stretches out across the desert. Hussam is driving, Mahmoud next to him, I'm in back. When I've driven through Nevada or eastern California I've see almost the same thing, though less of it, since the Mojave is clean, new and fresh. The sands around Shaayba are charred black in places and there are piles of wreckage here and there, old rusting cars rotting and smoking in the middle of the desert. It's just junk; a part of a building, some toppled power lines, little pieces of metal or plastic partly hidden by sand. These are table scraps from the Gulf war, ten years back.

In the front seat Mahmoud and Hussam are jabbering and I ask for a translation. Mahmoud makes his living by selling cell phone cards, but he wouldn't let his 13-year old son have one.

"No way."

I ask him why.

He laughs, turns, looks at me, and yanks off his sunglasses to better make the point. "Because he meets the girls that way," he says, and laughs. But it's a strange laugh and I don't see what's funny about cell phone cards or meeting girls.

"Then how do you meet the girls?"

"You don't! Look, if you want to get married and you see a girl you like then you go to your mother and you say 'I want to marry that girl.' Then your mother goes to the

girl's mother and says 'My son would like to marry your daughter.' Then you get married."

"But how do you see the girls around here? They're all covered up."

He turns away for a second, then turns back around with a new question, "When was the last time you talked to your mother?"

"I don't know; A few weeks ago? A month?"

"You're..." He arranges his cap and purses his lips. "You're a bad man," he giggles again and spins around in the seat to face forward. The fat on the back of his neck jiggles as the car bumps on the highway. I can see that he's shaking his head in disbelief.

"What should this bad man do about getting his papers into Iraq?" I ask. There's enough of a gap in understanding here that I figure I'll just make more of a bad example of myself.

Both Hussam and Mahmoud look back at me with foreheads seared from concern. Mahmoud is getting ready to tell me not to go. When an important act is to be done, time must be short-circuited. You can't think or alter your opinions once an important decision's been made. It's simply a matter of dealing with details until the time has passed. This is how things like weddings and assassinations happen; you decide on the thing, you decide when it will happen, and then you march forward as if the act has already been completed. There is no time or space for thinking and questions. Mahmoud can tell me not to go, but even if he is right it won't matter. Mahmoud and I are very different from one another. He doesn't understand that I am already in Iraq.

“Well,” Sam intercepts in his perfect English, “The problem won’t be getting into Iraq, man. I mean, there’s no fucking government. There’s just an army. The problem will be getting back into Kuwait. What if they don’t let you in? You want to make sure you can come back in. If not you have to... I don’t know... you’ll have to get out through Turkey or something, man.”

Mahmoud looks back at me again and shakes his head but still doesn't say what he's thinking.

Outside the skies, pregnant with pollution, sag heavy, and the horizon is bound with power lines all the way out to where the sand fades like rust into the white and glassy heaven. It is, truly, a post-industrial wasteland. Mad Max lives out here in his chopped-up Nova with dual fifty calibers bolted to the hood, flames screaming out the back. The political demons walk these lands, leaving sooty footprints and broken carcasses of automobiles. The sky is a charred memory of recent wars, and the sand quivers with industrial exhaustion.

It is my first whiff of the war.

We have all four windows down and the music is loud. Hussam’s playing Sidi Mansour’s *Ya Baba*, tapping his fingers on the top of the steering wheel, singing to this melted mash of western 4/4 rock rhythms and Arabian cymbals. The hot gas and sulfuric winds snake off the dunes as we hiss past the refinery smokestacks that puncture the horizon line. Mahmoud gets really excited and starts paddling Hussam’s shoulder with both hands. They are yakking about something. The two of them seem like teenagers with all this giggling and musical slapping and chatter. I can’t hear what Mahmoud’s

saying — the music is too loud — but Hussam swerves the car and yells at him, slapping back. They slap and drive and the pulsing rhythms of *Rai* drown out the hot wind steaming in through the windows and the car is swerving like a drunk powerboat as the tire slides off the side of the freeway and spits dirt out from under the fender.

It feels more like we should be in Las Vegas than Kuwait City, but there have been no drugs, as far as I can tell. They're just crazy, it seems.

A refinery appears over the horizon and I shout into the front seat, “Where’s the Rumayllah oil field?”

At the word *Rumayllah* Hussam swerves the car to the right, decelerates, and flips off the music as if I’ve just insulted his mother. I wonder if he misunderstood me. No, I think, he’s just fierce. In fact, everyone I’ve met lately is fierce. It’s the Arabian Peninsula.

The car at a dead stop on the shoulder, the music off, Hussam tells me that there is something I need to know. Mahmoud is serious now, too. The grinding of emotional gears is making me feel queasy. They stare at me with smoking owl eyes that are serious and purposeful as a gun barrel.

Hussam starts to explain to me that the Rumayllah oilfield, like any other oilfield, works with known principles of physics. An oil field is not something like a cornfield where valuable crop just squirts out the surface. It’s a massive underground lake of prehistoric blood and innumerable animal corpses and plants and other once-living matter that’s been crushed into a gelatinous goo after millions of years of tectonic pressure. But like any normal liquid, it flows downhill. So if one were to, say, blast a hole in the rock south of the lake’s center, the lake would ooze south. Since the Rumayllah straddles the

border of Iraq and Kuwait, there are gauges and measurement tools on each side that mark how much which country has sucked out, when, and (sometimes) where. It's based, like any water well, on the ratio of the volume of the hole to the volume of the contents. But unlike most wells there are American satellites that hover overhead, keeping an unblinking eyes on these peculiarly American interests.

One day, Hussam says, the U.S. State Department told the Iraqi government that subterranean detonations were happening along the Iraq-Kuwaiti border. Oil from Rumayllah was flowing down hill — and down map — into Kuwait. Of course this meant that the Kuwaitis were effectively stealing Iraq's natural resources and since Iraq was already agitated and had spent several years, if not decades, claiming that Kuwait belonged to Iraq, they decided to solve the problem and simply invade. And so, in late July of 1990, Saddam Hussein did so, prompting American and other forces to also invade and liberate Kuwait some months later. The Americans handed the reigns back to Prince al-Sabah, set up Camp Doha in the north, and penned some petroleum agreements in the process. It smelled like the same agreement that the British had with the Kuwaitis back in the 1920s, back when pirates roamed the Persian Gulf, back when importing spices from Ceylon was in fashion, and back when oil was only initially discovered.

These days, however, history is repeating itself so fast that it's starting to stutter.

Hussam shakes his finger at me and, in Arabic, says "Remember that." I'm not clear on which part I'm supposed to be remembering.

Mahmoud tucks his chin into his neck. Stern and manly, he says that the entire Iraq / Kuwait war was the fault of the United States and that it is trying to claim more

land for the Israelis. At this point I'm really confused (how did the Israelis get involved?). Hussam nods his head, convinced and concerned.

After some ten or fifteen minutes of ranting it becomes clear (at least by their counts) that the United States has been using Israel as a fulcrum to rest on to open the Middle East and that Israel has been using the United States as a lever. Or something like that. They tell me that the US is out to rule not just the Middle East, but the world. The two of them talk about Israeli ambition to extend past Baghdad. They cite everything from the Old Testament to 33 vetoed UN Resolutions. They said America is helping Zion. They say that there is a big conspiracy and Americans, too stupid to see it, are helping a uniquely undemocratic group named The Jews.

“They say they are chosen by God! They do not think they are humans.”  
Mahmoud shouts.

Wishing that we could just drive to the oil field and the mythical McDonald's (I'm getting a bit thirsty) I have a hard time believing these conspiratorial theories. I just don't have enough faith in large organizations, such as the US government, being able to self-organize. Conspiracy plots require information control and the bigger the organization the harder the information is to control. None of what Hussam and Mahmoud are saying is making any more sense than what the Americans were saying about Terrorism and Arabs and Underground Networks of Organized Assassins. Everyone seems hopped up on conspiracy and fear these days.

I say as much, amazed that the word “Rumayllah” could summon such a conversation so fast. Nothing like petroleum to lubricate a drive through Kuwait badlands.

Mahmoud grins a horrid face, cackles, and points at three Blackhawk helicopters flying towards the car. They're stick-pin bristly, all dark weaponry clustered around the flanks. They fly just overhead, whapping at the air in a growl of pure warfare. A man leans out the helicopter, a large rifle of some sort in front of him, peering down at our parked car, pointing at us with the weapon. A US flag is painted on the side of the helicopter. We are in the open desert and there is nothing between that large-calibre barrel and us. Sand blows around the tires of the car and Mahmoud makes a grunt from the front seat. He starts bouncing the car with glee and shouts, "Look! Three of your helicopters! They are here to monitor your new country!" and he starts laughing in that high-pitched giggle and slapping Hussam on the shoulder again.

He's jiggling around in the front seat tittering like this making the car bounce — so used to politics that it's a joke now. Hussam starts up the car. We pull back onto the freeway and head one way, the helicopters follow us for a few minutes, then they go theirs.

As we turn into the McDonald's parking lot I can see no other buildings. There are the webs of high tension power lines overhead, there is the hot sun, the smoking sand, the petroleum sky, and the long highway that slices a black line across the face of Kuwait.

But other than these things there is only McDonald's. It's a little yellow-and-red oasis.

The parking lot is full of expensive cars. It is always full. In fact it's been full since McDonald's opened their first restaurant in Kuwait. That day, that first glorious day in 1994, the McDonald's parking lot filled faster than you can say "Hummous."

That first day was an eventful entrée. There were the expected problems of burned fingers and grumpy employees and a broken grill here and there, but the real problem was outside. A riot was percolating. People had lined up for over ten kilometers, in their gold-plated Mercedes, for their bags of burgers and fries. Traffic was gridlocked. And then the same thing happened the next day. And the day after that. Finally, after a week, people either got sick of waiting or they'd had a chance to sample their first McDonald's, and the lines shrunk, allowing life to return to whatever normal had been, back before Ronald came to town.

Hussam, Mahmoud and I stand in line waiting for our food next to two American Army troopers. They're sullen and fat. Other people stand in line: they are either Kuwaiti Families or American GIs. There are Big Macs and the Coke logo looks the same and Ronald has that creepy mouth of his, and he's waving. This is the McDonald's I had been trained to know and love. It's a typical McDonald's scene, with the one difference of dress; people are wearing either turbans or fatigues.

Next to us is a big sign that says, in both Arabic and English, "ARABIC TASTE." I don't understand what this means. I've never, for example, seen a McDonald's in Europe that said "German Taste" or "French Taste." But "The McArabia (Grilled Chicken) Value Meal," — as it's written — is advertised in huge orange and white letters, a serif script, set inside of a scrollwork of Islamic curls. This seems the thing to have for lunch. The menu also offers the obligatory standards - fries, burgers, and coke — but with a few additions like shawerma and hummous.

When the woman in the hat chirps English for my order I'm wondering whether some meals have more 'Arabic Taste' than others. I decide that if I am in such an

exceptional time and place as the Kuwait City McDonald's that I need to take advantage of what it has to offer.

I put my hands on the counter and lean forward, "One McArabia Value Meal Deal, please."

The woman robotically pokes her keyboard and I hear a computer Ding somewhere behind her. This little factory, too, is familiar to me. The assembly line cranks into gear and the thing that makes this place so American is the fact that it is all so automatic. We are in a little tiny factory in the middle of the desert. In fact, this automation is so evidently American that it requires the McArabia marketing anecdote. As with any food, there's a flavor of culture to this, but I can't name it. Is it Arabic, as they claim? Or is it Kuwaiti? Or American-Kuwaiti? American? But even American is vague. After all, hamburgers are German, the name "McDonald" is Scottish, and ordering food at a counter is an idea that migrated from France. So what, really, is all this?

She hands me the bag. I pull it open and look in. It looks only a little different from McDonald's elsewhere. It's covered in Arabic lettering, a Kleenex tissue is in the bag (not a napkin, that is), and the bags themselves are an odd yellowish color. Is Baba-ghanough on the side? Shawerma? Is there a secret sauce?

I open the little box and bite into this product of automatic culture.

It tastes like chicken.

**--- *Petroleum Culture, Part One***

As below, so above. Like the oil below the sands, thousands of years of intense pressure from all sides have crushed the different parts of Kuwait into a new, unrefined, whole. It's pinched between the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. Below is the petroleum. Above are the Americans. And in the middle, from all over the world, are the Kuwaitis.

The country has a fierce international economy tied to a strong religion protected by a feeble military. They're ruled by a prince — an *emir*. Kuwaiti citizens, which make up about 1/3 of the country's population, enjoy the highest per-capita income in the world. The Emir believes that the oil belongs to the Kuwaitis and he gives them copious kickbacks. Financially speaking, Kuwaitis have it pretty good. They don't pay for electricity, they don't pay taxes, and (when they marry) the *emir* gives them a gift of about \$10,000 and a generous slab of land where they're encouraged to build. The Kuwaiti government gives citizens interest-free loans of about 70,000 Kuwaiti Dinars - about US\$240,000. They're expected to pay back about \$330 a month. So people get married, love their prince, build houses, and pour gas on their bonfire of an economy.

The country is a collision of international forces. Five times a day the *muezzin* drones out his call-to-prayer from loudspeakers mounted on the neighborhood mosque. The Kuwaiti businessmen, dressed handsome in their white robe *dishdashas*, hurtle down highways in sparkling Mercedes. Pick a day for some reconnaissance in the dense populations of Kuwait City and you'll find Bangladeshis, Americans, French, Syrians, Jordanians, Turkish, Filipinos, Iranians, maybe another American, and a few ex-Palestinians all sipping juice at the corner café.

If people live in Kuwait they live in Kuwait City. People simply can't live out in the desert with all the oil refineries and *ilagoul* bushes; it's too hot. In the summertime, temperatures are between 60 and 70 degrees Celsius (130-150 F). The badlands of Kuwait are combustion fields, brackish hills of carburetor phlegm, war leftovers, humming power stations, and petroleum refineries. The desert has become an uninhabitable industrial landscape of technological conquest, slowly exhaling an exhausted decade of sooty work. The countryside can be ugly, and the industrialization frightening, but the gas sure is cheap.

--- "*...You Will Call On Us*"

On my third evening in Kuwait City I am, as Hussam and Mahmoud promised, talking with Khaled Alanizi, Hussam's and Mahmoud's childhood friend and one of the executives of the LPH Ahmadi Petroleum Refinery. We're sitting outside in the warm evening air beneath the two huge minarets that define the city's skyline and the bay is smooth as an oiled mirror. Behind Khaled the lights flicker on the water, mixing the stars of the night with the light that leaks up into the sky from this great urban engine of Arabia.

Khaled's a gentleman and a Muslim, dressed in his white *dishdasha*, the top button of his collar neatly covered with a little piece of cloth. His turban is pulled to a severe point directly between his thick eyebrows and it flares out behind his neck like a

cloth cowboy hat. He's a sharp looking fellow, the dashing image of Kuwaiti business power.

He looks at me and takes a pull on his water pipe. He blows smoke up his forehead and it circles out into a halo. Strawberry shisha. Khaled has been working in the Shaayba Oil Reserve for most of his life and now he's a wealthy man. He buys the latest cell phones — the ones that have color screens and schedule organizers in them — and drives a shiny BMW. I think he has three of these cars. He uses the internet daily and has a big beautiful house the *emir* gave him when he got married to his first wife. He is as generous as he is extravagant which, considering that he is Kuwaiti, is considerable.

Khaled, like many people I've met here, wants to tell me what he thinks about America in hopes he can help set the world right, if just a little. I expect it by now; after all, we all pull as we can.

“American people came here and they said they wanted to set up a military base. At first our people refused. So the United States said ‘Okay, fine, but you will call on us and ask for a base later.’ But the Kuwaitis, the people here, didn't understand. Not then. This was in the 1980s, during the Iran-Iraq war. We didn't know what they had planned.

“The war between Iraq and Iran was made by the United States and the Soviet Union. America gave Iran and Iraq weapons and money to weaken the other. The Iranians and Iraqis just did not think about that. Back then America was against Russia. America has good strategies and it does not act quickly. They think slowly and carefully and plan for a long period of time. The American government begins inside, like fever. It is very subtle.”

In 1991 Khaled was serving in the Kuwaiti army when the Americans arrived to deal with Saddam's invasion. During the battles of that year Khaled wanted to continue north and remove Saddam. He met an American lieutenant named David. Khaled asked David when the Americans would be going north and the soldier said they wouldn't; they'd be staying in Kuwait. Khaled told him Saddam was dangerous. He told David that the US would be back.

"But now," he shakes his head, "...now things are different. America is controlling by remote control, by the power of petrol, by the power of many things. If I have petrol and the leader is under my control, what else do I need? Nothing. What does America care? There is no reason to think about the people here. American politics are different now. Americans don't care about the people of Iraq or Kuwait because the people are worth nothing to the American government. Even if we refuse and make protests and take up arms, they don't care.

"I'll tell you something; when American people want something they don't decide quickly. They arrange everything, even the attack, how it will happen. All scenarios are considered. The US politicians say, 'If this country refuses, what will we do, if that country changes their mind, what then...' They take a long time on it. Maybe more than 15 or 20 years to prepare everything. This is what has happened in Iraq. It has been 20 years of preparation. Normal people don't think like that, they just don't. They have other concerns such as how to feed their family. But normal citizens here *do* keep an eye on it. After it has happened we look back and realize how it was done and we say, 'Oh, America is thinking very long-term. This is America'."

He sat back and folded his arms.

Khaled had lived in Kuwait, and he had seen the influences America had on Kuwait after 1991. I wonder if he could anticipate what might happen in Iraq

“Well what do you think the Americans want to do in Iraq?” I ask.

He leans back in his seat, looking serious. He takes a sip of coffee, sets it down, and then laughs a breath or two. He looks at me and then stiffly twists his neck. He looks out at the water. He waves his arm towards the city, where the lights of the city twist on the surface of the water like flames, and he looks back at me.

“The Americans want more than just the oil. There are many things here.”

He looks over his shoulder at the city and waves his arm, then looks back at me, smiling.

### **--- *The Vikings of the Dunes***

The Persian Gulf is glassy and calm, the air is dry and hot, and the sun seems closer. The desert is Purgatory and the city itself, with its shiny hot asphalt, glass buildings, and smoldering factories, is Inferno. Lungs shrivel and skin cracks from the heat. And it's only May.

Hundreds of years ago life for settlers was dire. Back in the day, they were, more or less, *Bedouins* — camel-riding nomads that moved at night, traveling from the cooler southern regions of the Gulf. Three families came from Najd, Saudi Arabia and moved towards what is today named Qatar. From there the al-Sabah family, a group of some 300-400 people, moved up the coast to Kuwait and set up camp on the bay. Pirates were

a problem and so when the British offered a military hand of protection the al-Sabah family signed an agreement which gave the British control of international relations and protectorate services. In exchange the British set up a port that could be used to ship goods from India, Sri Lanka, and other empire hinterlands. About sixty years later Britain returned independence to Kuwait. In 1961 the Kuwaitis drew up a constitution and these days they still follow the tried-and-true method of having the *emir* run the show.

Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah became *emir* of Kuwait in 1978. It must be said a second time; he is adored by the Kuwaitis. There are photos of him in shop windows, hanging from car mirrors, posted conspicuously in cafés, in homes; everywhere. He got sick in 2002 and business across the land stopped — people worried for him and prayed. Maybe, in the United States, John F. Kennedy was as well loved (and as adept with media), but the *emir* certainly has more photos than he needs. There are three variations on image of the *emir*, each of them a smiling, handsome, goateed, formal, and classically Arabic chap. He has high cheekbones, a tightly hedged moustache, and a strong jaw. He's a king, old-school style.

Most shops around Kuwait City sport the official marketing: a color photocopy of his smiling head. In town squares and tourist trails there's a photograph of him and the vice-prince smiling, laughing, briskly walking. Perhaps these two demigods are headed to an important government function (but casually as you might, to a friend's house), or perhaps it is just a leisure stroll (but formally as you might to a wedding). In government offices there are paintings. The hand-painted portraits grace the wall in life-sized renditions. As if he is personally present. And always smiling.

This deific smile illuminates the country. It's a massive marketing campaign, with a deeper tradition than GM or Coca-Cola. I've seen decals on the back window of cars, black-and-white outlines of his face, like a Nike swoosh. His face is the national brand.

Being one of the ten wealthiest men in the world means that the concept of excess doesn't exist. He has over forty wives and at least twice as many children, most of whom neither know, nor, I suppose, love him. Sometimes having forty wives and almost one hundred children can backfire on you. Looking for new women for his harem he's known to visit schools and round the girls up, choosing his favorite. One day, on one of these shopping trips, he saw a young desert flower he fancied and asked her to stand up and give her name. She stood up and announced, "Rahaba Jabar al-Ahmed al-Sabah, Sir."

It was one of his own daughters.

I came here expecting to talk with people about petroleum and politics. But most of the folks I speak with instead want to talk about Israel. It's a popular topic. Many of the Kuwaitis I've talked with don't seem to think that the United States is after oil. They seem to think that it's interested in collaborating with Israel to gain more land and military power. The implication is that Israel and the United States want not oil: They want the Middle East. This point seems agreed. But whether the US is controlling Israel, or vice-versa, is the debate. In discussion after discussion, after smoothly rolling along with all minds made up that Israeli territorial gain was the goal, the conversation would spiral out on this question of who's really running the show. The United States doesn't do much to dispel the confusion. Since 1973 the US has been the sole veto on over thirty

UN Resolutions that have asked Israel to cool its heels, and the US sells Israel more weaponry than anyone else on the planet. So when American built tanks roll into Gaza and US manufactured helicopters hovering the Gulf the word spreads fast. US support for Israel is explained as a long-term interest in controlling the Middle East. For Kuwaitis – who are notoriously supportive of American power - the equation's that simple.

Israelis are not welcomed in Kuwait City, though it's better than it used to be. Up until 1991 neither Coca-Cola nor Cadbury products were allowed in Kuwait. They were, the government said, products manufactured by 'The Zionist Entity.' Operation Desert Storm helped dust off Kuwaiti legislation and soon the shelves were stocked with new products from around the world. That same year the Palestinian population of Kuwait plummeted from almost half a million to less than 50,000. Kuwait was known as an intensely anti-Israeli state before 1991 which was part of why so many Palestinians arrived. They were refugees, immigrants and shrapnel from the exploding West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"Before Kuwait was with the British and now we are with the Americans." Khaled told me. "In the past it was a choice for us - we either refused or we cooperated. But these days we have big problems because the Arabs hate us. They say that we opened the door for Israel. They call us 'Arab Jews.' This is not a nice thing to say."

***--- Stuck in Paper, Part One***

My first week in Kuwait City is spent wallowing in gossip and shabby information. The American GI that I run into at the corner store tells me that the Kuwaitis are running the border. The Kuwaiti cops say the Americans run the border. Hungry for more than heresay I call the American embassy to ask them, but I'm greeted by an answering machine. The Kuwaiti Ministry of Immigration is closed for the day. Other than the German Red Cross worker I met in the passport office, a tall blonde swimsuit model of a woman that has gone into Iraq and come back to Kuwait several times, no one can be found with any information whatsoever. Her paperwork was done for her, but she suggests that I check at the Kuwaiti Ministry of Information.

Over the coming days Khaled did some asking around and between his efforts and Hussam's we learn that the newspaper journalists have been issued *re-entry permits* from the Kuwaiti Ministry of Information.

The US embassy's phone robot again picks up the line but I need to actually talk to someone so I poke 0 enough times to finally get a confirmation; getting into Iraq is not the problem but getting back out, however, requires a re-entry permit. And it doesn't matter if it's Turkey, Iran, or Kuwait. Kuwait's border is selectively permeable; foreign substance is not allowed. Not many people want to get in but millions would like to get out.

After all, passports don't exist if there's no government.

**--- *"The Bad Man You Know Is Better Than The Good Man You Do Not."***

Hussam has an Iraqi friend named Khalifah who's coming over for afternoon tea. He doesn't like Americans and this means me. Khalifah is an Iraqi Sean Connery. In his early 50s, he still stands handsome and tall. His fingers are extraordinarily long, as is his white moustache. It rides low, nearly chin level, and he curls the end in a seemingly sinister way with his fingers. Between this, his high forehead, his dramatic eyebrows and his thin lips, he's from the Lawrence of Arabia époque; a classically well-mannered and calm man, someone with a white-hot temper, intelligent, educated and a bit bored. He keeps two pens and a small notebook in his shirt pocket.

When he learns I'm American, he recoils. He looks ambushed. He looks at my mouth as if I have black teeth or a forked tongue. He looks away and stops addressing me. But a few smiles and simple courtesy can often short-circuit the prejudice of culturism. After all, culturism operates best at a distance so the trick to getting rid of it is proximity. He simply needs to be close enough to see the whites of my eyes. I ask him for his opinion. I make it clear I'm more interested in listening than talking. Eventually I ask him if he would help me with my Arabic. And thus it is that one Thursday we sit down for coffee together.

When Khalifah lived in Iraq he had little love for the Ba'ath Government. He grew up in a wealthy part of Baghdad with his mother, father, and his brother, in a family that had two cars and a family tradition of strong education. He was raised with things like televisions, bicycles, pet dogs, and a 90-minute gym class as part of his high-school education. A few years later he picked up his undergraduate degree at the University of Baghdad, where his father taught, and earned enough academic honors by his early thirties to cover the wall behind his desk. After collecting a PhD in Political Science he

returned to the school, this time as a professor. It was a personal success. His father and his brother, both teaching at the same school, were proud of him, which was something that meant a great deal to Khalifah and cemented his life, giving it an early and solid foundation. Like many people in this part of the world, his family meant everything.

He had caught up to his lifelong dream but the Ba'ath Party politicians had other ideas for Khalifah. One day they called him into the office and told him he needed to be careful what he taught and how he taught it or else he'd soon be looking for a new line of work. If, of course, he joined the Ba'ath Party, they told him, there'd be no problems and he'd get a 20% pay bump. It was a common conversation at the University. Eventually, since he didn't want to join the party, he was offered a job as a legal clerk near the school. Not interested in using his PhD to file parking tickets he moved to France, married a nice French girl, got a shiny new passport, and had three kids outside of Bordeaux. After Operation Desert Storm, in Kuwait, ended he came back to the Middle East, but avoided Iraq. He's been living in Kuwait City for the last seven years and has been happy here. But not lately. He despises the fact that America has invaded Iraq.

"There is a saying in Arabic," he told me, pulling out one of his pens, "The bad man you know is better than the good man you do not."

I asked him if he'd show me how to write that as part of our Arabic lesson.

*[img: the bad man you do not know]*

He wrote it, slowly, in Arabic and I asked him a couple of questions about the grammar. He wrote it again, slightly differently, then looked up at me. Guessing that the

Americans were The Good Man (that the Arabs did not know) I had a hard time believing that he would have preferred Saddam Hussein. But the point was just that. In fact, he made it clear that Bush is considered in this part of the world to be worse than Saddam.

Khalifah took a serious tone his eyes latched onto mine and he said in a gravelly dark tone of a lifetime of determination, “Western ideas of nationalism and socialism were imported here. These ideas do not work with Arabic ideologies and this was partly because of the method that the West used: Criticism. No one likes to be criticized for how he lives. This criticism caused a reversion to traditional means.”

He held my gaze. He would see to it that this was a lesson that I would remember.

I nodded, blinked once, and kept my lips tight. At the least it felt polite.

“Not everyone here practices Islam, but it has its own place in society. And now, especially, with what has happened in Palestine, in Afghanistan, and now Iraq. This is why Americans are so disliked here; they are bringing in ideals that we do not want. Since 1967 at the latest, for the Arabs — the mass, the people — the responsibility of what has happened falls on the shoulders of the British and the Americans. They are first responsible for these problems.

“In the United States there is a very deep culture of ‘You are either with us or against us.’ Bush has said this. So the United States has said this. Now we here see that the Americans support the policy of Sharon. The Iraqis saw what is happening in Jenin and elsewhere and they feel it is against them and their religion. For them, you see,” and he slowed down to brought his face in close to mine, “this policy is against *us*, and it is against *our religion*.”

He sat back into his chair, blinked once, and folded his arms. He was making an effort to keep himself under control. I appreciated that and I thanked him for explaining this.

“The Muslim religion is really quite dominant in the Arab society and the Holy Qur’an is something that is very sacred to us. So how can you expect that we will accept this?”

Once again, I was confused; Who was the bad man the Arabs did not know? Who was the good?

Khalifah, patient with me, nearly begins to hiss, “Bush and Saddam are both criminals. Both profit from the misfortune of other people. Both of them initiate wars with pre-emptive strikes. Both of them work as independent renegades and refuse the assistance and advice of the UN. Both of them ignore democracy and invite war.”

I’d never heard the two of them compared so directly. In the states this would be heresay. I tell him such.

Khalifah lifts his eyebrows, turns his head a little and nods at me, ever so slightly.

### ***--- Petroleum Culture, Part Two***

Culture is a weapon that is drawn after the bullets and guns have fallen silent.

Culturally speaking Kuwait is more American than the United States. Much of this culture is the splash-back from Operation Desert Storm, when in 1991 America and several other countries arrived in Kuwait to send Saddam back north.

There is more to it. Kuwait is younger and — at least per capita — richer than the United States, both of which means Kuwait is faster to adopt new trends. Kuwait has taken American principles such as automated manufacturing, mass media, and international assimilation and whipped these ingredients into something like McArabia. But Kuwait has done this in the last decade, and so it's something of a modern version of The United States. Kuwait is newer, louder, faster, more automated, and more international.

In religion the two countries are similarly fundamentalist. Kuwaitis, like Americans, observe monotheism en masse. In 1993 Kuwait had a Muslim population of 84%. That same year the United States had a Christian population of 86%. Numbers in both countries have dropped a bit in the last ten years. Now Kuwaitis, open to an increased international influence are 79% Muslim and Americans are 77% Christian.

Kuwait City is certainly more like Las Vegas than anywhere else in America. The two cities both rely on imports (like water and fruit) to support their desert life. They both have spanking-new international airports. In their early days they were both theocratic havens (Las Vegas; Mormon, Kuwait; Shi'a) and these two desert temples to profits are built of the post-industrial materials of metal, plastic, glass and neon. They are strange centers of urbanity in the middle of a desert. Kuwait City is a blast-polished younger sister of Las Vegas, glimmering new and fresh off the conveyor belt.

Spending a night out in Kuwait City is like going to a shopping mall of giant dancing snakes, where histories wind themselves into metallic contradictions, making stranger offspring that are nothing like their parents. It is a tangle of imported mysteries. Underneath the skyscrapers, sleek cars glide off of the 5-lane highways and into the

McDonald's drive-throughs to order the McArabia Meal. People float down the shining metallic escalators of shopping centers, carry coffee out of Starbucks, shop for the latest Gucci *chadors*, talk on their cell phones, and suddenly stop, there in the hallway, to pray, as Bangladeshi chauffeurs wait outside, patiently, next to their Mercedes. Underneath the street level the dense pack of Internet cafés blare Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake. Pool players stalk the tables dressed in turbans and *dishdashas*. Televisions are neatly installed in every corner above every bar, chattering local ads in Arabic while the guy behind the counter serves up cocktails, croissants, and shisha pipes to dark grumbling sheiks. The Sultan Shopping Center is an orgy of Burger King, Applebee's, KFC, Chili's, Hardee's, TGI Friday's, and a Johnny Rocket's.

Kuwaitis are not a people reigning in their horses after a gallop through the desert. They instead reign over their companies after collecting profits throughout the world. And after collecting such profits, they return from America and Europe with Prada, Versace, and McDonald's and these things, like a non-indigenous virus, take wing, and grow on their own. The symptoms are an orgy of industrialized manufacturing and the consumption of disposable products.

And just as terrorism may be a response to globalism, fundamentalism is a reaction to industrialised manufacturing. For example, in the middle of the Sultan Shopping Center, as if holding some defense from an army that surrounds it, is an enormous and well-funded purple mosque. I'd guess that, if you have a good arm, you could throw a copy of the Christian old testament from TGI Friday's and easily get it across the mosque's parking lot.

*[img: Sultan Shopping Center]*

Other less visible changes are winding their way through the sands of Kuwait. Since 1992 there has been a curious change in the health of Kuwait

Kuwaitis are getting fat. Especially the kids (75% of Kuwait's citizens are under 25 years old). Even as an American whose eye is hardened to this squishy form of violence I'm a bit distressed by seeing so many kids so fat. The Director of the Ministry of Information's Educational Research Center pointed out, in 1998, that seventy percent of Kuwait's female population is obese and 64% of the male population is in the same shape. Each year it gets worse. Even the United States, that great empire of obesity, isn't that fat. The Department of Community Medicine & Behavioural Sciences, at the University of Kuwait studied about 5,500 Kuwaitis and concluded that obesity was "... probably due to the effects of modernization, affluence, increased food consumption and the concomitant changes to sedentary style of life."

Kuwaitis, since they are getting fat, are also having more heart attacks. The Director of Public Health mentioned in The Arab Times that heart attacks among people under 30 are rising at a staggering rate — nearly doubling each year. The cause, he said, was the "growing enchantment for fast foods, as well as a laid back style of living."

Kuwaitis are becoming diabetic in part because they're eating so much automated food. In 1995 the American Diabetic Association found that Kuwait has the highest incidence of diabetes among children in the entire Gulf region. There was a significantly higher proportion of children with this disorder than adults and the Association has indicated, in separate reports, that fast-food eating habits are often a primary cause. It has

to do with sugar intake, genetics, and, in the case of Type 2 Diabetes, how fat you are. The director of the Kuwait Diabetes Association, reported in 1997 that 80,000 Kuwaitis are diabetic, expressing concern about an annual increase of 20% since 1993.

And Kuwaitis now smoke more. The Arab Times pointed out, in both 1995 and 1999, that Kuwaitis smoke more, per capita, than any other nation in the world. It went on to say that smoking in Europe and the United States is decreasing at an annual rate of 5-10% while smoking in Kuwait is increasing at the same speed. Meanwhile Kuwait's Minister of Health has followed the American example of more or less banning cigarette ads. In 1990 the average Kuwaiti, age fifteen or older, smoked about six butts a day and eight years later the amount had increased to about half a pack (never mind the water-pipe *shisha* smoking, which is roughly four to five times higher in carcinogens than cigarettes).

The environment's having problems, too. Residues from depleted uranium munitions left by the American military, oil dumped into the Gulf during the war, and 20 million cubic meters of contaminated soil in the south of the country have left Kuwait at the doorstep of the UN asking for remuneration. No one's excited about paying the bill, of course.

Death comes in many forms. Sometimes it swims. In the last three years fisheries have taken a hit from pollution. Considering the environmental strain from the wars it's not terribly surprising. Other factors are also at work, like population and poop. There's been a 55% increase in the total coliform pollution of Kuwait Bay in the last fourteen years. Of the twenty-three fish species tracked by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Planning's Annual Environmental Bulletin, there's been a fishing decline of 40% from

1999-2001. This, too, has been accelerating. Twice as much crap; half as many fish. The moral of the story is; Don't shit where you eat.

Unfortunately, the air is kind of shitty, too. The Kuwaiti air has suffered a 42% increase in ozone, 54% increase in nitrogen dioxide, and a 34% increase in nitrogen oxide. By comparison, American or European air has changed by less than 5%, in any of these categories, during the same years.

These are some of the changes that have happened in Kuwait in the last decade or so. They're a part of Kuwait.

Kuwait's young culture, younger even than youthful America, is tied by the bowels to industrialized living. Some countries like Kuwait and the United States rely on automated manufacturing, some on traditional hand-hewn traditions. In places like India or China the culture is old and folks had been living there for thousands of years prior to the arrival of things like factory cities. Not so in either America or Kuwait. In these two countries automation was an assumed part of the infrastructure as the country was built. Like America, automation and industrialized living was a part of life by the time the country was founded, but in Kuwait — more so than America — automation is a more intimate part of daily living since the country was built out so recently. Kuwait was born with this cultural context. Automation is a more intimate and immediate part of its DNA. Airplanes, automobiles, trains, and televisions are all older than Kuwait. This is part of the reason why the country has a higher percentage of their GDP based on industrial goods than The United States, Canada, or Western Europe. This is part of the reason why

Kuwaitis are fat, have diabetes, and live next to a polluted gulf. They're part of an automatic culture fueled by petroleum.

In Kuwait the speed and scope of American Culture has been whipped into an even faster frenzy than in, say, Nevada. It's a high-octane version of American consumption; Kuwait has the two key proteins that the American culture of automation necessitates for its survival; money and a youthful willingness to adapt and change.

But it makes sense. Petroleum is, after all, Kuwait's life-blood and so the carburetor is their heart. They are made from the machine, for the machine, and of the machine.

[img: carburetor]

### ***--- Stuck in Paper, Part Two***

I've managed to make my way to one of the back offices in the warren known as the Ministry of Information.

At the counter, where some 15 or 20 of us are waiting for documentation, the man is screaming (he has a slight Boston accent) at the woman with the headscarf; "... CARRYING OVER \$500,000 WORTH OF CAMERA GEAR AND CASH! THEY HAVE BEEN SITTING IN THE CAR FOR TWO DAYS! DON'T TELL ME TO WAIT, GODDamm..." His voice trails off and he seems to recognize that he's around a more

devout group of folks than he's accustomed to in Massachusetts. He wipes the side of his mouth, sighs, and frowns at her.

She calmly tells him to have a seat and wait.

I'm in line too, but noticing that Ms Administration prefers honey over jalapeño, I keep my mouth shut and smile sweetly. Today I have to get one thing and that is a letter of commendation. A friend of Khaled's and Hussam's vouched for me so I will receive a letter that he faxed in. I will then take to another department so that I could then get the re-entry permit. The border guards won't let me back into Kuwait without it. After I get the permit I will have to go and get my pass. And a letter of permission. And then, finally, two stamps for my passport that cost three dinar. This woman will decide if I am eligible for the first step of some half dozen.

I have no idea how she will do this.

Hussam is sitting somewhere outside the building waiting in the car. We've been doing this for three days now. I'm sure he's sick of his car, and I'm sure he has better things to do. Hussam certainly has better things to do than help some errant American get his ass over the border into a war. But he insists on helping me. I've never seen something like this. It's a window into one of the key traits of Arabic culture: generosity.

As Hussam sits outside in the car with his son, and as I sit in the office near the man from Boston, the woman behind the desk hangs up the phone and looks at the man. He's being a bit more polite now that the yelling didn't doing any good. She blinks slowly at him and says, "You need to go down the hall and talk with someone there about this. I can't help you here."

A little neon sign might as well have appeared above his head that says “Not Worthy.”

The man makes a blowing noise in his throat and puts his hand on his forehead. He gets up to leave and as he does I see her adjust her head scarf and notice a near-invisible smile.

But I can’t tell what she thinks. Not at all.

But I know enough to know not to act like that guy.

And it gets me to the next step.

### ***--- Automatic Synthesis, Part One***

Souq Sharq is the largest shopping mall in the Middle East. It is a glowing example of western culture grafted into the digestive tract of Kuwaiti wealth. There are the brightly lit signs over the shops that sell sunglasses. There are chocolate chip cookie stores and mistranslated brand names from France, Spain, and Japan. A hundred cultures have all been slammed down the same tube and are being ingested into a new, and stranger, recombination. It’s just another shopping mall, but despite the shock of it all I have long been trained to expect camels and scimitars here in the land where Lawrence lived.

I’m wrong again.

The mall squats on the outer edge of Kuwait City’s harbor, making it a convenient drive for anyone able to find a highway on-ramp. This citadel of consumerism makes

every mall I've ever seen in the US seem a mere corner store — little, old, creaky, and in need of a good layer of polish. This place has fountains and flashing neon, and something in the air feels as traditionally Arabic as a gold-plated scimitar.

Khalifah (who, these days, treats me civilly, friendly even), Hussam, his son Meshaal and I stroll into the Sharq Mall to buy some fresh fish for dinner. The hallways of the mall are a cross-wiring of old Arab spice traders, watch repairmen, fish vendors, computer sales, cotton traders, restaurateurs, meandering housewives, the Bangladeshi servants sent out for dinner preparation, and the standard collection of transnational chains like Findi and Gucci, Starbucks and McDonald's. The Mall is an 1800s Arab Market plunked underneath a big roof, polished down with corporate spit, propped up with appropriate advertising, and set into a formulaic atmosphere that assure the herds of shoppers that visit daily. It's a nice place, glossy and somehow elegant. There is a fountain / timepiece / sculpture at one entrance, and a nice little area where you can buy fast food in between things like Nordstrom's and Armani Exchange.

Hussam and I watch four men walk into Starbucks. They're dressed smartly in their *dishdashas* and sunglasses, four business gentlemen going in for an afternoon cup. And when they came out we've got a question for them.

Hussam, holding his son in his arms, asks one of them, in flawless Kuwaiti-flavored Arabic, "Excuse me, can you tell me; where is Starbuck's from? What country?"

One of our subjects confidently shoots back, "They're from Kuwait."

Of course, as in many elements of automated culture, it is very difficult to tell what is from where. Coffee, after all, is not an American invention any more

[img: Starbucks Guys]

#### FOOTNOTE:

Coffee Arabica was first discovered in the mountains of Ethiopia almost two thousand years ago where the locals crushed up leaves and brewed it like tea. Around 1200AD a cup of coffee closer to what we drink these days was brewed over in Mecca, only it was made with something like chocolate, which is why we call it Mocha. It was a big success; Armies guarded the coffee plantations, storehouses were converted to garrisons, you could get fined for selling an unreported bean and, naturally, coffee houses were a smash hit. And lots of people got rich. The coffee houses must have been pretty wild in those days since, in 1510, coffee was banned as an intoxicant and in 1633 Murad IV started beating and beheading coffee drinkers, claiming that it caused social uprising; it could make you crazy. Some forty years later this early war against drugs spread to Europe since King Charles II of England penned the same edict. But these bans were for naught against the swelling tide of caffeine lovers who managed to fight for their right to drink coffee just a few years after the bans were put in place. The ban that Charles tried to put on it, for example, only lasted a few days.

After the Dutch and the French had carted coffee strains off to the West Indies it was brought into South America where growing conditions seemed ideal. There also seemed to be some international consensus that an improvement had been made in the cultivation process itself. So in 1962, the United Nations got involved in the action and the International Coffee Agreement was signed,

establishing coffee export quotas the world over and protecting the South American exporters' interests.

Nowadays Starbucks carries the tradition back where it came from. In 1983 Howard Schultz, the chairman of the company, was in Milan and, apparently more interested in the ambiance than the coffee, he decided to cart campy wall decorations and Italian-sounding nonsense names back to the States as part of Starbuck's brand identity. The cultural mutant of an Italian parent was used to promote the sales of joe and now Starbucks is now the third-largest brand in the coffee industry. In 2002 their annual sales had raked over \$113 billion. They hold 7% of the international coffee market and have over 150 stores in the Middle East with almost 10% of them in Kuwait.

*Souq Shark* could well be a mall in Houston. People wander leisurely about, talking on cell phones and discussing the politics of the day, and - other than the *dishdashas*, *burkhas*, and Arabic tongue – it feels familiar.

And then there's the war that's cracking apart the skies up north. Even shortly after the mall was built there were problems. On 29 March, 2003, at 2am, about a month before I got into town, a conventional warhead missile was gliding through the Arabian sky at an altitude of about 450 feet. It glided over the water, banked a bit, descended so that it was just a few feet over the waves, aligned its targeting system to the assigned target, and slammed to an explosion against the building's east side. The heavy concussion sent slabs of steel and concrete floating high into the air and the parked cars

in the darkness below, headlights off for the night, reflected the falling pieces of building. The eastern wing of the mall hit the ground and alarms across the neighborhood rang the signal: Missile Alert.

That much of the story is agreed upon. But there are still at least three unknowns about what happened that night. The biggest question is where the missile came from.

The first version of the story was on the air the following morning, courtesy of the US Army and the Associated Press. They said that a Chinese-manufactured missile had escaped their radar. Their radar had spotted the other two that night, one of which they shot down, while the other fell harmlessly in the desert outside Camp Doha. The Kuwaiti Minister of Information, Sheik Ahmed Fahd al-Ahmed al-Sabah, backed them up saying, “Some missiles we cannot detect. This kind of missile flies very low.” US Central Command said it was an “Iraqi Silkworm or Seersucker anti-ship cruise missile fired from the al-Faw Peninsula,” and shortly thereafter Col. Youssef al-Mullah, the Kuwaiti Military Spokesman, told The Kuwait News Agency that the missile had been manufactured in Iraq and came from Baghdad.

So these guys all said that it was Saddam’s fault.

But other people — perhaps better informed — thought differently. A man who worked for the Kuwaiti military in the 1990s told me that he had seen the missile — or what was left of it — and that it was a conventional air-launched cruise missile of the same make that the US originally used during the Cold War. He had seen such before. He also claimed that it was launched in an effort to shore up support for the war against Iraq.

He thought it was Bush's fault.

Meanwhile, the construction workers mending the collapsed building had their own versions of the story. They told me that the missile came from the southern end of the Persian Gulf, otherwise the south wing of the building couldn't have collapsed.

They thought it was Bush's fault, too.

This possibility meant that only US battleships were floating in the southern gulf. The papers had said that the pier had been hit, not the mall itself, which obviously wasn't true from the damage I saw. When they saw me scratching my head they all laughed, and said, "Yes, it was your country that bombed the mall — and look; the pier is hardly damaged so we know it wasn't Saddam. The missile was too high. But we don't mind that your country bombed us. We already built it once and so we will just build it again." And they all started laughing and sure enough, it didn't seem that the pier had been damaged so much as dented. Even though these piers were installed along the Kuwaiti coast to serve as fake-duck targets for Iraqi missiles during the 1990 invasion —the kind Saddam used to launch — I saw no way that shrapnel flying up from the pier could have brought down such a fat slab of concrete as the entire wing of the Souq Sharq. The Kuwaitis I spoke with were unanimous in the opinion that it was an American missile and that they didn't really care where it was from. Some of them said it was just an unlucky misfire. A carrier or some ship in the south end of the gulf had shot a line at Baghdad that fell short. Even investors in the Mall had no question. The public conclusion was not to worry about where it came from and simply rebuild.

America has its way.

*--- Stuck in Paper, Part Three*

Deeper still we burrow into the Ministry of Information. It is a tree, and I am a little weevil in search of a seed. I chew my way to what I need, leaving a labyrinth behind.

The day has passed slowly. Hussam is again waiting with Meshaal in the car outside. The weekend starts tomorrow (the weekends used to be thursday-friday, then they were changed to friday-saturday) and we're hoping to submit my permit for processing, which will take 3-4 days. So they tell us when I ask nice. Hussam's been a huge help. A critical help, in fact, since he's local and knows what's where and how to navigate the local waters. Getting things in before the weekend is a bit like setting sail at high tide — it ensures a safer and speedier transit.

The man at the desk is smoking a cigarette and drinking tea. He glares at me from under his red and white turban from time to time and, whenever he looks, up I think that he's going to somehow change my day and tell me something so, instinctively, I look up at him, only to see him glower because, evidently, I'm staring at him. We repeat this interaction some 10 times in the space of about 45 minutes. I'm writing down some notes, doing some drawings, and wondering who cares about Iraq or the culture of Kuwait or the war that is happening up north.

The man looks up at me and as soon as it's too late I remember I should keep my eyes on my little book but I'm anxious and I don't want to stay in Kuwait while I can

hear the war roaring, just over the hill, as if I'm outside some stadium where Mohammed and his band is having a show, and I can't scalp a ticket.

I look back to my book and write,

[IMG: "Seeing Iraq now is that rare chance to see a country at a soft stage when imperialism has taken a throttle hold, squeezed hard, and a baby country pops out of the motherland. Chaste, bleeding, and breathing the cultural child is being born in the dry sands of the gulf. I need to see what's really happening. Like the first time I saw that baby cow born in a snowy barn when I was eleven, I'm curious. It was a big deal. How did it come into being? Where did it come from? Was it somehow like its parents? Would it be able to stand up? Where did all the blood come from?" ]

The man is about to say something so I look at him again. Then I realize he's just looking up and he doesn't have anything to say. But then he looks at me looking at him. I tighten my lips and nod a little in that embarrassed smile of Protestant penance, or something less than penance and more than politeness.

The man asks me if I would like a cup of tea.

I accept and he has some good news for me.

One step closer...

**--- *The Kuwaiti Cocktail***

The sky is smoking sunset gold as we climb out of Hussam's car. But it's hard to tell if it is the waking city or the setting sun that is illuminating the sky.

Hussam threads his way through the parking lot (not paved, still dusty) and he steps between the shiny cars and up onto the porch of the café. They are all smoking pipes here. The monstrous thick-faced men with double chins, bags under the eyes and over sized noses move pregnant slow, dressed in white, royal; they are generous and dangerous. Red neon spills over people and tables from the words that hang overhead; "LA ROSE" (with an Arabic translation in smaller letters underneath). The sign is so big it can be read without binoculars an easy five kilometers from here. We are surrounded by glassy glaring eyes and a lot of noise and screaming, smoking men and a television blasting American baseball from the corner. The announcer is speaking French, play by play. The thousands of cigarette butts on the floor give the concrete a padded slip and I stay close behind Hussam as he weaves between the tables by sidestep.

There are so many people smoking that the night air hangs grey with fruity tobacco and the men in front of the television are alternating between roaring at the top of their lungs and slapping each other on the back in brutal congratulations. The café totals maybe 100 men, no women, smoking water pipes and playing poker, reading the paper, talking with buddies, playing backgammon, and talking on cell phones. It's a cacophonous mess of male. They have to scream over the television and each other. But this is not enough mayhem. A fat guy in his fifties suddenly stands up from a table, throws his hand down and really starts screaming at someone like he's going to chew their face off. I can't understand what he's saying. He's bellowing like a bull. His friend

stands up and bellows back. I still can't understand a thing but a fight doesn't, somehow, start and fortunately another guy with glasses, a skinny guy, stands up and puts his hands on both men's chests and shoulders and, like tax consultant, says a few important words and this calms them both down enough so that maybe twenty seconds later everyone is again, peacefully, playing cards and giggling and smoking.

I smile inside because we are in Kuwait City's La Rose café, and it's the weekend.

We swivel and step between tables, avoiding the important card games. There are toes and knees to be navigated before we pass into a back room. It's a little bit quieter, less crowded. Some old guy with scars on his forehead and a pair of little round glasses is reading the paper, his chair leaning up against the wall. I notice he's not reading the paper, but watching me with eyes of bedrock black. Hussam pushes through this room and we turn towards the door. Something strange is happening. A man stands in front of Hussam and they are talking fast about something I don't understand. I'm somehow forbidden, it seems, but Hussam won't tell me. They talk some more and we're suddenly walking again, we turn, push through into the back of the building, and now we're outside and down a narrow hallway, entering back-way into what looks like a standard American shopping center. Storefront windows loom next to us and I see that we're in an older and neglected pituitary dwarf cousin of the big mall down the street. This little mall huddles in its alley, old and stinking of piss. There are 5 or 6 stores with display windows, all of them abandoned dusty and one of them selling lingerie, feather decorations, and leather gear. Another window offers a wide selection of completely useless plastic items for under a dollar. A feral cat slips around the corner. We are

stepping through an economic ashtray where not-illegal items —things that are not appropriate for large streets and shopping malls — are not-sold every day.

Hussam turns sharply and leads me up a set of wide stairs to the big blue doors. A huge horse head, painted in white and pink, covers both doors. It has a long white mane and “Forever” is written below it in serif quill with a glittery plastic paint. The lettering suggests, ‘We are doily and dapper, serious and elegant. This is a class joint.’ Hussam shoves on the face of the horse and the doors swing wide to reveal a new world of brightly-lit billiards hall red and gold plush and banal reality on the other side. The crushed-out cigarette butt of the mall downstairs is left outside and we step neatly into a satin pool hall. Smoke and mirrors and music. A mahogany bar as big as a church pew. And here a row of five smiling Thai Ladies, –in super-short latex cut-offs, blue jean halter tops, squirming around all hips and teeth, greeting us with, ‘hellow’ and ‘hellow’ as we walk by. Hussam looks over his shoulder and smiles.

[IMG: illustration of pool.ladies w/ glittery shorts]

This is obviously The Place.

‘Sam takes off his jacket next to a pool table (Why does he have a jacket in this kind of heat?).

“So these are, uh, working girls?”

“Sure,” he smiles, “but be careful how you ask.”

This is nice of him, to offer such advice. In a way that he doesn’t intend it’s nice of him to bring me here. I’m not asking The Ladies for much of anything except a drink

and anyway I've never seen five Thai girls dressed in glittery shorts in a Kuwaiti pool hall speaking such silly English with such wide smiles. The order of operations in the place is hidden from me, covered up by rubbish at least four cultures deep.

One of The Ladies, momentarily free from her duties near the door, dances up to us and asks Hussam what he'd like to drink. He orders a cocktail. The Lady looks at me with her wide smile and shiny gold skin.

A-hah, I think. If they have hookers working the door then they must serve liquor. The ratty downstairs area with the alley-cat dust seems to make sense. We're in a speakeasy of some sort, one of the rare places in Kuwait City where the illegal is made legal and Hussam's been good to show me such a saloon as this.

"A 'cocktail'?" I ask 'Sam.

"Try it. Definitely."

I expected him to fill me in on the ingredients but the day I'm opposed to having a drink will be the day my mouth is full of dirt so I'm more than happy to tie one on and "cocktail" seems like a fine theme for the evening. After all, I haven't had a drink since I'd gotten into the country and my nerves are a bit worked, what with seeing monsters in the café and getting ready to hitch-hike into Baghdad. So I order a cocktail.

The pool balls are neatly arranged in their triangle, and it feels like home. For the first time, I really miss American living. I miss the things that are familiar and the ease of being around people that implicitly know me, anticipate me, trust me.

Fortunately the juke box is on and Jimi is singing about how the Wind Cries Mary. This is both touching and encouraging and the combination of Jimi and 8-Ball feel

like friends and family. The thought crosses my mind that I might not ever see certain things again, like the Pacific Ocean at sunset, or New Mexico's afternoon clouds, or my friend Sarah and her baby, or the pool hall in Nashville. Will I be shot in Baghdad or die undertread of a US tank? Will I see blue clear skies and big spicy pine trees and Dude in LA listening to his boom box too goddamn loud just to prove a point? Will I see my friends that speak my language? Will I ever get another chance to go skinny-dipping in Alabama rivers or eat grilled shrimp and dance under the moon and most of all talking to the blue-eyed girl with the western drawl that I'd fallen in love with? Would I see her again? Will I make it back to see any of them? I wonder about the soldiers that are up north, then about the Iraqi soldiers that are facing them across the road, and the families in the houses to their backs and all the thousands of dumb conical pieces of metal that are tiny windows into hell, all lined up in the right direction and smoking just north and I know, then, that playing pool is a beautiful thing and that missing your home is what makes it home at all.

The cocktails sail in to the table on a silver platter. The glasses are filled with four brightly-colored layers that look like a neon Neapolitan ice cream and they have a straw and a little paper umbrella sticking out the whipped cream top. Like a mai-tai it's far too bright to be trusted and looks like an alcoholic's slow sea side suicide.

The Lady smiles and says Hellow and if we need anything else to please ask and smiles again and shakes her ass off back to say Hellow to some big guys dressed in grey western-style suits that are walking through the door.

I blink at the drink.

“What... is it?”

“Try it.” He sticks the straw in his face and the level of the whip cream sinks by an inch or two. Wham.

He licks his lips and sets it down. I can’t tell if it is alcohol or liquid amphetamines but I figure that I might as well dive in. It’s just too colorful. I don’t trust things that are man-made and rainbow-hued.

The whipped cream completely covers the drink. So I hold it up and look at the outside of the glass. A red layer and a blue layer and a green layer. This has to be some deep distillate from the wells of iniquity. It is thick like kahlua but bright like hyssop.

I take a bit mouthful. It’s thick and sweet like maple syrup and heavy on my tongue but tangy. No boozy bitterness here, it’s strawberry juice. And some mango, too.

But not a drop of alcohol.

My nose in the cool whipped cream, it takes a second to get used to. It smells good (raspberry and banana, too), and just over the top of the fuzzy rim of the glass I notice one of the girls near the door waving at me and smiling.

### ***--- Stuck in Paper, Part Four***

Standing in the cool afternoon shade of Hussam’s living room I open the envelope and read my precious letter of permission, which will allow me to get my even more precious pass back into Kuwait. It is a paragraph long, in English and Arabic, saying that I am going into Iraq to collect photographs. It is from someone in the Ministry of Information, the folks that handle media types. I think this is the guy that Khaled knows

but it might have been the boss of the woman with the subtle vengeance or a friend of Hussam's. At any rate I have it in my hand and it took almost two weeks to get a hold of and it is a kind of proof of friendship, or several friendships rather, and from several quarters.

Something about this does not seem too automated. It seems traditional in a very old way. It was not my filling out forms that did it. It was the recommendations that did it. Since I am not here with some big newspaper or magazine, and since I have no one to rely on other than the people I meet here, I have found that the culture is, perhaps, not as industrialized as I had thought.

But at this point the permission letter feels more like a handcuff than a piece of paper. I have to remember that going to Iraq is inevitable, as if I've already done it. It's the only way I'll make it. I like it in civilization. I want to see The Girl in Paris again, I want to swim in Alabama lakes again, and I want to go home.

But I also need to know what's happening up north.

My shoes have to be ready to walk, because at this point only my inaction will cause failure. Even death won't be as bad as to go back.

Hussam was, perhaps, too kind.

### ***--- Automatic Synthesis, Part Two***

When he came back to Kuwait, after almost a decade gone, industrialization so obscured the country and that Hussam couldn't recognize his home town. He'd get lost

going for groceries. So lost that it would take him hours to find his way home again. He wanted to prove the rate of change and so we get in the car and we convince Florence, his wife, to come along. We gather up Meshaal and a few toys, and we stuff ourselves into the car for a drive out to see 'The Developments.'

Kuwait City is framed by a brand new grid of post-industrial era housing tracks that are as thick as the city itself. As we drive up over the hills (I can't quite tell if they're asphalt or sand) we see tract housing stretching out past the horizon in every direction.

90% of the work has been done in the last six years. Most of it has been built by United Building Kuwait, or UBK. They work on fifty or sixty houses in a day. Houses are precisely the same, but UBK is kind enough to offer one of four different designs that purchasers can choose from, depending on the neighborhood and availability. Ain-Baghdz is one of the housing developments we visit. It's not much more than a series of connected cul-de-sacs lined with red little repetitive Arabic style condos, each one-family unit links to another one-family unit, all exactly alike in a dreary utopic rhythm. Each has a small porch, a garage, a second floor bedroom, and a little brick gate that wraps around the front. They're set up in rows of 50 to 200 identical buildings and neatly numbered so that you can find yours. Every 251st building is a small mosque, which looks just the same as the next mosque that is just down the lane, 250 buildings away. Every 500 buildings there's a prefabbed shopping center. It has four entrances, each one designed for the housing systems that surround it. There are a few spots for water or a tree, but mostly it's about housing.

This, too, is an inheritance of a recent sort. Over 70,000 people live in this Arabic-flavored Levittown.

On July 1, 1947, on Long Island, New York, William Baird Levitt's landscaping company was grading a plot of land for a particular house. The plot had been pre-measured to accommodate a 770-square foot home for three. It would be one of 17,000 houses that would all be identical. They would all be lined up in neat, organized rows, and most of them would all be built in the next 8 months — automatic housing in action. As Levitt put it, "We channel labor and materials to a stationary outdoor assembly line instead of bringing them together inside a factory." It wasn't visionary or a revolution in design. What he produced was simply an automated approach to home construction. It was another American assembly line that turned equality and democracy into homogeneity and automation.

Levitt, according to his operations records, oversaw 27 construction operations repeated across the country hundreds of times. Acreage was set aside and trucks would appear, dropping cement and lumber off at 60-foot intervals. Wood was chopped and cement was poured over radiant heat coils. Laborers arrived to perform specific duties; framing, carport construction, tile the bathroom floor, screw in shutters, install some appliances, plant some bushes, and move on to the house next door to repeat the same steps in the same order in the same way, house after house after house.

Levitt knew the work sucked. "The same man does the same thing every day despite the psychologists," he once said. "It is boring; it is bad; but the reward of the green stuff seems to alleviate the boredom of the work." His original plan was to rent the buildings out at \$60 per month, but the Serviceman's Readjustment Act allowed all the veterans from World War II to actually purchase these houses at just under \$7,000 each. Levitt and his crew made \$1,000 in profit on each house. He knew that what he was

building was industrialized and automatic. As if in some effort to dilute the sterility of this automated home approach he gave the streets (though they were never named “streets”) names reminiscent of nature such as Mistletoe Lane or Meadow Road. These are terms that are pleasant, calming, and natural; the antithesis of Industrial. Not, mind you, automated factory names like “Conveyor belt Way” or “Street 12.” In doing this Levitt and his crews set not only a precedent for the rest of America, having more influence on how people live at home than any other single factor, but he also influenced Kuwait.

More than the Arab - Western style differences one thing is different in Kuwait and that’s the scale of development. Houses aren’t being developed – neighborhoods are. Twenty different Levitts are all working at once, each one in their own neighborhood. The construction company style determines the style of the neighborhood and the homeowners fund it. In some places the clusters are tiny brick houses, in others we see marble mansion tracts. In most neighborhoods the houses look exactly the same; a long walkway up some stairs into a marble-colored two-story building that’s blocky, white, and uses the same materials as the two houses on either side.

At some point we stop driving so that we can get out of the car and gawk properly.

What we see isn’t really a house, but a fully-flowered Arabic villa, painted a bright pink and lime. Three big Arabian domes — the onion-shaped, orthodoxically Russian schinocephalic type — sit on top of the building and look out over a generous front lot (I suppose it might be called a yard). A human-sized version of The Statue of

Liberty holds a disproportionally small torch cast out of bronze. The torch is too small and the head is too big which gives it, with that spiky crown, a look of being an inbred monster more than a beacon of liberty. Her face isn't the same, either. She is a distant, less attractive, half-sister of Lady Liberty. Behind her is a fountain that sticks up out of the middle of a concrete pool, like they do in Paris. Five cherubic statues stand around the water fountain, holding their urn or cup or penis, but dry and bleached white since the pump has been off for some months or maybe years. Where there isn't a cherub there's a plastic chair.

But it isn't Lady Liberty's monstrous relative or the waiting-to-piss cherubs we've stopped to stare at. It is the house. Because behind this large-scale menagerie melange imported from abroad is a porch made of black-and-white diamond patterns, making the house look like a 1950's LA burger stand. Pink and green barbershop columns support a green Italian-style entry of a veranda. It's the drunk punch line of some billionaire's bizarre joke. It can't be a real house.

But the more I think about it the more I realize that we are looking at the future.

Sam, Florence and Meshaal wait on the sidewalk and I creep around the driveway and snap pictures. I'm happy to trespass when possible and harmless. I get a couple photos of the statue, of the garden and I'm well committed inside the driveway when a car drives up — a nice car, as would fit a house that had clearly cost more than I would make in ten lifetimes — and I'm snooping around and making mental jokes about insane asylums built with the spare parts from a hundred countries. The woman driving is young, perhaps 30, and waves suspiciously. I wave back and gingerly tip-toe out of the driveway. She gets out of the car and waves me over.

I expect to get an ear full about private property and I probably deserve it. As I walk up I'm opening my mouth to apologize but instead we get invited in for visit.

Meshaal is of particular interest and his cheeks are getting pinched red by the Bangladeshi servant woman that comes out at the sound of the car. Kuwaitis adore children like no other people on the planet. The woman's mother appears in the door, her head is uncovered and she is wearing short glasses and now she, too, is vigorously waving us inside. We are surrounded. All three women insist we go in. There is no escape. And anyway seeing the inside of the house is a rare chance. This is, I realize, what we came out here for. To see the future.

The servant is merrily instructed to prepare some tea and cookies. A hand clap; some tea, please, and bring the photo album.

The front room is as big as a basketball court. It is not a collection, or even a melting pot, but rather a collision of a hundred cultures. Architecturally set up like something out of the Arabian Nights small apses are set at intervals along the walls and all have little articulated arches that came to a squiggly Arabian point at the top. Inside, little horse sculptures gallop in place. Between the apses are paintings; mostly poor-quality imitations of French impressionists; copies of Renoir, Gauguin, and Matisse. But to call them copies is a stretch. They're the artistic equivalent of fourth-generation photocopies. There are rip-offs of British landscape paintings and one or two cubist referrals. The walls, four or five times my own height, are covered with dozens of these things. Around the edges of the room, honored with their own pedestals, small copies of Rodin's work strike uncomfortable poses that Rodin could not do. But the symbology is intact (The Lovers, for example, are not kissing so much as trying to pull their glued

faces apart). Everything is a replica of a copy, just far enough off to make it horrifying, like the liberty statue in front. Faces are bent, colors are miscued, but the owner obviously didn't care or didn't know this when he bought them. His role is importer and collector of cultural icons. It was the quantity and range that counted, not the accuracy or beauty, all done in a strangely Kuwaiti manner; haphazardly.

Some of these items, the items that were designed and built by machines, are okay. The stuff from America, for example, are the 'original' copies. Row over row of Hotwheels cars sit in nice little rows on glass and gold shelves. Below them is a collection of Coca-Cola bottles. Hundreds and hundreds of tiny Walt Disney figurines (Snow White the collector's clear favorite) are mixed in with at least a dozen different versions of Mickey. There are odd piles of statues from Italy (tiny women with monstrous breasts) and shelf decorations from Germany (tiny waving figures in Lederhosen) and a huge brass case dedicated to Barbie. The dinner table has a glass cover and under that is the collection of coins from Asia, Europe, North America, South America, and, of course, all over the Middle East.

So we stand in the middle of this patchwork, we four who are invited in to see, and we are awed. It is like someone having a poker table with 500 cards and not a single complete deck. The symbol offers its own existence.

Florence and I look at each other with raised eyebrows. It is a compilation from so many places of so many cultures that we are both completely confused — a façade of American icons, Arabian architecture, and walls covered with the emblems of Europe.

It makes sense, though. Kuwaiti culture is synthesizing itself.

America went through a similar phase just after the industrial revolution. Andrew Mellon, John D. Rockefeller, and Henry C. Frick all bought European paintings from an art dealer fellow named Joseph Duveen. Duveen knew that Americans were in the process of assembling their own social constructs. These three industrialists (among others) were anxious to exhibit their connection to European cultural traditions. Since America hadn't yet found her own tradition, these gents were quick to adopt the cultural clutter from other countries. This Kuwaiti man, like Rockefeller or Mellon, was doing the same for Kuwait. He was building a new Kuwaiti tradition. After all, culture is not invented; it's assimilated. Cultural purity is as impossible as linguistic purity because both language and culture are born by assimilation, not by invention.

But, like any birth, it's still a horror to watch.

### ***--- Stuck in Paper, Part Five***

It's Monday morning and Hussam and I walk through another parking lot, a sea of dusty cars, past people formally dressed and auspiciously striding to important government level meetings. We walk into the massive building of the Ministry of Interior through the front door, with everyone else, and enter a huge room with marble floors. Two walkways frame the center space, and people dressed in formal national attire walk with certain direction up above and look down at us. Hussam knows where to go. He hands me Meshaal and I hand him the letter of permission.

We wait in line. Thirty minutes pass and finally Hussam gets to the counter and I'm still holding Meshaal. The conversation heats up and Hussam is arguing, forcibly, fast, with the man behind the counter. I can only catch a few words and Meshaal starts to get squirmy so we go play with his race car on the huge marble floor where everyone is walking back and forth.

Someone picks up Meshaal and sings a little song to him and kisses him on the cheek. Meshaal smiles and enjoys the ride, totally accustomed to strangers picking him up and pinching his cheeks. We go back to playing with his car. And two minutes later, as he's being twirled around in the air, he looks at me from well above some Kuwaiti bureaucrat's head and laughs.

Standing there, watching this tender and typically Kuwaiti scene, I realize that I don't much care to be standing in the lobby of the Ministry of the Interior with a race car in my hand watching a child being hoisted into the air and waiting to find out if I have permission to enter a war zone. But there are pipes we have to travel through before we can get to a split in those pipes, and decide again our fates for ourselves.

### ***--- American Castes, Hand-Helds And Sales Threats***

Kuwaitis, as much as any other people I've ever seen save, perhaps, for a handful of Americans, are determined to find the most convenient possible parking space and are willing to drive great distances in tiny parking lots to do so.

This is a totally unreasonable concern to have. It can't be about saving time since I've seen drivers wait for 30 seconds when they could have walked the distance to the empty parking space in half that time. It can't be about status because nobody really cares if you're The Parking Lot King. And it can't be about simple laziness because people put such patience and calculation and "visualization" into the effort. The only explanation I can find that makes any sense is Temperature. In Colorado, for example, nobody wants to walk through a blizzard to get to the front door of the local Wal-Mart. They want to park with an easy turn, shut off the car, step over the handicap zone and immediately find themselves warm and indoors. In Kuwait it's the same operation with one difference: it's sandstorms and sunburn. Both cultures are car cultures, but there has to be some other motive to the parking phenomenon. We get out of the car and Hussam is cursing because we're three rows away from the entrance. I'm amazed by all of it and don't care about anything.

The café where we're meeting Khaled and some friends is outside under some tents that are rimmed by a short wall of bushes. Another big-screen television, muted, is blazing bright light sports imagery and even has from its own little pedestal, under its own little tent. Clusters of people — groups of 3 or 4 — mumble in at least three different languages. They lounge on low cushioned benches, knees in the air, smoke rising. Little human dragons.

Khaled sits with two other men and they have little televisions in their hands — or cell phones or PDAs or something fancy and interwebbish. They're huddled in a tight

group, consulting one another on these things. Hussam throws a pack of cigarettes into the middle of the concentrated trio.

The screens — all three of them — flip off and Khaled gets up to kiss Hussam and me on the cheek, arms outstretched, laughing, and asking how we are. This welcoming process is practiced all over the world; there are introductions, invitations to sit down, the waving an arm towards our cushions. Omran, a rail-thin dark-skin Kuwaiti, very formal chap with a narrow face and smiling oriental eyes, stands up to shake hands. The other bloke is a chunky French with squinty eyes and fat cheeks. He's named Guillaume. We all sat back down and Khaled claps twice. A young Malaysian kid comes rushing over to our little area with two more shisha pipes and two cups of coffee and some bottles of water. Khaled doesn't acknowledge him say anything to him.

Hubbly-bubbly pipes (as they call the shisha) are set up for each person. These contraptions sit on the floor and support a little campfire of coals in the metal cup on the top. Every pipe comes with metal tongs used to poke the coals. The smoke, if you're a smoker, is tasty. It's a fruity cool and thoroughly enjoyable drag. In some way it is the definition of what smoking should be — entertainment. I watch the coals get pulled out of the little bucket and the kid sets it down with the gentle hands of a surgeon. His fingertips are calloused. He is a little sad.

Khaled's being hospitable, playing the sultan, and I'm thankful for it all, and something is starting to wear on me.

Being a guest in Kuwaiti societies has its demands and I had been a guest for the better part of a fortnight. I decided I'd slump in the corner with my water pipe and coffee

and step out of the conversation. Just sort of suck on the pipe and sulk over my exhaustion.

The little screens all come back on. Omran had just purchased a new hand-held computer / telephone / personal organizer thingamajig and the tech fetish session that was well under way when we arrived got easily rebooted. Khaled and Guillaume had theirs out, too, and they were waving them around, interrupting each other, comparing things like reception distance and battery duration. These devices always fit well into your hand.

The television, over in the corner, show men running across a field, kicking a ball; football (or soccer, as it's called in the States since American Football doesn't exist anywhere else). Advertisements interrupt. Some girl with big teeth, white hair, and a bikini starts squirming around and giggling about Fanta. A mother deftly defends her family with the Ninja Mosquito Coil while her son soundly sleeps with a smile. A man selling cars appears, dressed in the dishdasha and a big belly, he waves at the fields of cars behind him, and I'm reminded of fields of grain in Kansas. Plenitude. Abundance of automation. He walks towards the camera talking, with the cars behind him. Text bounces and flashes across the bottom of the screen. It's a special offer. He waves at the cars behind him in a big way. There is no volume on the television and I'm thankful.

Khaled elbows me in the ribs. He pulls me out of my hypnosis and he's smiling. I think he must really like me. I feel like I can do about anything and he wouldn't doubt me. "So," he starts and I can tell I'm done with my reveries. He asks for a review of the last week; What had I found in Kuwait? Where had Hussam taken me? Was he doing a good job? Had I tried the cocktails at La Rose? What did I think of the highways?

Sometimes, unintentionally, people ask for proof that their country is beautiful, that their people are nice, or that their food is good. Sometimes when this is the case it seems sufficient to tell them they are lucky to live there. Everyone likes to know that they live in a beautiful place; it makes their lives valuable. But Khaled seems genuinely interested and I'm at least glad to see a familiar face that knows me. I toss the executive summary rundown of the pool halls, my talk with Khalifah, and the Sharq Mall. Naturally, since so much of what I'd seen was peppered with America, we return to the topic of the war up north. It's there, always, waiting.

No matter how comfortable life is, no matter the computers or coffee, considering a nearby war does one thing: it frames what is important in life.

I poke Record as Khaled starts to heat up.

“Okay. Now, for the people of Kuwait I think the quality of living here is for the better. We have more now than we did before. But people are not very happy and many things are changing. If you follow American politics you see that they want us to believe what they say on the television, but what they tell us is not what I see happening here.”

“And for Iraq?”

“This is a hard question for the people of the Gulf. The Iraqi people are different so who knows what will happen to them. I cannot tell the future, but I think it will be better. It has to be a little better.”

He puts his hand on Hussam's shoulder. Hussam ignores our conversation. They're discussing something called Bluetooth.

“If I make Hussam your leader you will hate him. You have to choose your own leader. So you see, this cannot work. This is what the British did and it didn’t work then. We need our own people living in democracy and peace, not other people.”

“So why are Americans hated?” Asking a question like this breaks language — as all generalizations do — but I’m wondering more about his personal views and so the abstraction butters him up a little.

“Most Arabs hate Americans because America wants to control them. Even Europe knows this. America is controlling all the power and saying ‘You are with us or against us’ and Europe says ‘we’re against you’ and now the US wants to punish France. People do not want a neighbor like this.”

“Americans have their ideas for themselves, and it’s a big country, with many investments in many countries. There are many chances for the Americans. But the American government does not listen to anyone in other countries. This is a method of control. Most of the time Americans are attacking and shouting and trying to control the interests of other people that are working for them. They do not think of these people as humans.

“Really, though; Arabs or Muslims don’t hate American people. We know we are different from American people. The problem is with the governments. If American people controlled the government then these things would not be happening. Like what is happening now with Iraq. Consider Kennedy. He had very good relations with the Arab world. He was well liked by the American people and by the Arabs. At that time the American People controlled the Government. Not now. Not any more.”

Khaled's getting into the conversation now. His body is moving more and his face has gone from smooth and smiling placid to a more serious and staccato string of expressions. He puts his hand on my wrist and moves his face in close. He smells like Turkish coffee and cinnamon.

"The Americans come here to Kuwait and tell me I am free. But I was already free. We have minds, we know what we like and want. We have not just walked out of the desert. We want to choose, as a democracy, what we want."

Democracy has taken hold of the Arabic imagination.

Several people I spoke with told me they will make no compromises from its ideals — as it was set out by the founding fathers of the United States. bin Laden, in his "Letter to the American People" is a good example of this. He bombs civilians because, in American democracy, the civilians are responsible for the government. Americans are, by our own constitution, ultimately, responsible.

FOOTNOTE: Letter From Usamah Bin Muhammad Bin Ladin to the American People: (3) You may then dispute that all the above does not justify aggression against civilians, for crimes they did not commit and offenses in which they did not partake: a) This argument contradicts your continuous repetition that America is the land of freedom, and its leaders in this world. Therefore, the American people are the ones who choose their government by way of their own free will; a choice which stems from their agreement to its policies. Thus the American people have chosen, consented to, and affirmed their support for the Israeli oppression of the Palestinians, the occupation and usurpation of their land,

and its continuous killing, torture, punishment and expulsion of the Palestinians.

The American people have the ability and choice to refuse the policies of their Government and even to change it if they want.

Khaled leaves his hand on my wrist and though it's distracting me he doesn't seem to notice and he continues. "Maybe it is a democracy, butt there are many castes in America. Negroes and Mexicans are not free there, and that is because of previous wars — the Civil War and the Mexican War. There are more poor people in your capital of DC than anywhere. There are problems there; too many problems, and yet you want to bring *your* freedom into *my* country?"

He lets go of my arm and reels back, palms up, now with some sweat on his forehead. He's getting upset now. It's the F word and he uses it with a sardonic and almost mean tone as he says, "How do you want to transfer this *freedom* from your country to my country? Look at the freedom in America. It is all raping and drugs and killing and stealing. We don't have these problems here, not like that. But it is coming. The United States is bringing it."

I feel badly. It's one thing if Americans are jaded and cynical. That's like the French being that way. But Khaled, dressed in white, is beginning to look a drop diabolic. His face is becoming ugly and his usual friendly demeanor is melting out under the heat of this anger. And by the second. His hands clench up a couple of times and he puts his right fist on his knee. Hussam and the boys are still talking tech.

"You should begin with your country first. Grow the grass, begin in your land, in your country, and show it and offer it once it is good. But not by force. Not by the

military. Not by power. What is the difference between you and Hitler? You are smiling on TV and saying you are coming to help but what is the difference between you and Saddam Hussein? You do not listen to other countries, you do not hear them, but you come in and kill people and change the government. You are giving a bad picture, here.”

He stops and collects himself a bit. More to remind Khaled of other things I take a drag off the *shisha* pipe. Things have definitely hit a pitch for Khaled and while it is clear he wants to give a fair perspective, it is hard for him to stay untangled —a well-established oil baron cool Kuwaiti cat and a businessman. He was pissed off. And there in Kuwait City he’s considered modern and liberal — someone with Western ideals. He pulls out his cell phone / day timer.

“Now we have a bad image of the government of America here. We have nothing against the American people because they are in the same situation we are in. The problem is that there are no people of America now. They do not care anymore. Even the American people — the people that did not want the war — they were not listened to by their own government! What sort of a democracy is that? Where have the Americans gone? Now we see America as a soldier, with a weapon that says, ‘You are with me or you are against me.’”

Khaled finishes and I don’t say anything. I’m not sure if I even have something to say. We sit and listen to the conversation next to us. I feel like the two of us are standing next to a grave, staring at a corpse; What is there to be said? All is clear. In the space between the sentences I can almost feel bombs dropping. Someone coughs and it sounds like a death rattle, but speeded up.

Something grabs my eye and I glaze over at the television.

The X-Men are bouncing off of the statue of liberty, fighting a snarling super villain. I am watching something that is far beyond fiction. I stare into a mechanical box full of hallucinogenic skipping monsters. It is another American movie about victim's freedom from oppression. The X-Men, the victims of their society, are fighting to break free. Like all of the saints of modern America, they have to first be victims to later become heroes. Would the X-Men appeal to America if they weren't victims? Probably not, but..

Someone next to me says, "Mark's American — ask him."

Uh oh. This time, however, it is product, not politics. Hussam is holding a tiny computer screen in front of my nose that says, [Regional Settings], and [Microsoft Windows CE]. Contemporary American automation staring me square in the face.

"What's this mean?" he asks.

Omran, crocodile cool, nods his head. "I have it in English but I have been having a difficult time synchronizing it with my workstation, which is in Arabic. I have to write in both languages and remember which calendar is in which language. It keeps setting everything back to American — dates, area codes, denominations.... Do I need to download a language pack or do I need a hotfix something?"

I have to laugh after my conversation with Khaled. Everything getting set back to American standards, just trying to schedule a meeting. I feel for the guy and ask him to hand me his doodad.

We rearrange. Omran's software, everyone at the table recognizes, is important and a new seating order is required. Khaled, calmed down by now, claps some servant-

waiter over to help with the move of the chairs. It isn't simple. Shisha pipes are reshuffled, coffees are moved, saucers clink, people change seats, pillows are re-fluffed and all the positions of the evening get bumped around so that Omran and I, now shoulder to shoulder, can get to work.

After visiting English versions of Google and Excite until we bookmark a few possibilities. We check the news on Baghdad, check on the weather for tomorrow, click on the wares he needs, and set his little piece of plastic on the table so it can grind its way through the download. We talk about finding what you need on the Internet as the little light blinks on and off. I wonder if I'm giving heroin to a teenager and realize that, of course, Omran was hooked years ago. Digital technology, with its upgraded and intentional obsolescence, is always hungry and it only enables as much as it inconveniences (both of which cost money and time).

I ask him what he thinks what it would be like in Iraq; I have no idea how desperate it will be. Will I spend the next three months running from bullets, crouch in one doorway now and another the next minute? Will Iraqis shoot me simply for being American or stone me for being an infidel? How modern is it? Will it be modern, as in Kuwait City, where we pass the nights under minaretttes and talk about cell phones? Or will I be fist-fighting for rides on donkeys? I know that going to Baghdad is risky, but the decision has already been made, and I ask him if he has pointers on how to stay out of trouble. The war in Kuwait had to have given him some perspective on what war around here is like.

Omran takes a drag on his *shisha* and he stares down into the embers, poking the coals, and I think he might not answer my questions.

“The war here was very bad,” he says as he looks up at me. “People were shot, just out in the street, all the time. There was looting and killing and torture and some very unpleasant things.”

*Very Unpleasant Things* seem an impossibility for this Arabian Prince, so handsome and under control, all dressed in white and speaking English with a proper accent. *Unpleasant Things* seem further away from us than the White House as we sit on nice gold-colored divans in a nice, gold-colored café, downloading software to his nice, plastic-coated computer communicator gewgaw he just bought a few days ago.

“There were a lot of people shot, just like that. I saw people shot on the street just over here...” and he stretched his arm, pointing over behind the bench, “and I was almost shot myself. Many times.

“The Iraqis went crazy. They stole everything. In Iraq they have nothing. Iraq is a country that is hundreds of years behind Kuwait or even America. And so the Iraqi soldiers would loot Kuwaiti offices. For example, they wanted the air conditioning. So they set their minds to this when they broke into our offices. But they would steal the little metal grate — just tear it out of the ceiling — and leave the rest. Just the grate! They didn’t understand anything and they destroyed everything. They are like dogs.

“One day my brother was captured. They caught him near the Syrian border. He was on their list because he was using a car to run intelligence back and forth and he had been supporting people here in the city. But what happened... they handcuffed him. They blindfolded him and drove him to some place outside of Kuwait City. They put him in a room underground for two or maybe three months. He didn’t know how long he was there for because it was always dark. Maybe it was only a few weeks. There were some

other people in the room with him but if they would talk the guard would come in with a stick and whip them. It was very bad. They had to sit there underground and wait for time to pass. Sometimes the Iraqis would arrive and take him down a hallway - walk him into a room where there were six men. He was left handcuffed and they would make him sit on the floor with his arms around his knees. They would put a stick under his knees, and tie his arms, like this,” and he wrapped his arms around his knees, “...then he was ready and they would hang him between boxes.

“*al-Falikeh*” I said. I’d heard of this favorite Iraqi past-time. It leaves no visible damage and it’s as inexpensive as it is painful. The victim is hung at about chest level with the bottoms of his feet out. Then one of the torturers brings a stick.

“Yes, *al-falikeh*. So one of them men would ask him who he wanted to start. It was a trick question of course, because he didn’t want any of them to start. After teasing, one of them would get a big stick and begin to beat the bottom of his feet. They would beat his feet until the first man was tired, then they would ask him questions. Or sometimes they wouldn’t ask him questions; they would just beat him. But then the second man would start to beat him and my brother had to just hang there and wait until it was over. He knew it would, eventually, end, but that was the only thought he could keep in his mind while this was happening. Third, fourth fifth man. Two hours, perhaps, would pass like this.

“Then, when all six of them were done with *al-falikeh*, they would tell him to stand up. He couldn’t, of course. There was no way of standing on feet like that. He would try but he would fall down. They would yell at him and tell him that he wasn’t a man because he couldn’t stand up. Then they would take him back to his cell and he had

no idea if it was daytime or evening, but they would throw him back in the cell to wait until the next time they beat him.”

The television catches my eye again, or maybe I look away to get my head on something else for a second. A family is managing to smile and brush their teeth at the same time, all together, in front of a mirror, without spilling any toothpaste down their fronts.

“Mark, he didn’t understand what was happening at the time. Some days,” I turn back and refocus, trying to keep the universe from coming unhinged as it collides with itself, “not often, he would be dressed up in nice clothes and told to sit at a desk and wait. They told him that if he said a word he would be shipped to Baghdad and executed. And each day it became more clear that this was what would happen to him. But there was one woman who came to visit him. She worked with Red Cross. She suspected that these prisoners were being tortured and she was there to find out. Each day there were prisoners being sent to Baghdad to be executed, so she was in a race with the Iraqis. Could she save them before they were killed? This was her question.

“She would ask him things and he would answer everything, but there was a guard watching. If he drew attention then the guard would take a note and he could be sent to Baghdad. She asked if he had been beaten and he would say No with his mouth but Yes with his eyes. She saw what he was doing and she responded the same way. So then she knew. This helped him endure *al-falikeh*. He could wait through the beatings then and say nothing. He had hope because of her, just because of these conversations.”

Omran looks side to side and brings his face in close, like a confession. He puts his hand on mine and says, “If a man has hope he has everything. He is a rich man.”

He leans back and continues the story.

“Eventually she got my brother out — the same day he was supposed to go to Baghdad. She saved his life. This woman is American, you know. She lives in Cincinnati. The whole family is very thankful. But that was during a bad time. Iraqis would come into a room with a gun and just shoot people. Pow!” and he sticks me in the belly with a finger. I flinch a bit and he chuckles and holds his finger up in front of my face and says, “It will be very dangerous, up north, you know. They will be stealing and shooting guns. All the Iraqis have guns you know.”

His handheld squeaks and we both look down at it. Silver and made for the shape of a human hand it looks like a little gun.

Omran picks up his blinking icon of automatized culture and looks at the screen. He tsk-tsks at it. It has dropped the line. He checks his voicemail; two people have called. Now he rolls his eyes, “Of course they always call when I cannot answer.”

We try to download the software again.

Omran puts his hand on my shoulder and squares off with a look of sincere council. I’m reminded why I felt so exhausted before, all this emotional personal intensity of Arabic community. It’s all so damned *sincere*.

“If you must go up to Baghdad, and I see that you must, then ask people questions that will tell them what you know. Ask them why the Oil Ministry was the only ministry that wasn’t bombed. Ask them why the oil fields were protected before the National Museum. Most of all, ask them for their help. Arabic people are very warm and very friendly. Ask them for help and this will show them that you know that they are kind. If there is a problem, that will disarm them.”

This bit about kindness is strange to hear so close to the heels of his invading-Iraqis-stealing-AC-vents story. The conclusion is almost logical; If an Iraqi is an Arab he's fine. But if an Iraqi is just an Iraqi then he's a problem. Omran is willing to identify with Iraqis as Arabs, but his fraternal generosity has limits. Perhaps it was as Khalifah said; the bad man you know is better than the good man you do not.

"Mark, look.... My advice is this; Do not go to Baghdad.... Stay here with us. That would be best."

He rubs his palms together, slaps them once, and shouts "*Bai!*" This means "friend" in Arabic (but not in a very nice way). The waiter comes running. It is time for a refresh on the *shisha*.

It is also time for a change of subject. Exhausted and exhilarated things are all screwed up and somehow things are perfect. I am in a café in Kuwait City downloading software while a war is tearing the guts out of the cities to the north. I have met some really considerate people that are really pissed off. The X-Men are on the TV as a servant is filling our water pipes. All the great juxtapositions are swirling around me - freedom and oppression, global greed and local glut, cultural invasion and digital weaponry, brotherly torture and brotherly love, and now, as if the tonic note of the sonata - *Bai* - the servant that is the friend. The machinery of the world is breathing fast, out of focus and in my face, and humans seem to me less than animals, what with all this torture and interwebs and stealing and intense advice. On the television a dog is wearing a red cape. He is flying over a suburban back yard and the family below is waving. Yes, it seems, we are gods and we are animals and very little in between.

Omran's phone-organizer squeaks again. The line has been dropped. He picks the device up off of the table and pokes it with the pen. Then he slides the pen into the sheath on the side.

"Well," he looks up, "It seems I'll be using it in English for now. Maybe later. They don't have Kuwaiti Dinars on here anyway."

Khaled smacks my arm and makes me jump again and says, "Look! It's your man!" and points to the television.

We see the narrow-eyed countenance of George W. Bush on the television screen. Behind him stands a battalion of soldiers and tanks. They are arranged just as the cars had been, behind the Arab guy a few minutes earlier. George is pointing at the camera and saying something. There is no sound, just his finger, and behind his finger, him, and behind him, all these rows of soldiers, and behind the soldiers the equipment silent and robot like, as if from science fiction, from Starship Troopers or Terminator.

Someone in the crowd, for the first time in the evening, turns the volume up a little. Because what George has to say tonight will impact these people more than it will impact most Americans. This is not to say that Mr. Bush is universally liked. But he is universally listened to.

Bush may have been effective with the Americans but his techniques don't go down as smoothly in an Arabic culture. As an interface to the Arabic world Bush comes off as a weirdo who talks about numbers more than he talks about truth.

Bush, as many Americans, likes to cite statistics and draw clear lines between black and white and us and them. He likes simple truths - or at least simple statements -

when he talks his brand of straight-shootin' style 'merican. Bush's direct style of speech, his "I have no doubt" resolve, was something that gave many Americans confidence during the onset of this war. Bush, standing in front of microphones, stating facts and figures and pointing at the viewer is clear and confident. Truth is on his side. Sound bytes rule the airwaves. Five word truisms are necessary. And Bush is the master. "We are a good people." "We shall find the way." "The outcome is already clear."

This is Bush's straight talk.

But it occurs to me, sitting far away in the café in Kuwait City, that if I were Arab and I were watching Bush this would probably be downright rude. Especially in public. That kind of 'straight talk' is a buncha hogwash. From an American perspective this would be like Bush sitting on the floor, leaning back against the wall, folding his hands on his stomach, and speaking about lambs in the fields and water in the well; the Americans would think he'd been smoking Class A opiates.

But a few more Arabs might listen. It's just how our respective operating systems run.

Arabs have faith in parables as much as Americans have faith in stats. And let's face it - both systems are important and both contribute to understanding. Like thinking with only one half of your brain, it's dangerous when you start to rely on only one of them. You end up left or right, rather than balanced in reason.

After September 11, 2001, America's relationships with other countries seemed in a curious point of balance. After September 11 the entire world seemed to view the United States with a kind of pity. On September 12, French newspaper headlines read "We are all Americans." The Secretary of State, Colin Powell, days after September 11,

was on Al-Jazeera television. Donald Rumsfeld and Condoleeza Rice followed suit.

Senate hearings were opened up. Investigations were launched.

People seemed to be asking important questions.

Congress passed a “Freedom Promotion Act of 2002,” Arabic and Farsi language radio stations were launched, and an Arabic-language television network was in the works. \$497 million were dumped into a budget for public diplomacy and on October 2, marketing executive Charlotte Beers was sworn in as the new Secretary of Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy.

When the Bush Administration began shipping troops to Kuwait in the winter of 2002, French opinion, indeed most of Europe's opinion seemed to change in proportion to the number of troops. Beers, in a state of affairs report to the United States’ Senate Foreign Relations Committee had some updates to offer on public opinion in the Middle East in less than sparkling words. She said that millions of people “have gravely distorted but carefully cultivated images of us; images so negative, so weird, so hostile that I can assure you a young generation of terrorists is being created.” She resigned the following week.

George W. Bush points at us and stares into the lens of the camera. We lean into our cushions and wait, and watch, and blow smoke back. It is two days until I leave to see what my tax dollars are paying for. It occurs to me that bombs are falling so close that if I put my hand on the ground, into the sand, I might feel the trembling.

One thing that this president has done that has been truly amazing: he has managed to turn the entire world's opinion around 180 degrees in a mere four years.

***--- Two Bitches on The Beach***

Meshaal and I are both glad to be in the cool breath of the Arabian sea.

In the Kuwaiti desert your pants stick to your thighs, you're low on energy, and the world drowns in the heat and blur. But the beach dances fresh and bright in the sun and your skin is hot but your bones are cold and besides, light on water is the most beautiful thing in the world.

Hussam and Florence are busy with picnic things and so I carry Meshaal around on my hip. He's more comfortable with this system than I am. We walk the full length of the beach, surveying people, him understanding about as much as I do. The people are all wealthy and wearing blue jeans or t-shirts and listening to radios. They have all made a day of it, carting ice coolers and big umbrellas down to the beach, plopping collapsible chairs and children's toys in the sand nearby. This is not some Bedouin camp, this is the modern world. This is the First World, or one of them. Everyone looks familiar and I realize that I'm nearly in the States — Atlantic City is the best example I can see, or maybe Virginia Beach — but there are all sorts of crazy people walking around dressed like lunatics and doing these crazy things people do on the beach.

Frisbees spin by. Three little girls are covered with wet sand. They have made a castle that is getting sucked apart by the outgoing wave. They sit with their muddy palms in the air and watch, mouths open. Someone swimming in the water yells and a ball lands near them. People in Kuwait (as everywhere in the world) like doing handstands on the beach. The young men seem to have exclusive rights to this activity. They do the

handstand then at the apex, feet high in the air, knees bending, they teeter and start to fall and their bodies go rigid. By the time they hit the sand they are still in that same, rigid position, and so they hit the sand with a Whump, then bounce once, wince, get up, laugh, and do it again. A man in his late twenties does this and he immediately gets up to do it again, in front of a woman of about the same age. But after performing this strange and gracelessness act a second time — directly in front of her — she carefully ignores him. In retaliation he picks up a handful of sand and throws it in her lap. He runs off, giggling; she frowns. Meshaal and I are the sole witnesses and don't stop to ask questions.

When Meshaal isn't having to endure getting his cheeks pinched by passers-by he is an astute people-watching companion, quickly finding the interesting action. Without saying a word he points out the group of muscle men waddling around, a small herd of five vealcakes. Only in a wealthy country can people be so vain. They pose as I take a picture of their bulges.

Swimmers, mostly women and a few men, get into the water with their clothes on. Even their shoes. After dipping their heads under water for just a half of a second they go sit down like that and drip, not drying off or even acting like anything has changed, and put their sunglasses back on. T-shirts and jeans dripping and heavy, this is the polite way of swimming. Good vibrations, Islam-style. Meshaal meanwhile points to two beautiful lovers that are happily wrapped up in each other at the outer limits of the swimming area. This is something beautiful to see. The two are almost naked, and their desire is like a sun. They don't give a damn about anything — just each other.

Meshaal points again and now there is an American Blackhawk helicopter hovering about 3 or 4 meters over the water, where the girls are paddling toward shore as if a pack of sharks are at their ankles. A couple of American GIs lean out of the helicopter, waving and yelling. The girls keep swimming. The stupid helicopter flies away.

It's true; the girls are a big deal here at the beach. It's one of the few places in Kuwait where you see girls just being girls, and doing their thing. This is why that one guy threw mud. He didn't know what to do. Men and women seem to have a hard time with each other in Kuwait.

Extreme rules breed hidden reactions.

So perhaps now the veils and other coverings are necessary for the women. One night on the freeway with Hussam (cursing drivers) I watched four cars swerve and veer around a fifth driving at a reasonable pace. Horns were honked, lights flashing, and the driver of the fifth car was a woman, pretending not to notice. She hadn't covered herself and was paying the price for it since the guys driving thought her Westernized, and, therefore, floozy. She was also talking on a cell phone.

The veils frightened me, they still do. I like seeing women's faces almost as much as I like reading them. Living in a world of women wearing veils makes me not only suspicious of them, but it makes me feel numb; I can't interpret what half of the population is thinking. Hell, I have a hard enough time telling what women think; I don't need a veil to confuse me. Besides that if you're wearing one it seems like a pain in the ass. The damned thing has to be lifted up just to take a bite of food. This is more of an inconvenience than lipstick. Of course, with a veil you don't have to worry about such

other masks as mascara, lipstick, base, liner, earrings, or fussing with your hair. All of America likes to talk about the veils and finger wag against what is considered a rough slap to women's rights. And while I can see that — I wouldn't want to wear a veil, for example, nor, as I've said, would I want to live in a world where women wear veils —if there's one thing I've learned from travel it is that we like what we're familiar with, whether it's lipstick or a piece of cloth.

I've tried to get my Western discretion around this idea of Veil and a woman I spoke to there compared the veil to a bikini top; she told me that women wear a top at the beach because that is what society asks and they are comfortable with it and the men are out running around with their tits in the wind. After all, she said, the difference in the West between modesty and vanity is about as big as a nipple. Bikinis and *burkhas* aren't about what's covered or uncovered, but about what's different between men and women. And so a bikini top, like a *burkha*, serves a purpose. She told me it's sexy. It's the symbol for "This is what's Female" and so some folks — men and women both — like it, use it, and celebrate it. Underneath many women wear tiger-spotted jumpsuit negligees that they've bought from Victoria's Secret and other equally heavy-handed undergarments to counterbalance the heavy-handed over garments. She told me that she feels naked without her veil. It told her that if I were king of Kuwait that we'd all run around naked — men and women and Americans and Kuwaitis and everyone — all the time. She said that the vinyl on the seats of cars would be too hot. Then she got serious and told me and it would cause the collapse of society.

Society always finds its own equilibrium, especially under heavy pressure.

While I was in Kuwait I spoke with two women and four men about homosexuality. While figures varied, and none of them were official statistics, the consensus was that more than a third of Kuwaiti men are practicing homosexuals. If you live in a world where half the population is out of sight (under veil or inside) then I can understand how sex drives would need to get aired out on available highways. It's been noted before that homosexual practices skyrocket when women aren't around, so I can only guess that this is in part responsible for this difference from Western practices. I'd guess that this homosexual trend has also pressured on the big machine of politics as well since women in Kuwait weren't, until May 11, 2003, allowed to vote or serve on municipal councils.

I set Meshaal down next to Florence. They both seem relieved. There is another baby there. They start doing baby-things together and I take a seat on one of the plastic chairs in the sand next to the grill.

Florence sits with her husband, Hussam. The French Woman sits next to her husband who sits next to another French woman and that woman, too, sits next to her husband, Khalifah. I'm there, unmarried, childless, American, and still a mostly welcome guest.

The French woman surprises me by out-of-the-blue announcing, "I hope you don't take this wrong, but I just don't like these journalists that go into war zones. They're just thrill-seekers." Florence had told her I was going to Baghdad and The French Woman wants to beat me about a bit.

I like this distinctly French characteristic. It is a good chance to re-evaluate. This is what a good friend does. And so I take the commentary seriously as I can and slow down as much as possible to think on this. I look over her shoulder and see a boat on the gulf, maybe only fifty meters from the beach, dragging a water-skier. The rooster-tail peels up behind the little figure of the man slanted over. I wonder about the edge of the ski, a fast knife on slow gelatin. The blue water shatters upwards into the air, and the skier flickers past the back of the boat, changes edge, and throws water up the other side. It is violent and the boat clatters and groans just maybe 30 meters past the beach where people still splash each other and do handstands closer in, on the sand.

Her face comes into focus. The French woman sits in a folding chair next to her husband who has a magnificently solid midsection. The chairs are made of aluminum tubes and yellow nylon strips. He dabs his forehead with a little white cloth, still folded. She is in the shade under the tree. The bottom of the chair is buried in the sand. She has her toes stuck down there, too, and I look at her ankles that are covered with grains, from walking on the beach, stuck into her skin and dried there by the sun. The BBQ near her heel is loaded with smoking chicken. Black spots are appearing on the seared skin. Nearby the baby falls over his ball. He throws his hands out and they do no good to prevent his mouth from digging into the beach his wet lower lip coming up clustered with sand. Meshaal staggers around behind him, eyeing the ball. The baby doesn't care about sand. He stands up, and pushes the ball again.

This woman's comment is floating in the air among the seven of us sitting here. I'm considering this and wondering how to best approach it. I am generally lumped into this category and am quite sick of it. I want to be put inside someplace safe where there

aren't inquisitions and war zones. I want to go home where people agree with me and give me the benefit of the doubt, where I can feel safe. Then I realize that I already am someplace safe. Compared to Baghdad, what could be more safe than sitting in the middle of the American Dream, but on the Persian Gulf, in front of the French woman, next to her Libyan husband, drinking juice from India?

The fact is that going into a warzone is a sort of natural activity for me. Having fought forest fires I can be called an adrenaline addict, but I can also be called a "First Responder." I prefer the second function because it means that I can help people. Helping people I randomly meet has always been one of my top instincts. And having grown up in the woods I can live without the infrastructure that people are accustomed to. I know how to live without electricity and running water. So in some odd way I'm made for these places. And if curiosity bumps me that direction, it is worth following. Curiosity is always worth following. Even if it kills you. Curiosity is a sacred motivation, perhaps even an obligation to God.

But I'm not about to tell this to The French Woman.

She is a revolting shade of Parisian grey, even after living in the sun of Kuwait for 7 years.

She continues, "They're not considering the pain of the people, or the real circumstances around the war. They're not really paying attention to what is happening around them. They're just egoists that are looking for an adrenaline kick. All they want to do is to sell a big story as soon as possible."

It's a grim picture — a blind egoist with a twitchy gland. Now while I would consider myself an addict of many things (adrenaline being high on the list), I certainly

don't consider myself a journalist. Journalists get paychecks and visas. Journalists get free plane rides and travel around in limos filled with chicks and their shirts full of camera equipment and their pants full of money, satellite cell phone in hand, sunglasses on, ready to get shuttled with a pack of other journalists into the mouth of the lion where they can all inhale the stank of war for the entire world to smell. Well, sometimes.

I write to learn, I paint to see, and I talk with death so I can listen to life. So visiting a war zone forces me to understand the quality of life and the value of comfort and why we have both of them in the first place. Plus, suffering always makes for a good story.

Picking up the plastic pink cup sitting on the table I finally answered, "This cup has fresh water in it, we have fresh chicken on the grill and we're sitting next to the beautiful blue Persian Gulf. But up north the heavens are raining hell and I'm interested in learning how and why. And what I have to do with that. Plus, perhaps most importantly, since I'm American I can travel where I want. My greatest freedom might be my ability to leave my country. A person that doesn't travel is no better off than one that can't and so I'm going to see what good I can do; maybe I can bridge a couple of cultural gaps or lend a hand somehow. But beyond that I don't have any plans. So it's not about adrenaline or sales. It's about seeing as best as I can what's happening in some small section of a rather large problem. Why, after all, should any of us stay in our own countries?"

It sounds more bravado than I had intended. I decide that after a little speech like that I'd better not go off and get myself run over by a convoy or something stupid.

She raises her eyebrows and looks off to the side in that way that the French indicate disgust. The corners of her mouth are tightened a bit, grumpy, to point out I'm misbehaving. One of the babies suddenly screams and everyone looks; He touched the grill with the chicken on it and now he's sitting in the sand, still screaming. Several seconds go by. Meshaal, waddling over to the scene of the crime, awkwardly covers his mouth.

Babies, like adults, bear witness to their fellows' mistakes.

Some of us want to help and, though we don't immediately know how, we go to our neighbor's side, nonetheless.

### ***--- Stuck in Paper, Part Six***

"Three Dinar please." The man says and I have a hard time believing my pursuit has become this simple and small. Three weeks it took and three dinar it will cost. Hussam, who has been with me throughout the entire process, smiles at me.

I pull out three dinar from my wallet (worth only a few American dollars), and hand them over with my passport. The man applies the stamps - shiny postage-sized decals on the right page and slaps a red impression stamp on the left "State of Kuwait Ministry of Interior. General Department of Immigration."

It's done; I'm going. Immediately.

As soon as I realize this my stomach starts to turn and my left eye feels heavy.

We leave to go to the grocery store so I can get some items to take with me.

--- *The Night Before Basra*

It's about 4pm at Hussam's apartment. We have the shutters closed down tight to keep out the hot afternoon sun. The shades are a solid steel, and painted white, to reflect the heat that wants to get into the cool house. Hussam has been sitting at his desk for the last hour, writing. He walks over to the sofa. I'm engrossed in writing my last will and testament. Fortunately, I don't own a lot of stuff. Some paintings I've done, mostly. A stack of CDs. A leather-bound copy of Summa Theologica with notes written by a monk in the 1700s, a brass lamp I found at a flea market in Paris, my accordion, and a few thousand bucks. And since all my stuff has been in storage for two years it'll make sorting through things easier for my friends and my mother. Writing your will and testament is a worthy exercise. You think on what is important.

Hussam hands me a few envelopes, "Can you give this to my father in Basra? It's some photos of Meshaal and Florence and a couple letters."

The question is unnecessary; of course I will. Though they only live about two hours apart, as the car drives, it has been years since they've seen each other. Two or three years, maybe. The distance of family is measured not in space, but in time. I stuff the letter in my bag, along with two pairs of pants, four socks, two shirts, a camera, a notebook, a few pens and a good luck charm of some black corral a friend gave to me. I had also brought along a couple of boxes of tea from Sri Lanka, so I stuck those in with the letter.

We drive out to the supermarket to buy some other items for his dad; important things like cigarettes. News channels have been reporting that there is no electricity in Basra so we throw some candles in the cart. We've heard that water was also scarce, so I heft a box of bottles, too. We walk through the store, threading the aisles which would remind us what would be needed (Shopping for folks trapped in a war zone is not like, say, getting ready to have some friends over for grilled chicken, so this was taking a while). Since Hussam has already lived through one war he knows what his dad will need, but aside from the water and candles we don't find a lot of stuff worth buying, much less worth carrying. Shopping in a supermarket is not designed for wartime preparation. It's designed for peacetime consumption.

There is one errand left; his father needs heart medicine. By sunset we are driving around Kuwait City, peeking into darkened pharmacy windows, and reading that everyone is closed either for the night or the weekend (shops in Islamic countries tend to close on Wednesday and Thursdays). There are some currency conversion shops open so we convert about 90 Kuwaiti dinars for me and about 120 for his dad. We convert to US dollars since (we presume), if US troops are running the place US currency will too. We get a wire from the US for another \$500 from Shirine, Hussam's cousin, and instructions come with it to give it to Manal, in Baghdad. I am given an obscure address near the Russian Embassy in the Mansour district (whatever that is).

But Hussam and I still can't find heart medicine. We drive through the settling evening, looking in one street after another, and continue to sift through the city, always coming up empty-handed. Eventually, in a daring thrust of logic, we decide that since Hussam's father is a heavy smoker, that cigarettes will help him relax; after all, nicotine's

a drug, too. Maybe all that heart medicine is over-rated. Sure, that's all he needs in war (we assure ourselves). Cigarettes.

The living room. Night time now. The night before. Perhaps my last night alive. I don't know.

I drink a cup of juice as we survey our heavy-looking pile of goods that will travel into Iraq. There is about \$1500, several important and heartfelt letters, a dozen photos, candles, water, tea from Sri Lanka, and enough cigarettes to gag a factory. In fact, there are so many cigarettes (six cartons, in fact) that even my clothes don't take up as much space. The cigarettes take up half of the total volume.

A gun might be worth taking, some would argue, and growing up in Colorado I might be one to argue such a thing. But I've decided not to for three reasons. First, I am entering someone's home. Entering with a gun is, simply, not polite. The irony of this, in the context of thousands of other Americans entering – and using – their own guns is not lost on me. But I'm not them, and my intentions are different. Second, this is a kind of proof for me. Just like the 10,000 miles I've already hitched, doing this is about meeting people. It is about kindness and trust and if I am able to hitch-hike to Baghdad without getting my scalp blown off it will be more of a statement of why a gun is not necessary than otherwise.

Regardless of gun or no, tomorrow morning I will be hitch-hiking into the battlefield of looters, politicians, and soldiers carrying enough money to support an Iraqi family for almost two years. I have no weapons, no maps, no transportation, and the only

food I've got packed in are a stack of glucose tablets and four Snickers Bars (which, knowing me, I will probably eat in the first hour).

I look at Hussam who, eyeing the pile, seems concerned. I reassure him, "neither Don, nor Dick, nor Dark of Bush will keep the mail from getting through." I think I'm quite clever, but in the end I'm not sure who I'm trying to comfort.

He grins and looked at me as if to say something, his mouth open. Then he looks back at the pile. He whispers, as if to himself, "*Inshallah*."

Yes, I feel alright about it, worthy even. I have letters, money, and medicine to deliver to the family of a friend. I have found the excuse for my reason and vice-versa. I have my papers to come back. I have my proof of kindness to show to other Americans. In the face of Terrorism I can show that fear is not needed. I even have my good boots waxed up for the dry desert sands. And my sense of honesty is all I'm going to use as defense against the 26 million Iraqis that will, I'm sure, want to kill me for having invaded their country. Or at least for being the sole American whose throat they can grab.

===== **BASRA, IRAQ**

--- ***\$100,000***

A couple of journalists from the New York Times, Mark Lacey and Remy Gerstein, pick me up on the north-eastern outskirts of Kuwait City. They're Americans. Its all oddly normal. I get in, we meet, we drive, we talk, we laugh.

We drive across the border into um-Qasr and I'm staring out into the hungry desert while my head bumps against the window. A strong *suhab* is blowing east, whipping past a few date trees and blowing dust across a series of mud boxes that must be people's homes. Some kilometers back the world turns into an ambient gold and shatters the sun into a big smear of sandy copper mist. Um-Qasr, certainly, is not Kuwait. This is a world far away, but only 90 minutes apart. The world outside is far older than anything I saw in Kuwait. Kuwait is steel and glass. This is mud and sand and bedouin tribesmen, donkeys, and dozens of idle children float around like a pack of ghouls. But the kids surrounding the car is the part that seems so foreign and familiar. It's a National Geographic moment - one of those moments when you're going along just fine learning and seeing new things and then, in a single image, with a single sight, your stereotypes bend back into your face like a jackknifed semi; your forward motion stops because you suddenly realize you've been living with an impression that really exists, but that you didn't believe. Outside it is poverty and desperation and all the typical crap that I had seen in the media and didn't expect to see in my first five minutes in Iraq. But here it comes; all half dozen of them, maybe all of them under 10 years old, running around the car with their mouths open, and it looks like two of them are carrying guns. They're yelling but I can't hear anything because of the angry wind pulls at their clothes or maybe the growling car. When we slow down (is there some problem we need to help them with? What is going on?) several of these dusty kids - some only seven or eight years old

- circle the car and start pulling at the handles of the doors, like hungry ghosts. The door handles make popping sounds and I hear a few fingernails screech exterior paint. One kid laughs. I don't know what to think of this. What I mean is that I don't know what their real intentions are. What do they want?

Sure enough, the back door was left open and it swings to and the thin little membrane between their world and ours is broken but only for a second - they don't have time to steal anything - because an old man runs at them with a stick and they scatter, becoming mystical dogs again, instead of children with guns.

Remy hops out, closes the door, and climbs back into the driver's seat.

These kids must be good for something other than trying to rip off cars and run from what little law exists around here, but I can't come up with any good ideas on how to change things for them or better ways for them to spend their time. Obviously; neither can they. They're out there, in the wind, I'm in here, in the luxury of an SUV. Remy hits the gas (I don't think he had any interaction with the man that saved his crap from getting lifted) , we hit a bump and this time my forehead bounces off the window hard enough to make me sit up straight.

The Jeep has a cool blue suede interior with a nifty hi-fi looking four-color digital heads-up-display. There are lights that arc up and down as the engine revs and a big LCD that shows how fast we're going in nice, legible numbers. There's also a thermometer stuck into the rear-view mirror, with a compass. There are buttons for the windows, mirrors, doors and inflatable lower-back supports for that perfect, custom-bootie fit. It's a mobile living room designed to keep you feeling so comfortable that it keeps you from

feeling much of anything at all; inside is America, outside is Iraq. And me, wedged in between.

The two Americans working with the New York Times that picked me up a couple of creepy war-reporter types that travel around the world and shoot off stories about dead bodies that you end up seeing on your news channel. I like them both okay. And I appreciate the ride.

The driver, Remy, is talking fast about TCP/IP packets, satellite uplinks, and the politics of his office back in New York City. Remy is excited but still bored with the situation here. He has driven from Kuwait City to Baghdad four or five times since the war began. Each time, he says, these damn kids... He has spent six long months in the region, and he's looking forward to going back to New York. For him the war is over and it's time to head to his next assignment. Remy's got a deranged head of black hair and hands full of fat fingers and dirty fingernails. He wads his fingers up into a fist and occasionally pounds the steering wheel, swearing, or brandishing. He's smart like a scientist. I mean that he's guided by physical phenomena and not much else. This is reasonable since Remy is a technical kind of guy. His job is to install software and hardware for the Times staff, dealing with administrative tasks, running necessary errands (between the bullets and landmines) and generally keeping the communications engine humming. He owns a house but he hasn't been there in over a year.

In the backseat is a journalist named Mark Lacey. Mark's disarmingly warm smile camouflages a sharp eye and a quick wit. He looks so friendly that it's hard to imagine him a hardened war mole that can dig information tunnels from war zone to war

zone, pounding out 500,000 words a day while bombs drop on the hotel he's writing from. Mark is based in Johannesburg but he just got into Kuwait City this afternoon. He's here to relieve some other writer, also named Mark.

Remy is on and off the cell phone, negotiating the delivery of a sofa to the Times office in Baghdad. When he's not on the phone yelling at someone he's off the phone complaining about how inept the delivery guy is being. He tells me he has over \$100,000 worth of gear in the back of the truck and he's glad Mark and I were riding with him. Mark and Remy are talking about a guy that lied while writing articles for the Times. They knew him. I leave my forehead against the window, and watch the passing terrain of Iraq.

Another cluster of dusty kids surrounds the car and we hear the clicking of door handles. Someone throws a rock at the car. It bounces off the headlight. Remy doesn't slow down. It doesn't matter.

But \$100,000, I think, is a lot of money. Americans are wealthy because we are part of an infrastructure, not because we carry cash. This won't make sense to the kids outside. To them these are raw goods. The kids couldn't do it, but I imagine it anyway; pulling open the back door and the computer monitor and satellite phones spilling out into the dirt and rolling to a stop before a dozen quick hands pull these expensive items from the dust and spirit them away to the small blocks of mud homes where thin hands would divide the new-picked wealth. Nothing could come of it; the monitor would be cracked from the fall and there wouldn't be a computer in the village anyway, at least not one with a 16-pin AV adapter. The satellite phones would need pass codes or PIN numbers and while these kids would or could talk to some people, I imagine, they would

run out of batteries without the chargers, within a few hours, and the expensive devices would be used as decorations or reminders of the booty of one day when the stupid Americans drive through town. Anyway, it wasn't cash we were carrying and what could I do about it? I watch small faces with hollow holes for eyes skim past the car as we turn onto an exit ramp and they fall away behind the car blurred by the vibration.

My head keeps bouncing against the window and I am somehow too exhausted to lift it, feeling like an insane man banging his head against the wall of a luxurious glass prison.

Fortunately for my forehead the highway is in better condition north of um-Qasr. In fact, it's in excellent condition. It's a smooth, wide, American-style freeway that has been recently graded, paved, and painted. The slick black asphalt wedge runs in a perfect perpendicular to the horizon, where it narrows and disappears. There are two lanes on each side of the road, four total, with wide shoulders and fresh yellow dotted lines down the middle. If you hadn't just seen all the kids and mud houses you might think you were in Arizona or southern California. It is, after all, at roughly the same latitude. But as the kilometers stack up, it becomes more and more clear; things are different along the sides of the highway from what you might see in southern Arizona or the Central Valley.

I don't see planes overhead. I don't see bombs raining down. There are no troops wandering anywhere other than a few at the um-Qasr border. But here there are dark mysteries crouching on the shoulder of the highway. Burnt anti-aircraft weaponry smolders from behind a pile of blackened sand, or piles of metal are scattered around, as if some mad demon ripped cars apart and threw them haphazardly to the sides of the

road. Overturned cars, carbonized to a matte black crust, tires burned like huge scabs, also litter the highway. Overhead the desert sky is raging copper, and a heavy storm pushes so much sand into the air that it turns the horizon upside down. A man dressed in a *dishdasha* walks through the middle of nowhere. We zip past him at just under 100km/hr and I'm pulled from my comparison for the last time, dead certain that I am not in America.

All highways have small pieces from other worlds scattered along their flanks. It's part of what makes them highways. This highway has three very different countries scattered about: Iraq, America, and Perdition.

After driving for about 30 minutes we get to the Basra exit, or what seems to be the Basra exit since it's the only road pointing east. Evidently signs have either been removed or aren't needed for people driving north. We pull over to take look at a bad map.

We three discuss it and decide, Yes, this is the way to Basra. Remy puts the car in gear and starts to pull back onto the ramp when a flock of British warthogs come driving the wrong way blocking our route. We sit there on the side of the road and wait. There are maybe forty or fifty cars, all of them variations on the Royal Infantry theme, scruffy with dust and shrapnel. We let the convoy pass, of course (they're driving down our entrance ramp so we don't have much choice), waving back, Hi, Hi there, to these casual warriors. A boot stuck up into a mirror, sunglasses on the tip of the nose type of combat professionals. They are confident and victorious. These are the guys that captured um-Qasr last week. It occurs to me that I've never seen an army fresh from a capture.

They're damned cocky. Quiet, of course, since they'd seen action, but still waving attitude, mostly for themselves.

So we sit in the car and we wait for these forty Humvees to quietly roll by. I lean out the window and point up the road and yell to one of them, "BASRA?" I get a nod of confirmation. But if we're on the right side of the road what are they doing driving on it? Is the other side blocked?

Another four or five Humvees roll by while I mull this over.

It occurs to us, only then, what is going on. Mark points it out. They are driving on the wrong side of the road; but it is a road in a war zone and there is no government here. So if there is no government, there was no law. If there is no law there is no "wrong" side of the road. And anyway, they're British. For the Brits this is the "right" side of the road. Here, just inside the skin of Iraq "right" has become "wrong" and both are "left" and I can no longer tell the difference between any of them.

Remy gets back on the highway — the Brits behind us, Basra ahead — and I set my temple against the window and watch the winds of change lifting sand into the air.

### ***--- Offal in The Office Of Public Safety***

Basra's al-Ashar neighborhood is on the southern flank of the Tigris river. With its wide streets, bright sun, sandy gutters, tomato shops and guys driving around in pickup trucks it reminds me, simply, of Denver. Mark and Remy are booked to stay in the Marbad Hotel that night. I tag along at their suggestion, not having any better ideas on

how to find Mr. Talal than to ask when I get there. Remy has to drive to Baghdad anyway, so the deal is simple for me; wait here for a while until he heads up and go on with him.

The Marbad has a lobby, working electricity (they have a generator in back) and a working restaurant with a television. The news is broadcast in Iranian or Dutch. Press and media companies from all over the world are congregating here, probably because the hotel has the most expensive rates in the city (probably around \$10 a night). People are speaking German, American, Italian and Japanese. More Americans are here than anyone else. Someone from England is talking about installing an uplink to something else and a Portuguese tongue is flapping into a cell phone.

I check into my room, drop my bag on the bed, and stand there staring at a light square patch on the wallpaper, just above the television.

Fate doesn't exist, nor does free choice. Instead we live in a mix of the two traveling down a pipe of necessity until we arrive at a decision point which is really just a branch, a splitting of the current pipe into a new group of necessity-pipes that lead us through time in a different direction.

Standing there in my hotel room with the key dangling from my fingers a new set of necessity-pipes branch out in front of me. They have titles on them; Stand Here. Sit on Bed. Take Shower. Watch Television. These are the rational things that one would do here. Then there are the irrational things; Jump Around on Bed. Wash Everything. Rearrange Furniture. Then there are the ones that are simply insane; Tear Sheets. Throw TV Through Window. Urinate on Floor. Urinate on Self.

I decide to go out for a stroll, having absolutely no idea what I'm going to find outside. As I tie my boots I notice that every detail is sticky and collects unknowable importance as if I am living in a different world and one of these little necessity pipes might be the wrong one to choose. These details, such as lacing my boots well, means I'll be able to run better, but if I step on a mine and my foot is shredded, or if I step into hot gelatinous stuff and need to get my boot off fast for some reason I need to be able to cut my laces off fast, so I double-check to be sure I have my pocketknife handy. I just don't know what will happen and so I fret over little things. These are stupid decisions that don't normally make a difference but stepping into a war zone makes important things stupid, and stupid things become important, and so sanity gets leaky.

But money is always important (?) and so I hedge my bets and put half of it under a carpet and half of it under the lining in my boots, then I pull my boots on and look at myself in the mirror and tell myself 'Here we go.'

As I say this to the mirror I realize that I need a shave. My reflection asks me if facial hair is stupid or important. Is the mirror stupid or important? My own reflection? My thoughts?

Left is right and both are sharp as razors. And they all seem deeply wrong.

The hotel door is locked and I step into the hallway, into a kind of necessity-pipe, and fate clusters and regathers, invisibly, in front of me.

The burned streets of Basra, a city of over 1.3 million people, are empty. The noon-day sun burns bright. Though there is rubbish in the streets and buildings line the sidewalks, evidence of humanity, the city is impossibly silent. All I can hear is the

crunching of my boots on the concrete. I squint up into the gritty afternoon sun and listen for birds, but they aren't talking — if they're around at all.

A palm tree is charred and laying on its side. Building after building is split at the seams, spilling concrete rubble and dust into the street at the corners.

I keep track of where I'm going; I don't want to be lost.

Stopping a second time I listen carefully but not even a car can be heard. A few children are watching me (why are there always so many children in war zones?), but they say nothing and their heads disappear without a sound. I feel like I have stepped into a film that has been made without an audio track. Only my breathing, and my boots, and the slamming of my heart (beating far faster than she should be), are making any noise whatsoever. The world is holding its breath.

Sidewalks and streets and shops and houses and everything are a grey mess of twisted rebar and broken glass scattered among all the concrete crap that I carefully pick my way through. Boots are a necessity. There is so much broken glass and concrete piled around that the street is more a trashcan than anything else. The damage is astonishing. And there are, as I have said no people in sight. A few children, but that is all.

Administration buildings genuflect under the weight of the bombing. Saddam has been, quite literally, defaced and the country has been brought low. If there is a poster or a statue of the man it has been shot in the face, making his syrupy smile unrecognizable. Major international chains, where they existed, have been looted and anything flammable turned to ash and blown away in the wind. Streets are gouged by tank treads. Walls are pocketed and chipped from machine gun strafe. And not just the people have

left Basra; there are no dogs or cats or donkeys, or birds even. Just grey concrete, beige sandbags, silver pockmarks, and black smears holding the city together.

It is punished, and uninhabitable.

Someone comes into sight up the street. A man is walking, he looks behind himself, and now he is running. He breaks into a fast run and disappears behind a building. I step over a pile of crushed concrete and rebar and notice that mixed in with the PVC plumbing is a brownish chalky looking goo which I probably would have overlooked if not for the fact that it is next to a bone the size of a baseball bat. I look around then stare at the yellowish thing, just sticking out of the bricks, baking in the sun. There's some bad-looking meat mixed in with the dust. I have a suspicion, in my stomach, that in a city as hungry as Basra, that this isn't beef.

The streets are empty of people yet flooded with tension. It isn't the kind of tension that happens for a day or two after someone on your street gets hit by a car, or a neighbor's been robbed and everyone talks about it for a few days. This is also not the kind of unease that, I imagine, hit New York on September 12, 13, and 14. Here in Basra there is no central locus of damage, and everything has stopped, and the force that has come in has so overwhelmed the city that it is no longer even a city. It's a ditch with missiles tearing through the skies overhead.

*FOOTNOTE: If September 11 was a symbolic tragedy for the United States, the war in Iraq has been a time when hell itself devoured much of Iraq's population. In New York a city block, 3000 lives, and an important icon of*

*prosperity was brought down, but when the Americans came to Iraq more than 60% of the people in the country lost their jobs as the centralized economy was ripped to shreds. 24 million people were thrown into a dire struggle to find food and water on a daily basis. Nearly one million of them have died as a result of the war, as of June 2007. Data collected is from Iraqi physicians working with epidemiologists at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health. The findings are published online by the British medical journal, Lancet. .*

On each street I see, perhaps, four or five hotels. They are boarded up, and the windows have been smashed with bricks, but the buildings are largely undamaged and I can see furniture and some goods still set up on shelves inside.

Someone yells and it's so damned loud I almost cover my ear before I realize it sounds like a man, perhaps a block away. My fingertips are buzzing. My ears are stretching off of my head. Maybe jumping up and down on the bed would have been a better idea but instead I decide to go see. It is what I came here for.

In this neighborhood of hotels I find the largest hotel — and most damaged of them all —up ahead. It is four stories tall and squats the entire block. There are no windows, only holes, and each one bleeds black smoke up the wall, as if the building had been filled with ink, turned upside down, then set right again. I see part of a sign that says “Sheraton” only partly covered with smoke.

The air stinks of burnt rubber.

A couple of men in oil-stained t-shirts and jeans step calmly out through one of the sooty holes that used to be called doorways. They both have short hair and

moustaches and shiny, dark eyes. We surprise each other but I keep walking (after all, I'm just a guy out for a stroll). They stand in the daylight and look at me. The one closest to me has a large cut on his right arm, and blood is running off of his pinkie finger. He's got a piece of wood paneling pinned under his left armpit and he's also got a little pink doll. The man with him has a big plate of broken glass with brown and white lettering on it that reads "KING." This man's face is stern and argumentative and smeared with soot across the forehead and nose. They frown at me in confusion. I look strange to them.

This building, The Basra City Sheraton, is completely burned out and sooty black. Back on the 17<sup>th</sup> of last month, when attacked by coalition tanks, some al-Jazeera reporters got killed in the attack and fingers were pointed. Media empires started arguing and the American government was accused of foul play. The Basra looters didn't care and set upon it within 24 hours.

Even Basra mobs make decisions and one of them was to raid the Sheraton and leave the rest of the hotels in the neighborhood alone. Maybe the local hotel owners were involved, maybe not. It seems strange, however, that one building would be such a target as to be completely gutted while the rest are left more or less intact. But there is a brutal rationale at work. Looting has patterns, and perhaps even intent. A mob is more like a large number of crows or a pack of hungry dogs than a gang of troglodytes bent on retribution or ill justice. These men are two of the coyotes working the leftovers. And me, too.

I say “*alahu Akbar*” — good afternoon — to them and just keep on walking. We are all scavengers and I realize that I am no better than they. We are all collecting after-shocks and shards.

Realizing that they are simply hungry — not evil — allows me to ease up a little bit. These are not men just walking around looking to shoot me. They might be interested in the camera hanging at my hip, or they might want my shoes, but they’re out on a kind of shopping trip, not much else.

We pass one another and I hear noises from a different door, further down. This man is carrying two plastic chairs. I ask him where he’s found them.

“Third floor. There’s a few others left up there.” He smiles and absentmindedly spits on the ground, then licks his teeth. He’s not having a merry time, per se, but he is doing well for himself.

But I wonder how it is that people can just walk into a building and take things. If at home I were to walk into the Sheraton down the street and take things I’d probably expect to run into someone there from my neighborhood, or someone that might at least recognize me. Especially in a town like Basra, where neighborhoods are less liquid or mobile — and more familial — than a standard American neighborhood in, say, Tucson. If I were poor and all the Sheratons in my home town were ripe for the picking, I’d probably go to one in a different section of town so I would be less likely to be recognized. Of course, this introduces the logistical problem of transporting all my loot, but a little physical labor today avoids social persecution tomorrow. Or something.

So I ask, “How far do you have to carry them?” hoping that will get me somewhere in my studies of Civic Looting 101.

“Over to Old Basra,” he says which is about two kilometers away, and with that he cheerfully dances with his new plastic chairs, swinging them wide, and sauntering off to Old Basra. He smiles and lifts his chin; goodbye.

The sun is hot and the air isn't at all clean so I angle north, toward the river.

Every street seems to have been smashed and burned and I realize that am walking through a story of a behemoth that passed before me. The giant walked through these streets with his great hammer, kicking cars over, crushing houses, and spitting flames on rooftops, and as he walked the streets, picking his way among neighborhoods, he was concentrating on government administration buildings, bringing his great maul down hard through the roof, then again, and to the side, like a croquet mallet, and then striding through the streets as he finds them, and picking another target (he did not care if he mis-steps on a house or school) until he wanders, smashing and burning, over the northern horizon of Basra. But there was detail work that had to be been done in the footsteps of this colossus. This giant was followed by a mob of smaller ones like him, perhaps only as tall as his knee, human sized in fact, but hungrier than he, and they too had mallets and they too spat fire and they followed in his footsteps and did more of the dirty work, fanning out behind him like a wake behind a ship.

Thus the Coalition of The Willing cut a new culture into the back of Iraq.

The National Police Headquarters, when seen from the front, looks like a five-floor office building. It's been burned and emptied, Sheraton-style. But the looters' motives were different here. Now “The White Lion,” as it was known to neighbors, stares blankly over the street with eye socket windows, and a broken jaw from a direct

missile hit. When the missile hit the building, the weapon went so deep that the interior supports were shoved out through the doors and lower stories of the building blew outwards. The explosion lifted blocks of concrete and broken glass across the street into other buildings and caused the building, only 20 years old, to lean, sagging down on top of its barely functioning foundation. Once an untouchable symbol of police authority, but now neck less, the building spills forward, leaving man-sized blocks of stone as an obstacle course for the cars that slowly drive by.

This was one of the offices of the *Dahirat al-Mukhabarat al-Hamma*, or The General Intelligence Department. Under Saddam the General Intelligence had two simple responsibilities: 1) control Iraqis inside the borders, and 2) control Iraqis outside the borders. Inside Iraq, the greatly feared *Mukhabarat* monitored political groups that included Ba'ath, non-Ba'ath, men, women, youth, and unions. They squashed Kurdish or Shi'a movements, kept an eye on embassies, journalists and foreigners, ran counter-espionage, and built a tight network of internal informants that often posed as citizens and neighbors. Outside Iraq things were just as ruthless. They threatened expatriate Iraqi journalists, ran sabotage and subversion operations in Syria and Iran, executed members of opposition groups that had fled the country decades before the murders, and aided opposition groups in lands to Saddam. They were a busy hive of bees. This is a list of only a few of their daily chores.

When an Iraqi didn't cooperate he was interrogated, imprisoned and generally tortured. Since the *Mukhabarat* reported to Qusay Hussein, a known sadist and someone that was not considered — even by *Mukhabarat* standards — gentle, there was little reason to keep the manacles and wires in the closet. The stories were repeated by Iraqis

every day: the victims whose fingers had been shot off, had been hung upside down with electrical wires stuffed into his (or her) genitals, the guy that spent decades in a small box with no light or people, shitting on himself in the dark, the man who was crucified with a Makita power drill and some extension cords, or the one that had his feet sawn off and was driven out of town and dropped off in the dunes and told to walk back.

If the police were protecting and serving someone it wasn't the citizens that paid taxes. Under no circumstance could you trust a Policeman since they worked for Saddam. None of them. And many civilians did, as well.

"These walls were walls that we could not ask questions about," my guide, Ali, a man in his early thirties, tells me, "Sometimes people would ask 'What is behind that wall?' and they would disappear. We knew better than to ask questions like these." He nods and raises his eyebrows and looks at me. I look back at the building and feel a bit sick.

Ali, says, "It was called Saddam's Guest House."

The complex had many ironic names including the Office of Public Safety (one of its official names). We step over the rubble in the front street and pick our way around the building to a courtyard in back cut in deep trenches. Each trench is about 3 meters deep and cut in nonsensical paths excavated yesterday by the British. Obviously some sort of big tractor was used to do this. A huge, mechanical maggot had mashed through the *Mukhabarat's* back yard. My guide tells me that during the digging process — an attempt to extricate prisoners from randomly placed underground cell — the soldiers heard people's voices, shouting from inside one of Saddam's subterranean nightmares.

Apparently some nine or ten people were saved when they lucked into prying open the right piece of concrete.

Most of the hundreds of thousands of people, across Iraq's vast national prison system, will never be found breathing. Police would arrest anyone — for no declared reason — and were allowed to hold them for up to six months. Especially around election time. If people went into the prison system there was a one-third chance they would come out. Mass graves were commonly used by the *Mukhabarat* and the people that were buried there were often only remembered as a number in a docket. That docket, along with a long list of other documented atrocities, went up in flames the week before I had arrived, burned by the looting of all of the Basra administration offices. The Iraqis knew who had done this and what had happened. There was no need, as far as they were concerned, for retribution or Western-style justice.

Criminal courts be damned; the solution was fire apparent.

On the other side of the trenches, past the main administration building (also bombed, burned, and looted) are a series of yellowish hallways. We walk in.

The place stinks and my stomach immediately curls into a ball, as if trying to disconnect from my throat. The hallway smells like sewage and rot and I assume it's corpse. Something is too ripe to be right and I brace myself for the worst. It is quiet here, too, and there is trash on the floor here, but the worst is the smell. No, the worst is the building itself, the blood of the building. The walls drip a dirty nicotine color and the doors are spaced evenly apart down the long hallway in that grisly mathematical rhythm that pounds out the stuff of hospitals, psychiatric wards, prisons, nightmares, and — most horribly — torture cells.

Off of the hallway are small rooms, about two or three meters cubed, that serve as prison cells where fifteen prisoners would be kept at a time. Some people passed the better part of their lives in these rooms. Jammed in together there wasn't enough space to lie down to sleep, hygiene was inadequate, and living in conditions of shit for months — or years on end — made the lives of prisoners poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

Occasionally guards would come, take someone out, beat them, then bring them back to cart someone else off. The tortures were that all-time Iraqi favorite, *al-falikeh*, but they were often far, far worse here. I read one story about a woman that had been tortured, daily, for 35 years, in one of these rooms. She was captured when she was in her teens. You can do the math. The British released her about 3 weeks before I got there and some mercy light shined down and someone gave her an apartment and some money to buy food. But now she drools and draws on the walls of her apartment. She's got a lot to get out of her system. You can't blame her, after all; it's hard to integrate into society after you've had all your fuses blown from three decades of electrical torture.

It smells, as I said, like shit. I watch my step. Littered among the concrete shatter and copper wire are wads of human-sized feces. I look a second time; yes, these definitely came out of a human. But it doesn't make sense. What the hell; someone couldn't find the potty? Why not use a toilet? Was someone insane, gibbering in the stained hallways, walking around naked, shitting at will?

As we walk through this nauseating labyrinth Ali points to graffiti on the wall. He recites the names of Basra residents, long dead and remembered by their family that came here, to pick up a piece of cinder from the floor and scratch a mean litany on the yellow

walls. In the torture tanks of the White Lion, people had been writing epithets and Saddam-hate-graffiti, in black-coal fast-paced Arabic.

*“One person in this place, my brother Mohammed, was killed here by Colonel Moustaf.”*

They were everywhere. We began to read on one wall and slowly turned to the right.

*“May Saddam, the great criminal, fall.”*

*“May God curse Saddam and all of his people in Tikrit until the day of judgment,”*

*“Saddam, the bastard, may he burn in hell for all eternity”*

*"Saddam; Son Of A Bitch."*

There was poetry, as well. One of them read:

*No matter the time,*

*Death lies eternal;*

*We will remember,*

*And here we will wait.”*

What do you say to someone that tortured your sister, raped her, tortured her some more, killed her, then threw her in a grave somewhere outside of town with twenty other people, some of whom you might have gone to school with when you were a kid? What can purge something so foul that runs so deep in a town?

Then it occurs to me (as I step over another turd on the floor) what is happening here. Some folks had gotten their hatred out on the walls, others had just left it on the

floor, leaving less articulate, and far smellier, symbols which just contributed to the already crappy décor. Somehow, like the pragmatic sensibility of looting a city that has no government, taking a shit if you feel sick makes that same kind of sense. Without concord, without understanding, and without someone keeping our urges in check, we humans fast become animals. The line is tremulous and thin, a string that if plucked, makes a strange and ancient tone, and if snapped, breaks the dam between civilization and bedlam.

But there is something else about these hallways that is deranging and it might have to do with the smell, as if the stench of the place is not just from the shit. It creeps into my arms and through my back and swirls around my neck like an invisible rope, gagging me, coiling up mostly in the back of my head—this place where many people have experienced a great deal of pain and where many people were butchered. I can tell — before Ali opens his mouth — which rooms were used for the most horrible of crimes. Something here is deep and flows now. Even after the smell of blood and shit and soldered flesh has left the room, the psychic residue oozes between the bricks, at the limits of sensibility, as if a spirit world has been etched into the air and I can feel it coiling up inside of me, trying to find some reprieve.

We walk back out into the searing sunshine and the colors of the world crackle and hiss in a strange radiance I have never seen and the air that smelled like burnt rubber when we went in now smells good and strong and dusty and full of the breath fresh from God's nostrils. Walking out of that place —my legs unbroken and my head still on one piece - on my shoulders —feels so damn good that I want to kiss the sun and thank

someone for setting me down in a different part of the world so that I never have to spend a minute in there against my will, my health, my family, or my life.

Out back of Saddam's Guest House, a family has set up a little campsite of a home. The mother and her skinny husband have pulled desks from the offices out here next to the dumpster, stacking them end-to-end to make something of a little fort for themselves (I don't blame them for not living under the roof of this crumbling *cauchemar*). There are plastic sheets held up by rope and a patch of carpet has been cut up to designate the living room where the woman sits next to a little fire she is keeping, where food seems in order. She is dressed in simple rags that have been sewn together a hundred times and added to by other pieces of cloth she'd found, perhaps from prisoners' corpses, or maybe from old uniforms she found. She smiles at me and I can't see her eyes, but I can see her crow's-feet and her white teeth. I want to talk to her, but it is her living room I am looking into, and so I walk the corner to let her fix lunch - or whatever she is doing with the fire - in peace. Above her, sitting on the roof, a boy yells and points at me.

Her two sons have some friends over to play for the afternoon. They come rushing up, asking if I'm from London and if I have candy for them. They're normal looking kids with big eyes and flapping hands. They're dressed in khaki pants, t-shirts, and tennis shoes. One kid is older than the others. He isn't asking me questions, and he has a straight line mouth that doesn't crack for word or smile. Sad eyes are set inside of a big, old man's forehead. He must have been ten or eleven, but he looks past his prime; -a veteran of war.

And these kids are mostly just kids, asking if I will take their picture. We talk a bit and they show me how they kick the ball around. They climb around on old car husks, and throw tin-can memories and bounce slowly up and down on the big pieces of rebar that stick out of the sides of the eviscerated White Lion.

### **--- *Functional Art***

After a fire burns through a forest it takes only a few days for sprouts to push up through the ash. The incinerated forest becomes a set of raw nutrients for seeds that are underneath the forest floor, still alive after the inferno's passed. Before a fire sunlight cannot get to plants below the upper canopy. But after a fire the view of sunlight and sky becomes clear. Some trees, such as redwoods, actually require the clearing effects of a fire to grow at all. The heat of the fire allows the pine cones to pop open, the seeds fall from between the plates, and trees that live for thousands of years emerge from the ground. Growth is a practice that is built this way. But it is hard for sprouts to find root in the winds that blow after a forest fire. Because with no elder trees the winds are intense; there is nothing to slow its plunge.

This morning the *suhab* is blowing again, smearing the colors of the village and summoning to life everything that was limp. A sky of sand is slowly raining upward turning everything an eerie monochrome.

I've taken a taxi out into Basra to look around. We drive by buildings so bombed out that they are little more than slabs of vertical concrete. There is no glass in them,

nothing to be seen inside, save for the dark breath of the fire that escaped out the windows. Administration vaults where the looting and bombing had been most concentrated loom overhead, each building a huge tombstone. They are silent blocks of grey, set in cryptic rows, now just representations of death and souvenir.

One of the buildings next to the road, the former Television Broadcast Center, has been adopted and put to new use. The top floors are smashed, but in the bottom two floors I can see people walking inside. After being demolished from above and burned from below benevolent hands have washed its interior clean and have carried a new life into its walls. The windowsills on the top floors are still toothy with shattered glass, but below them, on the ground floor, there is a bed sheet that hangs over the door. It reads “Art Gallery” with some dates, and a few names including the Basra School of Fine Arts. The letters are spray-painted in green.

This derelict art gallery is a new sprout pushing up from under the ashes.

The air inside is as cool and calm as a library. Neatly spaced and carefully organized, about 150 paintings hang on the walls, with each artist’s name hand-written on small pieces of paper taped underneath. The styles ranged from Maxwell Parrish to Iron Maiden.

Since there’s no electricity, light slants in from the east side of the gallery. I’m standing in a corner, where it’s a bit dim, looking at a painting about bombs. The triptych is of three flaming buildings, tiny people running into the street, each carefully etched. Their hands are in the air and their fingers are crooked. Bombs fall. Someone is jumping from a window. On the right panel the people are closer, and you can see their faces. Their mouths are empty little O’s.

I notice that a man in his forties, wearing glasses and a white dishdasha, standing behind me. He looks scholarly.

In perfect English, “Please accept my apologies for the poor lighting.”

If he weren’t so serious he’d be joking. The fact that the gallery is in the middle of war-time Basra is bizarre enough – the city has no electricity. But this man, so polite, becomes a kind of signpost of how civilization has nothing to do with electricity or artwork, but simply of people considering the well-being of others. He wants so much more.

He pushes his glasses up his nose and he explains the story of the gallery and the dozen people that have organized the operation. People gather behind him. They look as missionary serious as he and they, too, are considerate and move slowly, hands behind their backs. A couple of them carry clipboards and lost in taking notes. These men care for the paintings, actively, like gardeners, or mothers. Some of the men are the local art school professors, some are friends of artists. Some are just interested neighbors who, not really having a job or anything better to do, came in to help put the gallery together. They don’t, of course, pay rent or insurance or fees to the local arts council. This is a pure endeavor and I’m afraid I will be the only Westerner to see it (not, perhaps, that it matters).

The man with the glasses is one of the professors from the Basra College of Fine Art. He tells me that almost all of the work has been done in the last month. He walks me past works by children in their early teens, college-age students, graduates, professors, parents, grandparents, and paintings that a cleric and a sheik did. It’s so weirdly... *democratic*. Neighbors down the street have brought some paintings to hang.

There are a few people that live outside of Basra, in Shaayba, that handed over some pencil drawings on wax paper. A t-shirt is stretched over a piece of wood. A newspaper is sculpted into a head. A sink pokes out from the wall, the bottom covered with ink, and the ink scratched away to reveal a silver illustration underneath. There are charcoals, oils, sculptures, acrylics, gouaches, sculptures made out of broken glass, airbrush on stretched linen, and some quilt-like knitted pieces that use thin metal wire as thread.

I want to teleport the building to the United States and show the snobby what art is —what function art really can serve — for the first time. This may be one of the first real exhibits I have ever seen.

“The work isn’t pretty,” the professor snorts, as the men follow behind him, all of them focused and silent. He is right; It is too sincere to be bothered with Pretty. But strangely, perhaps because Pretty is rarely beautiful, this work makes an orbit and the collection of the different kinds of work, the fact that there are so many people involved, the circumstances (so very hard, like a brick on a sprout) all make it beautiful. I tell him so. He already knows.

During our conversation I notice a painting that has a sculpture set inside of it. It is a particularly articulate piece about a baby trapped by weaponry, with no escape from the center of the bomb. It was painted by Manal Kheirallah, a 23 year old student at the art school.

Thanking the man for setting up the gallery, I tell him that I am a painter myself, that I have studied painting at a few art schools in the U.S. and have made at least part of my living selling my work since I was seventeen.

He politely nods and I wonder why I wanted to tell him about my own life. He says to me, “We have a saying. ‘A man whose hand is in water is not the same as a man whose hand is in fire.’”

--- ***“The Devil Himself”***

The necessity of delivering something as important as baby pictures drives me to some extreme measures (dear god, I would never do such a thing as deliver baby pictures in the States. I cringe when new parents reach for their wallets, but maybe it is those parents that taught me the importance of my little mission; and so getting Mr. Talal the photos of Meshaal was something at which I determined I wouldn’t fail. Even the money and probably Hussam’s letter wasn’t as important).

One of the measures is asking people in the street if they know Mr. Talal. Hussam had given me a phone number, but of course the phone system was down so phoning him was working about as well as trying to catch a cab in the middle of the Atlantic. So in the street, near his neighborhood, I started asking people. I delivered messages by word of mouth: Marbad Hotel, friend of Hussam’s. Mr. Talal needs to contact me. I have something for him. The men I spoke with (though Islamic tradition is less severe than Kuwait, there are still not many women walking the street these days) nod and they know it’s serious and eventually the message will get through.

The system worked; someone left a message for Mr. Talal. In a place like Basra everyone eventually knows everyone else (which will be the real reason a new

government is established, not because Uncle Sam has a gun to the temple and insists they prey to the Gods of Democracy). Mr. Talal manages to somehow call the satellite phone at the Marbad Hotel and left me a message: 2pm today.

At 2pm sharp he walks into the lobby of the hotel while I'm sitting in a corner, smoking on a shisha pipe (or, rather, nargile, they're called in Iraq. The difference escapes me. The hose is a little shorter, but otherwise I'm too ignorant to tell the difference).

I'm surprised to learn that Hussam's father became a member of the Iraqi National Basketball team in 1966. After this he played ball professionally for six years in 8 countries across the Middle East. He told me stories about playing against the teams in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Turkey, recounting his glory days, when he was thin and young. It is hard for me to imagine. He's not, shall I respectfully mention, skinny. He is not obese, with that loose flapping fat around the face, but he is round and solid and he moves slow. Now he is slow with thick arms, heavy eyelids, and a syrupy drawl to his talk. But he still seems somehow dangerous and sharp, down deep inside the years of stillness and half dozen wars he has witnessed.

In 1972 Puma offered him a job as their Middle East sales director. He moved back to Basra in 1983, at the age of 41. For the past few years he had been promoting Basra's local theater, and helping train the school kids on acting, makeup, and set construction. Last year he wrote a book detailing his theory of acting, and how, at its core, it is a team sport. The book was published just before the war by a publisher in Baghdad but distribution was limited because the warehouse was bombed during the invasion and his book on theater caught fire the same day as the Ministry of Defense.

He is glad to see the smokes and I am at least as glad to be rid of the packages I had brought. I mean, I'm glad to deliver them, too. But I'm mostly glad to be rid of them since hitchhiking through a war zone with a fat wad of American greenbacks is a fast way to get shot.

And more so, as expected, he is glad to see the photos of Meshaal. I try my best to deliver the news and explain that his grandchild, at the tongue-tied age of two, is delivering sentences in Arabic, French, and English. I explain how he recognizes the *adhans* and the *meuzzins*, broadcast by loudspeaker from the mosques over Kuwait City. The concerned grandfather that has never seen his grandchild, naturally, has questions about how he spends his days, his health, and what his mother is like. I don't tell him that Florence has neon pink hair.

The cigarettes are a big hit. Marlboro reds, his favorite brand.

"These are very valuable here, you know," and he lights one while grinning. I'm reminded of his heart medicine, and something inside of me laughs because this man, smoking cigarettes and on a fat-slide towards death might be, in another less mean country, on a fast track to danger, but I realize that he is lucky to be alive at all. The man must be mortar-proof.

He turns his full attention to the photographs. There are photographs of Meshaal pushing a ball, and swimming in the sea with his mother, and sitting in the sand proudly holding next to his ear a dead fish, like a phone, that he found at the beach. Mr. Talal holds the photo over his head, and laughs (it seems like the photo of Meshaal; they are clearly related), then he abruptly stops, as if remembering something, and he flips to the next image. A photograph of his grandson, with chocolate cake smeared over his face,

makes him especially proud and he shakes it in front of me and said “Look at that!” twice. Then he is quiet for a full minute and I wait while he carefully looks. Eventually, as if he had to return to the world of the war, swimming out of a psychological well, his eyes focus on mine and he doesn’t say anything for at least five or six seconds. His mouth becomes hard and I think he might yell, or simply explode, showering the room in a spray of terminal ardor.

“It has been very hard for the Iraqi people to know what to believe,” he begins. “When we were at war with Iran, for example we used to watch Saddam talk on television every night for two, three hours... On and on he would talk about war, medals, conquering... Those kinds of things. What generals did a good job. Like that.

“From 1960 to 1975 we were at war with the Kurds. Then we had four years of reparations. Then from 1980 to 1988 we were at war with Iran. Then we had a year of reparation. Then in 1990 and 1991 it was with Kuwait. Then another year of reparation. Then in 1992 until 1997; Iran again. And from 1998 until now, the United States.

“You see, we have always been at war, and Saddam was always telling people what to believe. People do not know what to believe. When there is a war everyone must believe in the same thing. There is no room for questions. Everyone must believe. You cannot say ‘No’ to a war.”

The United States snaps clearly into focus, bumper stickers and flags and t-shirts of God Bless America and We Support Our Troops unfurl before me, and something made a little more sense.

He looks around the lobby. It is habitual. Many Iraqis I spoke with do this frequently. People are scared for the same reason your leg wobbles if afraid someone will hit you.

His main concern is that Basra is absolutely lawless. Traffic lights are out, sure, there is no electricity, but the problem is that nobody is helping. They run the light since there are no police and there is no fear of punishment. The army has bigger things to worry about than traffic accidents. One of the things concerning Mr. Talal is theft. Anyone might take your car, at any time, for any reason. Mr. Talal watched a man get shot in his car just the day before. It was at the Habib Intersection. He stopped at the intersection and someone waiting for him opened the door, pulled him from the car. The man, his legs momentarily pinned under the wheel leaned forward so the man shot him in the head, yanked his heavy carcass out of the car, got in the driver's seat, and drove away. That simple. There's no vehicle registration to worry about because there's no government keeping track of registrations. The English troops are the supposed protectorate, and they tell everyone, "stay inside." But doors get kicked in and windows are good doors, too, so the only way any of these people will be able to really be safe inside is if they move to Tokyo or New York. That isn't going to happen since even if they did have the tenacity to drive to um-Qasr they'd never be let into Kuwait to catch a plane out of the Middle East. No, these people are trapped under the storm of blood and fire that other men have summoned, and there they will stay, and many will be gunned down and all will lose the lives they knew.

War ripples from the tragic souls of a few, and that ripple engulfs those unlucky enough to be nearby.

“And we’re told it will be better soon. But the British cannot control this. None of them are doing any good.” He tucks his chin in a bit, and adds, “They need to fix things soon or people will revolt. People need water and electricity. Iraqis are not patient and the British have done us no good in the past. Things were better with Saddam.”

He looks at me and nods, No Really.

“At least we had some order. As long as there is a law people are, at least, fed. There is no one working to help. Things are very bad now. I don’t think this war is a good thing.”

“And Freedom?” I ask him. I hate to use the F-word.

“These people don’t even know what freedom is. They think that it means they can break the law. They think democracy is anarchy.”

“Why do they think that?”

“This is what Saddam told them.”

Mr. Talal looks at his photos of his grandson. He is unconsciously curling them into a tube around his fingers. He realizes this and smooths the photos then sets them on the table, just inside arm’s reach.

Everyone, Mr. Talal tells me, is afraid to go outside. I can see why, what with intersections doubling as Get A Free Car murder stations. He says it is more dangerous now than during the war because everyone is shooting their guns. But there are Iraqi priorities over water and electricity and one of these is education. The children still have to get to school. But at the same time with such looting and mayhem they aren’t safe. Especially the girls. Mr. Talal knows of a dozen girls that have disappeared in that last week. Consequently fathers go to the schools and wait while their children attend class.

Then, in the afternoon, these patient fathers bring the children back into the home, and go again the next day. Education is imperative to the Iraqi mind. Meanwhile, if a building is left unattended for a few hours it will be looted. The theater where Mr. Talal worked was looted just the day before yesterday.

“In my office we have a storage area for all of the publicly-owned theater goods. The curtains, masks, make-up. Things like this. I went to the office yesterday morning and everything was gone. The door had been broken. I asked the watchman what had happened and he told me ‘Oh, there were too many people, they were armed.’ But I know he was involved. His family is selling my stuff at the looter’s market today. Anybody that steals something just takes it to the market and sells it there. Nobody cares anymore. There is no civilization now. My friend worked in a building where the Shi’a came in and took it. They walked in and said ‘This is our building now.’ And just took the building. There was no one that the man could go to for help —the British do not care. He had to leave. And he left everything when he went.”

In an effort to gain some kind of control over the looting the British have selected civilians to be police officers. Some of them had already served under Saddam but most of them were fresh to the job. Though it will change in a few months, none of them are trusted with guns. The situation fast becomes laughable when one needs to arrest a guy shooting a driver of a car in the head at, say, the Habib intersection.

“What were they supposed to do? Yell ‘Stop Thief’? These people can’t do anything except sit in the office and drink tea. Well, they read the paper, too.”

Mr. Talal laughs a bit and softly pats the back of his neck. He is a large man and his body is a horse he is only partially conscious of. He lights another cigarette.

Suddenly someone appears next to us. It is a friend of Mr. Talal's. They shake hands, exchange kisses on the cheek, pat each other on the shoulder. They are old friends, and there is some joke about his friend's son. The young man returned from Baghdad this afternoon. Things are bad there and looting is the same as it is here in Basra. There are more guns and the US army is guarding the Ministry of Oil, but all else has been gutted. Mr. Talal, rather than react to this news, simply introduces me, Someone has broken their leg, and someone else has set it for them. A friend of theirs purchased gasoline at a good price. A woman had a child this morning.

After twenty or thirty minutes of the local news Mr. Talal's friend leaves, perhaps out of politeness, and Mr. Talal sits back down and continues, waving in the direction of the door.

"That was Amr; he is a good man." They have been friends for thirty years, since they were boys.

Mr. Talal explains that people in Iraq are, as he puts it "not ready for democracy." His concern is that there are too many groups that think differently and collaboration cannot be achieved. This was one thing that Saddam and the Ba'ath party did for Iraq: they forced a unification. He never used the words, but I can tell that civil war was on his mind.

"Saddam was president from 1968 until last week. That is 35 years. The culture here is a Ba'athist culture. That is the way of thinking. You cannot just change this by bombing things. It is the way of the culture. It is the way of the people and some people here are a lot like Saddam. They like the rule of the jungle. They like stealing and

killing. They like drugs and weapons. They deal with weapons like they are toys.

People here are just not civilized. No one here can be trusted.”

He is serious now, leaning forward and looking me in the eye with a fist between us and his teeth exposed.

“There are no cell phones or pagers or fax machines. This place is a jungle. There is nothing here. Nothing!” I wonder if he’s going to pound the table. I check the photos, the money, the cigarettes. If he pounds something there won’t be any serious damage. He probably needs to blow off a little steam.

But instead, a gentleman, he steps back from this emotional precipice. His eyes are dark and wet and they seem heavy in his skull. The man is an avalanche of despair, waiting to snap off and slide down the mountain of his mind. But he keeps it together.

“Four months ago, if you had come here to bring me these photographs and talk with me, I could not. They would have killed me. It was like this for everyone. Every family — EVERY family — lost one or two sons to Saddam. This started in the 1980s. Saddam is like.... He was like a hungry monster. For example, one day a friend of mine, a doctor, found his son missing. Two days later the police came to his door and they said to him, 'We have your son. He is okay. Give us money.'”

I stupidly ask if the doctor had paid.

“Of course he paid! He had to pay. They were the police!”

He pauses, looks off to the side, then his eyes come back to mine. He looks utterly furious, but his voice is quiet now.

“He paid them. Two months later they came back and they said the same thing. Every two months they collected some amount, \$100? \$200? I don’t remember. A lot of

money. This went on and on. For twenty years. All this time he hoped he would meet his son again. Twenty years waiting for his son. Five days before the British troops showed up — just last month — they shot him and left his body in front of his father's house. That was what they did.”

He puts his hand to his forehead and, leaving it there, abruptly thanks me for bringing the photos of his family. Some things, he says, are going to get better. The bombings had been more or less accurate, with a few exceptions, and when the British troops came into Basra people were expecting them. So everyone stayed inside while the crashing and rattling stormed through the city's war-blown streets. Saddam's yacht was bombed, the palace was flattened, government offices were blown to rubble from planes they couldn't even see and meanwhile their homes, he said, stood unharmed. The people that stayed out of the way were safe. Yes, there were casualties, he said, yes, we did lose a few people, but all things considered, the war was precise and effective.

“We're glad it happened because we are tired of Saddam.”

He shakes his head, “But things need to be better.”

He seems exhausted and I suggest we step outside for a few minutes for some air. It's late afternoon, the sun beams have been leveraging their lines up the wall, and a break seems important. Outside, two security guards open and close the gate and sit on blocks of concrete with several handguns strapped onto their belts. They seem old. They move slow, as if drunk from the heat.

American culture of automation has preceded my arrival by decades. Mr. Talal has a 1972 Chevrolet that is peeling blue paint and rusting underneath with crap-orange

upholstery and springs sticking through. But to have an operational car in Basra in 2003 makes Mr. Talal a wealthy man. He suggests we go for a ride. We climb in, he starts the engine, and we pull out of the parking lot, slow like a Chevy does, to go see what is left of the ancient city of Basra, Iraq.

We drive past the Sheraton Hotel. The same furtive men I met the day before are still busy tiptoeing through piles of concrete. It smells like sulfur and roasted chicken. We keep driving, slowly, to see, but not to stop, as Mr. Talal explains that it is too dangerous to walk. It is kind of him, to show me. I thank him for the tour; it isn't, certainly, in his interest to cart me around wartime Basra.

The buildings are crushed the people are cursed, the streets are obstacle courses, smoke rises from places it shouldn't and the setting sun frowns mean on us, casting the city in a despicable light. Things here are ruined. It will take years to rebuild this and Halliburton and Bechtel will do the job, erecting the same culture that is in Kuwait, minimizing costs, maximizing efficiency, and mass-producing a new society that will be profitable, car-reliant, and automatic. I wonder if things are better but Mr. Talal assures me they are.

He looks at me while driving.

"If the devil himself had come we would have welcomed him."

Welcoming a devil into your home is, at best, desperate.

--- *Justice*

He slows the car down so we can listen. Tatta-tap tat-tat-tat-tat. I look at him to gauge his reaction since he is obviously pointing out the fact that someone is shooting a very serious automatic weapon very nearby.

“Looters?” I ask.

He smiles at me and the corners of his eyes crinkle up like he might smile, but his mouth purses. He raises one eyebrow and an index finger.

I wait.

Tatta-Tat. Pop. Pop. Several guns, maybe just across the street, but certainly within a sniper’s range.

Resigned and practical, he looks at me and sings the words, “Ali Baba.”

There is looting and there are skirmishes and they usually happen in that order. The British still have a good deal of work to do. In some cases there are the well-publicized Saddam loyalists, but far more frequently are gangs and small-time mafia that are hoping to whittle out a section of sod for themselves. It’s not ideologic or religious; it’s simply practical. This is the gun law. And it has come from on high.

A few minutes later, near an intersection, we step out of the car. Mr. Talal silently points to a puddle and I have to laugh, because he is treating me with such consideration — as if I mind stepping in a puddle. All I care about is not getting my brains spattered across the sidewalk. A wet shoe? Sure, let me have it. But of course I step around it (there is that thing again — important and stupid; a wet shoe, an unshaved face. (These things that lose identity when bullets fill the air.)). I listen to the gunfire, keeping track of its location. It is circling us, like a wolf. Night is falling and the buildings have no lights, so the sepulchral street dims, graying under the gathering sky. People become dim

shadows, blending in with the fronts of buildings, and the world seems to be very slowly, imperceptibly, falling apart. The cars are louder now, and the air is thick against my face. I hear myself swallow. I clench my teeth. My feet are made of paper. The gunshots chatter again, closer now and my hands feel like they are sparking.

War zones, like amphetamines, have these effects.

As he did every night, Ali Baba got restless and roamed the streets, shooting automatic rifles, looting, burning, stealing furniture and school-girls, and causing at least as much mayhem as the war itself. There is no electricity, no water, people are busy shooting each other, nobody has jobs, the police force is inept, the hospitals are all closed, the phones don't work and so everyone goes inside and prays that the someone will, please, put things right. And fast, *inshallah*, because despite all the pain, Basra is still alive. Life, like death, will be neither invited nor dismissed. If you're wounded you don't live because you want to; You have no choice in the matter. You live because you must. Humans are not qualified for these kinds of decisions.

We walk up to a shop nearby where a friend of Mr. Talal's is counting his money. He has been selling cars all day. I don't know where he got the cars or who he was selling them to but his smiling face is pointed at us, like a sight on a rifle. It's a grimacing, clown-like smile, with fat shiny lips and white teeth and snappy movements as he counts his money, framed by his brand new world of death and foreign coalitions. His face floats out at me like a ghost, or a portrait that has come unhinged from the wall. I smile back, feeling jumpy and skittish and hopped-up on adrenalin and fear. He waves, smiling still, his face frozen in what looks to my giddy eyes like a grimace. He has a generator in his shop; it isn't just his smile illuminating the room.

Sales were good today, he tells Mr. Talal (after I am introduced. I wonder; am I a trophy of some sort? Am I, the American, a status symbol or a control symbol? What do I mean to these people? There is no possibility for answering this, so I smile and shake hands and keep my trap closed).

We walk down a few more doors, the rest of the shops growing dim with the setting sun and it is easy to see that, by now, lights should be coming on but aren't and won't be. Instead hands reach down, holding matches, and candles get lit by which the city takes a gentle and luminous glow and people tiptoe in the darkness between ancient buildings, as they did for thousands of years before electricity arrived here.

Another group of Mr. Talal's friends are playing backgammon and smoking *nargile*. They laugh as smoke pours out their noses. They are a family of little dragons. They trade news with Mr. Talal, some of which I have heard (the woman that had the baby, the Oil Ministry in Baghdad, etc). They have no electricity so they play backgammon under the golden light of a kerosene lamp. We spend some five minutes with them and I calm down a bit to and relax to see the beauty of friendship and backgammon and kerosene lamps. And they are together, these playing backgammon friends. I knew these men better than I knew anyone in the world. I have met them hundreds of times before, when I was a boy, in Colorado, or Wyoming, or Florida. They discuss sports and which children are getting in what trouble, and business, and who is marrying, and small pleasures, like smoking (or chewing) tobacco, and which kind is best, and how it is done, and other important aspects of the business of life. These are the men with the broad wrinkled necks and the deep chuckle. They are the caryatids of

community. They smile gently at me and welcomed me and shake my hand. I wonder what can be stranger than kindness in a land of war, if not war in a land of kindness.

It is at that moment, we hear the gunshots so damn close that I feel like I've been slapped in the back of the head. It's a large caliber gun just outside the door. It makes a deep clop, clop sound. I crouch and spin around, and peer out the door to assess, and I see a man laying in the street. He is dressed in a dishdasha and is squirming. The people walking on the sidewalk fan out away from him, as if he is leaking plague, finding doorways to duck into, or running across the street, or just not walking near. Two men stand over him, both pointing the guns at his back. The man writhes around in the street like a wounded snake, crawling since his legs don't work. He pulls himself and squirms across the ground and drags blood behind him. His movements are jerky. He doesn't have normal control over his muscles. He just claws at the street, like an infant on a carpet. He isn't making much progress. His mouth is opening and closing but he's not saying anything. All these details in a portion of a second.

One of the men holding a gun can kick the man; he is that close. But instead he shoots him again, in the back, from only three feet away. The man on the ground seems like an animal being slaughtered — thick, like pork, and the bullets don't jerk his body when they enter but just make him squirm more, as if they are insignificant hornets, and not spears in his bowels. He keeps crawling, incredible. I thought a bullet stopped someone instantly, but instead he keeps moving, his muscles pumping, and blood spilling out of him into the road, filling up the gutter behind him as he crawls. In spatters and drawn brush strokes his knees leave a macabre swath of dark black, as if he has become a

paintbrush held by the hand of an invisible demon, writing an ungodly confession on the oily page of the street.

Mr. Talal calmly touches my shoulder and tells me that this is an assassination. The assassins are making a message for people. The man being shot was a Ba'ath party member. It is time for things to change, Mr. Talal says. This is what happens when there is no government. Like exiting the highway entrance, or shaving, or stepping in puddles, or shooting people at dusk. Nothing is important now. Venti lattes at Starbucks, scarves for a woman's face, the price of oil, or the protocols the Internet uses. In war things become as stupid as life itself. Perhaps only family, and friends, matter.

I'm glad to be under Mr. Talal's wing. We hurry back in the car, staying out of the path of the curious crowd. More gunshots are fired as we drive away. I learn that sometimes killing can take a while.

The night is filling up with an invisible flood of death and we, like ants in a sink, want to get out of its way before it wraps around us, and pulls us into the blackness that seems to have opened up everywhere, and all at once.

### ***--- In Which Diwans and Amsars Are Established***

Culture can be sold, bought, learned and shot. It's an inherited trait.

Between the years of 632 and 732 Islam ripped through North Africa, Europe, and Asia like a wildfire. Mohammed hadn't even been dead 100 years yet his legacy of Islam

had claimed land from India to Spain. Part of the reason for this radical expansion was that the various tribes —good “taxpaying citizens,” as it were — had originally pledged allegiance to Mohammed. As news of his death spread these tribes withdrew their vote of confidence and started taking a fancy to the local prophets instead. Prophets were a dinar a dozen back then and so it wasn't hard to find a new favorite. As a result the Islamic Empire, relying on these contributions, got financially wobbly.

One man was going to solve it. Omar al-Khattab (also known as the Emir-Al-Mo'mineen — "prince of the believers") had managed to continue with the military campaigns and secure more land for Islam, but he had other problems as well.

First, there were problems dividing all the booty. There were the taxes to be divvied, but also loot and land that had to be split up. So Omar set up a system called a *diwan*. The *diwan* was a list that ranked Muslim soldiers. The immediate family of Mohammed was at the top of the list and this was followed in chronological order by his relatives, helpers, and soldiers that had fought at Badr, Uhud, the Raddah Wars, and other key battles back in the start-up days. So when a town was raided the place would be divvied up among the occupying troops and the *diwan* determined the logistics of doing that.

The other main problem Omar had to deal with was that when the Muslim soldiers would get a hold of a town they'd start getting a little rowdy and, shall we politely say, *mingling* with the locals. Control got tricky so Omar set up separate villages for the soldiers to live in called *amsars*. The soldiers would live there, within sword's reach of the town, under the watchful eye of whatever general was in charge of the takeover. So Islam kept itself, always, a little apart from the pagan clusters they'd

conquered. Imagine something a bit like Camp Doha, in Kuwait. It's a separate village for the military to use so that they don't get too tangled up with the locals and the commanders can keep track of the troops.

Nowadays, after 1,400 years of change, the *diwan* and the *amsars* still exist.

In 636 an *amsar* on the southern end of the Tigris was set up to monitor shipping trade. The Amsar eventually turned into a busy little shipping yard and became Basra. Though the population is less than a third of what it was only a couple decades ago the layout of the city, and the population concentration, echoes the invasions of the day. Perhaps the invasions of our day will reflect in the future, as well.

The *diwan*, meanwhile, is now the *diwaniya*. Not a list but a small building outside the main house where gentlemen gather to talk over local news with each other, smoke some shisha (or *nargile*, depending), and pass the evenings doing things like watching television and laughing. In America and Europe the sports bar is probably the closest equivalent. Smoking is replaced by drinking, while gossip, fraternization, back-slapping, laughter, and television remain time-honored constants. Women don't go into the *diwaniya* and men don't go into the house so the *diwaniya* has become something closer to a living room where the boys don't have to wipe their feet than it is a military registry, but it's a tradition that's been held in close regard until the last decade, at least. In Kuwait, since 1991, the tradition of the *diwaniya* is dying on the vine. Or so Hussam told me when I was there.

Traditions, like butterflies or lycanthropes, take a new shape, and continue as they chose.

--- *Local News*

Mr. Talal pulls up in front of his friend's house where they have moved their *diwaniya* evening onto the sidewalk. It is a hot night, at least for me; I've spent the last few years in the freezing rains and cloudy summers of Europe. Having the *diwaniya* on the street seems a little odd, considering the number of bullets in the air, but I figure they knew better than I. There are about 12 boisterous but restrained men here, and they have been meeting, Mr. Talal tells me, every night for over three decades. They grew up together in Basra and they are getting old together in Basra. This is how it has been done for thousands of years. These, Mr. Talal says, are the kinds of friends everyone should have. Men are bustling everywhere in the dark and I can only vaguely make out a moustache here, a ring on a finger there, someone chuckles.

Across the street a tire is burning and a generator kicks precious light out over a couple of houses that share the chug. We sit down in plastic chairs in a rough circle on the sidewalk, and, as a foreign guest, I am given what appears to be a seat of honor. They also give me a bottle of water. This precious commodity (remember, there is no fresh water in the city) appears on a table in front of me. I realize that my guts are torn with thirst and that this is something more precious than any other common good in the city. People are dying from dehydration and diarrhea, cholera, , sewage burping its way up into the street. Fresh water is nothing less as valuable than the blood in your veins.

I have never experienced generosity like that before, nor since.

Lacking words to express my appreciation I simply say, “Thank you, this is a very considerate gift.”

I’m stepping carefully, playing polite.

“No, this is only customary Arabic tradition,” someone informally quips.

“It can’t be because the war isn’t customary,” I reply, a little more confidently (but insisting on a note of appreciation).

“Oh, yes it is!” two of them yell, and everyone is laughing because they’ve all seen enough wars to last them a thousand lifetimes and beyond.

I fast down two glasses, feel my throat relax and they start their interrogation before I’ve even finished swallowing. Since I am the token Yankee — the closest thing they have to George W. Bush — I am put to task; “When will we have water and electricity?” and “Does Bush just want our oil or does he care about the people?” and “Is he just toying with us?” and “What do the Americans think of Iraqis?” and, “Does he care about the people here?” and “How many of them speak Arabic?”

This last question is the saddest, as the questions are being put to me in English.

I do my best to answer of course, but the questions have complicated responses that are held out of the reach of ninnies like me, and I tell them as much; I don’t know. Some of the questions I can make guesses at. “When will the troops leave?” is one of them; I told them that there are still troops in Kuwait and there are still troops in Germany and that if they’re being realistic about the situation they should get used to seeing them for at least another decade. Some grumbling and grunting ensues.

The discussion winds through the evening, punctured only by the report of occasional guns, and a break for more tea. I get lectured on Communism, reprimanded

for Capitalism, educated on Fundamentalism, then handed a plate of tomatoes and cucumbers. They even break out an old bottle of absinthe — which none of them tried because their Muslim faith said otherwise. The men smile at me in the dark, somehow thanking me in a silent way by nodding and listening as I try to explain things about which I have no hint. I feel out of place, surrounded by such gifts while I, from the invading country, can come and go across what borders as I want, with privilege, freedom, and George Bush on my side, but lacking information that is solid enough to help them modulate their actions and make important decisions. I am, after all, from the most powerful nation in the world and I am, after all, ignorant, there to learn, and functioning as little more than a mailman.

Mr. Fayed sits across from me. In the dark I can see that he is an 80-plus bespectacled hawk; an ex-professor from the University of Basra. He is bald on the top and doesn't say much, though I can tell he's one of the most respected of the group because when he makes a small noise, just clearing his throat, everyone drops silent and looks at him to speak. He leans forward and points at my chest.

“Remember this, Mark: The Muslims must protect themselves with death. Their land and their family cannot be taken. It must not be taken. This has nothing to do with Saddam. The Americans need to understand this. If the Americans do not leave we will begin to fight them ourselves.”

My hair stands on end.

He puts his hand back in his lap and the air seems to turn into electricity, and everything slows and nobody speaks.

Though it isn't the first time I've heard this message I realize for the first time that the reaction is probable and that Americans will interpret something like this as guerilla warfare led by Saddam leftovers or clerical upstarts or Osama insurgents and the US will respond with more laws and more weapons and more Terrorist Marketing, feeding the media machine and widening the gap between those that watch television and those that talk to neighbors. Iraqis will think it is a liberation battle. Americans will think Syrians are importing Terrorists. It could open the door to a civil war and the clock would be set back to the 1930s.

Mr. Fayed goes on, lifting his hand again. "The British hate Iraqis. They have hated Iraqis since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and under their rule nothing was improved — no education, no health services, and most of all they kept the people poor. You know, this is the same procedure that Saddam has been using —keep the people poor to prevent an uprising. Saddam took over Iraq in much the same way the United States has done — violently. But, yes, there are other tactics at work now, and the violence of the United States is much greater. Perhaps it deserves respect." He looks around at the group, then finishes his sentence; "But perhaps not."

Then Mr. Fayed surprises me.

"I was across the street from the bank the other day and I watched the British shoot off the doors of the bank. Then they rolled the tank back and waited. After a few minutes some bold people rushed in and the soldiers simply watched from the car." Another man to his right said he saw the same thing at one of the city's administrative offices, just a few blocks from where we were sitting. Apparently the British just watched the looters help themselves.

This looting, like the assassination, is part of a cultural change.

Washington learned the technique from London.

On the evening of August 24, 1814, the Congressional Library in Washington DC was burned along with the Capitol itself. Looters, of common and historic course, took advantage of the chaos. England's strategy was to remove the memory of the culture so as to replace it with a new one. Kill the head and the heart will die. After all, governance is about controlling minds more than bodies. A mob, like a river, doesn't need to be pushed to carve out a canyon; the water just needs to be given a little room to move in a new direction. The momentum does the rest.

The 1814 invasion of America was part of an English Equation that involved military conquest followed by cultural cauterization. New leadership needed new traditions, burned into place by wrecking libraries, museums, universities, and temples. In Ireland, Scotland, India, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Iraq, New England, and the West Indies the English Equation involved not only burning libraries and museums, but also instituting English culture. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, was supported during the 1800s by both Parliament and the English Philological Society as a means of ensuring colonial rule. The Spanish, French, Portuguese, Dutch, and later the Germans used similar methods. It was the European way and it was nothing new. In 1848 the British burned libraries across India and Sri Lanka, such as the 1500 year old library of Aluvihara. The Germans burned the ancient library of the University of Louvain in 1914 and then, 29 years later, they torched the Angevin Archives in Naples. In 2003 the United States carried the torch of tradition into Iraq. The pattern is predictable; libraries, universities, museums. All were looted, many destroyed, and those of us watching, from

around the world, seemed shocked. We shouldn't have been. Who started the burning and looting - and how - didn't vary much from the methods used for the last two centuries.

And now, in Basra, we are the lucky and unlucky witnesses of this historic technique.

I ask Mr. Fayed what day it was and he tells me it was the second day after the invasion — the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> of April, the day after the British took Saddam's Basra palace.

By the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April British military spokesman Group Capt. Al Lockwood said that Basra was "under control" And UK soldiers had The Central Bank under tight guard. The 7th Armoured Brigade had, in fact, moved most of the money out of the vaults to avoid looting. But this was two weeks after what Mr. Fayed had seen and there were more than a dozen banks in Basra. The British plan clearly articulated that "control of the city remains paramount" and that precluded them from doing much more than watching looters. Certainly there was more coalition forces could have done to stop the looting. When the Museum in Baghdad was crabbed a gunshot put a halt to affairs. That lasted for thirty minutes until the Marines left to go back to guarding the oil ministry.

My already brittle ideas of Right and Wrong start to smolder. Speaking with these men I wonder if there is something coalition forces did to start the looting in the first place. Or perhaps, more accurately, facilitate it. In an historical context it makes sense. Mohammed and Islam did the same thing, as did the Christians and a thousand other armies before them. It's an old tradition. But to give them benefit, perhaps the coalition

soldiers thought, in a beneficently democratic sort of way, ‘The Ba’ath government stole money from the Iraqi people and used that money to build these offices and so we should give them access to take those things back.’ Or perhaps it was something less kind. Or more lazy. It’s impossible to tell.

The looting is rampant and the Iraqis, after decades of sanctions, oppression, and poverty, think nothing of the damage. As Joseph Heller neatly put it; If everyone around you is committing a crime, then you’re a fool not to.

I ask Mr. Fayed who he thought destroyed the library and museums in Baghdad.

“The Americans allowed it but I think it was Hussein. He hates the Iraqis more than the British.”

Someone disagrees, saying it was the Kuwaitis because they hate the Iraqis more than Hussein.

Someone else says it was the Americans since they hate the...

Another says it was the Iraqis.

No, it was the Israelis...

Cacophony crackles, contention breaks out, and the conversation fractures into three separate squabbling groups and they seem somehow used to it all, all of this mayhem and sadness and confusion about what is out There. A bit like Americans, in a way.

Someone nearby shoots a gun and everything immediately slows to stop-gap slow motion as adrenalin fires into my bloodstream like a shot of cocaine and I see particles floating in the air, and hear that slow “kumpah, kumpah” of my heart. Behind Mr. Fayed,

across the street, I see the tire burning and the street streak oily petroleum smoke lifting into the air like a tiny demon.

As I would learn the following morning, just out of sight — on the other side of the wall across the street — fifteen men had been tied up, lined up, and were being shot in the backs of their heads, laying face down in the dirt, by self-appointed assassins, or robbers, or politicians, or all three. Or none of them .

Who the hell knows what goes on during a war? It's mayhem and murder.

I remember, just after I heard the first bullet, seeing smoke writhing up from inside the lip of the tire, where the rim is thin, on the edge. I remember the big man to my right, Sateer, who had so many questions for me that night, swing his hand in the air, palm-down, like a paw, to swat at a slow-motion fly (did he start the action after hearing the machine gun? I can't remember). I remember the puddle in the gutter, and the paper that was poking out of it, and how the puddle had a blue, gasoline shine to it, reflecting the light across the street. I remember the generator making absurd flatulent noises in between the gunshots, slowly farting in rhythm. I remember feeling heavy from the heat, even though it was dark, I remember the taste of cucumber and absinthe, and I remember remembering curbsides in the United States. I used to paint street addresses on them to earn a little extra money when I was a boy in junior high school. I carried a can of spray paint and a cardboard cut out, and went door-to-door, asking if anyone wanted their street address painted, feeling at 12, like quite the entrepreneur.

The curbs are shaped the same in Basra as they are in Colorado — that same 90-degree angle of concrete that overlaps the asphalt for about twenty centimeters, with lines

running perpendicular to the curb, to facilitate hot days and cold nights and expansion and contraction without the concrete, itself, cracking under the pressure of the heat.

--- *Sad*

Hours later, safe in my threadbare hotel room, I take off my boots and stare at the dark television. It is a set from the early 1970's, from before the UN embargoes and sanctions and the lean years. It has rabbit-ear antennae tipped with little wads of tinfoil. The On/Off button (in English) pops the screen to a sizzle. There is the old-style dial that clacks through 4, 5, 6, 7. It receives two channels. The first broadcast is CNN, also in English. The other is a worship scene in a *dnikr*. Several hundred men are kneeling on the floor, praying, while another man recites in slow ululations, "Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar.."

God is great, in deed.

The Qur'an, as it is being sung, is desolate and beautiful. The scene is sad and gentle. This is not a militant Islam. It is just a church where people contemplate peace. The *imam* is dressed in a nice buttoned white shirt and blue jeans, and wears a moustache, like most of the men. He is sad. All of the men there are sad. Their religion seems a kind of physical form of grief, or maybe a relief from it (the two can be hard to tell apart sometimes) as if it is mud they can hold and cry into. The worshippers bow down, then raise up, then bow again. Not in a rigorous, geometric fashion, but with subtler structures, syncopated and sorrowful. The camera switches from the crowd to the

architecture to the *imam* then back to the crowd. They bow up and down as the words to the verses scroll across the bottom in green teletext type. A few of the men have beards, most of them are in their 30s. Many of them recite along with the *imam*. Many of them are crying.

===== NASIRIYAH, IRAQ

--- *Mohammed Sells 7-Up*

Remy and I are headed north again. Since he has to finish the drive, and since I don't have a schedule, it would have been even stupider of me to look for a different ride, despite the possibilities of making new friends. We left Mark at the Marbad hotel, where he would be living for two months. He wasn't looking forward to it but Remy and I had Baghdad ahead of us, so we just left Mark there with his suitcase, his laptop and a satellite connection. We drove away and got on the highway again. Easy like America. You just drive around when you want.

The Iraqi highway has a big median and the lines are freshly painted yellow and white on that black tar (I understand it, too, is a petroleum by-product). Out in these parts people don't stop much between cities but you do occasionally see people walking (I've only seen this in New Mexico, where Indians walk, weirdly, out in the middle of nowhere, not asking for a ride, just walking across a vast plain with no buildings for

hours in either direction). Where these highways intersect the overpasses are like any overpass you'd see in the States and generally have the same clover shape, in the same proportions, with the same inclines.

But beyond these things I can see nothing familiar.

First, we are utterly exposed to the malevolent skies, where bombers float overhead aiming their jittery cross-hairs and fingering triggers that would spread our car out into a flat black disk. Just in case some airborne American post-teen gets any ideas we have a big orange piece of cloth taped to the hood of the car to tell them "Don't Bomb Us." We trust that they understand the orange banner means Press, and that they're paying attention with those bombs of theirs.

Second, this freeway slices down the middle of a massive mirror of sand. The heated air over the dunes bends the light, giving the appearance that large lakes of calm blue water have collected next to the highway. But there is none; it is *mirage*. Sometimes we can see small bundles of grass or shrubs that stick up. I see what looks like an oasis and break into singing "Midnight at the oasis, bring your camel to bed," but Remy tells me to shut up and puts in the Otis Redding CD.

Anyway, beyond these things the world outside the car is a series of straight lines; the highway, the horizon, and (aside from the pregnant jets) that is all.

We've been driving for about two hours and Remy is talking on his cell phone again. There are still problems with the sofa delivery and he has his laptop open. He is moving MP3s around on the screen with one eye and driving with the other. There are no concerns about getting pulled over by cops or even going off the road. We'd just drive

into sand, turn, then get back on track. It's not like we'd get a ticket, or someone is going to pull us over and administer breathalysers. You can drive however you want, or kill someone, or get lost and break down without any gas and slowly die in the sand. Anything can happen and most of it does. No one will give a shit and I don't want the car to break down, though I'm not sure what I care, myself, for that matter.

"Yeah, I'm headed up right now," Remy says in this short, perturbed voice, "I should be there at about four or five."

There's a pause, then, "Can you hang on that long?"

There isn't a cloud in sight. In fact there isn't anything in sight.

"Well, look, it doesn't make much difference. Just put it somewhere in the back room. And tell Jennifer that we'll have to move the machines outta there, too."

Just sand and asphalt. Some dust, here and there.

"No, no. Just leave it. Those guys will get it in the morning."

The desert is strange because the local and the global are exactly alike. You somehow always know where you are. The car drifts like it is on air.

"NO! I told you about that last week. Talk to Steve."

An explosion of sound inside and I jump in my seat, thinking a fucking bomb has dropped through the roof and my life is over until Remy turns the stereo volume down. I never realized Otis Redding could be so terrifying. I'm jumpy as a tomcat on speed, and I realize as I wait for my blood to find its way back into my veins, if it would be possible to survive getting bombed (burns and all so much worse than a wreck) and I look at the bright orange piece of fabric covering the hood of the car. Then I roll the window down and look out, up over the car. There is nothing to be seen. The sky is hot and clouded

with smears of sand, far far up. The wind is hot against my cheek. I hope that the car doesn't break down and now I'm sure I care. How do people live here?

I pull my head back inside the car.

"Sorry. Stereo," Remy says. "Look, just talk to Steve, okay?"

Ahead of us I see a tiny figure on the horizon. It looks like a person standing next to the road.

*Sittin' on the dock of the Bay, watchin' the ships roll in.*

Remy is quiet, listening to the tiny voice in his phone. There are no houses or buildings anywhere. Just sand, sky, and asphalt.

The little figure on the shoulder slowly swells into a child, maybe 12, standing on the side of the road in the middle of abandoned Nowhere, in between highway truck stops in the desert, dressed in a long grey robe with a ragged hem along the bottom and a small knitted skullcap. It's just a boy standing there. He's waving.

I wave back. He suddenly smiles and jumps up and down and waves with both arms. There is no problem. He is just saying hello, I suppose. Hello. Hello, Sand Boy on the highway.

Remy turns Otis down and keeps talking on the phone.

"What did she say? When?"

In the back window, as he shrinks now, the boy is still waving. I hold my hand up, hoping he can see the silhouette and intent.

Turning back around I look at Remy to see if he'd seen the grey ghost-child we've just driven by. I stick my thumb towards the back window.

He covers the mouthpiece and says to me, “Yeah, they’re everywhere. You’ll get sick of waving back, trust me.”

Not in spite of Remy, but out of respect to the grey ghost-child’s enthusiasm, I swear to myself I will wave every time someone waves to me. It seems a stupid resolution, but not as stupid as war, so I decide I’m on the right track.

I settle back into the seat, clap my hand over an AC vent on the dashboard, and wish I had more water.

Remy hangs up the phone.

I look at him and smile, “We’re spoiled.”

He smiles back and it somehow comforts me, but not as much as I would like.

Iraq’s oil infrastructure draws a big 4 across the country. Two of the three primary pipes empty at export terminals on the Mediterranean, in the ports of Banias and Ceyhan. One of them goes north, through Turkey, and the other stitches its way across the deserts of Syria. The third pipe stretches out of central Iraq, south to the Gulf, towards Basra. As I look at the rushing landscape outside that same pipe, out the window of the car, makes a sudden guest appearance, flying in and out in jutting formation with the shoulder of the highway. It is made of three parallel pipes held a few feet off the ground by stalks of steel, like feet, set at intervals. Looking out the window of the car I watch the black monster of an industrial centipede swing close to the highway, then jerk away. It is insignificant there, outside the car, or seems that way, after all of the noise and reverence and war from so far away. It is just plumbing; a petroleum Iraqi vein filled with the country’s black blood. It snakes back and forth against the shoulder of the highway. The

pipeline takes on a demonic and infinite appearance, an enormous oily vein that is not only laced, varicose, over the skin of Iraq, but is stretching out far, far further, under oceans, up into other continents, into peoples homes, through their kitchens, their cars, their clothes, their beds.

Beyond the pipeline is another mirage, but not quite. It doesn't shimmer and it is, like the pipeline, carbon black. I point it out to Remy and he slows down a bit. It dawns on us that the thing is, literally, petroleum lake. It is a prehistoric black, wet on the hot sand, but not evaporating. A mirror black lake, framing the blue sky above with its inky shores. Though the first international oil contracts in the Middle East date back to the 1870s, people have been using surface deposits, such as this lake, for thousands of years. And this is how oil was first discovered — someone stepped in it.

Far past the petrol puddle, further out, clinging to the horizon, I can see a smoking city. Clusters of angular geometry stick up out of the sand, hazy and buried in the distant sky, but with distinct plumes of smoke coming from a half-dozen points off the top. I see what might be a light, or a large flame, licking off the top of one of the thinnest skyscrapers I've had the confusion to see. Of course this is a very big petroleum refinery. A factory-city set in the middle of the desert.

My eyes are pretty good but they're sensitive to light and right now they feel like fried eggs. I screw them back into their sockets with my dusty knuckles. This strip of highway is the Grim Reaper holding Santa's red gift-bag; outside, the grey ghost-boy, the steel centipede-demon, the black lake, the smoking city, the orange sky, the sense of foreboding on this road into Baghdad hisses and unrolls underneath the car while Otis

Redding moans about California and I cower under a roof of thin metal from bombs dangling impossible and likely overhead. Maybe it is the heat or the bright sun.

Looking in the little mirror on the backside of the sun visor, I'm reminded that I haven't shaved in a while as the car lurches left with Remy cursing as we narrowly avoided slamming into an old cart getting pulled by a donkey.

"GODAMMIT," Remy spits and punches the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. "It's like they're on a fucking suicide mission."

I swivel around in my seat to look back behind us and, sure enough, a donkey is running in a zigzag on the road while the father driving the cart smacks it with a little whip. A woman and a child are in the cart with him.

I finger the stubble on my face, put my hand on the AC, and wish a bomb would shatter us and the car and the \$100,000 worth of goods, splatter us across the highway so this man would come collect and feed his family and get his donkey's alignment fixed.

But God is not so great as that.

"Okay, that's it; I have to piss," he announces and starts to slow the car down to the right. We're about half way there. It seems like a good idea, I think, as I finish off my bottle of water. I have already gone through two liters this morning, I have one bottle left, and so I make a mental note to damper the intake in case we end up walking, or whatever (crawling with our tongues out across the dunes searching for the Oasis, I tell Remy to go on without me). Most of the water I had brought I had left with Mr. Talal, keeping only a couple of bottles for myself. I didn't know what I would find, but I knew he needed it. I have a bottle left. As long as nothing unexpected happens we'll be fine.

I open the door and the hot wind off of the desert blows through. I suddenly appreciate the load the car's air conditioning has been carrying. Nothing like burning more gas in the land of soaking lakes of petroleum for the sake of comfort. While Remy takes a leak, I take a look around. I walk into the middle of the highway to get a new view and turn around in a panoramic circle. There are still no clouds in the sky and there sure as hell are no birds or planes or cars. I hold my hands next to my sides, in the air to feel the wind, to get some clue, to feel some message. But the wind is suspicious of me, and falls quiet. The stillness has nothing to do with peace. The car door slams (will Remy leave without me? I somehow panic a little — it's always one of these concerns when hitching; getting left behind). I can see that Remy has the back of the jeep open and he's digging around. There's still a few minutes.

Across the road I see what looks like a camel, lying down on the highway. At first it seems an insane vision, but then not at all because in a war insanity is physical. It appears before you as in a dream, with so little making sense that you stop wondering.

It isn't one camel, but six. They're all dead, tongues hanging out onto the hot asphalt, now dried, blood and guts and fur and limbs bent in directions that limbs don't bend. One of the camels has been violently folded in half; its bones stick yellow out of his black and brown guts that are scattered across both southbound sunny lanes. Another looks in pretty good shape —not rideable, mind you, but intact — and then I notice the swath of blood that trails from the center of the highway to its current position. Maybe a tractor pushed it over, cleaning the road. There is a little white camel that looks very peculiar. It has a white and yellow series of markings on its back, but its teeth are

showing in a silent camel-death grimace. The others have all been killed by similar causes, whatever that was.

I take some pictures and jog back in the car wondering what could have killed six camels.

We move some stuff around, there is trash all over the road, we get in and we get to driving again. Some 10 minutes go by and maybe now I can see what killed the camels.

It starts as a speck in the other lane, the lane that is coming out of Baghdad, and looks like another pipeline. Then I realize that it is a convoy of trucks, packed close together, each identical to the one behind it. Convoys are common so we don't really pay attention until some 50 or 60 16-wheelers have roared past us and the line still shows no end up ahead. This is a fleet of Mack-style military-suited robo-trucks. Each has a matching twenty-wheel trailers with flip-flap rollers coming off the back. Painted camouflage black and green, they're American and they've obviously left all the tanks they had carried north up in Baghdad.

I have plenty of time to get an eye-full of these details, despite the fact that they pass us at a combined speed of maybe 120 miles per hour. In fact there are so many of them that I look at the clock and start timing it and I wait and study and watch the clock and ride with Remy for eight full minutes, studying this wheeled village and marveling. That's something like an 18-mile long convoy. The real automotive power of the American army hits me. It's not that the US Army is made of soldiers; it's made of cities. Cities, vast cities, of soldiers with the best weaponry of the most modern times. But not

just cities on wheels, cities in the air, cities on the water, and invisible cities of information.

Meanwhile, on our side of the road (the “right” side) we’re passing a convoy of a different sort that’s headed north. This one isn’t as big, only three pickup trucks stacked high with hundreds of cardboard boxes. The boxes each read:

**U.S.A.**

Refined Vegetable Oil.

Vitamin A Fortified.

Considering that the only other trucks we had seen going north were military vehicles, some journalists with big orange swatches on the hood of the car (the kind like ours), and an occasional ghost-boy, I would have expected these trucks to carry water. Or vegetables. Meanwhile, on the “wrong” side of the road (their right) a second convoy, like the one that just passed us, pour down the road out of Baghdad.

Some couple of hours later we pull into a little town named Hillah.

They are busy digging up skulls just outside of town and President Bush was saying, “The truth would be known,” and it seems such a perverse thing to say; person A dies in a car wreck, person C watches it happen, person Bush pulls the dead person out of the car and proclaims “Now the truth is known.” In America politics is drama and the news is entertainment, but the Iraqis they don’t give a fuck and they quietly dig everyone up by hand and put them all in little plastic sacks. They give the sacks to the families to

cart home or wherever they were going to cart their precious plastic bags. Of the handful of people I spoke with about Hillah, none had ever seen direct US assistance. Maybe it happened, but none I spoke with had much to say about it. They just kept digging and putting relatives in garbage bags and the marketing machine in America kept spinning.

Remy and I pull over to get something to drink.

On the edge of town we pull up next to a group of four guys running a drink stand from the shade of a palm tree. They have a small table, a couple of covered crates, and sell soda from a white styrofoam box. The kind with the lid that lifts off. The guy running it is named Mohammed. He has a pencil-thin line of a moustache that isn't too old. He's about 20, dressed in a brown plaid shirt and a pair of khakis. His sleeves are down and buttoned. His hair is neatly combed back and he stands up straight and smiles. He has broad shoulders and a broad chin and he's damn proud.

"When did you guys start selling?" I ask him.

"Just today. Today is our first business day." And he sticks his chest out, just a little. For the last two months there has been no business. It was too dangerous to do anything other than stay inside. Now, it seems, there are sprouts coming up in more places than Basra's new art gallery.

Mohammed has three buddies with him. Two of them are boys, maybe 9 or 10. Mohammed's main man, Rashid, has big ears and a long neck and wobbly eyes that float over a friendly smile. His big eyeballs dart around. He's thinner than he should be and doesn't say much, floating behind Mohammed's shoulder, watching. Mohammed is the proprietor.

“How’s it gone so far?” I ask him. I really want to know, because Mohammed seems determined.

“Good. Listen, I’ll tell you something I’ve been selling soda all day now and the weather is nice and things are good. It’s good to be working, you know. Where you from? England?”

“The United States. We’re headed to Baghdad and we’re hoping you could sell us something to drink.”

He slaps his hands together, rubs them once or twice, smiles at me, and asks in English, “What you like?” He’s serious about selling soda. The two boys nearby laugh and run around his legs and lift the lid of the cooler so Remy and I can survey inside. Rashid barks something at them like Get Lost (I guess Rashid was mid-level management). Laughing, they run off with the cooler lid.

Floating in water; Coca-Colas, Sprite, 7-Up, and Dr. Pepper. Just water would be fine, I think. I only have a little reserve water left in my bottle. Mohammed has melted ice water in the cooler, but I’m not (yet) thirsty enough for that action.

“Which one you like?” he asks me.

“What’s your favorite?” I ask him.

“Mine? Me? I like Seven. Most refreshing.”

So I grab a cold 7-Up. Remy buys a Coke, and while we drink our sugars down Mohammed quizzes us on events in America. Remy gets bored with it and walks to the other side of the car to organize something.

With Rashid perched on his elbow, Mohammed explains that they’ve been next door neighbors their entire lives. Up until the war started they had worked for a gravel

company that sold sand to one of the refineries. Bombs started falling and so they waited for a couple of months. They ran out of money. Just last week they took the money they had left over and bought these sodas.

Mohammed dramatically swings his arm to indicate something behind him, and he bumps Rashid. Rashid jumps back so Mohammed can finish the gesture, which he does. Three boxes of soft drinks. The Stock. The Warehouse. The Trove. Their Future. It's admirable because it's intentional.

"You'll do well, I'm certain." I mean it and some part inside me prays I'm right.

One of the kids falls off of the table and Rashid immediately turns his angry face around, true to his post, and yells at them to get lost. The kid gets up out of the dirt, wipes his mouth with his shirtsleeve, and giggles. His friend, still sitting on the table, throws something at him. Rashid stomps at them and they start to flee.

About that time an automatic rifle starts firing 'Takka-takka-tak.' It is directly across the street, maybe 10 meters away, and I shorten my neck like a turtle wanna-be and step close to the car.

'Pop... pop' says the response.

I look through the car and see a man jump over a wall, carrying a rifle. And he fires again. He's not looking at us so I look at Mohammed and Rashid and the two boys. Are they going to join me next to the car?

Mohammed and Rashid and the two boys don't care. Rashid is chasing the kid off. The kid is laughing. Rashid is serious. Dust floats in the air. The other kid is about to fall off the table. He is laughing too hard to sit up straight. He is just laughing, with

his hands on his stomach and his mouth open, and his feet up like a duck, and bullets hovering just a few meters away in the air across the street.

***--- In Which British Major General Maude, After Capturing Baghdad In, 1917, Declares, "Our Armies Do Not Come Into Your Cities And Lands As Conquerors Or Enemies, But As Liberators." ...***

History is repeating itself so fast it's starting to stutter.

The United States is following a script that was written by the UK back at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the UK was following a script that was written by the Ottomans. Three monotheistic empires, three centuries, three invasions. Three cultural hand-me-downs that don't quite fit. I wonder if the US invasion, and specifically the destruction of the museum, can be considered an improvement over the Mongol invasions of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when Holagu, Genghis-Khan's grandson marched into town and all the scholars of Baghdad were snuffed out and their heads were chopped off and then piled into a grisly "pyramid of smiles" in the square, just downtown, where everyone could see; invasion always calls for cultural decapitations.

It's worth repeating: Culture is a weapon.

The recent version of the script, a very American script, starts with The Hero. He is a strong man, a charismatic man, an intelligent man, and one that has many friends and associates. But, once upon a time, something bad happened to him. He was unjustly

attacked by an evil force. He suffered for a time, but being a strong man, he decided that it was his role to help others fight evil. Perhaps he is Steven Seagall, perhaps he is Arnold Schwarzenegger, but he is called to battle against his will.

He is a curious fellow because he works with technology. He is very good at tinkering with new tools. He has many wonderful devices that he uses at home, in his castle-laboratory, and some of these he has made into weapons to help him combat the forces of evil.

One day he receives a call that only he was able to hear. It was, he assures his associates, both a threat from an evil force and a plea for help. Innocent people are being oppressed. This, he says, is his calling (God, in fact, is on the line). Despite the urgings of those with whom he often confers - and those that will later witness his tragedy - he and his friends fly from their homeland in powerful technology armed with vast arrays of weaponry.

He lands, stealthfully, in the badlands. He makes his presence known. He declares his battle. He gives one final warning. Then a battle ensues. The Hero neatly slays The Tyrant (and smiles <Flash-Click> at the camera). After wiping the blood from his blade and sheathing his sword, he steps forward and says to the awe-struck locals;

“My friends and I have liberated you from The Tyrant. We are here to protect you. Our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators.

“We understand you have suffered greatly. We can help you improve your lives.

“As for Government, we would like you to become a democratic nation, an example and inspiration to the rest of your neighbors. Do not fear; You will be guided by a new leader, a well-connected man that has previous governing experience and who comes from one of the most respected families in your country. You choose him, of course, and we have decided with you. Though there have been problems here before, you may now count them ended.

“We have spent a great deal of money and risked our lives in liberating you, but this is, after all, your country. In our mutual interest we can help you with the production, processing, and distribution and everyone can profit. And we have friends we would like to introduce.

“Militarily - as you may have noticed - we can protect you for a nominal fee.

“This is how we can be friends and live happily ever after.”

This is where we currently are in the play; something around the beginning of Act III. The people of Iraq are, naturally, dumbfounded that such a thing would happen. They're glad to see The Tyrant gone, something sounds suspiciously familiar. In fact, they've seen this play five or six times now and each time the plot gets more and more similar.

Which would be fine save for the fact that The Play is a tragedy. As it has been played before The Hero betrays his associates (and, last time, when England was concerned, his Liaison), after each of them have already betrayed the Iraqi people and the Innocent Bystanders. The Kurds, Sunnis, and Shi'a all start fighting (the Israelis, in a

strange guest appearance, jump in and take something from the battle, then run out again), and the whole thing eventually falls to pieces, ending in a tragedy.

But the plot is very clever because the story ends where it begins.

### **--- *"I Am An Optimist"***

Sheik al-Janabi is one of the members of the provisional council in Iraq who has, several times, met with Paul Bremmer and before him, Jay Garner, who was the original envoy to Iraq. Being a sheik means being an interface between the opinions of culture, family, government, and the other sheiks. He's the Iraqi version of a mayor, or a governor. His responsibility was inherited.

His house is an air-conditioned, well-furnished, suburban sprawl and he has a nice soft sofa that I'm ready to live on. His home is somehow removed from the war. When I knocked on his metal door it took five minutes for him to undo the column of locks. We sit down he kindly hands me a Coca-Cola (with ice) and a fan blows the air around our heads.

We talk in English for about an hour. He has a perfect British accent.

"...it was the Westerner's push that has generated the form of radical Islam that we see today. It began as an Islam that was focused against Communism. This push brought us to the brink of a civil war. Then came the coup d'états. Unfortunately the Americans have wanted to continue the fighting to facilitate the anti-communist efforts. But this did not serve their interests as far as the oil was concerned. Now, I hope, the

change in American policy reflects a change in this thinking. Now there is a strategy to tame Islam. And there is also a strategy to ensure oil supplies. The new conservatives in the Bush Administration are working to ensure a stable oil supply, an abundant oil supply, and moderate prices that serve America's interests. This is okay with us."

He slows down a bit, takes a breath, and repeats the important point. "If Americans want a stable abundant oil supply that is okay with us. If they want a moderate Islam then we will need their help.

"America has come into the world in an age when technology is changing not only the markets but also the interactions between people. This means we can now deal with one another in a different material way. We can now work and talk in a largely global space and Iraq is now a part of that. We are now living in a world with very different borders. If Iraq is absorbed into this global society and if moderate Islam serves to be a success for the Americans' purpose and if oil supplies continue we can live with this."

Gunshots start outside, high intensity crackling, like Chinese fireworks. It doesn't affect Sheik al-Janabi and I'm almost used to it myself. It happens every few hours. He seems completely gathered and as accustomed to the sounds outside as a professor is accustomed to the silence in a library. He pushes his glasses up on his nose and continues without commenting on the gunfire.

"America is a fact. After the fall of the Soviet Union there was no other superpower on the planet. There is no competition now. I believe that September 11 has had a dramatic effect on the American psyche. They now recognize that there is no one that can live in a world that is not influenced by America. By any definition America is

the dominant power in the world. If you work on the web you work in English. The shape of the business is American. We can resist it, we can fight it, but we cannot avoid it. I hope that the effect of September 11 on America was that America realized it could not be isolated from the chaos that it created.”

al-Janabi tells me about the long histories in Iraq and that the culture is not something new. He tells me they have been shattered by wars and by oppression but recollected everything to grow into a multi-ethnic society. One of the only, he says, on the planet. But America does not understand what this means.

“To understand Islam you have to go back. Radical Islam was not created by the Americans, but it was pushed by them. Radical Islam did not exist 50 years ago. This radicalism was brought to, financed in, and encouraged in Saudi Arabia. So if we think of Islam, it is not necessarily a radical belief. It does not say that if you do not think the same thing as me that I have a right to kill you and cleanse Islam. Radical Islam says, ‘I have a right to kill you.’ This is not Islam. The Islam I knew as a boy was never an Islam to dread.

“Iraq can go either way right now. It is open. If you read history you will see the diversity of this place. But these days everybody is someone else. I don’t know who they are anymore. The Shi’a have traditionally been fraternalistic and moderate. Not all Ba’athists are bad; don’t believe the press. In the last 50 years the Ba’ath party has been compromising with Islam and great starts have been seen.

“If we start Iraq with this premise then great progress will be made. We have things to sell. If America wants to tame Islam now we have no problem with that. Some may call America’s progress ‘imperialism.’ I do not. We can live with that, happily.

“I am an optimist. I think things can work out.”

As I sit there I see something odd in his face. In it I can see is the spectre of civil war; America will pull out too fast, leave a vacuum the same way the British did the first time, and Sunni, Shi’a, Kurds, and a half dozen other contingents won’t be able to work things out. It seems to me that doom hangs over this country.

But things like that are often best left unsaid and it is only the coming four or five decades that will tell us what kind of job America, really, has done.

### ***--- In Which Bechtel Pays Honor To America’s Tribute***

Bechtel has a well-known presence in the region, but the company’s impact on the quality of life in the region is not as well known.

In the United States of America, On April 17, 2003 before major operations were even declared finished in Iraq, the national Agency for International Development (USAID) had signed the first major contract rebuilding power, transportation, and water systems in Iraq. The list of candidates were Bechtel, Halliburton, Parsons Corp, Fluor Corp, and Louis Berger Group. Bechtel won the contract, of course, which was an expected trade for some substantial political investments among some substantially powerful people that have been working together for decades. The Bechtel Group is one of the biggest political contributors to politics in the construction industry. According to an analysis by the Center for Responsive Politics, the corporation and its employees contributed over a quarter of a million dollars to candidates and committees in 2000.

They hedged their bets pretty well. 43% of the donations went to the Republicans and 57% to the Democrats.

Bechtel is well-known for being well-connected in Washington. George Shultz, the Reagan Administration's Secretary of State, served as president for the company from 1975-1982. He remains one of their senior counselors with a seat on their board of directors. He also happens to be chairman of the advisory board of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, one of several Washington committees that aggressively pushed for the war stating the necessity to rebuild its government as well as its economy. Bechtel's SrVP, retired general Jack Sheehan, serves on President Bush's defense policy advisory board. Caspar Weinberger, the former US Secretary of Defense during the Iran-Contra affair also held an executive position at Bechtel. And just this year Riley P. Bechtel, Bechtel's CEO, was appointed by Bush as a member of the President's Export Council, a national-level trade advisory board.

Bechtel's project in Iraq is of no small scope. There are almost 2,000 miles of road to re-open, most of Baghdad's power grid to be repaired, four airports to be rebuilt, several thousand schools to be renovated, Basra's deep-water seaport to be dredged, sunken ships to be pulled, grain elevators to be repaired, and 550 emergency generators to be delivered. This is part of the list. The deal represents one of the biggest export bonanzas in US history. The initial contract has a cap of \$680 million but estimates are for over \$100 billion worth of work.

Bechtel's long list of contracts in the Middle East lace the Arabian peninsula and cut a series of patchwork projects across Iraq, Iran, and neighboring countries in the Gulf region. With almost 50,000 employees, 900 projects, 150 offices in the Middle East, and

annual revenues hovering around \$12 billion, no other single company is as responsible for the industrialization of the Middle East as Bechtel. Shortly after World War II, drawing on its connections with Dubignon Clay and other White House administrators of the day (folks that were involved in rebuilding bombed-out Germany), Bechtel moved operations to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to set up petroleum export centers. They've been there ever since.

Sometimes they do a good job. When Bechtel arrived in Kuwait, in March of 1991, the torched oil wells had released over 500 million tons of carbon dioxide (the single leading cause of global warming today) and the oil spilled into public water aquifers, fisheries, crop-beds, and rivers. Bechtel got to work and the restoration of hydrocarbon production and fire suppression took half the time most experts had predicted. Bechtel put together an international group of more than 16,000 people and 6,000 pieces of construction equipment working at over 700 wellhead fires. Nine months later the Kuwait Oil Company was producing 400,000 barrels of oil per day and the following year saw an increase to over 2 million per day. Other work included building export piers, rebuilding storage tanks, warehouses, and laying more than 2,000 km of transfer pipe.

Bechtel also has a long list of problematic projects that extend from Boston to Cochabamba and back to Kuwait City. Their work is expensive and it incurs more than financial costs. Much of their work in Kuwait orbited around the al-Ahmadi refinery, where Khaled works. What I saw there was surreal. It was a destroyed ash pit of environmental wreckage overshadowed by a polluted sky cluttered with power lines as far as sight could stretch. I understand that between the war and the reconstruction the

Kuwaiti government has written off the land as uninhabitable. Kuwaiti citizens are encouraged to develop elsewhere. Oil refinery employees are given free milk twice a day to coat their trachea, helping to filter out some of the carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, and other hydro fluorocarbons that bob around in the carburetor climate of Kuwait.

*Footnote: Bechtel was busy developing the Cochabamba dam and public water system in Bolivia when the government fired Bechtel partway through the job. The cost of water, privatized by Bechtel, became too much for locals to afford. Bechtel fired back with a \$25 million lawsuit against Bolivia, claiming lost revenues. In Boston, one of Bechtel's flagship projects known as The Big Dig was so severely underestimated that Boston is now the proud owner of the world's most expensive highway. The price tag drifted up each year, starting at \$2.5 billion and now costs almost seven times that amount. California taxpayers are feeling the sting of Bechtel mistakes in San Diego where the San Onofre nuclear power plant sucked in water and then spat it back out after passing it through a reactor that was installed backwards.*

Iraq's future may come from the Bechtel versions of Saudi Arabia.

In 1933 four geologists from the Standard Oil Company were poking around in the dirt next to al-Jubayl, Saudi Arabia, a small fishing village about 150 km down the coast from Kuwait. In the late 1960s plans were being drawn up and by 1977 full-scale construction was underway. By 1983 al-Jubayl was the single largest construction project in the world. An industrial city was being constructed. Monstrous oil refineries were

erected next to a series of steel mills which were built next to one of the three largest desalination plants on the planet. The port/factory/village was shipping petrochemical and plastics exports. Its industrial future looked bright, if a little, well, industrial. In 1991 an oil spill eradicated what was left of the fisheries, and so boats were traded in for plastic gloves, giving the local population one last chance to decide how they wanted to earn a living.

But Bechtel and Saudi Arabia had a problem; Where would the 300,000 al-Jubayl factory workers live? The answer: al-Jubayl. Now, after 70 years, al-Jubayl has been transformed into a 360-square-mile industrial zone complete with neat neighborhoods and glossy shopping centers. Factory-workers and necessity-shoppers don't have to suffer a long commute. A neatly planned community housing project with room enough for 370,000 people is being built next to the refineries. Were it in the United States al-Jubayl would rank the 45<sup>th</sup> largest city in America, making it larger than Miami, Colorado Springs, or Pittsburgh. And it certainly is not the kind of place you or I would choose to live or work.

The man in charge of Bechtel's operations in Saudi Arabia is named Terry Valenzano. On April 21, 2003, four days after the Bechtel contract in Iraq was secured, he met with Jay Garner in the Kuwait City Hilton. Since then he's had repeated meetings with Paul Bremmer, the US administrator of Iraq. It seems reasonable that his job will be to build al-Jubayls in Iraq.

A little over a month later, on May 30, 2003, Bechtel announced that it had signed its first subcontract with an Iraqi construction firm. The al-Bunnia Trading Company,

based in Baghdad, will, Bechtel said, help to rebuild a bypass on Highway 10, west of Baghdad. Their suspiciously worded release quotes Loay Ibrahim al-Saied, one of al-Bunnia's senior engineers, as saying, "We are so happy not just for the contract, but to work again in our country with our people and our equipment to help rebuild our country."

This is a strange quote that smells a bit like marketing, but thus the new roots of commerce take hold in the soil under the fire.

===== **BAGHDAD, IRAQ**

***--- In Which Authority Has An Authorial Conflict***

There is always a relationship between authority and authorship.

On day 13 of the War in Iraq Saddam Hussein's son, Qusay, was on Iraqi National Television saying "The leadership is still in charge and you can see this because we still control the TV." The United States retaliated on July 26, 2003 when they broadcast images of his body with a rebuilt head and 20 new bullets. He and his brother had been assassinated in a shoot-out after having a Wild West \$15 million price tags on their heads and dinner with an associate interested in some extra cash.

Louis L'Amour would have been proud.

Washington was busy, many moons before the war, spinning its own web of authority. On October 7, 2002 in Cincinnati, Ohio George W. Bush said, “The risk is simply too great that Saddam Hussein will use instruments of mass death and destruction, or provide them to a terror network.”

Meanwhile, on that same day the CIA delivered a letter to the Senate Intelligence Committee which had an altogether different message. The letter said, “Baghdad appears to be drawing a line short of conducting terrorist attacks with conventional or chemical/biological warfare against the United States.”

White House news releases quoted Bush, the day before the war officially started, as saying, “...the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised.” About a week earlier Ari Fleischer, the White House Spokesperson, put it more succinctly, “We know for a fact that there are weapons there.” And Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld seemed clear on the existence, if unclear on the location, of the famed Weapons Of Mass Destruction. As he put it, “They're in the area around Tikrit and Baghdad and east, west, south and north, somewhat.”

It was all a bit confusing to me. But as George W. Bush, the forty-third president of the United States, most concisely put it, “This war is all about peace.”

### ***--- The Information Factory***

Remy and I drive into Baghdad. The off-ramps are deserted and husks of cars and blown-out concrete barriers litter the highway from where the tanks went through, like a

herd of buffalo. Otherwise it's like pulling into any city; we see the sign, we take the exit, we are in the parking lot of the Sheraton Hotel, where Remy has to stay to wait for his sofa delivery.

There are two layers to the mess here. The guards that are guarding the mess they made, and the journalists that are making a mess of everything that hasn't already been messed up. If we've been travelling in the land of no laws, the parking lot between the Palestine Hotel and the Sheraton Hotel is Bedlam's own bunghole.

In the middle there are the two hotels and the pile of journalists and cars. Outside of this central pile of chips American tanks and Bradleys have been scattered around the two central hotels. Soldiers perch cavalier, rifles on the knee, keeping a cool eye from atop the frowning grey tanks. Just beyond are loops of razor-wire that define the edge of the great craps table that defines where the media is spinning its magic.

The journalists are rats running haphazard underneath the tank turrets and skipping nimbly over the barbed wire. Anyone that is not running - and this includes Remy and myself - is trying to thread their way through the crowd and find a place to park.

Cars are jammed into awkward positions that people dodge to avoid getting their legs pinched off by colliding bumpers, horns are honking and the whole parking lot is indigestion in the hot, noon-day sun of Baghdad. One of the ostensibly safest places of the city is a congested wreck. The journalists have, obviously, been away from Society for some many months. They are ragged and gravy-eyed, dressed in dust and rags in some cases, in others, screaming at their guides and throwing papers down for others to pick up, making the traffic, of course, honk and shake fists. Pirates would have been

better behaved. To make matters more fun, this is the densest population of cars I had seen in Iraq. Not just cars, either, but the expensive, fat, gear-laden leathern-interior ubervehicles of urbanity that Remy and I have been driving — the kind equipped to the throat to cope with “the most severe conditions”. The media felt a need to be as geared-up for battle as the soldiers. Maybe more so. Despite my assumptions that I was traveling in Style, my ride north had apparently been exceptional in the context of Iraq, but unexceptional in the context of the journalist cadre. These were all the same vehicles.

Remy is craning his neck out the window. The bickering crowd streams by the car; American soldiers, Iraqi guides, French writers, American ISPs, Armenian cell phone vendors, Iraqi beggars, more American soldiers, Chinese photographers, American translators, and yet more American soldiers. I can’t tell soldier from salesman. Everyone is here to find a dime and pick at the big body of Iraq.

Some tough-looking Arab bloke with a black beard and a camera case slaps Remy’s windshield. Remy stops the car and laughs.

“Welcome back to Baghdad!” the beard smiles at him, “When’d you get in?”

“Just now, man. How you been?” They shake hands and seem genuinely glad.

The guy with the beard answers, “I got arrested and they were going to cut off my arms, but I jumped out a window and got away. I’ll tell you about it tomorrow at the party. You’re coming, right? Poolside at the Hamra?”

Remy says he’ll be there but now his phone is ringing again and he’s dealing with the delivery of the sofa while (gentleman that he is), introducing Ghaith and I. We shake hands in front of Remy’s stomach as he leans back into the seat to talk sofa business. Hi, nice to meet you, too.

I figure I won't see Ghaith again.

Five minutes later my bag is out of the car and I thank Remy. We trade emails, and thank him again. I figure I will see Remy again.

The broad gold-colored front steps of the Sheraton are covered with a dusty carpet that has seen too much wear but either under hopeful pretense or wartime distraction, no one has pulled it up in a long time. People run up the steps and then realize something halfway up, spin run down. There are clusters of people stitched conspiratorially close together, someone slips and falls, another person yells about forgetting a fax. Hundreds of people swarm in a small space, all of them conduits of information.

This is, as far as the world is concerned, the center of the war. This is the mouth of the beast. It is also the ear, the eye, and a good portion of the brain. Shelling and bombing is happening from place to place, gunfire is rattling across the country, strategies are being discussed in Washington, but this is the location that generates the media, the hype, and the opinions that will determine which necessity-pipes are available to Iraq's future. Businesses that will be investing in Iraq will do so based, largely, on the information that is pumped out of this building. Politicians will decide Truth based on the images these people broadcast. Public opinion will be molded, remote control, from here. Whether it is support or dissent it will be based, largely, on the news that radiates from this building.

Jogging reporters collide with other jogging reporters and shouting satellite crews swing huge armatures of metal rigging at my head. CNN, ABC, NBC and whatever else has transformed The Sheraton into a mobile media empire and all the name brands that

we Americans actively trust to define our view of the world are there in might and money. This is the second invasion of Iraq.

Most of the journalists are filthy and emotionally scuffed up. They're a toothy, confused, and battered crowd, stumbling over steps, dressed in absurd khaki vests with lots of pockets, running in different directions with little scraps of paper and handwritten notes fluttering behind them like a flock of moths trying to keep up with their frenetic sprints in figure eights. I stop and watch a sheik, waving wide his arms for the cameras, giving interview in noble majesty. Then as the camera is shut down and points away he exhales, sags, and magically reverts back to a simple old man dressed in white. Japanese camera crews frantically squeal to each other and pitch cables, hitting a freakishly startled American woman in the face (who screams) and then another man in the neck (who curses). No apologies are made; there is no time here. Phones are jangling. Some guy slips and falls and someone else jumps over him and keeps running.

I can't see a thing from the press of people so I look for an orientation point, a hub or a spine. There is a paste-board with advertisements for translators, photographers, guides, and mundane personal notes ("Jill! Meet us here @ 5:30! B.") tacked to it. Glass breaks and someone curses. This is a good sign; it means someone is serving a drink somewhere nearby.

A bar. That serves cold water. And alcohol. A cocktail, maybe. And a cigarette.

The best seat in the house is miraculously empty, my bag fits neatly on the floor underneath the bar stool, so I pop a drink down, and I sit to watch the freak show of international reporters.

Among all the ransacking and ranting I can almost make out a pattern that looks like a factory. These people are hard at work. They have *been* hard at work. After weeks of living in the war they are spent, drawn, and trying like hell to get what matters back across the wire. They're scraping the bowels of the war zone for information that is dramatic, important, and entertaining. Their job is to cull the most gripping stories from the most gripping events on the face of planet. They are there to sell what sells.

Reporters, as I learned on my ride into Baghdad, call this a "Goat Fuck." The term comes from US Military references to an Afghani sport that uses a dead goat as a kind of polo ball. AKA "Cluster Fuck" but and still a horror to see. I concentrate on the ice in my drink, at my own little booze-soaked crystal balls, and hope for some clarity, hoping that by the time I look back at the lobby I'll see things a little more clearly, a little *better*. These are, I tell myself, people that are here to make some sort of improvement to human understanding, or to report on what is important, or to save lives, or to educate people. Or something. The Important Thing will be clear when I look up. I take another sip of scotch and concentrate not on the goat fucking, but on the ice cubes.

My eye, like the journalists themselves, goes instinctually to the point of greatest movement. I see two men standing near the bulletin board. The man on the left grips the shoulders of the man on the right, shaking him like a red-headed rag doll, yelling at him. It's apparent that the man on the left is an American journalist shouting at an Iraqi minder. The American tries to jiggle something out of the Iraqi. He will shake information, like change, from this man. He insists on a street address. The Iraqi man's jaw is flapping around his neck.

Okay, I decide, that little act of ice cube augury didn't go too well. Try again. Sometimes these things don't work like they're supposed to. I look back into my glass and give it a second swirl, take another sip and look up.

A man sitting next to the fountain in the middle of the room is sorting through sheafs of paper. They have that faxy, waxy look. He is sorting fast, putting the pages on either side of him; (on the right) slap, slap, slap, (now left) flip, flip. Another man, dressed like him, runs up. The second man is panting. The sorting-man hands the papers to the running-panting-man, barks a command and waves two fingers towards the stairs ('GO!'). The running-panting-man takes off like a dog with a squirrel. The sorting-man is alone again, sorting. Flip, flip, slap, slap. The situation repeats itself now with a new running-panting-man dressed the same as the other one. The sorting-man points in a different direction ('GO!'). Running-panting-man #2 splits. After about five minutes the sorting-man walks up to the reception desk and collects new papers and returned to his bench to resume his sorting.

I decide to try a third time.

Look at my ice, give it a swirl, take a swig, swirl it again, imagine what is important, and I look up in a different direction.

A woman sits relaxed despite all the ching-chang, on a sofa, with her laptop. She's ice-cool and sexy, like Grace Kelly. She is the Grace Kelly of wartime info-grinders: glasses, pert, young, collected, concentrated, administrative. Typing like an engine.

Around us the Sheraton, too, clicks and snaps and hums. It is a factory itself. The American journalist (who is still shaking his guide), the sorting-man and his running-men, and the woman typing are all winnowing. It's as if information were on a conveyor

belt and their job is to sort out numbers and words to be sold at retail. They remind me of the coyote-men in Baghdad, picking through the bones of Iraq, looking for that thing they can put to use. But these reporters have the important job of assembling the information from the war and transporting it across the wire to the world. The journalists aren't there to make friends or learn about the people or help anyone. They are here to work. They are here to extract The Information. They are here to dig this data out of hell and send the shiny nuggets back to the kingdom.

This factory, mobile and automatic, like so many things modern, wraps around the planet. The journalists, there on the front lines of assembly, are pumping the information out of people, processing it for the editors, and piping it into their sat-phones. The transmission is thrown up through the clouds by a spot-beam uplink at a speed of about four billion cycles per second, received, translated to about 10GHz, converted over to a new protocol, snapped back down to the planet's briny surface, shoved across a transatlantic backbone, shot over to some city somewhere in the States where the data is confirmed, stamped, filed, and the bits are passed through an overloaded router, converted into another protocol, squashed into another cable, uploaded into a satellite, and spattered out across the atmosphere into the eyes and brains of millions of people sitting, wide-eyed, in front of a television. The consumers. The end of the manufacturing line. They, too, are a part of this machine and are, in fact, the most important part.

And this Iraqi guy that's getting his cage rattled has something that millions of people want to consume. It is in him, and the journalist smells it, and he will get it.

The Baghdad Sheraton, the information mill at the center of the bleeding heart of Iraq. It is a mass media factory, pumping information from the vena cava. I sit at the bar

for at least an hour, basking in this strange heat so close to the aorta, staring (more than sipping) at my drink, drooling on my knee, scratching my ear, fingering my face (*Why does the hair keep squirting out of it like this? Should I worry about shaving?*) and realizing that I have neatly lost my ability to deal cogently with the war that swirls around me.

--- ***“Media Is An American Tool Now.”***

It is Ghaith, the guy I met in the parking lot, who snaps me out of my coma.

Ghaith is fast as a whip and tough as a railroad track. He was born in Baghdad and raised in the Middle East so he speaks enough languages to tongue-tie a database.

He walks past the bar and stops to talk for a few seconds. I ask him what he'd recommend a local tourist go see.

“What are you here to do?” he asks. It's an odd phrase to the question, but it is also an odd circumstance, so I tell him I want to meet people, take some photos, see things that he likes, things other people are interested in, find out some about the history around here, talk to some locals, maybe just get lost. Standard tourist stuff, really.

“Get lost, huh?” He sparks up a strong-toothed grin and thinks for a second.

Ghaith, as it happens, was thinking of doing the same thing that day. He has been spending more time around the Sheraton than he wants and is looking for an excuse to get out.

We walk out the front door and into Baghdad.

I've found my guiding angel: a tough local Iraqi that speaks English, grew up in the city, has lived through the war, and won't get pissed off or dead if we end up on the wrong end of a hot gun barrel.

One of Ghaith's friends is a fellow named Salam Pax, an Iraqi writer that has kept an online journal through the war, posting personal news of Baghdad from a local perspective ([http://dear\\_raed.blogspot.com/](http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/)). Salam risked his family to do this little feat of subversive journalism. Of course his family didn't find out about what he was up to until after Saddam was dethroned and if, prior to the regime's fall, someone besides his family had found out, his family might have been executed. Forget being grounded because you dent the car, teenagers, this is catching capital punishment for your father because you say the wrong thing on your website.

Salam, like Ghaith, is alert, and watches the distant waters of the US for ripples that, when they break on the borders of Iraq, will fetch deep change. And he's smart enough to be ready for it. And smarter, still, to know how to reflect those ripples back to the source.

Salam's middle-class opinions from upper-class Baghdad were understood by people outside of Iraq. Salam, who published his web memoirs in a book called *The Baghdad Blogger*, has managed to maintain a level of recognition that's kept him both in and out of the media's unblinking eye. He's an expert with it. As far as I know he hasn't given too many interviews — maybe one or two as of this writing — and when I meet him I was able to see why; he's smart. Like nature, or Thomas Pynchon, he hides himself. There's a few reasons for this. First, living under the Ba'ath party cultivated habits of

secrecy. Second he understands American media so well that he also can anticipate its effect on his life in other ways, and guards against that. Fourth he's just a classically private computer geek. And, fourth, it makes good common sense to protect yourself and your family.

During the war everyone that was reading Salam's site was spellbound by his grace under such pressure as a US-led bombing campaign, but some folks just didn't like what he had to say. They said he was unappreciative of American efforts ("He should thank America," one reader posted), or that he didn't know what he was talking about ("This is an American posing as an Iraqi."), or that he didn't exist in the first place because he "knew too much for an Iraqi" ("He's one of Saddam's agents," another reader posted). But despite the pressure, the risks, and the rancorous postings he kept writing. This is part of the reason I like Salam; his freedom is worth risking himself.

These guys — Salam and Ghaith — are the future kings of Baghdad. Someday they'll rule the city with a firm insight and a fast wit and I think that the place will be better off for it.

Salam and I drink that most precious of commodities, clean cool water, and stretch out on soft pillows in a downstairs café that was still open, secretly, off of the old French district, downtown.

"Cultural Imperialism works," he says. "Everything on the web has to orient itself to an American Public. While I was posting people doubted I was Iraqi only because they could not understand that someone outside could understand America so

well. But come on!” He raises his palm, as if tossing a tray over his head and smiles in a kind of creepy way, “You guys are all over the place!”

“You can’t control what people think. Americans realize the impact of their cultural products around the world. And, indirectly, this is how people talk, think, and live their lives. It’s a kind of gradual push, this marketing, just pushing. If you push on a boundary, slowly, people begin to change. Gradually. I was watching an Egyptian comedy show the other day and they now have a laugh track. It was so stupid!” He pulls his feet up under his and puts his hands on his knees.

I ask him what the Americans are pushing for, wondering what he means by ‘cultural imperialism.’ After seeing Kuwait I’m not so certain it’s simply American. It seems bigger.

“Politics. Soft Drinks. Making sure they will be successful — financially successful. How could one nation have such influence on the whole world? These days you have to please the USA to make sure your country succeeds. I don’t know...” he shakes his head and puts his index finger on his forehead, “I don’t know what they are pushing for. But they’ve been pushing since before the cold war. And now these things are starting to spring back. Consider Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and now Iraq again. These things are backfiring. Iraq and Iran went crazy. The wars and the ideologies. The media does this to a large degree, and the media will backfire too. ‘The Global Village’ ... what stupid words. There is an implication of equality in this idea of ‘Village’ but there is no equality. None.”

It’s as though he’s talking about weather. He doesn’t get red faced about it, as Khaled did. He doesn’t shout or raise his voice and his fingers remained on his belt

buckle. Salam seems determined to cope and desperation would be a denigration. It's clear these are not new thoughts for him.

"So how do you deal with it?" I ask.

"Well, you need to know how to manipulate the media. Media is an American tool now. The Americans think that they're the only people making television shows and music and news. But more and more people are learning how to use these tools. Then suddenly these people use your tools against you. We are now learning how to get what we want to say on your TVs. If Iraq is not on the TV we are out of the American consciousness. Consider Afghanistan; if it's not on the TV, then let it rot. Osama Bin Laden is an expert at this. He drops every now and then just a little note, just a few phrases, to al-Jazeera or whoever. Just to let you know he's still there. Like a monster under your bed. He's there forever. The issue here is not whether the tapes or even Bin Laden are real. It's about the terror that is generated by manipulating the media. This is what the Americans have done."

Salam seems free to me. Free to criticize, sure, but more than that, he says what he means and not what he's heard. He has something to say and he believes in it.

### ***--- In Which The English Equation Finds An American Analogy***

Cultural Imperialism, as Salam calls it, wears a few different forms of regal attire. This week it's fatigues.

Ghaith and I are in a cab. We drive by the Mirjan Mosque, built in the early 1300s. That is, thankfully, intact. The Saddam Mosque (which will soon be renamed) — a shopping center more than a worship zone — dangles under multiple swinging scaffoldings like the ones that build skyscrapers in New York or London. The Bab al-Wastani Ruins are ruined (but they've been ruined for some time now). The Foreign Affairs Ministry building is a smoking toothless mouth of ruin. The Sinak Bridge still has abandoned cars and piles of debris making driving more a weave through debris than a method of transportation. The al-Rashid Telephone Exchange building had been lobotomized. The power plants are paralyzed. All ministry buildings, except for the Ministry of Oil, which was carefully guarded from the day American tanks first entered Baghdad, have been gutted, burned, ransacked, raped, and left for husk. Tanks roll across medians, soldiers guard gas stations, and buildings occasionally drool smoke upward into the sky. They are just concrete slabs with black holes where windows used to be. But mostly Baghdad is quiet.

Except, I should add, after sunset. After sunset Baghdad's battle ground bleeds out from hiding and everything changes. People crawl through the reeds along the riverbank, alleys become battlegrounds, the wealthy become targets in a shooting gallery, and the city becomes choked with gun-toting troglodytes, out to kill whoever they happen to find in front of their gun. There is no reason NOT to kill. It is a kind of past-time for some people (or so I am told though I never met one of these people myself and so I cannot say for sure).

Suffice to say that going out after dark could well be fatal.

Ghaith and I arrive at the National Museum around 4:30pm. The museum is surrounded by clusters of journalists waiting for an announcement that the US Army will be making in fifteen minutes. People want to know what has happened to the artifacts.

While we wait Ghaith tells me about how the fires had started and how the US Marines didn't respond. Over 175,000 items had been lost — items that were the last memory of thousands of moments in human forgetfulness. The museum lost Sumerian cuneiform tablets, tapestries, clothing, and dishware from Mesopotamia, plaques and writing that was evidence of geometric schooling over 500 years before Euclid. The museum's vaults had been shattered and some of the items were too heavy to carry out by hand so, evidently, someone had brought a dolly along for the job. Looting a museum of this caliber is a strange idea. What does one DO with the royal court records of the Ottoman Empire? Read them? Where does one house the religious Awqaf library, or the treasures of the Ur Tombs? On the coffee table? Conversation pieces? "Well," you say to your two dinner guests, "...this is the Lady from Warka, an alabaster sculpture over 5000 years old and that old coaster is the first known writing in history of the world."

?

In response to the looting, Dr. George, the director of the museum, and his assistant, the museum's deputy curator Mossen Hassan, started a new cataloging process. But since the card catalogues and computers were lost in the fires the new inventories were sloppily remembered and hastily scribbled. But at least it was a start. Something, after all, had to be done.

Drs. George and Hassan faithfully presented what they had of the catalog numbers to the US general that was overseeing these operations. Citizens of Baghdad went on the

hunt, visiting the looters' markets, searching for anything that might be an antique, asking friends. The network engaged.

A few items found their way back to the museum. These things, a vase for example, had small official-looking catalogue numbers inked onto the bottom. But the US Army refused to take them, saying they weren't listed as missing. They weren't on Dr. George's list which was, of course, only partial and from memory. And so people were turned away, told that the items didn't belong to the museum. Some nine weeks after the museum had been looted Washington began to publicly pat itself on the back, claiming via the AP and Reuters that "most" items lost in the looting had been regained. This hollow self-congratulation was trumpeted by the newspapers as proof that America was looking out for Iraqi interests. The few pieces that were returned were either on the short list catalogue or else, as the Lady of Warka (who was returned in mid-September of 2003), so well known that no market for them exists.

But at all stages of the crisis the US Military was reluctant in response. Robert Fisk, who worked for London's *Independent* saw the museum fires starting and ran to get some help from the nearest authority he could find: A US Marine. Fisk wrote, "I gave the map location, the precise name in Arabic and English. I said the smoke could be seen from three miles away and it would take only five minutes to drive there. Half an hour later, there wasn't an American at the scene and the flames were shooting 200 feet into the air."

News of the latest lootings in Baghdad were breaking over the wire and Tony Blair's Labour Party patched together a speedy press conference at London's British Museum where Secretary of Culture Tessa Jowell vowed to support the protection of

Iraqi Antiquities. While the Secretary gave her presentation to a room full of smiling supporters, thousands of miles away, books, chairs, tables, carpet, lights, and more books were being looted from the National Library of Iraq. As Ms. Jowell spoke into the microphone, ancient documents from the Ottoman Empire, illuminated copies of the Qur'an, and yellowed pieces of parchment, thousands of years old, were curling under fires set by unknown hands.

Meanwhile, under American supervision, the Ministry of Oil remained well guarded. Donald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary of Defense seemed satisfied with the decision. "Yes, it's untidy, but freedom is untidy."

Art historians and archaeologists from around the world had notified the US State department prior to their invasion that these events might happen (an easy enough assumption since it's a cycle that's been spinning for some 1800 years). Both UNESCO and The National Association of Art Museum Directors sent a polite word to the US State Department, in January 2003, reminding them that the Iraqi National Museum is an important place.

As we know, it did no good. There was a brief reprieve in the looting, but the entire fiasco, which could have been shut down at least in small pockets, wasn't. Iraq should be used to it by now since tons of Iraq's antiquities have already been looted by foreign visitors. For example, if you walk into the British Museum the entire set of the walls of the Assur Nasser Palace have been dismantled and moved for English viewers to enjoy. I've heard the argument made that they are "safe" there. For now. But as Baghdad

knows, the center of civilization gets around and what appears safe this century is a battlefield next.

There is a certain respect for culture in Iraq that is hard to overlook and harder still for Westerners to know. In 1991, when the Iraqi army occupied Kuwait, there was looting then, as well, mostly by Iraqi soldiers looting the al-Sabah palace. But the Kuwaiti National Museum wasn't touched. A special brigade protected the place and even went so far as to package, inventory, and ship the items up to Baghdad. They did a nice job of it, too. Then, when the Iraqi army withdrew from Kuwait they politely returned everything to the Kuwaitis. A few items were cracked, but overall, the inventory was complete and the items were tucked neatly back onto their shelves. In fact, the Iraqi inventory was an improvement on what the Kuwaitis had done before the 1990 invasion. Or so I was told by a Kuwaiti that worked at the National Museum.

There were sufficient armed personnel and military resources dedicated to specific buildings to protect them from these problems. It was a matter of choice. Perhaps public statistics are wrong and the battalions were just too busy with other tasks — they didn't have sufficient resources. But the US Army was capable of preventing looting — at least in pockets — and most Iraqis I spoke with were willing to overlook the deaths, but were surprised at how little the army had done to preserve their culture thus giving ample leeway for use of such phrases as “Invading Barbarian Marauders” and other epithets that have been mouthed in these parts for centuries.

But it may be that the looting was a part of a larger battle plan. It might be that the US reluctance to prevent events such as the burning of the Museum can be explained in another way: Perhaps the US Army felt the need to facilitate it. As has been seen in other

countries, at other times, it may be that cauterizing a culture allows for a new government to grow more easily. Maybe it's just a part of the process of warfare that has been practiced by English and Europeans for millennia. In 1917, when the British took control of Baghdad libraries were burned (but not quite as well). Universities were trashed (but not quite so thoroughly). And the Museum was broken into (though not looted and burned). Law and order took wing with the sandy winds and people were looting then, too. If there once was an English Equation then perhaps we are now looking at an American Analogy.

Warfare is a cultural event, and one that is military. The thing that I have seen is that America started the war on her own schedule. But the troops were sent without enough force to keep law and order. That is a decision that will be remembered by Iraqis long after the Americans have forgotten.

### **--- *Neighborhood Watch***

If I don't get this cash out of my boot I'm going to spook myself flat silly. I've been carrying half of it in my boot and half of it in my opposite leg pocket, hedging bets of some strange sort ("If I step on a mine I'll still have half of it," perhaps?). Today's the day to run my second delivery mission and at this point I'm damn glad it's here because I'm starting to feel white-washed, as if all my blood lives in my stomach and won't get near the surface any more, as if all my platelettes are hiding from stray bullets. But I

have to get over to Manal's house and I have only a vague idea where it is. The sun will set soon and things get spooky then.

Walking won't do the trick. That's not to say that I couldn't walk the few miles across the river, but at this time of day I'd get shot faster than I could say "Coups" since it's just too gunnish after dark. Afghanistan is the same these days. It's a strange parallel — Afghanistan and Iraq. Under the Taliban people are living their lives, more or less, as they had for millennia. So too, for the most part, under Saddam. But now that the United States is waging a War On Terror all of that has changed. Now people fear for robbers, dehydration, looting, starvation, and being pulled out of their cars and shot in the middle of the forehead in the middle of the street for a car that hardly runs. There's shortage of electricity, shortage of medical care, shortage of education, and, in a strange way, a shortage of freedom, democracy, and financial stability.

Anyway, I'm not about to walk to al-Mansour. It's just too dangerous, especially for a cute white boy like me with minimally functional Arabic, no weapons of caliber, and a dull old pocket knife.

At Jumila Square I flag someone down, give him the address and we drive northwest out of central Baghdad. The cab is shaking like a machine gun, but outside, beyond the cab, over the city, a great cloth of evening slowly falls over the earth. In any massive desert the sky, as it changes from orange to blue, becomes a serene threat. The afternoon winds are an inhalation, and the moment when darkness drops is the moment before the exhalation of evening. The desert — any desert — relaxes and comes alive when the sun stops watching. With Ali Baba creeping around in the somber setting sun, the evening is

livelier, still. But out the window of the cab I see a peaceful horizon framed in glittering gold that drains upwards into a gentle early evening azure.

A full moon is rising, as it always has, crawling its way out of the earth and palm fronds and into the sky pushed by the Scarab, or being hauled by the Sumerian guy with the rope. I wonder how many more chances I'll have to watch a full moon rise and it occurs to me that this is an event that almost everyone that has lived has had a chance to see, if only a few times, and that all the Sumerians and Egyptians and Chaldeans that lived around here once watched it, themselves. And suddenly the Brass in Washington and the grey ghost-boy walking alongside the road just don't seem too different from each other.

If you're the moon then everyone is old and everyone is young, and all at the same time.

But for little me, I see a bad moon rising. I see trouble on the way, and that moon is looking down on the same land where the Sumerians — the crazy people with their gods that looked like bearded lions and the same people that had indecipherable angular handwriting and turquoise mosaics — this is the land these people once lived. And, once upon a time, Sumerians had looked from that same place up at that same moon in that same light. People are people, sure (as Americans are so fond of saying) but people are also so different that the only solution to problems is to recognize the differences, be they Babylon's or Washington's.

But we all live under the same moon. Of that I'm certain.

The cab slams over a bump, the brakes lock, and I grab the padding in front of me in time to hit my hand with my own chin. I switch from staring out the moony back

window to watching US tanks cross the road, perpendicular to the path of traffic.

Massive metallic wildlife they just cross the traffic and force everyone to stop (of course there are no stoplights and here might does, truly, make right). They just drive across the median leaving big cuts in everything from the treads of the tracks, stupid as cattle, and we in cars, we deer, all stare and wait. There is nothing to do except sit in the cab and wait and look out the window and be taught that might makes right of way.

A boy sprints out of the bushes at one of the tanks and I think he's going to get pulled under a tread. But he banks in time and he's running alongside, waving his arms and shouting. Some Humvees following the tanks come up behind. When the boy sees them he stops running. He turns around and jumps twice in the air. He waits until the Humvees are near him and holds out his hand. A soldier riding inside leans out and, like some uncle, slaps him a sideways high-five. Comrade. The boy jumps up and down and starts screaming again and runs back in the direction he came from. Crazy fucking kid. Running around with Ali Baba, chasing US tank tires, slapping hands with the troops, jumping up and down and laughing like a little musician. I guess kids have been doing this here for thousands of years. Some kid must have done this with the Ottomans, and the British, too.

What happens to these kids? What has happened to that kid living behind the torture tanks in Basra, behind Saddam's Guest House? Or the ones that threw rocks at Remy's nice car as we drove through Nasiriyah? Or the kids that rip cars at the border? Or Mohammed's buddies that lifted the cooler lid? Or this one?

Every war zone I've visited has one thing, absolutely, constant. Not gunfire nor bombs nor poverty nor anything you might think. Instead, they all have children running

everywhere. They run and run and do surprising things, as if war were as natural as sunset. Only children and the angels themselves are the witnesses of war. Everyone else is simply waiting for the tanks to get out of the way.

It's dark, but we're in al-Mansour. The darker it gets the more my blood crawls into my stomach. I now lack a clear head, I have no clue where I am, the sun is setting and I can hear gunfire outside the car. And it occurs that I need a shower.

We take one wrong turn after another and manage to eventually regroup near the Russian Embassy. Everyone in Baghdad knows where the Russian embassy is, so we're able to navigate off of that and eventually pull up in front of what I assume is Arras and Manal's house. This is where the letters and the money belong. Or so I hope. I also hope they can put me up for the night.

But by now it is dark and I just want to get off the street. There are no more cars out and I'm hearing occasional gunfire.

Tipping the driver \$5 is nothing for me, but a good dose from an Iraqi perspective. I open the door to the cab and set foot in the street, looking around with my squinty alley-cat eyes. I don't know where I am and I'm not interested in getting my head shot off just cause I pull up in a cab at the wrong time. If you're in a cab and if you have some money (and it's obvious from looking at the texture of skin on a cheek) then you're a Baghdad bull's-eye. I have cash in my bag and that makes me nervous anyway, but knowing that Ali Baba is randomly pulling people out of cabs and shooting them in the neck, like rummaging through the mail in hopes of finding something valuable, doesn't set my heart at a gentle pace. People all over Baghdad are getting shot for weird reasons - or no

reasons at all - so I stand up sort of slowly, close the cab's door (SLAM it seems so loud in the gathering dusk), and immediately hear more gunfire.

Pop pop pop. Chakka-chak. Pop.

But it isn't close, not aimed at me anyway, just in the neighborhood, like lightning could be, so I stop for a second and stand there in the middle of the street to listen and look. There is no electricity. The streets, lined with houses and yards and cars, like you might see in a suburban American neighborhood, are utterly grayed out save for a few glimmers of candles here and there. But the moon is a little higher now and she is just caressing the palm trees, casting blue shadows onto the asphalt in front of me. I see no one. Not in the street, or in the houses or anywhere. It is empty. Ali Baba is out bagging bigger game. But at the same time this really isn't the time for me to be standing in the middle of the street with \$1000 cash in my pocket and a stupid American look on my face as I ogle the Sumerian moonrise.

I'm in the right neighborhood, I know that much. I just hope I have the right address. If not I have no clue what I'll be doing since that was the last cab I'd see tonight (*"Hello Mr. Baba. My name is Mark. Can you give me a ride to the Sheraton?"*).

This is the right address but the house is dark, so I can't tell if they're home. Of course all the houses are dark, so I can't tell if anyone is home anywhere. It's a strange dream of desertion in a world of gunmen. If no one is home I guess I'll sleep on a roof somewhere. There's not a lot of other choices.

The fence — one of those chest-high chain link fences with the metal curly-cues on top to make it look a little less industrial — surrounds the yard. It is empty except for a swing and a couple of chairs. I put my hand on the gate, and pause. I see a small light

— maybe a candle — inside. Options. I could knock on the door, but I'd have to climb the fence and I don't want someone inside to scatter my chest with a sawed-off mistaking me for Ali Baba. I could shout, but that seems stupid as announcing I'm lost with a few years' salary in my pocket...

I hear a crunch of gravel behind me. Directly behind me. I turn. Four shotguns point at my stomach. Four mustachioed machos with enough buckshot to turn me into a lumpy puddle of purple. My intestines, now actively squirming around, may well be spattered like gutter water from a passing car, hanging red mucus from the jowls of the chain link fence. Somehow the letters that have traveled thousands of miles, only to end up in the trash, seems as much of a waste as anything and I think of the cash in some other guy's pocket. I am going to be robbed, if I am lucky. That's what I get, I think, for standing in the street and staring at the goddamn Baghdad moon. *It won't hurt for long*, I think.

But everyone can be reasoned with. If one has a choice between asking a favor of sister fortune, or standing in front of a firing squad, you should always think fast and make a gamble.

I put my palms out and say, "I have letters to deliver."

Now that it is out of my mouth I feel better life and letter isn't a thing we just abandon in silence

"What are you doing here?" the big one grunts.

This is a promising sign; willingness to communicate is always a good sign. I go real slow and make sure I'm being clear; clarity of communication is the second step to keeping your bowels near your spine.

“I’m here to deliver letters from overseas. I am here to see Aras and his wife, Manal.” I cite their address. I stall for a second, trying to remember Manal’s mother’s name, “...and Manal’s mother, Suham. I am friends with their family.”

“How do you know Manal and Aras?”

“I’m friends with Manal’s cousin Hussam, of Kuwait City.”

One of them turns their head and another relaxes. My guts are still hanging safely inside my ribcage though my heart seems to be trying to bust a hole in my throat. So I inhale through my nose and finish the sentence that is taking forever to get out of my mouth.

“... and Manal’s uncle, Mister Talal, who lives in Basra.”

A sentence can take forever and a bullet takes so little time. The odds are not fair.

But my answer was; two of the guns drop. I’m Friend.

Exhaling (can one exhale under one’s breath?) I thank them for their concern and one of the guys walks over to the house to knock on the window. The fourth still has his gun on me. It’s not small and he’s not shaking. As I look at him I give him a grin. Neighborhood watch has never seemed to me to be too much more than paranoid grannies peeking from between frilly curtains and complaining to their next door neighbor the following week, but here in Baghdad it makes sense.

The barrel of the rifle points towards the ground.

Manal is Mr. Talal’s niece and Hussam’s cousin. She says something soft and reassuring to the big guy with the gun then walks up to me. I introduce myself to her in English, handing her the letters with the money inconspicuously folded among the sheets of paper. That way she’ll open it and see what’s there without Jojo and the Neighborhood

Watch getting wind of what's up. I can give her the rest later. I don't know, really, who to trust but I suspect that, given the alignment of circumstances, she will be a safe bet.

Trust is all that exists.

### **--- *Dinner***

Twenty minutes later Manal, her husband Aras, and her mother Suham are all sitting around the table in the yard (the front yard, next to the street), with a tray of cucumbers, bread, parsley, onions and hummous. They've pulled out a beautiful dinner spread, despite the impossible circumstances of the war, and with the kerosene lamps keeping time to the full moon the evening promises peace, despite the distant laughing of Ali Baba's guns. The guns echo in the distance the same way sirens do in a major city; you know something is happening nearby, but there's no real reason to spend time concentrating on it.

Manal, a Shi'a Muslim, is no shrouded *hajja*. She is dressed in a t-shirt and jeans and her English is fluent, if not perfect. She doesn't walk around the edges of the room and she doesn't wear a veil. She's not shy or demure nor is she an outcast in the society for being or not being these things. It's hard to tell her age because she, like her mother, smiles so often. She is probably in her early 30s. In her wedding photo her age becomes even more impossible to tell, since she has a classically elegant face of a 19<sup>th</sup> century beauty. She's got a degree in mechanical engineering and keeps up on the storm systems that are brewing in the Western World. She can name each member of the Bush

Administration, knows where George Tenet went to school, who Jennifer Lopez last married, and, though she's never been to the United States, she knows that Washington is both a state and a city. She's the girl next door.

Suham, Manal's mother, is something of the keystone of the household. She was born in Tehran, Iran. She's quiet, but, like Manal, constantly grinning, and always busy doing something that everyone knows needs to be done but no one else is really willing to bother with. She makes the rest of us look a bit lazy. Suham is the kind of person you want to have around if a war descends on your neighborhood because, after having lived through more than a few, she knows how to do important things, like take cookies to the boys that live across the street and ask them if they'll keep an eye on the house until there's a government in place. And so she's a little sad. Certainly she has seen some difficult days, after living through half a dozen wars, and losing a husband. Manal, as far as I know, is her only child, and the two of them stick close together and keep an eye out for other family candidates, however transient or American. But this sadness of Suham's is outshined by a stable energy and a care about what other people are up to. She's one of the few people I've met that I would call content. It's as if there is a secret she learned, through all the bombs and poverty and the bright desert days, and though it is a sad secret, it is her compass.

Though her face is exposed she keeps her head covered with a thin white cloth, a babushka looking gauze, but Suham doesn't insist Manal do the same. One morning, up early, I walked into the kitchen where Suham was quietly drinking her juice and looking out the window. She had long hair that draped over her shoulder, almost to her stomach. As soon as she heard me come in she quickly wrapped up her hair, flicked on her

headscarf, jumped to her feet, and wished me good morning would you like some juice, all in one smooth move. I, of course, felt like I had walked in on her while she was taking a bath, but she made nothing of it and instead pointed to the birds outside, who were happily pecking some cracker crumbs she'd left on the sidewalk. From then on I made sure to bump things in the hallways before entering the kitchen in the mornings.

Aras, Manal's husband, is Manal's perfect match on multiple levels. He's loudly proud of being a Kurd. His cousin is Massoud Barzani, the famed and feared militant leader from the northern steppes around Dohuk — and the place where the al-Anfal genocide happened in the late '80s. Aras is short and dark, stocky, handsome and sports the common mustachio of Middle Eastern masculinity. And he's a damn good shot with a handgun. If he were to live in the States he might be a fisherman, or a carpenter. Manly like that, he's trained as a civil engineer. There is something cute about Aras, too. Maybe it's just that he's so compact or that he's so manly.

When Aras was in his early 20's the girl next door was also a student at the university and someone that he spent the evenings talking to, outside on the sidewalk under the streetlight, after school in the warm Iraqi evenings of the early 1980s. Eventually, Aras asked her to marry him and Manal, of course, accepted. She finished her degree in mechanical engineering and Aras and she were married a couple of years later. They could be living in New York or Paris and get along fine with the rest of the world. They make jokes and get drunk and try not to wear the same socks two days in a row. They are considerate and open. Aras is robust and dark and seems made of denser matter than most people, as if he wouldn't

break easily. Manal has gentle, Oriental eyes. They make, as it were, a handsome couple. They seem like nice, normal, adult human beings.

After getting done with school in 1988 there was no work to be done. As Aras puts it, “If you even disagree with the government or their opinion or are not a member of the Ba’ath party they will not give you any work. It’s that simple.” So he did ‘free work’ for a living — working with companies for credit or trade. He says that worked okay.

He doesn’t seem sad about it, but he would have preferred for it to be different.

“You see, I’ve been waiting for this war for many years. I realized that there was no way to avoid the war and also that there was no way to avoid Saddam’s problems. It’s been more than one year since I knew that the bombs would come.”

Aras tells me that the Russian embassy did a great job of protecting the neighborhood. Guards had been posted on top of several towers and when the fighting got fast these guards doubled as snipers, getting rid of robbers and other Ali Babas around the neighborhood. Apparently the Americans were not so kind as to station troops in al-Mansour, so the residents of al-Mansour have done what they can with what they have.

A side benefit of war is that everyone has lots of spare time to be together. And so families solidify under the most unstable skies and we happily eat meals and the rifles down the street continue their crackling.

While we eat cucumber and hummous I relate the news from Basra, Kuwait, and the United States (my entire family is very small, so it’s fun to be the newsboy). We’re laughing and eating tomatoes when a couple of feral cats get into a fight over some hummous underneath my chair. They get to screaming and howling and putting up that

horrendous noise cats make when they fight and this shocks me so badly my skeleton jumps out of my skin and does a little jig there under the full moon.

Goddam wildcats. I almost pissed myself.

Aras, who hasn't moved, chuckles and says, "Relax, you're with a Kurd."

### ***--- Open Sesame***

Once upon a time there was a poor carpenter named Ali Baba. He lived with his wife, his brother Qasim, and his children in a small shack at the edge of the forest. They were poor, but Ali Baba worked hard. He would go out in the afternoons by himself to collect wood. He had done this for many years and had always earned an honest day's living this way.

One day Ali Baba was at the base of the mountain, near the cliff, collecting wood when he heard people coming. They were on horses and, since he didn't know who they were (and since he knew that thieves lurked in these woods), Ali quickly hid behind a tree.

The pack of thieves rode up to the sheer rock cliff and one of them said in his gruff voice, "Open Sesame." The wall slid back to reveal a little room inside the cliff. It glittered full of gems and coins. The bandits threw the bags they had just stolen into the pile and rode away. Then the door quietly slid closed.

Ali, still hiding behind the nearby tree, was amazed. He got up his courage, walked quietly up to the wall, and said, "Open Sesame." Sure enough, the door slid open revealing all the gold and gems that the thieves had stolen.

~

At Saddam's Republican Palace, just off the side of the river on what is probably the premier piece of real estate in Baghdad, America has set up an administrative center. The Green Zone, as everything else in Iraq, surrounded by tanks.

The American soldier standing in front of me takes his hand off of the gun and holds it in the air between us even though I had given no indication I was planning on walking past.

"Can I see your press pass please?"

"Well," I said, "I'm not affiliated with anyone, but I have this letter from ..." I poke around in my bag, "...here it is; from Lieutenant Ruch, who I spoke with yesterday down at the office. I explained I was working on a book and asked permission to come in and take a look."

I dig out my letter that includes initials from the Public Affairs Office and hand it over. He glances at the front, glances at me, flips it over, glances at me again, and hands it back. "Please follow Corporal Johnson here; he'll show you through."

I put my papers away and thank him. Please Thank You Please. Feels polite in a strange American way. I smile at him for good measure.

My escort walks up and vigorously pumps my hand. He's smiling, too.

“Now, if’n it’s okay with ya, I’ll be takin ya to the places that *I* think are best and the things that we’ve found here that are most interestin ... but I’m gonna haf’n ask that you refrain from taking photeegraphs of workin’ staff and personnellll.”

Corporal Johnson, is a combination personal tour guide and protocol spigot.

We walk up some stairs and through a gate and across a broad lawn of nicely trimmed grass that makes a semi-circle around the palace. Or at least this part of the palace.

”How long have you been here?” I ask.

“Well, I gah shipped in ‘bout three weeks ago.”

“So you’re here *only* to work with the Press Office?”

“Yes sir.” He says as he looks over his shoulder at me, fixing a hat that he wears - one of the hats that has a brim all the way around - and I realize that he must be hotter than I am. He’s a bit overweight, as the majority of the US Military is, and he’s dressed in pants, shirt, etc. But he’s carrying a lot of paperwork. They guy must be lugging four folders. They look heavy.

“Y’see, the Press Office has the work all cut ou’ for me. We’ve got ‘round 1200 reporters here in town so there’s been a lotta work for us to do.”

“1200 reporters - all right here in Baghdad?” I overemphasize my surprise.

He looks at me and smiles. “Thas rye.”

So we talk while we enter the palace grounds. The estate has not only has well-kept Kentucky bluegrass lawns (now a bit cut up from all the tank treads) and sweeping architecture (a bit blasted by shells and bombs), and big open green spaces that remind

me of an oversized country club (full of soldiers), but it also has fountains (that aren't working).

The building is about a fifth the size of the White House (it's one of a half dozen office compounds around here) and on the roof, at each corner, are heads about five meters tall. Not busts, or statues, but really big heads. They might be of Saddam, I can't quite tell, but they have on tough-looking traditional military hats that come to strange points at the top, almost like a dunce-cap, but a tough one.

"Now wouldnya like some heads like that on yer house back home!" Corporal Johnson is excited by the prospects. "I mean, for my house, I'd hafta make em a lot smaller... maybe outta wood, say.. but hoo-yaw!.. my neighbors would be immmmpressed!" and he looks back at me and smiles.

We walk briskly up the steps where a group of about a dozen official-looking Americans are clustered together in an informal meeting. Maybe they've just gotten out of a meeting and this is the post-mortem get-together, but whatever the circumstances, these people look about as strange as anyone I've seen in a long time. It's not that individually they would have surprised me so much, but as a group, together like this, their traits become accented and dramatic.

Reminded of the fact that I haven't been in a major western city for the better part of six months, their clothes look strange. I'm not used to seeing suits. They are planar and have creases and look not like cloth, but sheet metal. Robotic. Three or four women are wearing skirts and those had the same effect. These people have not hair but helmets. What throws me off guard isn't the clothes, or the press-job or the hair. But the skin color. After spending many moons in countries run by people at least two shades darker

than myself, seeing Pink People is simply odd. Their skin is thin and translucent, they are puffy and somehow unhealthy, these official Americans, here to do business, here to be The Ruling Class. It all feels like a science fiction novel, the palace, the strange people, the long steps up to the door, the guards with guns everywhere, the translucent puffy people running the soldiers that are running the weaponry that is running the culture of New Iraq.

One of the males, a big one, blinks. This assures me to some extent. They are from another world, one that is automatic, but they are also humans.

Down the long marble hallways there are few carpets. If there is one it is a light beige to fit in with the white-and-gold décor, or else it's a rich umber, and hand-woven in dazzling patterns of ancient Persia. Otherwise the floors are a well-polished white marble and the rooms are big and gold. Faucets and handles (anything to be touched) are gold. Doors are twice the size they need to be and are white, handles trimmed with gold paint (or in many cases gold gold). Chairs are white with gold trim. The floors are white with gold trim. The ceilings are white with gold trim. The guys mopping the halls are brown, but they wear little white with gold trim suits.

It's Dictator Kitsch. Five-star hotels and tyrant's palaces makes the same design decisions. It's a simple recipe of white, gold, marble, and big mirrors. Frilly plaster stucco lines the ceiling, following a long tradition of imitating French and Italian interior designers from the 1800s. And it's all a predictable hue of gold. International culture, like cheese, homogenizes at the top and at the bottom; fast food restaurants all

look exactly alike, as do all luxury hotels. And Saddam's Palace is doing a fine job of imitating the upper crusts.

The Corporal takes me through a door (it's made of solid gold, he points out) into a chamber - a lecture hall, really - that is filled with gold chairs (these have beige upholstery and are organized like seats in a theater). At the front of the room is a gold podium where Saddam used to stand. To my right is a massive painting of a mosque in an idyllic little village also known as The Dome of the Rock. The painting is a local equivalent of a Norman Rockwell; it is the Iraqi Dream. On the round ceiling above is a painting of horses galloping among the clouds, circling the sun like a constellation. It's about 10 meters across and neither stylized nor realistic but just meticulously painted, and somehow passionless. To my left is the most curious of them all; a painting of Scud missiles launching over the plains of Iraq. It reminds me of the bald eagle images I've seen in the states; The Predator streaking skywards, leaping over the head of its victims.

This is the same room where, in 1979, shortly after forcing al-Bakr to 'resign,' Saddam Hussein called a cabinet meeting. When everyone came into the room he stepped up on stage with a video camera, a few dozen security guards, and his best fatigues. He announced that there was dissent among the Ba'ath party. He said that the party was doing well and that this dissent made him very sad and that it would not be tolerated. He called the name of party member sitting in the third row and asked him to stand up. He was escorted from the room and never heard from again. 54 more names were called and 54 more people disappeared. Each one of them either objected to the way that Saddam

had taken power or were calling for a legal election to confirm that Saddam should be president. Hussein wouldn't have any of that, so he killed them.

*FOOTNOTE: One year after the invasions this room was being used as a dormitory for US soldiers.*

Force can solve problems, but not permanently.

In their early days, the Ba'ath party was democratically minded. They held elections and they had popular support among Syrians and Iraqis for a number of years. Saddam climbed that power platform. Then, once he got to the top, he took control of it, short-circuiting the democratic operations of the party. By then it was too late for anyone to stop him. In the 1930s the Ba'ath ideologies appealed to Arabs who had just gotten out from under the English boot and wanted a sense of a unified Middle East. Their motto, "Unity, Freedom, and Socialism," was an anti-imperialist cry (anti-British first, anti-Western second) for Arabs to unite and develop a new socialist system. Salah al-Din al-Bitar, Zaki al-Arsuzi, and Michel Aflaq, were the three early promoters of the system. The primary attractor was "The Arab world should be united and you should have enough money to live." The proposition made sense to the millions of poor Arabs that were pissed off after so many Western interventions. What happened at the top, specifically with Saddam, was a nasty redirection of popular opinion. It's hard to say who was more guilty - the British and the French for causing the initial problem, or Saddam for taking advantage of the instability.

But Saddam, with his camera, and his fatigues, initiated a rather gruesome presidency that day back in 1979. By terrifying the other party members in the audience he implicitly made the claim that you were either with him or against him.

I stare at the stage, then the ceiling, then that bizarre painting of the missiles.

“S’something, ain’t it?” The Corporal says.

“The missile painting?”

“Yeah.”

There’s a pause, then he finishes, “Everyone here loves tha’n.”

### **--- *Lacerations***

We’re on the highway, headed north, and fast. Taximan Ali is drunk as a lord and as angry as a cat with a 9-volt attached to its tail. A rocket literally sails past. The car is doing 160km. We break most of the laws of physics that apply to cars, roads, or human reaction time.

Booze, fear, and hate are a volatile mix. And while I’m not all that happy to be in his taxi, in front, gripping the handle, seatbelt snug, the stink of beer in the air, it’s a temporary situation. And he isn’t talking, he’s shouting,

“George Bush is doing the same thing Saddam did!”

I’m sitting in the front seat, gripping the handle, seatbelt snug.

“GEORGE BUSH is the real Ali Baba! He comes in! He takes all the power from the people! He asks no one! He COMES IN and he TAKES IT!”

As he accelerates he shouts and that makes him accelerate.

“And now everyone is SCARED — Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Saudi Arabia — EVERYBODY is scared, Bro! BUSH is Ali BABAAA!”

We plow along the Tigris. Taximan Ali speaks English and is really excited, bouncing up and down in his seat as he talks. The guy is drunk and sober serious. Then he switches and giggles and speeds, as confident as the Grim Reaper.

“Here, have a beer,” and he takes one hand off the wheel to open the white styrofoam cooler under my legs which is full of water, ice, and cans of Sakara Gold. I figure that I'd rather die drunk and after walking around in the Baghdad burn I don't mind the offer one bit. I've never had a cab driver offer me a beer. And anyway it's nice of him. The cans are black and gold labeled.

“You know, it is no good; to drink and drive...” he decelerates, “...it's better to drink and sit.” He pulls the car over into a parking lot overlooking the river, grabs another Sakara and looks at me. Sure, I think, especially if you're going to drink a six-pack and carve high-speed gouges in the freeway blacktop.

Ali's likable and I'm suspicious. I don't know why, we just are. We get out of the car and stand there. In front of us two overturned Iraqi anti-aircraft guns, melted and slashed by hot missiles from on high, stare upward in slackjawed stupidity. In the distance we can see Baghdad's broken power plant, with only one of its four smokestacks dribbling grayish muck up into the copper sky. This means that only 25% of the city has electrical power right now. Things are bad all over.

Ali's just looking at the river. He has something else to say.

“You know, three of my brothers were killed last week. THREE. I just don’t care any more, Bro.” He finishes the sentence, leans back, and keeping the Sakara can perpendicular to his face, sucks down the rest of his beer. From this angle I notice that he has a skull with deep eye sockets and thick brows. His nose might have been broken, once upon a time. He has a brutal and handsome face. He is dressed in a pretty white shirt as if he had just come from a wedding. He is in pain, and alive, lit with something like faith or maybe just raw determination.

He leans forward and swallows hard. We both seem alone, there, together.

Several minutes pass in silence. We squat in the parking lot, drink, watch the sun set over the Tigris River; it's a peaceful scene. I don’t know what to say so I either keep my mouth shut or pour beer into it.

Someone shoots a gun on the other side of the highway.

The power plant continues to exhale, heaving smoke slowly upward, and the sun is burrowing into the ground.

The gun goes off again.

Taximan Ali shifts his weight and his shoe makes a crackling noise on the gravel.

“It’s goddamn crazy,” he suddenly shouts and stands up and throws his beer can down the embankment of the river. “...All three are dead.”

Two of them had been killed in the bombing last weekend and his third brother was shot a few nights ago by a US soldier. Since Ali’s father had already died in the Iran-Iraq war his mother is out of her mind with grief. The neighborhood where she lives is just over the hill, over there, he points. His mother, he says, is going crazy.

Taximan Ali, I decide, is going crazy too.

The last month or so have been busy for him. He had just come back from Syria - I don't know what he had been doing there - when the US invaded. He came back with a few Syrian friends that wanted some work in Baghdad. Pieces of a puzzle take shape as I listen to this novel use of the word "work." Taximan Ali tells me about how his work mostly involves big buildings, mostly in downtown Baghdad, and how he has to work at night and get things finished by sunrise.

"Only the big buildings, you know. So two nights ago we were out working..."

He starts to really get behind his cranking tongue. He talks softly then gets louder and louder and jumps in the air and shouts something important in the middle of a bizarre callisthenic. Most people gesture, Taximan Ali jumps.

"What were you doing?"

"Collecting copper and zinc. ZINC, bro!."

"Okay."

"And we're a bit nervous, trying to get this stuff done when a big damned dog comes running around the corner, " (and Ali jumps into the air). "HAF HAF HAF! So Jamesh pulls out a gun and 'POW!'" (and Ali jumps into the air again) "the dog falls over. Jamesh turns around and I yell 'Watch out!' because by then the dog gets up again! HAF HAF!" (and Ali is really animated now and he runs around a little circle here, in the parking lot, and jumps in the air a third time, then looks at me. "Jamesh had to shoot the fucking dog six times. It *finally* dies. Oh, oh, oh! So what does Jamesh care? It's Jamesh. We finish our work and we put all the damn wire in the car and go home! Do you know how much I made that night, Bro?"

He squats down close and looks me in the face. He smells like beer. His eyes are tragic holes of Stygian fire and down in those fierce wells I see that he has rounded up packs of demons and chained them to the back of his skull. He is nuclear and burning alive in angelic recognition of the horror. Taximan Ali's the herdsman, the chariot driver, and his heart is darkness, yet lit bright with the embers of Iraq's desperation. His eyes are almost black, and so they are all the more reflective.

I can see two tiny images of myself, one in each eye, and in the reflection of the sunset in his eyes I realize that he needs me more than I need him. All I needed was a ride to Mansour, but he needs a witness and he needs a mirror. He needs someone else to see the horror of his life. Thrown into this situation, I realize that it's my duty to stand solid, and somehow be his anchor. At the very least it is my duty, as his witness, to provide him with another set of eyes. And I realize this as I'm looking into his and seeing the flames of Baghdad licking up into the sky behind me.

"How much?" I ask.

"Twenty thousand dinar!" He smiles wide, crow's feet wrinkle across his cheeks, and he stands up and turns toward the car, slapping his hip, "You want another beer, Bro?"

I'm his Bro. I guess that means that he's mine, too.

"Sure."

It occurs to me that I have no way of telling if beer had been illegal in Iraq before the war. Is Sakara Gold as new as satellite TV or American Tanks? I don't bother to ask. Everything is unhinged in his world and none of it matters. His story about pulling wires and shooting the gun doesn't make complete sense to me and I'm only surprised he's

calling me Bro, because we're speaking English and I wonder where he learned it. But as much as this I'm surprised he's telling me about looting buildings in the first place. But what does he care? What does Jamesh care? Who do they have to answer to? There's no government. There's no cops. There's no anything. For him the world has turned sour and the underside has gone to rot so it's softer for the digging. And me, I'm just his bro, sitting with him in the parking lot helping him drink beer, and anyway what difference does anything make if your father is dead, your brothers are dead, you're one-half insane and two-halves infuriated, you live in a world with no government, and this is the fourth war you've been forced to live through? For him cruelty is as much a part of life as water. Maybe, considering the dry sky overhead, more.

For years his life has been worth less than a dinner, and now he's gallant, and steaming with thoughtless need. His need is to exist and to push deep into his violent world at risk to himself and to others with no concern of the next day. In his world everything is already ruined, so nothing can be broken. His life is thoughtless like an animal's, immediate, and his determination is stripped of law and consideration. He is uncalculating, unprincipled, and impractical, and I find myself admiring him for living through it. He's a human furnace, furious, and shuddering under the wrath of Chaldean gods, but unscathed, impractical, and alive. He is divorced from necessity and flying into his abyss with such speed that his eyes water.

"What else have you found?" I ask.

"Everything, bro. You know there's so much out there right now!" and he waves his arm wide and indicates the entire world and that throws him a bit off balance. This is the golden land of opportunity. It is his copper rush.

“Everything; zinc, lead.. silver even! Fucking silver!” and he slams his beer on the asphalt so he can use both hands. “We found a coil of silver this ... ghah! THIS big!” and he holds his arms out as if he is hugging a tire. “That was a hundred thousand.”

He shakes his head and his mouth hangs open, just a little. He is hungry like the sea and full of storm, and I look at his eyes because they have watched people die in strange ways.

“But sometimes it’s hard to find people to buy.”

I can only imagine.

We stay there for a while watching the sky blaze red and in that angle of light I can clearly see that Baghdad is bleeding from more places than the just the power plant. The whole city is lacerated and leaking into the sunset. And my bro, Taximan Ali, is just another incision, leaking upwards into the sunset sky here, next to me. And he reminds me of myself, as if I have traveled all this way to discover him.

“Hey,” Ali snaps out of it and he raps his knuckles on my shoulder.

“Wha, Bro?” I look at him and smile sincere.

“I know a guy that can sell you Qusay Hussein’s Mercedes for \$5,000.”

### **--- *Carpe Mortum***

As the drunk death-angel named Taximan Ali stares into the eye of the sunset I stand up and walk over to the edge of the parking lot for a moment of slightly drunk solitude, to watch the last light of day slowly exhale. My bones feel solid and perfect. I

am nearly safe. I take a moment to find the pulse of the world, to look at the smoldering sky. The warm Arabian wind tussles the hair of the palm fronds overhead. I think about Taximan Ali's life of Death. And I think of mine.

My father died in a plane crash when I was about 13 months old. He was a pilot in the Air Force, a graduate of the class of 1963, and after flying a record number of missions in Viet Nam, and avoiding many bullets himself, returned to Keesler Airforce Base, where my mother was waiting for his return. It was his second tour and he'd made it home in one piece. He'd gone to war and come back alive.

A few months later, safe in the United States, while running some test flights over the Gulf of Mexico, his plane gave out underneath him. The aileron snapped from the tail of the plane, the wing cracked loose from the frame, and the vehicle sagged, beginning a long and fatal spiral downwards into Mobile Bay. It was a fast ending. My mother reassured me, when I was small and she related the story, that the last thought he had was of she, and I.

The plane hit the water and shattered into thousands of pieces, skipping debris across the smooth morning water, and somewhere in the maelstrom of metal and plastic, his heel drifted to the ocean floor. A mile to the east, his jaw floated to the bottom.

He died eight days before his 28<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Eight days before my own 28<sup>th</sup> birthday I returned to the town where he died and where I was born to observe, in part, his death. But perhaps more than that I went to observe my own life. For over two decades I had always harbored the strange suspicion

that I would not be able to outlive him. It seemed, as if by inheriting his eye color and the size of his hands that I would also, as part of the package deal of my life, inherit the hour of his death. I knew that this wasn't real, but many things that are not real must still be confronted, and so I waited until that hour came. I drew, with a pen, a mark on the glass face of the watch.

The minutes ticked.

Sitting on a park bench at Keesler Airforce base, just a few blocks away from the street that was dedicated to his name, I waited for a kind of eclipse armed with my notebook and watch. I'd carefully calculated the time of my life in which, at a certain hour, I would exceed the number of hours my father had spent on the planet. Would the number of heartbeats run out for me as they had for him? Would I somehow combust, evaporate, be shattered into a smear a mile long? Would my heart just mystically stop?

Most of us live our lives knowing we will die, but not believing it. In that moment I believed I would die but knew I would live. Life was logically certain, but emotionally dubious. My certainty of death became my uncertainty of life. I knew that the answer was no; my heart would not mystically stop, but somehow I didn't believe this.

The clock hands moved and I sat there telling myself I was in no danger. But I still watched the clock. My blood-hot heart pumped and pounded like a horse and sweat was making my palms shine. My ears hissed and my mouth got dry as cardboard. But I was sitting under a tree in Mississippi, safe in the windy warm September afternoon. From God's point of view this hour was like any other hour. The day, like any other day, was unimportant. I was very alive.

Then the minute hand clicked past the mark I'd drawn on the glass and that was good and so I drew another breath, and then a second breath, and my heart beat a third time, and I realized that someone, somewhere, had died that minute.

But it wasn't me.

In an unreal way I had made it through the thicket and stumbled out to some other side. The colors of the sky overhead did not change; the veins in the back of my hands still looked purple and green. I bit my lip and the high-pitched pain came when I called. The breeze smelled of magnolia. These things did not change. Life was still to be lived. But something - whether it was a star's solar flare, far away, or a neural pathway in the core of my brain - had changed. I had outlived some weak specter that had been stalking me.

Death has followed my mother and me like a taxman in a country of two. I've lost a father, a brother, three grandparents, four close friends, two girlfriends, and enough pets to fill a zoo. I've gone to more funerals than weddings and I'd lost count of the coffins I had carried by the age of eighteen. The Grim Reaper adopted me as his own damned nephew; as I grew older the old fiend became an old friend and now I consider Uncle Death to be my best of friends; he schools me right. And here, in Iraq, is another good lesson.

Some folks have called me a Death Junkie. Friends have misunderstood my talent as a death-wish, others who are probably closest to the mark, call me simply stupid. But there is nothing I would rather do, when the Grim Reaper calls my name and swings his scythe, than stare the blank bastard in his basilisk eye and hold my head high so he can

get a cleaner shot. My father gave me, as all fathers do, both my life and my death. But he gave it to me in a different order than most fathers hand such mysteries down. I thank him for that, and for opening up the gates long before my time was up. Eight days before my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday I died under the magnolia tree, and I was also born in some new way, holding risk in one hand, and life in the other.

If it weren't for death then life would be pointless and so if Death knocks at your door invite him in for dinner. Value is determined by how much you have, and so if you're time is up, the value of a heart beat increases proportionally.

One day the sun will rise and you won't. And since that's the case, then why worry about when it's going to happen? Death is your instructor and it's the only thing that gives life value. After all, when it breaks on the smooth surface of life we can suddenly see, in the ripples, the color of the world. Death defines, and enlivens, and if it weren't for death we wouldn't have family, love, will, freedom, and reason enough to do the unreasonable, like count clouds, or make love, or deliver letters, or sit around in a parking lot, drinking Sakara Gold, while Baghdad bleeds antigravity petroleum woe.

This is how Taximan Ali and I spend some time during our lives of death. We sit, we talk, and we find friends and family and we increase what is important and beautiful and walk through the forests and the shadows of the Valley of Death.

The Valley of Death is not to be feared because there, in the middle of the Valley of Death is the little house where you were born. And in that little house lives your family and your friends. This is all any of us have. At least for a while. In the end, and before the shadow falls, we can share what we have, and bear witness for one another.

With that small magnifying glass, beauty can be found anywhere.

***--- The Backyard Stove***

After an exhausting day of American aggression and Iraqi despair, I am wrapped in a cotton sheet on the sofa in Manal and Aras' living room. I am falling asleep to the strange song of machine guns over in nearby al-Mutanabbi. As I float in and out of sleep, almost used to the guns, the sound of the popping turns into the persistent clatter of raindrops and the sound of rain turns into the chirping of small birds, and these little songs wake me up with the rising sun. I look out the window.

The birds are pecking at crumbs someone left for them on the walkway.

When I step outside into the morning (it is strange; quiet and peaceful) I notice the yard is wet from the rain. Manal and Suham are already up and are busily scraping together mud and mixing it with grass and little twigs and piling it up against the northern wall of the back yard (never having seen two women gathering mud and twigs in their own backyard I'm baffled and figured I need some coffee so I can stop hallucinating).

Suham's friend, another Iranian woman, and her husband, are helping out.

They're in the final phases of building a clay stove. It's mostly done and Suham has again made the rest of us look lazy.

In essence the stove is a big, hollow brick, slightly tapered at the top.

It's about waist-high and half as wide. On the top of the stove is a large hole. The front of the stove is blank, save for the very bottom, just above the ground, where there is

a little air-hole, about as big as your finger. On the ground in front of the stove is a rock — a plug for the air-hole. Normally the fire that's inside the stove pulls air in through this hole, but when the rock is stuffed in there the airflow gets stopped up and the temperature of the fire drops.

This thing's as reliable as multiplication. The interior of the stove is shaped in a cone. This design means that the top of the stove is kept hot — almost hot enough to fry an egg — and the temperature of the interior walls can be neatly controlled with the little plug-stone at the bottom.

We toss sticks and twigs into the hole and it lights up. As the stove starts to warm Suham's friend gets down on her hands and knees, listening at the hole to make sure it's breathing properly. Though a few cracks appear in the sides, we just patch these with some more mud and soon all is in order. We're cookin'.

Suham brings out some flat dough patties, pizza parlor style. They're just white blobs that you slap back and forth between your palms until it flattens and thins out. Admiring the smooth efficacy I give it a try, thumbs in, arms out, nice rhythm; slappy-slappy-slappy. But the dough's not getting wide enough. It's just turning into a lumpy teardrop shape. So I go a little harder. Instead of improving things I lose control altogether and almost throw the dough into the dirt. Suham, fortunately, takes the dough from my ignorant hands and makes a quick recovery from this dusty little demise, whupping the patty into shape in less than 5 seconds. I stand there watching, my mouth open, hands hanging at my side. It's tacitly agreed that I'm better at making mud than bread.

Suham appears with a pillow and a bucket of water (where does she so quickly find these things?). She patties the dough into a nice disk, drapes it over one hand, and with the other dips the pillow in water. She spreads the dough carefully over the wet pillow then looks to see if I am watching. She smiles at me then lowers the pillow into the top of the stove with the dough facing up. She slaps the pillow against the inside surface of the stove so that the dough is actually sticking to the interior wall. Then she carefully peels the pillow out, finishing the act with a flourish of gently setting the pillow down next to the water. I'm on the brink of applauding.

Since the side that is closest to the fire is wet, the dough stays cool enough not to burn. The bread constricts as it cooks and after a minute or two Suham reaches in and peels the bread off and sets it on the top of the stove. It smells bitter and it is steaming. She already has another disk ready, which she slaps to the inside wall of the stove. She peels off a corner of the first piece and hands it to me for sampling. I'm the center of attention - the American who is about to taste the first piece of bread from the new stove.

The bread is crispy on the outside, almost like a soft cracker, but inside is the warm dough, soft and perfect, like meat. Bread that has just been pulled from the oven can never be shunned, but there is something about the smoky tang that puts it in the top 10 pieces of bread I have ever laid tooth on. Traditional bread that's made from scratch in the scratchiest of ways. I mean, we made the damn *stove* from scratch. I nod and smile to let the audience know it's okay; the stove works and the bread is good; we're cookin'.

Aras carries out several bottles of water and I notice that he gives me the one with the unbroken seal. Nothing is said, but he knows and I know that my e-coli aren't calibrated for Baghdad and, anyway, water from the faucet is pretty dubious, to

understate the situation, since some bad-ass virus is making rounds here in the city during these days of dysentery and diarrhea. I appreciated his consideration and try not to drink the entire bottle at once.

Bread and water have never been so fine.

It's an exceptional and beautiful day in the warm morning sun of central Iraq. The clean water and fresh bread is all luxury and surprising technology until Suham and Manal outdo themselves and carry out a metal rack with three fish pressed in between as well as some bay leaves, lemon halves, and a pepper grinder (again - where did this come from? Where does one get fish in war-torn Baghdad? Does she have servants working in the kitchen? How, how?). Summoning lemons and fish strikes me as being part of the Iraqi way; make due with what you have and offer as much of it as possible to your friends and family and anyone else that happens to come over for an afternoon luncheon during the war.

### ***--- The Woman Across The Street***

There are so many duties in Arabia, and hospitality is perhaps the most important. That duty, combined with this family's genuine kindness, quickly folds me in as an adopted family member. As an American, a resident of a land in which people don't have these same customs - not in this same way - I'm stumped.

I'd arrived, a stranger from another country (a country that was invading theirs) and suddenly Suham decides she had a new son and Manal and Aras treat me as brother.

As we stand there in the back yard, chewing bread, and smiling at each other I think to myself that the world is somehow perfect, despite war, famine, disease, and petroleum addictions.

It is nothing like what I have been told.

We finish lunch and the sun and the dust are stifling, making it hard to breathe or move. The fish are hot and the bread is hot and the sun is the hottest of them all and so the dust seems to be lifting more heat up into the air as the sun and the temperature rise. We finish lunch and the women carry everything inside to clean.

The neighbor from across the street walks through the gate.

Though The Lady is tall, she is also small; perhaps she is insecure. She walks across the street nearly every night since she has neither husband nor son, and so she sleeps on the sofa, another (like me) member of the family. She's active. Since the war started she has organized some small study groups for the kids in the neighborhood - daily busy-sessions that she put together to keep momentum going and keep everyone interested in education while things like Government and Economy get dismantled. She is a silent catalyst. She has been a teacher her entire life, and like Suham, her good friend, she's lived through more than a few wars, so this is more or less what she does now; set up ad-hoc schools in times of war.

She is finished with work for the morning. She has come over to pay a visit and get a bit of the bread that I'm sure she was able to smell across the street. Suham also offers her cucumbers and tomato slices and there's some of the fish still warm. Everyone

is proud and we have reason to be because we have created comfort (and that is more difficult than creating pain).

While The Lady talks about the school and a few of the kids that are there I notice that she has sad eyes, like wells of blood. She is a traditional woman, about Suham's age. And she is quieter and gentler than Manal. She has long grey fingers with smooth fingernails that are clean and her face wears a perpetual smile, distressed with the little wrinkles on the sides of her eyes. She is sad and female, like Suham. Many women I've met in Iraq have these sad eyes.

We fill in the corners with cucumber and tomato and talk about the kids down the street and how they have to show up on time each day for escort to school. Most of the kids are concerned, but not scared - not like the adults are - because they see what is immediately in front of them. The Lady says that the school is coming along well enough and she is hoping to talk with a local sheik about putting some money together to improve things.

We lounge around on the chairs and the tiny events take on dramatic importance.

After an hour or so The Lady prepares to leave and before doing so she hands me a piece of paper. When I reach to take it she holds onto it and then puts her other hand on mine; something important is about to happen.

She tells me that it has been over a decade since she has seen her son. He lives in London and she hasn't been able to get a message to him. She asks if I will deliver the letter for her.

Being a messenger seems my happy destiny in Iraq: I am to be the needle that passes through the fabric of the borders, I am to be the carrier of thin wires that help to

knit the world together, with individual threads of gossamer travel and coincidence. I am proud that she would trust me with this - a single piece of paper from a mother to her son, after twelve years, and it is me that is to ensure it gets there. What a precious piece of paper! I will guard it with my life! How I would get it to London didn't matter - an American getting a letter to London is easy. But getting this important little thing out of Iraq is another matter and this is why The Lady is looking at me with her sad eyes and holding my hand with her calm fingers.

These are the important things in the world. Never mind bombs and ambassadors; it is friend and family that makes the earth our own.

That night we are sitting on cushions on the living room floor. It is well after sunset and there is gunfire occasionally snapping outside, but in here we are safe and warm and sitting on the floor. The carpet is a soft green color and the curtains are a chiffon with little doilies around the bottom. My legs ache from sitting for so long, talking with these two. The walls are an unusual mint of a blue and they are trimmed with white. If I were to be asked to place the period of the house it might be the 1950s, or it might be the 1990s, but I cannot tell because, like homes in Russia, a poor country falls out of step with the fashions of the world, and they dwell in a cul-de-sac of time.

We have eaten our dinner of hummous and more of our brilliant bread (we made about 20 pieces, so it will last for a few days). The Lady and Suham are talking about the things that they like about life in Baghdad which amount, mostly, to their conversations with the other old ladies that live in the neighborhood. And they both agree that fruit juice is very good, which leads us to a detail of their favorite things of the mornings.

Suham, of course, likes orange juice and sparrows in the morning. The Lady likes tea and sitting in silence. I assume she means prayer. They both enjoy watching the children in the neighborhood grow big and they both enjoy phone calls from their friends. Neither of them like Ali Baba and this subject pulls The Lady into a long tirade about how there are many kinds of Ali Baba in the world and how bad things are now.

Suham nods and I listen.

The Lady had been born in Baghdad and was married at the age of 17. Her husband was an international businessman who bounced back and forth across borders, sometimes making a good deal of money. In 1970 or so the Ba'ath party took an interest in him. She had a child, who died shortly after birth while her husband was out of the country. But her life went on. Her husband continued to work and, meanwhile, as a way of entertaining herself more than anything, she became interested in education, specifically for young children. She said that it was the act of realization that, for her, was a symbol of everything human - life, intelligence, and spirit. Her job, she said, was to help young people realize themselves. A year after she had her second child, a son, her husband divorced her and left Iraq with the baby to London, where he would be able to conduct work without the Ba'ath party's helping hand.

She expected she would see the two of them again, but the years passed and the borders closed and eventually it was impossible to send a letter, an email, or even make a phone call. So, with the instinct of family hard to ignore, she started a kind of synthetic family of her own there in the schoolyards of Baghdad and here in the house across the street.

Suham puts her hand on her friend's shoulder and they smile at each other then smile at me with their four sad eyes and all seems peaceful until I hear the popping outside. It makes me jump but the two of them keep smiling.

At 4am the world is shaking and rumbling. I lie awake and listen to bombs hitting buildings and it seems very far away - three or four kilometers maybe - but it also seems near. I count four bombs then fall asleep again, to dogs barking.

The sun is a quarter of the way up and the heat is starting again.

I see the The Lady walking across the street towards Manal and Aras' house. She is carrying something - a small piece of cloth.

Walking through the gate she approaches me and doesn't say anything but instead traps my hand again and tells me that she wants me to have this. Inside the cloth is a piece of turquoise cut into the shape of a heart. She tells me Thank You. I guess this is all about delivering the letter.

I don't really want it; a turquoise heart isn't really my style and anyway it will serve a better purpose for someone in the States that hasn't seen Iraq, and for a member of my own family, maybe, but not me so I ask her if I can give it to my mother. It just seems a good thing to do since I will be seeing her in a few weeks. I point out that my mother won't lose the turquoise, as I probably would.

The Lady starts to weep and nod and Suham, who's come out of the house, tells me that this is all okay and Suham puts her hand on my shoulder and I feel so much taller

than either of them and I wonder what it is like to be a small woman, soft, considerate, and weepy.

So I think that this is all arranged and, everything is thankfully, over (I would like it if The Lady would not cry) but the next day The Lady shows up with yet another small white cloth. This one is a teardrop-shaped piece of rock that she calls “indiestar” (I don’t know what it is in English, or even if that is English). That’s what she called it. It’s red with small gold glitters inside of it. She insists I keep it for myself.

### --- *“Cultural Imperialism”*

Several days later.

I’m back to the Baghdad Sheraton, in the bar where I met Ghaith, only now I’m here to talk with Salam. It’s ironic, in a way, to be surrounded again by the hive of buzzing information merchants, but the chairs are comfortable and I knew how to get there, unlike anywhere else in Baghdad.

Salam agreed to meet with me to tell me more of his story.

He started his site on uruklink.net, an Iraqi ISP. In June of 2002 he put up a personal site that was mostly about who got married, where friends of his were working, and other relatively mundane activities in his life that included his circle of friends, such as Ghaith. He had been looking for Arab writers using the internet, but the discussion forums were saturated with Muslims’ rants, which irritated him a snip.

Eventually, through a friend of his named Gotham, he was able to link to other websites. During those days his intent wasn't to document what was happening in Iraq, politically or militarily. He was just talking about his circle of friends.

“But people came to read and so I started talking about what was happening here. I hate the term ‘warblogging’ but okay, we talk about what is happening. One day I posted something to the site and a few people got upset. It was the only Iraqi point-of-view on the war. I made some comments and they got really angry, but I said, ‘Look, I do not represent anyone.’ There are twenty-six million Iraqis. I am just one voice. But this was when journalists started quoting me without looking at what I was really saying, without reading the rest of the posts. Some people were getting really upset, telling me that I should thank America and this just caused me to post some other responses. I liked it because it helped me understand how I felt about things. I wish every Iraqi had a blog. Everyone should be able to do this.

“I can read about what the West thinks of us here. I mean, we're not sitting in tents in the desert, right? We have phones and computers. We also have good Malaysian smugglers working here. We get American movies faster than Europe does in some cases. I make efforts to learn your language, your culture, your news. Why should I listen to criticism from people who do not make the effort to learn about mine? There is a big divide called Language and Culture. If people are on the Net they have to speak English - they must.”

His English is perfect, better in fact, than many Americans I know.

“Arabic, meanwhile, is being diluted; marginalized. It's the way things are - from the Gulf to the Ocean there is no one thing that is really called Arabic Language. I have

no clue how people can think of an ‘Arabic World.’ Sometimes I have no clue what someone is saying to me in Arabic. If he speaks to me in Arabic I just can’t understand him. And technology contributes to this. For example, these days when I text message to another friend of mine in Arabic I do it in both ASCII - English - and Arabic. Why English? Why not Chinese? I don’t know. It’s how things are. Language has a massive impact on how we think and what we do. It’s the first step towards controlling what someone is thinking; as you control the language you control the thinking.”

He seems to be talking about another form of cultural warfare. I ask him if controlling thinking might be a way of developing understanding and developing peace. If it might be a way of increasing understanding instead of confusion. I imagine war and language as two polynomials in a kind of cultural algebra in which the highest common factors can be inverted, and yield their opposite.

“Okay. Maybe that’s the other side of it - at least we can understand each other. And it’s happening everywhere anyway. We all want our language to survive. It’s a big part of who we are.”

“So,” I wonder, “should the plan be to guard the language? For example, in France, l’Academie has a full committee set up for this. I like this idea - they want to guard their culture. The French are aware of the cultural damages of imperialism since they were the prime imperial power for some time. Maybe they’re concerned they’ll get fed their own pudding? I don’t know but what about Arabic safeguards?”

Salam nods and puts his chin on his hand. He’s thoughtful, almost academic, with unusually soft skin and dark eyes. Someone in the other room, the lobby of the hotel where all the media are running around, is screaming about a television delivery. Some

glass falls onto the marble floor and shatters. A cell phone rings. Salam looks down at the table and fingers his water glass.

“I don’t think the Arabs will guard their language,” he says. “It’s too late now, anyway.”

He shakes his head, No, then continues, “This is something from 1000bc. I just don’t relate to it. I haven’t read a book in Arabic in over two years. There are some groups. Like the *Majama Almi* - these scientific collectives - they’re supposed to check these new words, these invaders from other cultures, and decide whether they’re appropriate or not. The easiest thing to do is to turn to English. You can’t stop it.”

He lifts the glass to his mouth, sets it down, then swallows.

“You said that this is a kind of Cultural Imperialism,” I push, hoping for a kind of definition. “What does that mean?” I’m trawling for something simple I can understand.

“To make sure that you are not a threat, to assess your use.”

His eyes dilate and he continues, “Now, remember, the method is more subtle. I try to affect your thinking; I want you to think that I’m good for you, that I’m a bit superior, that I won’t take anything but that I’m there to help you live a better life. I want you to think that this is good for both of us. It’s nice. I want you to think that your future generations aren’t threatened by my offers. I want you to think that we have an understanding. But this is not a dialogue. The conversation is going one way. I’m telling you things and showing you images but I’m not listening. Okay, maybe I listen to what concerns me, but that’s all. The West does not communicate with other cultures because it thinks it is superior. And other cultures think the West is arrogant. People

have decided that the pushing and the talking hurts. And, eventually, this will be very bad for the West. It would be bad for anyone.”

***--- In Which Iraq Installs Electronic Borders***

Iraq has been reluctant to allow the Internet in. Which means a lot of Iraqis haven't been able to get out. It's a cultural fence.

For Salam and other Iraqis there were no means of accessing email accounts. Anything that said “Free E-mail” was blocked by the Iraqi firewall which also made it difficult to set up a website. In 1999 if you could use a Thuraya satellite phone, an internet account in another country, a solid wad of technical grit, and a pocketbook fat enough to feed the data line for the 5 minutes per week you might be able to collect your email. National security groups - primarily the *Mukhabarat* and *Istikbarat* (the Iraqi equivalent of the FBI and CIA) - reported to senior administration in 1993 that an Internet presence would make their job of controlling information flow impossible. The internet was banned and international telecommunication was gagged.

That same year *al-Jamhuriyya*, a national print publication in Iraq, called the Internet "America's means to enter every house in the world" and "the end of civilizations, cultures, interests, and ethics."

- Source: Associated Press, 17 Feb 1997

*Footnote: There were some strangely-positioned voices of dissent. The president's oldest son, Uday, for example, started his own weekly newspaper in June of 1997. He named it al-Zawra, and used his first issue to criticize governmental control policies, including the ban on satellite television and Internet policy. In an op-ed article he said "if this continues, we will end up like one of Africa's tribes." - source: al-Zawra (14 June 1997), as reported by the Associated Press (14 June 1997).*

I think that *al-Jamhuriyya* confused the internet with cable television. In the United States, in 1981, there were there were roughly 23 million "basic cable" subscribers. In 2001 there were 74 million. That's 70% of the people that own televisions in the United States. In Iraq about 10% of all homes have televisions and nobody has cable. At least, that is, until this month.

### ***--- Satellite Invasions***

After leaving the Sheraton I hail an old yellow cab and ask him to drive me through Harithiyah, Kindi, Qadisyyah, Mansour, and a few other neighborhoods, just to have a look around.

In each one I see the strange sight of pickup trucks stacked high with satellite dishes parked in front of stores, unloading, scattered around on the sidewalk. Inside the store satellite dishes are stuffed to the ceiling. And behind those I can see more boxes,

with people sidestepping through the piles. Outside, in the street, customers are loading and unloading, haggling, bartering, and - despite the heat of the immense Iraqi sun - carrying away their brand new connection to the rest of the world with beatific smiles on their faces.

If buying the thing isn't trouble enough, the quantity of cash the transaction requires is. Saddam's dinar notes are about the size of an American Dollar. But the snag here is that only 250-dinar notes are in use. Anything larger (a note of 1000, or 10,000 dinar) would be speedy suspect for counterfeit. The notes are a light blue color with a picture of the grinning Mr. Hussein and a little patch of white space where the watermark is *supposed* to be. But, after looking at 10 or 20 of these I have yet to find the watermark. So despite the fact that people are worried about counterfeit currency (with good reason) all of the money they're dealing with is counterfeit currency anyway. But it's small enough that no one really cares and an implicit agreement to go ahead and use it seems to be in operation (what else is there to use?). And if everyone's using counterfeit money, then what bother? After all, the money I used to buy everything in Baghdad (food, gas water - simple things) were false prints, too, and it worked fine for me. I doubt I once saw a real dinar note.

Because of this situation all transactions are done in 250-dinar notes (which are, you understand, worth about a quarter, give or take twenty-four cents, depending on the day). So imagine, if you will, conducting all transactions in quarters. But the quarters are pieces of paper. So if you want to buy a satellite dish for \$500 you have to bring 2,000 bills with you. This means that you have pre-counted stacks of 100 notes (\$25) that are wrapped with a rubber band. These blocks of paper are then carried around in a white

plastic bag. It happens repeatedly; someone looks left then looks right then pulls the plastic bag out and, after years of experience, counts through five hundred bills faster than you can say 'ATM.' I think they weighed it more than counted it, but soon they'd fork it over, recounted, rubber-banded, and ready for receipt.

Everybody is selling TV dishes; grocery stores, car dealers, and clothing stores have big cardboard signs out front, some of which advertise suspiciously competitive prices, such as 1,000 dinar (\$100) per. And many of the surrounding stores are closed. Just the satellites are being sold; this clustered madness of squabbling and fondling being enough to lift whatever store carries this high-demand product back onto its financial feet. I don't know how many satellite dishes have sold this week - I doubt anyone does - but I can confidently say that there is no other commerce, at street level, that is moving as much money in as little time as television satellite dish sales. Probably not even food, guns, or water.

Cultural invasions are happening at all levels.

Meanwhile, far over Baghdad, a specially-modified American EC-130 plane known as "Commando Solo" is transmitting on frequencies previously used by state-run Ba'ath television. The transmitter, calling itself *al-Hurrieh* ("Towards Freedom"), is, literally, a flying TV and radio studio, spreading anti-Ba'ath messaging and pro-American propaganda to all the people with ears tuned in to listen. I can only imagine the experience of an Iraqi; you get home after risking your life to buy a satellite dish. Your family is pleased. You install the gadget, your family huddles around the TV, you flip the boob toob on, and the first thing you see is an American Flag and a US Army general talking in 'Merican accented Arabic about the good times to come.

But this stuff just doesn't add up. My interests, brewed in my American brain, are commercial. There are three things that I want to know. First, if there are so few televisions, how can so many satellites be selling? Where are the televisions coming from? You need a television for the satellite dish to work. Second, thinking about Omran's air-conditioning story of the Iraqis invading Kuwait, how much do people know about this technology? What are they doing about subscriptions? It isn't like there's a lot of functioning credit cards, banks, or for that matter, cash. What, really, do they think they were buying? And third, isn't there something more important than satellite dishes? What about something like guns to protect their houses? Where do they get those?

The frenzy of television sales is nothing short of a psychopathic frenzy. Baghdad is in the middle of a war, for fuck's sake. Who has time to watch Friends reruns while guys with shotguns are kicking in your front door? Three-quarters of the city doesn't have electricity. Sixty percent doesn't have water. Ali Baba is fusing small gangs into a pseudo-mafia regionally flavored warlord quasi-government organizations and all Baghdad wants to do is watch Friends reruns??

I would go to the looter's markets to see what clues, or even answers, lived there.

### ***--- The Looter's Market***

On a normal weekend in Baghdad three main markets would be in operation; Bab-al-Sharji, Sahat-al-tahreer, and Baghdad-al-Jadeera.

Oddly enough the weapons and electronics - I've been told by Salam and a few other people I've spoken with - are both sold, primarily, at Baghdad-al-Jadeera. So I take a cab down the drive to see what can be found. I suspect things will be rough. After all it's a war, there's no other law and, as my good ole central Colorado upbringing tells me "If it's time to run, go get a gun, son." I'm on that kind of high alert that turns your hearing up a bit, colors get brighter, and sense of smell is more acute. . Full-volume input, waiting in case.

We drive through the streets with the other cars (*are there more cars out today than in the previous week, or is it just me?*), past donkeys, military tanks, people carrying barrels, people running from one building to another, and dry, gasping Baghdad outside, passing by the windows.

We find nothing that looks like a market, and pull a U-turn. I figure that it must be relatively clandestine, something sneaky, like a market in an alley (I console myself with this romantic ideal of thieves selling stolen goods in the alleys of Baghdad, as if it were some timeless and romantic constant, like Pirates, or Princesses). So we swing over to Jadeera proper and I start skulking around, asking people if they know where televisions or guns are sold. The shopkeepers say no, the neighbor says no, the guy walking down the street says, "No, no there is no gun market here, friend," and I realize I'm acting like an ass. If some foreigner were to show up in your neighborhood - some foreigner from an invading country - and ask YOU if there was a gun rally nearby would you even tell him if there WAS? I doubt I would, so I walk into another shop and pull an orange Fanta out of the cooler. The cooler is not a cooler. It is just a cabinet since there is no electricity. The Fanta is room temperature. I had momentarily forgotten. "Nope,

no weapons sold here. Only soft drinks and candy bars," and then a particular smile and nod that makes me pause and pay attention. My intuition says that it's time to go.

Therefore it is time to go.

I'm always happy to make an ass out of myself, especially to learn something. More than that I don't mind people I don't know thinking I'm an ass. But, at the same time, this isn't my market (Jadeera nor the soda market) and I'm where I shouldn't be, a nosy little rat-bastard, so I take the warm Fanta and use the door.

The market at Bab-Al-Sharji, however, yields a different result; after a busy night of plundering, the Ali Babas of Baghdad are busy unloading their booty, perfectly willing to sell it back to the Jack they stole it from. And so is the rest of Baghdad that had reasonable and legal things to sell. The sun is high overhead and the world feels a little bit mean: compromise will be made, but only for a profit.

The plaza, central in the city, sits underneath a huge concrete monument that looks like it was airlifted out of the Soviet Bloc. It is a 60-meter long bitumen slab with figures of workmen engraved into it. There is another smaller monument; a 4-meter tall mosaic of Saddam's smiling face (he's dressed in a business suit, now). It is built out of small tiles, except for where his face was, and that has been shot to shards by passing machine guns.

Underneath the monument is the market. Clusters of normal, poor, men sell clusters of normal, poor things. Things that neither you nor I nor the people selling them really want; wood-handled screwdrivers, Nike shoes for toddlers, 220-110 English converters, roller skates, Tupperware, dusty copies of Risk board games, talcum powder, stained manila files, little plastic chairs for dolls, and Daisy Duck tank tops.

I see hundreds of men walking back and forth, arguing and bartering, cash changing hands, pointing in the air, stomping their feet in dissent, smiling and staring, while they wait for a new customer, but there are no women here. And under umbrellas where the shop keepers have set up their tables, sit people on benches and beneath the benches, is a mushy greywater carpet of cigarette butts, sheafs of paper, coke cans, cartons of cigarettes, more paper, and mysterious brackish slush.

It is dense. People are stirring like liquid, they're so close. The Bab-al-Sharji Market is a living thing, an old, world-famous market, and it has been around for thousands of years. Everyone from pirates to princesses have, in fact, been here. I stand in the middle of this human river and I smell thousands of lives. Cardamom and nutmeg, body odor and booze, sewage and newspapers, cologne, bleach, and mothballs. It is not too different from how it was a thousand years ago.

I keep my hands near my pockets and watch out for bumpers, rippers, or pickpockets. There are definitely no women here, there are no children here, and there are no soldiers here, either.

Drifting through the crowd for an hour or so I start to meet with a little success in my search. Televisions are being sold. Some of them are damn nice televisions in fact; color TVs with hand-held remotes. Most of the Sonys are new, still boxed, with speakers and a VCR. I ask one of the sales flips how he had gotten his and he tells me a story about a Baghdad-wide bargain. There was a delivery that a Turkish guy had shipped to a secondary breakout in Mosul. That person had sent four semis down with these televisions to Baghdad about a week ago. There were about four thousand of them. Those were purchased immediately, but in the last two days the Turkish guy is, again,

coming down from Mosul. So these chaps at the end of the line are trying to get rid of the leftovers before the new shipment arrives. I'm sure it's difficult, that day in the sun in the Bab-al-Sharji market, but not as difficult as selling Daisy Duck tank tops.

One guy selling this same model of Sony television has a demonstration rack set up with a few VCRs and a computer. I walk up from behind seeing first the expressions of the men before I can see what they are looking at. There are maybe forty of these guys clustered at a single television screen. There are a lot of wrinkled foreheads and dropped jaws.

“And now I can STOP the picture, like this!” The Salesman says.

And a couple of heads pull back and mouths snap shut because - remember - they have never seen a television image simply freeze. This might be like you or I hearing a radio broadcast but rather than turning it off the sound simply stops and the sound is held in a steady hum.

“If I want I can start again... and now, watch carefully, and ... fast forward ...”

I lean around the side and crane my neck to see what's up on the monitor. A Hollywood cop movie zips through a chase-scene. The Salesman is fast-forwarding a VCR.

“...annnnnd.. STOP!”

Mel Gibson is standing next to his car, pointing his gun, legs spread. Danny Glover is behind him doing the same.

“...and now REVERSE!” he shouts and Mel and Danny are simultaneously sucked backwards, into the car and it accelerates, backward, around the corner.

“...only four buttons; forward, reverse, play, pause..”

The men watching the demonstration are in their 30s, mostly. Everyone looks confused except for a few that look downright pissed off. This is some spanking-new media they're getting, crazy shit, designed for things from distant shores. And as I see their expressions I realize that cell phones that download language packs in cafés will have to wait a while. In fact they will have to wait about ten years, if Kuwait can serve as any rough indication.

The Salesman is tall and has a George Michael stubble, his neck shaved clean. He has sunglasses on the top of his head, like Italians wear them, and he is dressed in a nice white button short sleeve shirt with a pointy collar he's flipped up. A pen sticks out of his pocket, giving him the particular 'savvy, smart, and good with the numbers' look. Despite the heat this guy is cool like The Fonz.

I had found where some of the televisions were coming from, but I hadn't gotten an answer to my second question. I doubt I will. And my third question still stands: Guns, Goats, and Generators. Forget Mel Gibson and Danny Glover, where are The Important Things?

Bab-al-Sharji is selling a lot more than shirts and VCRs.

People are sold here, as well as class-A drugs, counterfeit document, and services that run the gamut from assassination to kidnapping to deranging the NGO's enough to keep the US from stabilizing anything around here. The deals would make an honest government man's teeth chatter. And Bab-al-Sharji also sells simple things, like bullets. After decades of war and several invasions it only makes sense that the citizens of Baghdad are one of the most well-armed populations on the face of this planet of ours.

Everyone - and I mean 100% - of the population in Baghdad owns a weapon. And compared to your average Baghdad resident, the average member of the United States NRA is a weekend watergun enthusiast.

The American invasion has given birth to a whole new subculture of criminals, a new super class of Ali Babas, that never had this kind of 'freedom' under Saddam. Meanwhile, in reaction to the Ali Baba super class, all the regular folks have to protect themselves, and so they buy an automatic rifle, a mortar, a couple of handguns, a silencer or two and some stun guns for the kids to use. Remember, licensing weapons in a country like Iraq - a country where there is no government - does not happen.

A man sitting next to me is selling bullets. He's selling them out of little self-service Tupperware dippers, sorted by caliber, as you might find almonds or cashews for sale in Safeway. I act interested for a few seconds, idly poke a few of them and then ask him where I can find a gun. I say "gun" and hold my hands about shoulder-width apart. Big Gun.

He stands up and yells someone's name. I look but don't see anyone. He yells again, louder. A huge thug of a beard lumbers out of some shade and waves me over. I swallow and step through the crowd. He doesn't say anything but turns around and walks back to the corner where he'd been lurking. As I follow him I tuck my shirt in and make sure everything is battened down tight. At a moment like this I'm glad that things like properly lacing my boots have taken clear precedence over shaving. Talking gun sales with thieves is not the time you want your shoelaces causing you problems in a tight getaway.

Once we get back to his street-corner lookout station we stand there for a minute. Or at least enough time for me to wonder if I should say something. Do I indicate what I'm specifically shopping for? Is there a special code word, a secret handshake? I look at Beard and he looks at me without smiling or blinking. This is hardboiled Baghdad and while it occurs to me that I might have finally gotten myself in too deep, it also occurs to me that there's no reason for this guy or his buddies to harbor anything against me. They might steal my cash and beat me up, or... or they might be pissed I'm American and that might be enough to get killed.

A smaller man dressed in a crisp grey suit walks up, doesn't say a word, shakes my hand, then turns around and starts to walk away. The Beard looks at me and gestures with a wave of 'follow him, Stupid.' So I stupidly follow.

The streets are narrow, maybe only two meters wide, and we thread our way through more men, over more puddles, past more trash, into a small side street that is more indoor than alley. My guide turns a fast left and ducks through beaded curtains. I dive into the darkness and the world suddenly changes into something dark.

I can make out eight men stand around the room, some of them drinking tea. They are well dressed and I can see that a few of them are not wearing traditional Iraqi dress. There's a Sikh and some guy that looks Japanese. The Sikh has a nice clean turban and a handle-bar moustache kept groomed and shiny. He seems fresh off the time machine. His counterpart, a compact and well-pressed businessman, keeps listening and saying "Hai." They seem weirdly levitous, as if buying guns is a standard business transaction (I'm forced to imagine that they are outfitting a group, or small army). One thing is clear; this isn't the market anymore and the fact that they have tea is a sight to

behold. It's common to be offered tea (and rude to refuse it) but it's generally reserved for friends, family, and serious business.

This room feels almost like a tobacco shop. Roughly square, the place is lined with shelves and large glass display cabinets (the kind that rotate if you push the little button on the top). The shelves on the walls run floor to ceiling, end to end with innocuous boxes, shipping numbers stamped on the side. Whenever I find myself in a place like this I'm sure to watch the other people there. Sure, like everyone else I don't want to act like a jackass while I'm in a back alley gun shop in Iraq, but I also like watching the people that are watching the other people. This is all to say that everyone's a bit nervous, and that makes it entertaining.

Counters are covered with accessories; holsters, cleaning kits, parts, repair manuals (in Arabic, French, English, and Chinese). But I'm interested in the glass cabinet case. Weapons are sorted into big and small. In one is a row of hand grenades, knives, brass knuckles, more knives, more hand grenades (there seem to be two main kinds, one that is the Viet-Nam era pineapple and another is tubular with a button on the top). There's even a few landmines for sale.

As I stare at this materiel I'm reminded that "legal" and "illegal" are concepts that are, literally, broken. There is nothing that is "illegal" in Iraq right now and so everything, including driving on the wrong side of the road, is "legal." Of course, I couldn't get a bottle of Arrack into Kuwait City, but here, on the other side of the border, buying a gun that can kill a herd of cattle in 10 seconds is something else.

After having been in three war zones, I can tell the difference between a tank and a slingshot, but that's about it. The handguns - mostly .38s and .45 caliber - cost about \$5

each. There's a few .45s that are \$8. The automatic rifles - used AK47 style machine guns - are selling for only about \$15 a piece since, I guess, so many had been looted that prices have dropped. I wondered if in this citadel of crazy capitalism a free box of ammo comes with the deal.

Guns and Iraq go together like mom and apple pie. As soon as the sun sets in Baghdad the bullets start to hiss through the air light up and everyone that isn't firing one has one under their pillow. The country is saturated with guns. Despite the efforts of the NRA, and other American groups, to make firearms legal, guns are no where near as much a part of American society as they are Iraqi.

I've been in the shop for five minutes before I realize that people in here are talking in substantially quieter tones than when I walked in. From that third-person perspective I realize that I, as an American, should probably split. In other words, the only Americans in Baghdad that walk into back alley gun shops are either servicemen or secret servicemen and so, from the shop-keepers perspective I'm probably about the closest thing to a cop that exists and if I'm with the Americans (as is clear from my jaw) then I'd have access to all the weapons I wanted. Which asks the question why I'm there at all. For all he knows I may be coming back with my buddy the Colonel and to shut his shop down.

I decide it's time to go, I bid a polite *adieu*, and pass through the beads back out into the bright sewage-smelling sun of buy and sell.

Two hours later, satisfied with not knowing everything that goes on in places like that, I take a cab across the al-Jaysh Canal into what used to be Saddam City, a relatively

modern grid-pattern low-income housing residential district that's been afflicted with mass riots during these days. It's recently been renamed Sadr City and houses an estimated two million Shi'a residents. Local *mullahs* have started instituting their own law and rumor has it that the neighborhood was in pretty good shape, all things considered, before the Americans rolled into town. I want to see a "normal" place, where there were no markets, satellite dish sales frenzies, or hot guns. I want to see how people are living that aren't in the middle of the mess, and what kind of result the war is having here.

But what I was looking for wasn't in Sadr City; Sadr City is just like everywhere else in Baghdad, albeit a little cheaper. As I walk down the streets I can hear babies crying and a gun goes off somewhere before the afternoon silence sets in again. The streets themselves are cluttered with car parts, piles of broken concrete and strange nonsequiturs like seat cushions and hydrogen canisters. A couple of corpses are strewn in the street, propped up against the curb like big black mannequins, only bloated and round with detailed purple faces. A couple of houses are still burning.

After several blocks I get into a slightly more peaceful section of the Sadr district. The air is cleaner. Walking through the slanting sun of late afternoon Baghdad seems almost peaceful. The smell of dates, dust, and a slightly acrid scent of burning rubber blows on the Arabian breeze. I walk past row after row of tract housing, lined up in the Levittown style tract housing. I step over a pile of concrete rubble and see written on the wall with spray-paint, one of the messages of the emerging culture in Iraq; "Suicide bombings will make the Americans leave."

--- ***“We Want Them To See Us Like They See Themselves.”***

I don't really know what Aras does during the day.

My guess is that he spends most of his time with friends around Mansour. I know he has family in Baghdad but I wonder if, given his attachment to the Kurds, he's involved in political poo. He tends to disappear around 10 in the morning and re-appear for lunch, then be gone again for a couple of hours, but home for dinner. Manal and Suham don't seem to care. At least there has never been discussion around it.

Just before the war started Aras had been in Turkey. The war started in Iraq and he came back quickly to be with Manal and Suham, and to help take care of the neighbors, such as the sonless mother across the street. It was a hard journey. He walked across the Syrian border into Iraq through a freezing rain, paid an enormous amount of money to some guy he met to give him a lift to the Baghdad city limits (the driver wouldn't enter the city) and walked to the house while US bombs dropped around him. The trip took over two days of solid walking.

Aras is serious as he tells me this. He points to my notebook again.

“Let me tell you something, Mark. I wasn't worried about the bombing. The strikes have been straight to their targets. As you have seen they were not attacking civilians. There were, daily, 200 or 300 missiles. If one or two miss, that's not bad. So we were sure that the missiles would hit the targets that were military positions or guard

palaces, as you have seen. Have you seen cases of civilians that have been hit? Have you seen bombs that have missed their targets?”

I have to think on that one. There were cluster bombs that had been used, and I did see several buildings that had been bombed that weren't administration buildings, but overall I had to answer honestly that, no, the bombing had been surprisingly accurate.

“So you see we were not afraid during the war. The Americans did a good job. But we were afraid of one thing. We expected that in Baghdad Saddam Hussein would give a real fight, a strong resistance. And we were concerned that he would use a weapon, some kind of chemical, and that then the US would answer with an atomic weapon. That was our fear. You understand. If Saddam Hussein uses chemical weapons then maybe the Americans will use atomic and then the civilians would be destroyed. But nothing like that happened. We are glad for this.”

I stopped writing long enough to look up. His hands were turned, palm up, and he was gentle.

“We didn't think any power at all could remove Saddam Hussein from power except the United States. ... no way to remove Saddam Hussein. The only way is that the United States would attack him or bring him out from the power. And that's what happened.”

Aras is pointing at the ground. He's serious. He's Kurdish and he's glad Saddam is gone. Manal, sitting on the sofa, starts to clap and nod. She isn't Kurdish, but she feels the same.

I ask Aras, "So all the people in Los Angeles and Toronto and Bombay and Paris and London and San Francisco and New York... all the protestors that are opposed to the invasion... Are these people wrong to oppose the war?"

"No. They are not wrong. But they do not live the problems that we live here. They do not know, as we know, how bad Saddam Hussein has been." Aras' voice is short, curt without being impolite, brief without being uninformative. "Did you know that Saddam Hussein would give any suicide bomber \$50,000? Did you know that?"

I don't answer. I've heard about payments, and I knew that there were Martyr societies in towns in the West Bank but ....

"Well, write that down!" Aras insists. He points at my notebook and scowls.

After jotting it down, I ask "How do you know this?"

"This is easy. It's in our television, newspaper, embassy in Jordan, it's announced here that everyone with the bomb belt, you know, will get \$50,000 from Saddam Hussein. Palestinian people. Do you know... I am Iraqi. Okay," he shifts gears, shifts in his seat, claps his hands, rubs his palms together, leans forward and says, "This is my big problem. I want you to write this down."

He points to the notebook again. I assure him again.

"Now I am not able to have a house in Baghdad because I am Kurdish. I can't. I have enough money to buy a house here but I cannot register it in my name because I was not born here. But I am an Iraqi! Can you buy a house in New York? In California?"

"Well, theoretically, yes," I answer.

"Any state you want - it's your country. But I cannot. I am forbidden. If I want a house I have to go to Dohuk. No, no - even in Basra I cannot buy a house there. Here, if

I want to buy a house I have to register it in Manal's name. It is because I am Kurdish. I should be able to buy a house here simply because I am Iraqi."

Manal agrees from the sidelines and says, "There are many problems here, Mark. There is much discrimination."

To my Western eye Aras and Manal are the same race. Hell, it's the same culture even.

Aras continues, "Now everything is different and I am thinking very short-term. I hope the US troops will stay here for at least one year or two years so that we can avoid a civil war. And I hope that, as soon as possible, that we will have our own government, and a democratic one that will be chosen by voters, by voting Iraqi people. I hope that the democracy will take place here in Iraq."

He looks at Manal. She nods.

"And you know what? It has already started. Otherwise I couldn't talk like this to you."

He falls silent and looks out the window in a way that makes him look just slightly confused.

"What else has changed with Saddam gone?" I ask.

"HAH! Everything!" he immediately fires, his eyes again in focus and his face suddenly animated.

"Everything was a problem with Saddam. My wife, she couldn't travel freely. Before we traveled anywhere we had to pay about \$200 to the government just to get permission to leave Baghdad. Before Saddam Hussein. 20 years ago, when I wanted to go to London I could get a visa. Now, no way. Not even as a tourist. I think this will be

better for us now, to go and see the world. There is an important thing I want you to know, Mark. I think that before, with Saddam Hussein, every country in the world hated Iraqis. Have you noticed this? If I am going to give my passport to any foreign embassy they will not give me a visa. Why? ‘Because you are Iraqi!’ they say. Okay, fine. I think that Saddam Hussein has made us a very unwanted people. We have become very unliked. “

Manal makes a tisking noise with the teeth then pitches in; “People in other countries hear that Iraqis are suicide bombers or extremists or Ali Babas waving guns. People in other countries don’t accept Iraqis. If the world has a new view of Iraq now, then it can only be better. We do not want people to be afraid of us. We want people to know we are wealthy. We want people to know we are free. We want people to know that we are a peaceful country.

She looks at Aras and concludes, “We want them to see us like they see themselves.”

### **--- *Werewolves***

It’s fucking two o’clock in the morning and I thought I’d be able to sleep here at the Palestine Hotel, but found out too late there are no rooms available because they got bombed or something. I’m half-drunk from some flat Budweiser that a GI gave to me at a party here and now I have to pay the driver three times the normal cab fare to get me over to al-Mansour so late at night, but he said he’d do it and so off we drive, leaving the

safety of the hotel with its Marines and barbed wire and we're back out into the Baghdad night, warm, like Hell for beginners and probably a lot more dangerous since we can die and people in Hell just suffer.

The cab driver knows what to do and I trust him with my life.

We're driving fast. The cab is smashing its way through potholes big enough to lie down in, and we take dangerous fast turns around corners. I imagine that we'll slant a bit too far, get a tad too top-heavy and topple over, making enough noise to alert all the Ali Baba wolves within ear's shot radius that we're a big cow laying lugubrious and cross-eyed, waiting for slaughter.

As we drive from one street to another I see Baghdad's night life, and it ain't pretty. I'm reminded of the movie *Escape From New York* in which Kurt Russel (or someone equally rock-jawed) is trapped in Manhattan during some future in which there are no police. It's trite like that; there are occasional camp-fires burning out of hacked-off oil drums. I see the stained faces of brigands and thieves squatting nearby, their necks lit, sepulchral, from below. Everything is crumbling. Guns are more frequent than wallets. Two men are huddling over a third, who does not move. I turn, watching them pass, for detail, but the cab is hurtling around another corner and since there's no electricity there's no stoplights and the streets are deserted and the two and a half men are gone in the darkness. Images blur past out the window of the car: Puddles darker than water - perhaps they are merely oil - seep out of piles of rags or stacks of garbage. I can still see people out there, occasionally, in snapshot poses. Two men are eating some small animal they've cooked over a little fire. Rags and ragged, the details that are not devoured by speed are hidden by the night but still I can see Horror and Doom between

the buildings, and walking along the sidewalk. This is the stuff that stereotypes have been built on, and it seems Medieval and I realize that I will never forget hanging over this abyss and I begin to pray the car does not break down.

In a world where there is no government there is only bullet law. People consolidate and pre-governmental institutions emerge, what most Americans call Gangs. And this is where the law and order of night-time Baghdad really lives now.

Looking out the window of a car gives you only so much resolution, but when you stop for a second you can see things more clearly and some of them you wish you'd never seen. And so as we pull up to an intersection, the driver looks down to fiddle with something (a string that was tied around his wrist for some reason - attached to his wallet, I think - and he stops paying his nervous pound-the-pothole frenzy of mind. He lets his attention drift down to his wrist for a few seconds and I see three men to our right step from behind a cardboard box and begin walking towards the car. No, these men are not walking, these men are jogging, and I'm definitely not talking about a Getting-A-Little-Exercise-In-The-Morning kind of jog, either. They're shambling if they're running and two of them are carrying something in their right hands; sticks, or guns. I think to myself, 'Well, I don't really have anything to lose other than my life so I might as well relax and wait to see what happens,' but I hear my voice saying something to the driver (I don't know what I'm saying) and the driver looks up, sees these three shibboleths, panics, slams the gas, the car lurches, lurches again, and stalls. He mutters something, looks at me in the rearview mirror (why did he look at me?) and tries to restart the engine, but it just stammers and won't turn over.

The three men are about halfway across the street now and I can feel my stomach tightening while my brain is churning and I'm wondering things like "Do I get out of the car or stay in here and get shot? And if I get out of the car what to do after that?" or "Is there a chance they're coming to help? No. Maybe they know the driver? No... Maybe they want to grab me and hold me hostage thinking I'm an American GI and someone gives a shit about me enough to pay them ransom? Yeah, probably."

I don't like the idea of getting shot while in the back of a cab. The man on the right has a filthy face with a smear from his upper eyebrow down to his chin (is it blood?) and the other two wear moustaches and they are in their late and dangerous twenties and one is carrying a pistol and the other has a rifle and the guy with the smeared face has a metal pipe.

The car is churning and the driver is swearing and the three men are walking and I sit with my hands on my knees in the back seat, and weigh my chances and strange alternatives; I don't have to run faster than they do, I just have to run faster than the cabbie and anyway he charged me three times the bill, and he's no real friend, but I don't like the idea of leaving someone to Baghdad werewolves. It doesn't matter, I'm going to get shot here. Even if I do get away I would then be out walking around in 2am Baghdad without a map or a weapon and it'd only be a matter of a few minutes until I got chewed up. I decide, like a woman in a wild-west wagon, to stay and fight with what puny weapons I have. It's a stupid way to die, to thieves and brigands (I think like that woman with the parasol) but hell, I might as well do my best.

The car starts. It lurches forward and we simply drive away.

My circulatory system begins to unravel. My thighs are tight.

Out the back window Smear-face looks dull and impotent. The other two walk back to their dark alley to wait. If you're an opportunity feeder you have to be patient.

### **--- *Cool Freedom***

On my final afternoon in Baghdad I'm driving with Aras and Manal. We're going to pick up ice for the refrigerator. The windows are all rolled down. I have my hand in the breeze, drying off my sweaty palm. It is bright and Baghdad is beautiful and old enough to be interesting, and not at all a trash pit. Palm trees nod greetings to the golden sky above. I smell meat frying and bread. The city is, maybe, coming back to life. It will live. It live through wars in the future, too, as would cities in the United States that would, some day, be just like Baghdad; old, attacked, and desperate.

The car is hot and dusty and I look down at my feet.

Aras asks me if I like George Bush and I say that I don't care much for him. Manal leans forward from the back seat and puts her hand on my shoulder and she shakes me and she tells me that I'm crazy, he is a good man. She would marry him, she says. She leans back into the back seat again. A few seconds go by while she thinks on this and from the back seat I hear a chanting "I want to marry Mr. Bush! I want to marry Mr. Bush! I want to marry Mr. Bush! I want to marry Mr. Bush!" and Aras isn't laughing too hard because maybe he's her husband or because he isn't as big a fan. We drive by an American soldier guarding the corner of some street, and Manal catches his eye, waves,

and we all laugh as his head turns to follow the car. Manal is beautiful and laughing and Iraqi and she feels good this afternoon.

Aras reminds her that she is already married.

I remind Aras that George Bush is also married, and point out that Manal is certainly more beautiful than Lara. I say that I don't like George Bush and that Manal is about all George Bush has going for him.

Aras leans over, while driving, and says to me, "You may not like George Bush but I like George Bush. Because if it wasn't for him then I would never have met you."

My throat snags on that and I can't reply with the few words I have and so I put my hand on Aras' shoulder and shut up. My other hand is outside the car. The warm Baghdad breezes are twisting between my fingers, whispering to me something about how love and friendship are small enough to survive something as big as war.

After a few minutes we stop to buy the ice. It is incredible and deliciously cold and wet. There are huge silver blocks, as big as my leg, melting on white cotton cloth on the sidewalk. Everything seems clean and cold. Maybe twenty people are here to buy, standing around with blue dollars crumpled up in their fists. Everyone is excited about this. One man sells, one man loads. The loading man is about 20 years old and he has a shaved head and muscles with two huge hooks in each hand and he just hooks the ice and lifts it like a little baby into the trunk of your car and he closes the door and smiles polite and you drive with your ice in the trunk.

As we drive back past the shops that are only again beginning to open, the city seems wounded, but smiling, like a patient in a hospital bed, glad to still be alive. But something seems ill to me, as if the patient never needed to be wounded in the first place.

War is complicated, and no single opinion is ever more correct than any other. There is, really, no “right” and I still haven’t shaved in some couple of months.

We are driving through that goddamned heat, with the melting ice in the trunk, and Aras and Manal are in front. I watch the backs of their heads bobbing. They are singing. They start singing nonsense songs, just repeating the word "freedom" over and over again, or Aras is hanging out the window and screaming hello to his friends, just to say hello, or screaming "FUCK SADDAM" and shaking his fist at everything out the window because it is the first time he thought to do something like that. We drive by an image of Saddam (the faces of the effigies have all been destroyed) and Aras laughs a victory laugh and pounds the steering wheel and breathes strangely in a state of heartfelt and violent prayer.

### ***--- Hitching Back***

Back when I left Kuwait I’d told Hussam that if I wasn’t back by a certain date that he shouldn’t worry, and if I wasn’t back at a later date he should write me off and tell my friends that I wasn’t coming back.

I look at my watch and realize I have exactly 16 hours to get back before Hussam will write me off and tell everyone I've died in Iraq. I don't care to cause strife and so I have 16 hours to extract myself from the war zone, get into Kuwait City, and let Hussam know I'm still alive. There's no phoning since there's no phones. The job has to be done with surface travel.

There is one problem. Carrying as little cash as I am, I can't afford to pay a taxi back to Basra (there are, of course, no trains or planes or boats running - public transportation has been shut down). If I can get to Basra Mr. Talal would, I'm sure, shuttle me the short distance to Um-Qasr's border and from there my rather dubious stamp job will get me, I'm sure, back into the safety of Kuwait. At least I think I'm sure.

So I have to find a ride at least to Basra.

Aras volunteers to drive me the entire distance, but this isn't acceptable - it's too far and the gas will cost too much (in the last week lines of cars waiting for gas have become miles long and gas has become unbelievably expensive - people are waiting overnight, despite Ali Baba and his night-time forays). I again fall back on my oldest and most favorite form of travel; Hitch-hiking. I'm sure that this morning there is *someone* headed to Basra with a spare seat in the car.

In fact I'm more sure of that than I am sure that I can get back over the border into Kuwait.

Aras insists I'm being stupid. It's too dangerous, he says (this coming from the man that walked through the rain of bombs). We cover all the usual semantics and argue over this for some 10 or 15 minutes until I ask if he would rather help me find a ride from

the south end of town or drive me the 7 hours to Basra. He sees a single shred of reason and so a reluctant compromise is struck.

Only when the agreement is settled does Aras allow himself a smile.

Contrary to popular belief, hitch-hiking is always preferable to regularly scheduled transportation for two reasons. First, you meet a lot of nice people you never would have the chance to otherwise meet. It is a string of happy accident and chance friendship. The myths about Ted Bundies and Ed Geins populating the highways of the world are a load of well-washed crap. In my experience those guys are such extreme exceptions that I'm more likely to get hit by a runaway meteor than picked up by a Ted Bundy throat-slicer. In fact, my experiences have been the opposite. I've had grandmothers feed me home-baked chickens and 4-person families give me a safe place to sleep (and insist I stay for a couple days, afterwards, just because we're all having such a grand time). I've met friends.

Secondly, you learn about where you are and the history of the place better than any tour guide could ever do; local restaurants, local history, and how people there live. Those were the two reasons, in fact, was why I was in Iraq; to meet people and to learn about their lives. So hitch-hiking was a logical conclusion to the trip.

Aras is willing, reluctantly, to investigate the possibility. My survival seems as insoluble to him as his is, walking into Baghdad as he did, to me. So we agree that what must be done is to find The Driver.

The thing that seems most likely is that Western journalists will stop for me. When I was in Kuwait I had an advantage because pretty much anyone going north to Iraq had some official reason generally associated with the media. Even in Iraq it was

clear I wasn't from around there - which would mean I was one of Them - and media workers seem to have that peculiar tendency to glom together for reasons of necessity, income and fear. Most of the western media didn't give a shit for the Iraqis, but they seem to be willing to help out other westerners. It's not evil or inconsiderate, its simply a form of culturalism; you trust who you know (or who you think you know). It's just how human culture works.

Anyway, Aras decides that the best plan is to get to the gas stations on the south end of Baghdad, where all the roads converge into a river of highway traffic. Find a gas station, and ask around there, he says.

It's agreed, and we're ready to leave.

I say my goodbyes to Suham and Manal and The Lady that lives across the street. There is much hugging and kissing and my throat snags again (love has nothing to do with time, but with experience, and what is seen together) because I feel like I'm leaving people very important to me and I wonder which of them I will ever see again.

They wave to me from the frame of the back window. They keep waving. Aras and I drive away and they are waving from the porch until a parked car obscures the view, then a building, then a corner.

Worlds split apart and they're gone. It's that simple. There is a wave and we turn the corner and my friends are gone and reality splits apart into two of those necessity-pipes and I keep traveling down my own path, and they have theirs.

On the south end of town, at the outskirts of Baghdad, where there aren't as many people, the paths of traffic have found the highway. We ask around at a station on the

side of the road, where people had pulled over as they were leaving. There is a line for gas, but not as bad as in Baghdad, and we eventually find a guy that's headed to Basra. The Driver already has another rider with him (I don't understand how they met, but I don't really care much either) doesn't mind a second, less so one that will help pay for insanely expensive gas. I'm more than happy to put down a few Dinar and so I climb into the back seat as the engine starts. The windows are tinted a dark purple. Aras, like his family, waves to me and fades. Reality forks, a second time.

There are three of us in the car and those two take the front seat, which is great as that leaves me a little extra room in the back. As we swing out onto the entrance ramp I shuffle around through my bags to make sure I haven't dropped anything while switching cars and discover something I wasn't expecting. Suham has packed a little lunch for the road and slipped it in my bag when I wasn't watching. Like grandmothers all over the world she is one step ahead of everyone else; she stowed away two apples, a cucumber, a banana, and - most precious of all - a bottle of water. There is no note.

But there is one problem; the bottle of water, while in the commercially-packaged plastic bottle, has a broken seal. This water is not from the factory. Suham poured it from the plumbing systems under Baghdad, brackish waters rippling with dysentery and other cooties mean enough to turn me inside out. I hold the bottle to my forehead and on my cheek. It is cold. And it is water. And I figure, well, if I get thirsty enough I'll have a little sippy later on. Maybe. But I probably shouldn't. But maybe. I've heard stories of people dying over bloody toilets and I'm not interested in such a gruesome ending. I eye the bottle not able to tell it as friend or foe.

Outside the car, Iraq rips past. The road south of Baghdad is smooth and The Driver hits the gas hard. The drive from Baghdad to um-Qasr is normally about a six-hour drive that, judging from the quivering speedometer, we'll be doing in four or five. If all goes well I'll be in Kuwait City by sunset. I smile to myself and settle into the seat.

The landscape changes from the intestinal grey and red ribbons of Baghdad into the blue and brown streamers of the Iraqi countryside; the small mud huts, the date trees, the sluggish river, the Babylonian winds that are whipping up sand, far off to the south.

Despite the war and all of its brutal waste and bloody chaos I'm surprised that I don't want to leave. I can't tell precisely why, but perhaps it is that under the hot sun of Iraq, and next to the white heat of war, reality burns a little brighter, and what is important in life becomes a choice rather than a law.

The countryside stretches out in front of us and I dig around in my bag again, looking for my notebook and camera. The drive is going to be long and I decide to take some notes, maybe draw some if the ride isn't too bumpy.

As Baghdad fades out the back window the guy in the passenger's seat turns around to have a look at me. He has dark, shiny eyes set deep into his skull. He is handsome and rugged in his conservatively Arabic dishdasha. With a hooked nose, a black moustache, and a red-checkered turban that is impressively draped over his shoulder he cuts an impressive, caballero look; a Marlboro Man of the Sudan.

One elbow is over the seat and he's staring at me, expressionless. Five, perhaps ten, seconds pass. I raise my eyebrows and smile a bit to ease things along.

"So? What do you think?" I honestly ask him.

"You're American." He calmly replies.

“Yes, but it’s not entirely my fault.” At least that was what I intend to say.

Even if I were the chest-pounding, flag-waving, God Bless Our Troops type cowboy, this is clearly NOT the time to do engage in such activities. John Wayne comes to mind and I hear him saying something about ‘strangers in these parts.’

Another seven or eight seconds creep by.

“What do YOU think?” he asks.

I have to consider this for a bit. I’m not sure if he’s chiding me or just bored. I decide that his question, like mine, is honest.

Omran told me what to say, and I repeat what I saw. “I think the National Museum and Libraries got wrecked, Baghdad University is trashed and the Oil Ministry is in fine shape with US guards sitting on the roof drinking fresh water. I think that my friends are glad Saddam is gone. I think that in the end things could work out okay if, *inshallah*, my countrymen smarten up and they leave Iraq soon.”

Omran told me what to say. He also told me that ‘*Arabic people are very warm and very friendly*,’ and I fix this in my mind like a vase of flowers in the middle of a table, before guests arrive, and I tell myself that Marlboro Man is different from me, and the differences add up to a greater sum than we, as individuals do. People are not alike everywhere, but this is to our benefit.

His eyes waver out the window for a second then he looks back at me and snorts. A wry smile cracks his face for a split second.

He replies, “The Americans are after Iraq’s oil. When they get that they will finish taking the rest of the Middle East. There are no weapons here except for the ones the

Americans sent us in the '80s. There are no terrorists here except for the Americans. The government of America is out of control. It says it is a democracy, but it is not."

He stares at me, hard now, and he sets his jaw and now I know what he thinks.

I'm not so confident about our next seven hours together.

He continues a little louder, warming to the subject. "America is a liar and a thief and the world's biggest terrorist. They, with Israel, are here to terrorize all the Middle East and control our governments. You want to take all resources from these people who are already very poor?"

Ah, there it was. He has just made that critical transition from speaking about "They" to speaking about "You" and I realize that - from the view in the front seat - my face has just changed into George Bush's. Things are now getting personal and we aren't even 20 minutes outside of Baghdad.

*'Arabic people are very warm and very friendly,'* I think of Omran and wish I had his ability to speak Arabic, or to appear different than I do. Even for an hour. I want to blow out the window, like a breath of cigarette smoke, and float in the breeze, and never have these problems again, but I cannot, and will not, and I look at Marlboro Man and nod in agreement, because I think he may be right. I cannot say, from my small eye, what is right.

The Driver looks over his shoulder at us. He's a bear of a man in his 30s dressed in a yellow and white collared shirt. It is striped and very clean. He has 4-day stubble and is wearing Tom Cruise Ray-Ban sunglasses, driving with his wrist on the steering wheel so that his fingers dangle in front of the topped-out speedometer. He sticks his

right elbow on the seat (they both have their elbows on the seat, now) and looks pissed off, too. He is getting ready to say something.

I'm now about as nervous as I have ever been in my 10,000 miles of hitch-hiking. I'm thinking that I should be ready to take a high-speed roll onto the highway if a gun comes out. One thing is sure. If they don't kill me then this situation will teach me to listen to my mother and not hitch rides in active war zones where my country is the aggressor.

The Driver looks over his sunglasses, pokes a cassette tape into the dashboard, and says, "Hey, do you guys like Celine Dion?"

He cracks a huge, beautiful smile. He is missing a front tooth.

The Driver is going to Basra to bring some cash to his sister. He had made some good money in the last week and wants to share the wealth with his family. The Driver's sister lives with her husband and two daughters and they got robbed a week ago by Ali Baba. No one was hurt. The Driver now visits her and his nieces a couple of times a week, just to make sure that everyone's okay. He sells radios for a living in Baghdad.

Marlboro Man, meanwhile, works - or used to anyway - at the shipping and distribution centers in Basra on a *khar*, an old river inlet that's been converted into a shipping yard. Ships would come in during the day, palettes would get unloaded in the afternoon, and those get sent to different distribution centers in Basra. They unloaded some 12 boats each day before the war. Now there's no work at all. During the working days it all took place under the watchful eye of Saddam's riverside al-Sabah palace and the massive 7-story tall yacht that had rumors of bedrooms lined with mercury. Now the

yacht is a pile of cinder and smoke and Marlboro Man is out a job. No one's bringing boats in or out of Basra these days.

Marlboro Man is most proud of his children, his wife, and his mother. They are living together in the same house. This wasn't the state of affairs before the war. Before March, his mother lived in a smaller house just up the street, with a friend of hers. These days she spends the nights over at his house, relying on her family for safety. They cling together, he tells me, and points out that it isn't right for her to live by herself, but at least it is just down the street and she enjoys waking up with her grandchildren nearby. She has been working at the mosque every day since the war began. A lot of people need help.

He hopes to purchase some land outside of Basra and he claims that his children will make good farmers. His family and the family next door are working on a couple of gardens behind the house. He smiles and holds up his hands, fingertips touching. The tomatoes are growing well.

As the hours pass and the dust gathers on the windshield wipers Marlboro Man and I conclude that we are both nice guys. Ironically, we were suspicious of each other for similar reasons; He had been worried that I'd pull out a gun in the car, which was why he had turned around to watch me. Before that he'd been watching me in the makeup mirror. I was, after all, the first American he had met and this was, after all, what Americans did; they pull guns and shoot people. He's seen it all a hundred times; it was what everyone said.

The situation is so stupid that it's almost worth a laugh. I think of Americans watching television and being told that Arabs all shoot guns. It's all gossip gone gospel.

"What is that?" he points to my camera.

"Want to see some photos of Saddam's castle?" I ask (this American has an itchy trigger finger, after all).

I click on the button and hand him the camera which displays a little image on the backside screen. He leans back, squints, then turns it upside down.

"Is this a television? How does this work?" he asks.

I show him the photo of the entry room at the front of the main presidential palace; the mirror-walled room with thick red carpeting and red-suede upholstered waiting chairs inlaid with solid gold. The next photo is of an amphitheater-sized room with gold-lined chairs, doors, and painting frames. Bullet holes in a cracked mirror. A painting of a mosque and of missiles. The image in each photo is the same: grotesque expense.

I get tired of reaching over his shoulder to advance frames and take the camera from him.

"Here." I put his finger on the button shaped like an arrow, "push on this to see the next picture." He gets the picture and disappears into the front seat.

After some 20 minutes he turns around again and says, "You know, if the Americans take fifty percent of our oil and leave us the rest I'll be happy."

"Why?" I ask.

He looks at the camera and finishes with, "Saddam took ninety-nine and left us one." He turns around again to finish his tour of the national palace.

The bottle of water Suham gave me lost its cold hours ago. In fact it is about as warm as a bottle of fresh urine. The Driver and Marlboro Man are been drinking from a canteen they brought along. It sounds like it has ice and water sloshed together. They offered me some an hour or so ago and I felt a little rude when I'd refused. But they had refused one of my apples, so it worked out okay. I was getting so lustful for this water that I couldn't think about much else, so I decided the water Suham gave me was my friend and I took a little sip, rapidly thinking "no problems, no cooties. no problems, no cooties." Sometimes these sorts of things do some good. I'd been in several countries that didn't have any real water infrastructure just before I got into Kuwait and in each one I'd slowly gotten used to the water. Each time I tried just a sip (usually after having been served ice, which is a good way to get started with a new e-coli system). And each time nothing bad came of it.

I lick my lips and stare out at the landscape of ancient Iraq, considering friends at home. We are flying through a funereal storm of sand. Outside, in the winds of change, a little village that has somehow survived the last thousand years is in the middle of another day like millions of other days that have washed past it. The buildings are weirdly simple mud blocks with doors cut into the front face. Three kids kick a ball around. Some date trees are slapping in the breeze. Below them an oily pool of water snakes along next to the highway. Something is sticking out of it, maybe a box, but the details are lost in the speed and the town falls away behind the car. It is like any other part of the world; a neighborhood with families and kids and houses and yards and trees. This is how people live. But the water makes me realize that these people are so far off The Grid that they stagger at the brink of disease.

How long will it take, I wonder, before that village looks as modern as Kuwait City, or Bahrain, or Reno, Nevada. Her million days are over. Things are going to change radically now, everywhere, in this land. On one hand if there were a McDonald's in the neighborhood then there'd be electricity and water. On the other hand these folks would be eating a lot of fatty cow shit and turning diabetic while they watch hygiene advertisements on television. But I saw what Marlboro Man meant about the 99/1 ratio. Everything happens always and none of us can control it and all of it is, somehow, absolutely necessary.

One of those oil pipelines that make up Iraq's circulatory system is running parallel to the highway and seems to be flying in formation alongside the car. Something shaped like a donkey-cart shoots past. Further out, among the dunes, an Iraqi military tank, with the top ruptured black, smokes. Black chars of sand are sprinkled around, as if burning gas exploded, or was dropped from above. Between the gusts of sand I can see what might be parts of cars, or guns, as if some factory had been blown apart, far far away, and these scattered pieces finally fell to earth near the tank. It doesn't make sense. The horizon is turned upside down by the *suhab* and the sand particles in the air give the sky a sick and creepy greenish pallor, drifting like nuclear fallout, but made of gold and malachite and copper, an ancient Babylonian mist of metal, swinging like huge fists, slowly, over the empty deserts of Sumeria.

I wake up. My head is bouncing against the window. We pull into a dusty parking lot. It is lunchtime in Nasiriyah, they say, get out of the car. I grab my camera (which Marlboro Man kindly tucked back into my bag while I slept) and I follow them

down a concrete path that is framed with delicate wood trellises. Vines spill down around the walkway and it smells like olive leaf and apricot.

The Driver shoves on the restaurant door (I can see for the first time that this guy is really large, and he lumbers) and the three of us step into your standard highway truck-stop greasy-spoon diner, Iraqi style. Three long wood tables split the place into quarters and about 30 people are eating chicken and laughing and arguing and suddenly shut up when they see me. Everything is as big as Texas, and everyone in the place is staring at me, like they do in Texas, wondering what the hell That Guy's doin' here. People stop eating, their fingers limp in front of their mouths. The Driver walks over to a table and indicates where I should sit.

"Thanks," I mutter under my breath as I sit down, "that's very nice of you."

He's making it clear to our audience that I'm accompanied (whether the message is Brother or Bitch, I don't care) and that he is responsible for me. I'm making everyone a bit nervous. Some of the eyes stare me down, others dart away, and this insect-fast world of Gaze and Judgment is new here, at least as far as Americans are concerned, and won't go away, and will keep people apart from each other for centuries.

The general noise of plates and conversation starts back up again and the daily special is brought out by a tall man in an apron; he brings us ten or twelve huge plates with three main courses of chicken and rice and bread soaked in tomato sauce. On the side are the cucumbers and thick slices of raw onions.

The food is excellent. Hunger is the best sauce and I'm downing three times the amount I normally eat. The hummous is peppery rich with olive oil and little nuts sprinkled over the top. It really gets The Driver talking. For most of the drive he had

been pretty quiet, concentrating I guess, but once he eats some hummous in him he gets started and doesn't really shut up for the rest of the meal.

He picks up an empty plate and turns it at an angle, like a little satellite dish.

For the last few years The Driver has been selling radios to car mechanics out of his shop in al-Wahdah. It's a living, he says with the usual shrug, but it isn't the kind of money he wants to make. But now that Saddam (and everything else) is gone a panic has erupted, old laws are gone, new ones aren't around yet and among the chaos The Driver noticed, like me, that people wanted one thing more than any other: satellite television.

"Now," he smiles and clutches at the air, tucking his chin into his neck, "Now we can see," he said.

So he started selling. In the last nine days, he tells us, he has made almost \$2,000 selling satellite hook-ups - an enormous amount of money for someone used to making a percentage of that in a month. This war is the best thing that's ever happened. He's making fat bank giving people what they want.

"What could be better?" he asks.

Getting the dishes into Iraq during the war - when the demand first gathered - was a dangerous gamble of getting bombed versus getting satellite TV. His cousin brought some dishes down from Turkey, some came from Syria, some came, incredibly, from Kuwait. His cousin, he points out, is a courageous man. He was delivering satellite dishes at the end of April, when UN food and water delivery trucks weren't willing to make that same trek. His cousin was obviously more motivated, for obvious reasons, than UN food delivery guys (people commonly die for lack of funding). Four hours after his cousin had delivered the dishes he and his uncle placed a few out on the sidewalk.

And five minutes later the first sale was made. So for the next week he stood there with a cash register, and his uncle stood there with a shotgun, and they told each of their customers that delivery and installation was free with each purchase, and they hired all of their friends that had lost jobs.

Marlboro Man says, while chewing his chicken, that he's been wanting to buy one and that he spent a couple days last week looking around. He swallows his chicken. The Driver's confident and nods and says he can get him a discount. An address is written on a piece of napkin and they talk faster about money.

Naturally, like in all of Iraq, we are eating with our fingers. Manal and Aras had set out forks and spoons for me while I was staying with them - at least they did the first couple of nights - but I was used to the idea from Kuwait and, in fact, I prefer eating with my fingers. A friend of mine who's eaten with his fingers all his life once said "There are studies showing that people begin salivating when they touch food with their fingers," and this study, by the way, was done in countries where people normally eat with their fingers. In the US and Europe people probably salivate when they pick up a fork - we like what we're familiar with. But, here in an-Nasiriyah, I think eating with my fingers counts for a lot in Marlboro Man's ledger.

After lunch, while we're were washing our hands, he gives me a sudden smile for no reason other than that we were washing our hands together.

I want to be a nice guy. I appreciate his smile. Neither of us pulled guns on the other. I need something simple to say, something easy, agreeable, common, important and true. I want to make some formal declaration of amity, or point out that angels live

everywhere, or offer to take care of his family in case he dies, or something like that; something important.

I reply to his smile, “Good lunch, no?”

He smiles and slowly nods and I can see that he is a little king.

I wish that I was like him; that I was part of a group of people. But, then again, I do not.

On our way out the door Marlboro Man insists on paying for all three of us. This seems a nudge awkward, but Arab hospitality knows neither discretion nor pride. If I can fault this custom I can only claim confusion when generosity is practiced with such fierce conviction. But this beautiful trait of the Arabic world is probably the single biggest difference I’ve found between Arabic and Occidental; the different versions of generosity. From Palestine to Kuwait I’ve found that people are determined - brutally determined - to honor their family and be as hospitable as possible to strangers. Marlboro Man insists. I open my mouth and put some money down and The Driver puts it back in my hand and pulls my arm toward the door.

The air is light and dry and my mouth tastes like tomato sauce. Things are quiet here. Nasiriyah seems peaceful enough. The truck-stop diner is operational. Things are okay for now.

Next to the car a gray-bearded Bedouin man and his son walk over and introduce themselves. They are dressed in their formal best since it is the son’s birthday. They are pleased about this. The two men have a large black cow with them, and they seem very pleased about this, as well. This is a big day for The Son and so these two are celebrating

it by walking around, talking to people, and smoking cigarettes. We all start laughing at this and finally settle down to business so that The Driver and I can sing happy birthday together in English.

Marlboro Man walks up behind us and says, simply, "Good."

At this point everyone is quite pleased with the celebration, and the old man in particular. He pulls a knife out of his *dishdasha* and holds it up. I take a photograph and it seems a good idea to me, smoking and laughing and walking around with a cow and a knife to celebrate your son's birthday.

Nowhere on this great planet are people sane and this is why we must celebrate.

The Nightmare Highway - that part of the road littered with husks of cars, burned piles of rags, long strips of blackened sand, and around it all the blowing winds that follow us like huge ghosts - clutches for the galloping car. The world outside is haunted and starving. It is brimming with phantoms.

Sometimes there is a thing, like electricity, or heat, that appears around a war. It is a panic shared among thousands of people, a transmission of fear to and from everyone in the area. It's an instinctual communication that is not articulation, but sensation; shared sensation. Fear is the most primal and most social of all emotions and while I'd have a damn hard time proving it, I'm convinced that it is communicated among people and animals in a manner far more subtly and far less physically than we suspect. Nothing ensures survival more than fear, and nothing would ensure survival among a group of animals better than the ability to share that sensation. Fear is a psychic transmission that crackles among the frightened herd the split second before they bolt, but more so fear is

also a thing that lingers behind, long afterwards, like a scent in the air. This was what I was smelling in the torture tanks in Basra and in the streets of Baghdad at 2am in the morning. This is what makes your hair stand on end and it is what makes death, somewhere nearby, terrifying. And it hovers here, along this strip of highway, like the smell of a carcass. But my window is up and I wait for the car to pass through it all and I keep my eyes shut and wait for it to pass. Like weather, or a bad mood, or a wound, it is all a matter of waiting.

But as soon as I think we are escaped from the strange emotional cloud of the area and I open my eyes three figures appear on the side of the road. I see some boys crouching over something. Further off the road is a pile of rags or dirt. The details are smeared up by the car window and velocity, but as we get closer I see that one boy is stomping in a puddle of red, and another is holding a stick up over the corpse of a man who is wearing only a shirt. The boy is beating on the dead man's thigh with a big stick. The skin is either very brown, or missing. Behind the boys are some two dozen more corpses. The boys are playing with the dead men.

This is what boys do with corpses.

I used to do the same thing, only when I did it they were birds or dogs, not neighbors.

But this I cannot say is right or wrong, it's just a part of the world, the huge machine that operates in cycles and we, as cogs made of dreams, spin in our place, and do our best not to shake apart under it all. It is our job to dream the nightmare.

An hour later The Driver is singing, ever so sweetly, under his breath, as if no

one can hear him, “*Every night in my dreams, I see you, I feel you...*” It’s that Celine Dion song he played on the cassette deck. He really loves Celine Dion.

The Driver abruptly stops singing and turns around to announce that the US Army will be staying. He is concerned that Saddam will appear in North America and wreck havoc there. He is worried for the Canadians.

He directs his first serious questions at me, some of which are relatively easy to answer; Will Iraqis be issued US passports? Will the American Government give Iraqis new cars? Do you know Paul Bremmer?

Some of his questions are a little harder; Will the US attack Syria and Iran? Will Iraq have a president? Will he be Shi’a? Will there be women in the government?

And then there was the most difficult of them all, and, for him, the most pressing; Will Celine Dion tour Baghdad?

Once in Basra, we leave Marlboro Man in front of his mother’s house. It is a simple, relatively new house in the north-eastern section of Basra. Fortunately, it is tucked away from the fighting that has been ripping up the streets of the city, leaving pock-marks from bombs, tread-marks from tanks, and even some inexplicable linear explosions a block long. But here it feels suburban and almost quiet, at least by such relative measurement.

Marlboro Man gets out of the car with little ceremony. He simply opens the door (wind pulling at his dishdasha, sand hissing against the door, the smell of hot grass), he solemnly shakes my hand, grabs his bag, slams the car door, and walks to the front of the house. The front door opens. A small woman emerges out of the dark opening. She is

pulling a veil across her face, and Marlboro Man walks inside. He disappears and the woman closes the door. He will return to Baghdad and he will buy a satellite dish and he will see many strange things on his television, some of them from the Baghdad Sheraton, and his views will shift for better and for worse. The world forks again and realities diverge. There is no way to determine what influence this man will have to my life, nor mine to his. One event can change everything.

The Driver spins around and looks at me. He is still missing that tooth, of course, but somehow he seems like someone I have known for years. Hitching is strange that way. Landscapes change fast.

He smiles and says, "You can sit in front now."

As I sit down in the seat and pull hard on rusty hinges to close the door I ask him if he can drop me off in the middle of town, hoping that it won't be out of his way. It's about 3 minutes' drive from Marlboro Man's house. But this is important: one of the rules of hitching that any hitcher worth his thumb knows is this: You don't inconvenience the person who was kind enough to give you the ride.

The Driver asks me where I'm going.

"I don't care - whatever is easy for you. The middle of town, near the big intersection?"

"No, no. You are going to um-Qasr, to Kuwait."

"That is where I will eventually go, yes," I carefully say, losing track of the questions and answers.

"Then we go to um-Qasr where you will enter Kuwait, but I cannot take you to Kuwait City because I have no papers."

“No,” I tell him, “I have a ride I can get from Basra,” again facing Arabic custom and Iraqi generosity and I know that arguing with him will be fruitless and I will either be forced to lie or else accept the ride.

I remember my conversation with Aras and I start to put together a little agreement we can come to when he beats me to the punch with, “If you walk it will take you all day and you might get shot. If you find another ride it might take you all day and you might get shot. If I take you there now we take 30 minutes and everything is okay.” He says that he doesn’t have anything better to do and anyway; it is important that the friendship between Iraq and the United States be started on the right foot.

I am wishing him good luck with sales. I hope his sister and her family are well.

He tells me that, god willing, all will go well and peace will come. He’s not worried about money for, maybe, the first time in his life. He tells me that as soon as things cool down he is going to buy a plane ticket to Miami, or Ontario (he doesn’t know which). He wants to see North America, he says, now that he is a part of it. He smiles his magic bull’s-eye smile.

We spend the next 5 or 10 minutes leaning against the side of the car as I write down numbers, streets, and the names of friends and family in Canada and the States. He gives me one of those huge awkward hugs that large men give, and slaps me hard against the back, then he puts the palm of his hand against his chest as a symbol of many things Arabic; devotion, kindness, family, sincerity, appreciation. I thank him again and start, simply, walking away. It is why we have driven here and, anyway, there is nothing else to do than to half the world, once again.

As I walk toward the checkpoint, a wadded tangle of military gear, truckers, and media angst, I realize that space is changing. Instead of getting closer with each step, I am getting farther away. Instead of each step taking me closer to the border check, the space is telescoping away and I am losing ground. I realize that my heart is cracking and my eyes do not see light, and the stars are out of alignment, as if the world might just shatter underneath my feet.

I turn around three or four times to look at The Driver. I am hoping, each time, that he will have left and will be concentrating again on his own life, driving back to his sister's or whatever, and not thinking about me. But he instead is still standing next to his car waving, and smiling with his goddam gap smile. It feels empty, to be walking away so easily, while he waves good-bye from inside the smoking nightmare of the war, standing next to his car, waving with innocence. I am leaving a friend stuck in a trap my country made. Or maybe I am not. Maybe he will do fine with his satellite sales and sister in Basra and cousin in Turkey and his uncle with the shotgun. Maybe he is waving from inside a nightmare woven into a dream with bombs falling all around, and pink people dressed in sheet metal, with money coming from everywhere, and all of the world watching you there, standing next to your car, waving good bye to some American guy that is leaving your country.

As I look back for the final time Aras and Manal (and Suham with her beautiful smile) mirage behind him, trapped in the same huge bruise named Iraq. But then, too, they have a new stove that makes good bread and their friends and family live nearby and they have high hopes for a new future. In this they are luckier than most Americans. Aras and Manal both wanted to put their engineering degrees to good use. They wanted

to work and have a real, solid purpose, and make some kind of difference in their world. Maybe they are trapped, maybe they aren't. It is all a matter of invisible and shifting necessity.

The woman with her son in London, (yes, the letter is still safe here in my bag I think as I touch it to confirm it is where I left it), Taximan Ali, Salam, Ghaith, 7-up Mohammed, Mr. Talal... these people all stand behind The Driver like a gang of tough angels. Somehow I consider staying here, inside of Iraq, and giving everything up, as I've done, twice before in my life - just for the simple joy of a change in direction. I could live in Baghdad and try to help people navigate the storm of America that is gathering overhead. Things here in Iraq will change as fast and in the same way as things in Kuwait changed in the last decade. The shift will be tectonic, industrial, and immediate.

But it is always for others to decide what to do with their lives, and not for me to make cultural consultation, just because I'm from the otherland. This, really, is why war is a crime; it is not the killing or even the destruction of things like the museum. It is the simple fact that war deprives people of their choice to live as they choose. None of the people in Iraq have chosen these circumstances, yet the choice swept them up, like sand in a storm. No wonder they want a democracy. They assume it is a method of ushering in peace in which leaders will not select guns over diplomacy. They assume it is a method to peaceful resolution.

So I keep walking toward the border until, mercifully, the mayhem and the noise suck me in; Bedouin kids are begging the driver of a 16-wheel semis delivering red white and blue packages that read, "FOOD FROM THE USA." Clusters of soldiers, casual in

their Humvees, rifles draped over a knee read “Rock And Roll Guitarist” as Tool plays in the background. A woman with a pink Southern-California veil (the gauzy type, not the Muslim type) is yelling at a border guard and slapping her thigh in protest. There are broken light bulbs and pieces of paper and cardboard boxes blowing with the dust. I pick my way through this mess of transition and show my visa to the border guard. Up ahead an SUV is being searched by the Kuwaiti border patrol.

I walk up and ask the driver in English if I can catch a ride south.

He’s from Turkey, and after two months in Baghdad, he’s returning the rental car to the Hertz office in Kuwait City. He has been installing satellite uplinks for American television crews in Iraq and after sixty days he’s been released, with someone else coming in to take over for him. It’s his job; to fly around the world and install satellite uplinks for television crews in war zones.

### *--- Epilogue*

I got an email from Aras. Somehow, from the bedlam of Baghdad he had gotten an email account and sent that thin stream of data out of the country. He wrote,

hi mark

I was warried a bout you and about your arrival save to home. we are fine as you left us but may be lettill beter.

manal and her mother send you thier greeting and all the people  
her too , wish you the best and keep in touch

with our love

manal & aras

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Four years later, in 2007, Suham, Mr Talaal, and most of the other people I met in  
Iraq are deceased from one cause or another. Suham and Aras fled to Syria. Nearly one  
million Iraqis have died as a result of the war. Many many more have fled.

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*NOTES: All interviews are word-for-word transcriptions from actual conversations. If  
the conversation took place in French or in Arabic translation has sacrificed poetic  
implication for the sake of intended, literal meaning. Each event that is explained  
actually happened and I have done my best to convey the experience faithfully without  
betraying the feelings and impact on the people involved. All illustrations were done  
after photographs that were taken during the time there. These illustrations are  
integrated with the photograph, this manipulated image is then printed and watercolors*

*are applied, producing a 13"x19" original piece of artwork that is then included in the layout of the book.*