HitchHiking to Iraq

(or, Hummous To Hamburger)

(Abandoned book project. Please read preface.)

by Mark Stephen Meadows

13 May, 2013
Colorado Springs, CO, USA

Salaam Alaikum.

Ten years ago today, in 2003, I hitch-hiked north, into the war zone of Iraq. My plan, at least for the past decade, has been to return, today, to see how things were going and write about it. It was an ambitious project fueled by history's mechanical repetition and oiled by the Bush administration's unreasonable logic. I decided that I would visit the results of the invasion and make before-and-after snapshots of this ancient country in an historic transition. I wanted to see what all the blood was about.

Unfortunately, I won't be returning. Things are going worse than I'd thought.

Several months ago, as I was preparing for my return, I emailed with my Iraqi friends and family, asking them if I could come back to Baghdad and stay with them again. The response said, in short, "No: it is too dangerous. If you, an American, were to stay in our house there could be repercussions from the neighbors." This was a rather wild thing for me to read since before, while bombs were dropping, Ali Baba was looting museums, houses were being robbed, smoke was rising into the night sky, cholera was visiting more houses than Ali Baba, and, in short, all of Baghdad was in a frenzied state of total mayhem and violence .. well, it wasn't a problem for them then. They liked America then. It wasn't so dangerous then, evidently.

In the last ten years things have changed for me, as well, and with a wife, a child, a sailboat, several new book projects, and a new company my function on the planet has shifted. I no longer feel like a target, for one. Foreign affairs are of less interest, my perspective is more local, and gain holds more attraction than risk. I've changed my style a bit. Maybe I'll go back some other year.

I still want to see what the US Government did with Saddam's palaces.

Therefor, due to an excess of new roots, and a lack of old reason, I'm abandoning this book, at least for another decade.

I'm sorry to those of you that would have read it and I am more sorry for Iraq and the people trapped within that suhab of a war.

All creative projects are eventually abandoned, but at risk of being overworked. This time I'm avoiding the risk.

You can find the book in its shabby form here:
http://markmeadows.com/books/iraq/

I hope to finish this someyear, but it's been ten years and today's the day to call it quits. At least for now.

I'd like to send a hearty Shokran to Arras, Manal, Ali, Hussam, and especially Shirine, for your help and hospitality over the years. I wish you the very best of luck, and hope to see you some day soon, in whatever country we may find one another. I hope we may all remember the words of Amu Talal, and keep his memory sharp, and the memories of others, with us as we move forward towards days of prosperity, peace, and long lives.

Warmly,

Chapter 2: Basra

$100,000

A couple of journalists from the New York Times pick me up. 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. 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 important, and so sanity starts to leak.

I put half my money under the carpet and the other half under my insoles. I then pull my boots on and look at myself in the mirror and tell myself 'Here we go.' I need a shave. But is facial hair is stupid or important? The mirror? My reflection?

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

I step into the hallway, into a kind of necessity-pipe, and fate swarms and gathers, 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 s 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.

On each street I see maybe 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 17th 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 and he's 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

FOOTNOTE: If September 11 was a tragedy for the United States, the war in Iraq was a time when hell itself devoured all of Iraq's major cities. 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. Over 21,000 Iraqis have died as a result of the war.

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 Baath, non-Baath, 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'sGuestHouse.

The complex had many ironic names including the Office of Public Safety (one of it's 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

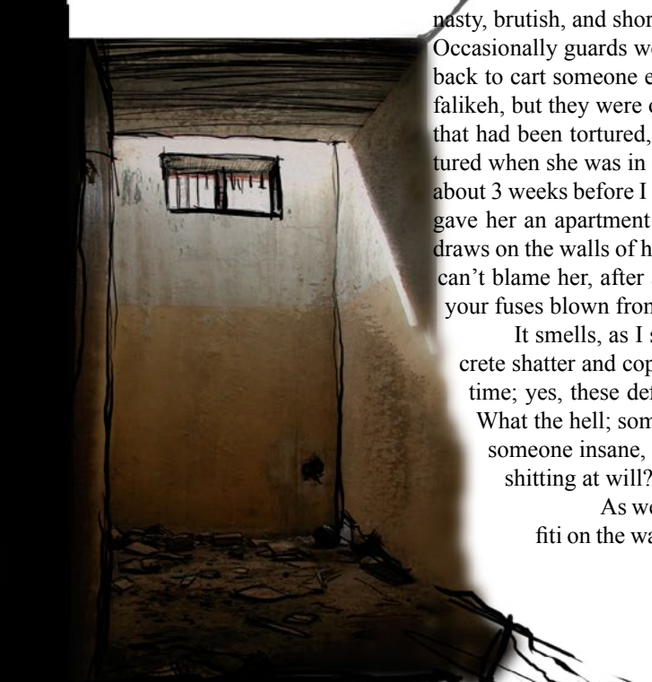
yard. My guide tells me that during the digging process - an attempt to extricate prisoners from randomly placed underground cell - the soldiers heard people's voices, shouting from inside one of Saddam's subterranean nightmares. Apparently some nine or ten people were saved when they lucked into prying 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.

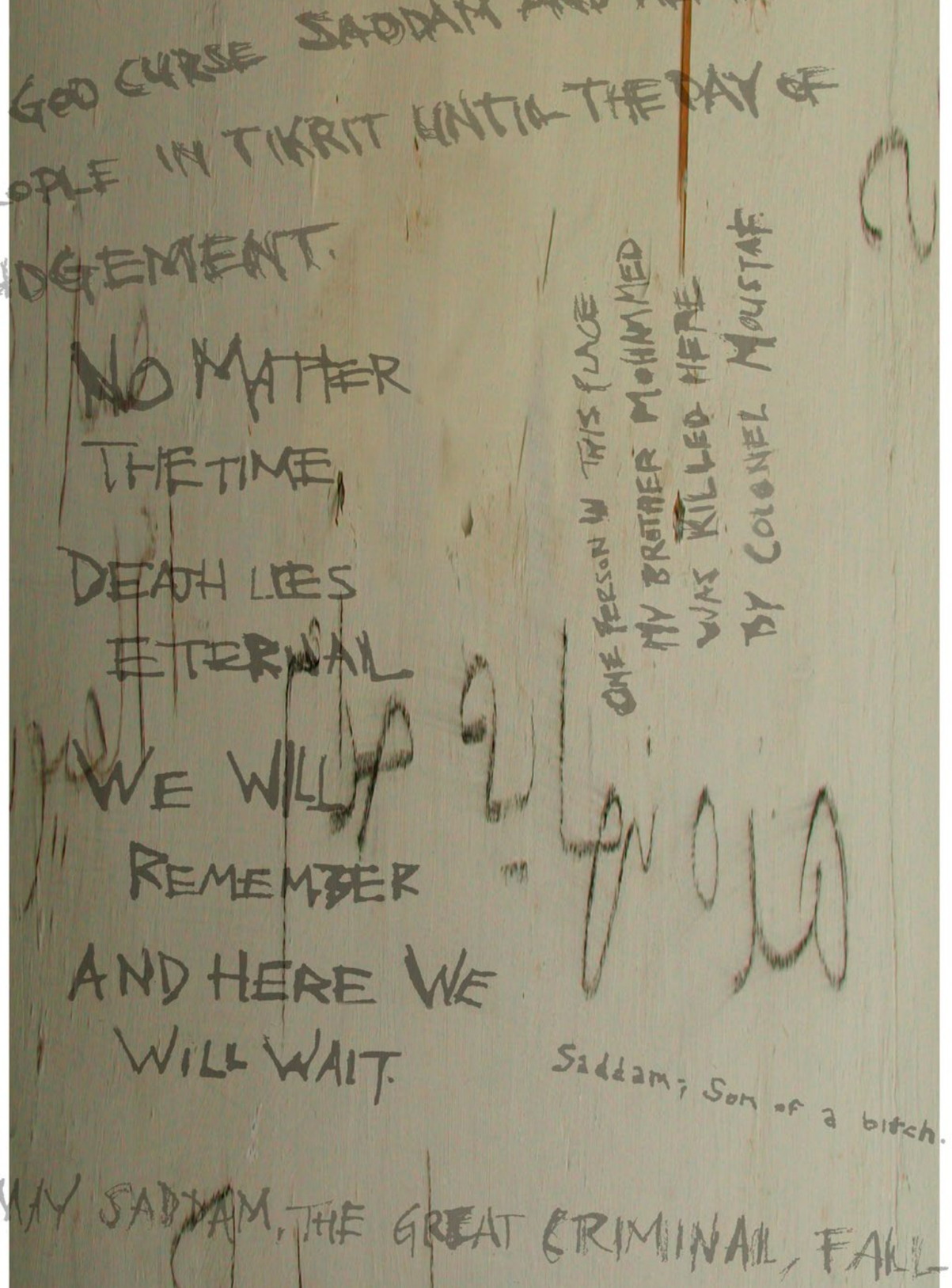


Off of the hallway are small rooms, about two or three meters cubed, that serve as prison cells where fifteen prisoners would be kept at a time. Some people passed the better part of their lives in these rooms. Jammed in together there wasn't enough space to lie down to sleep, hygiene was inadequate, 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.

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.

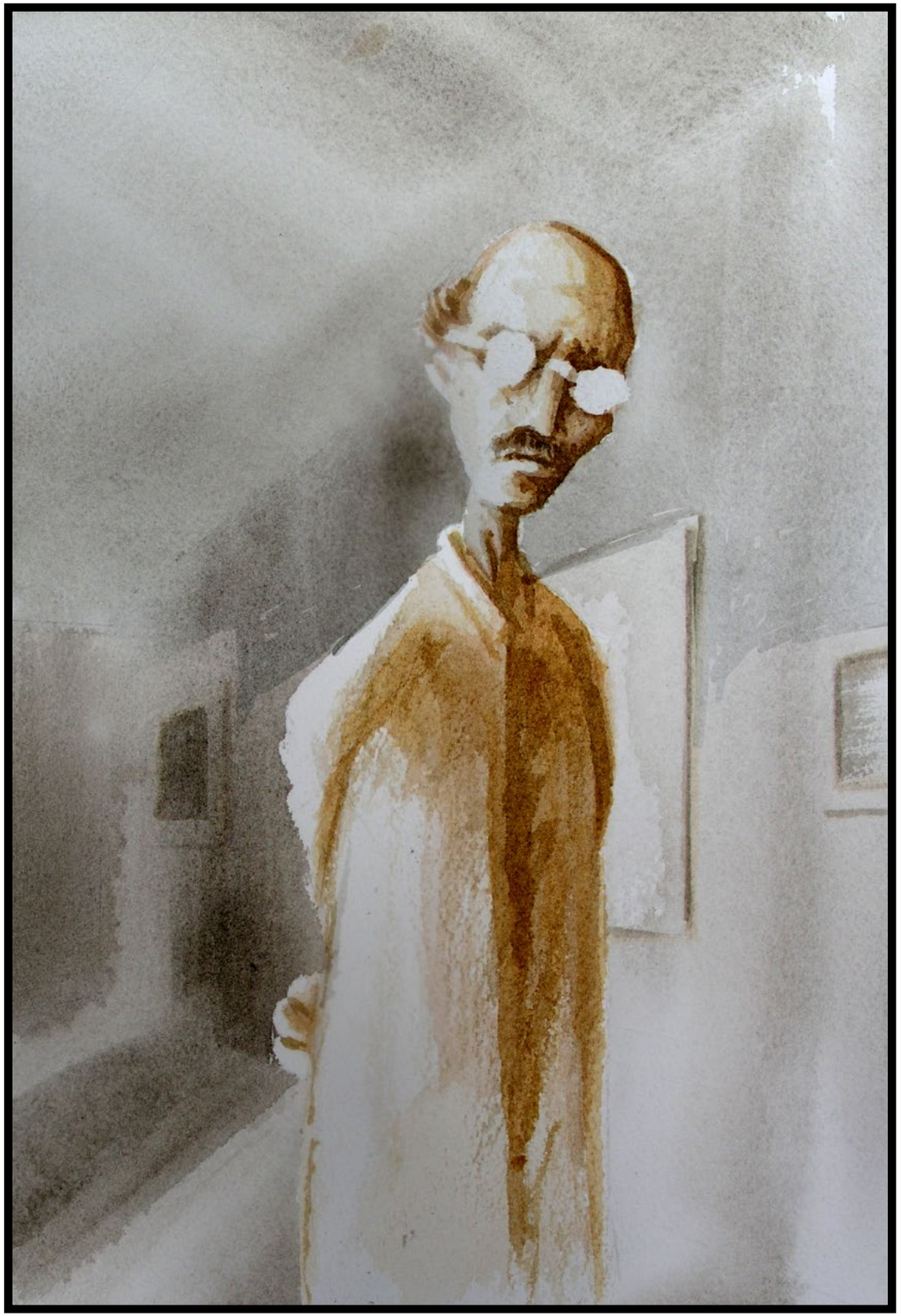
But there is something else about these hallways that is deranging and it might have to do with the smell, as if the stench of the place is not just from the shit. It creeps into my arms and through my back and swirls around my neck like an invisible rope, gagging me, coiling up mostly in the back of 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



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 adjusts his glasses and, as 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 smoothes 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.

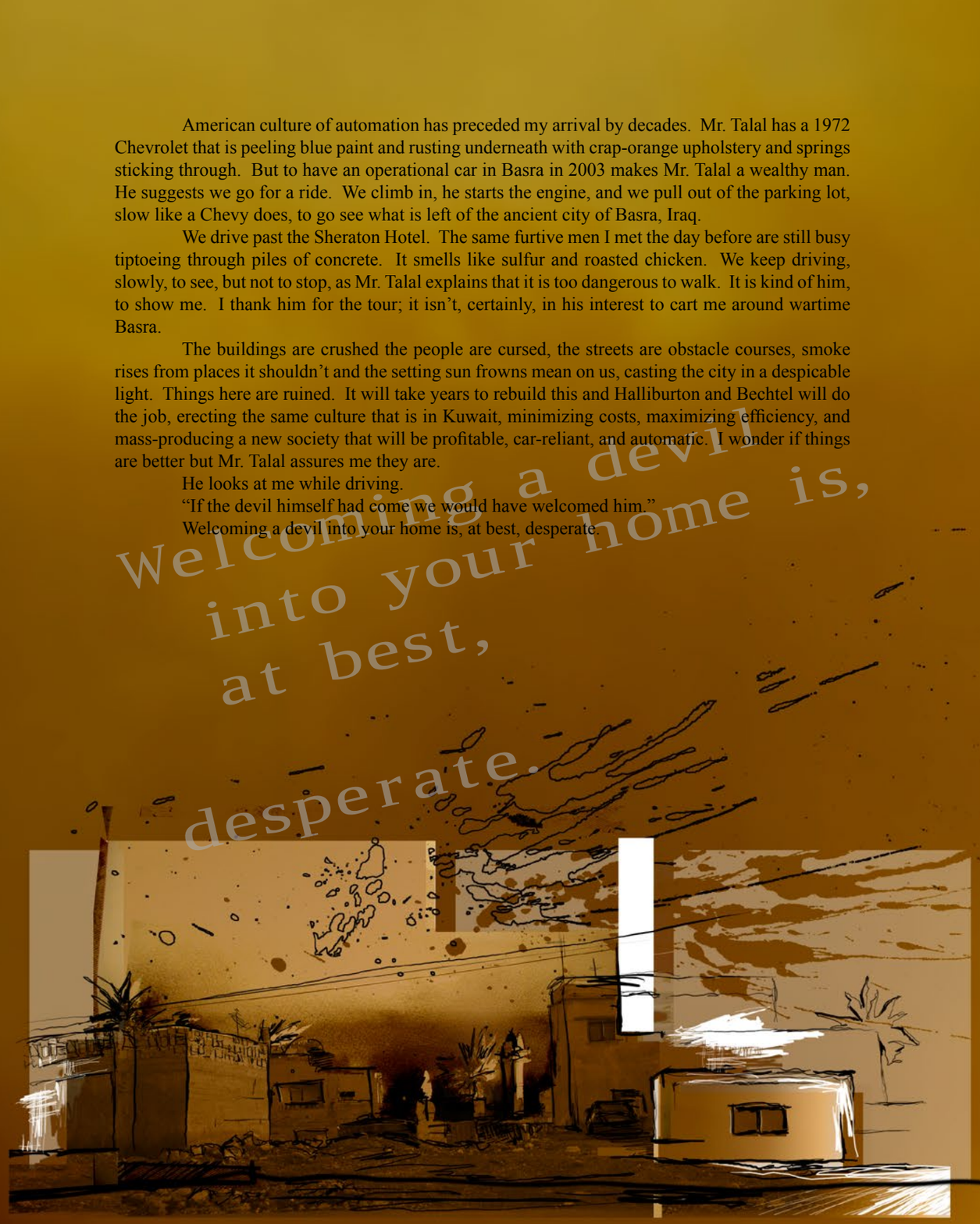
We drive past the Sheraton Hotel. The same furtive men I met the day before are still busy tiptoeing through piles of concrete. It smells like sulfur and roasted chicken. We keep driving, slowly, to see, but not to stop, as Mr. Talal explains that it is too dangerous to walk. It is kind of him, to show 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 idealogic 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.

A Friend of Mr. Talal's in his modern-day Diwnaiya.

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 i s

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, a 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 Cap-

italism, 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 20th 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.

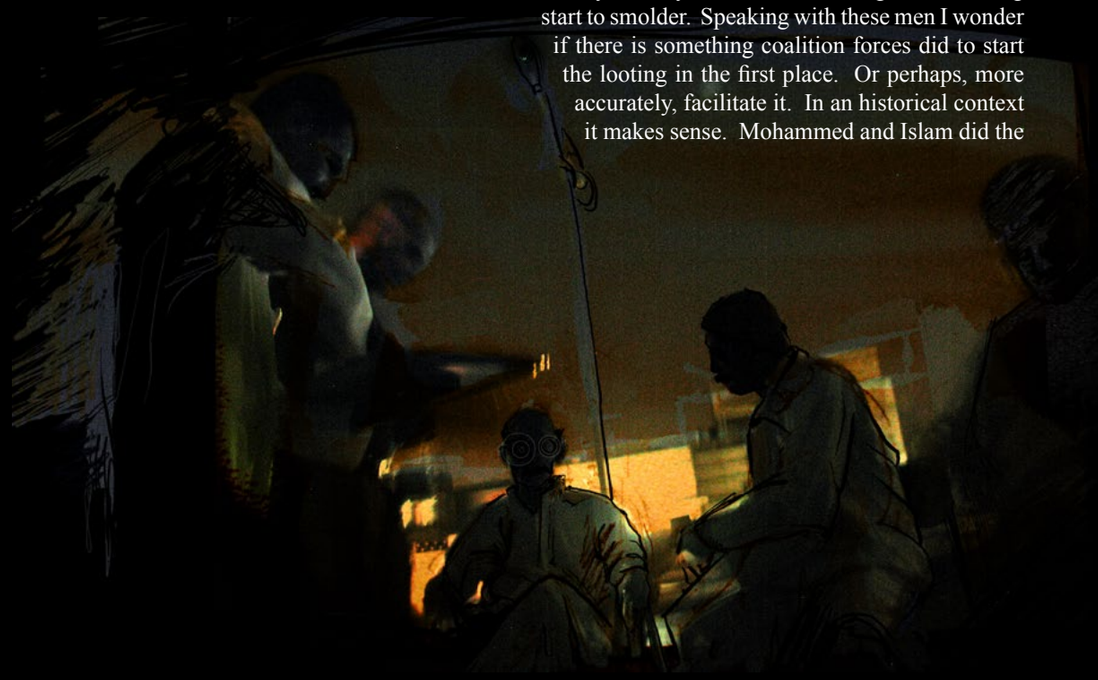
The 1814 invasion of America was part of an English Equation that involved military conquest followed by cultural cauterization. New leadership needed new traditions, burned into place by wrecking libraries, museums, universities, and temples. In Ireland, Scotland, India, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Iraq, New 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 7th or 8th of April, the day after the British took Saddam's Basra palace.

By the 23rd 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

Moham-med 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 jutty 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 Mi
leum 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 ridable, 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 conurbation 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.

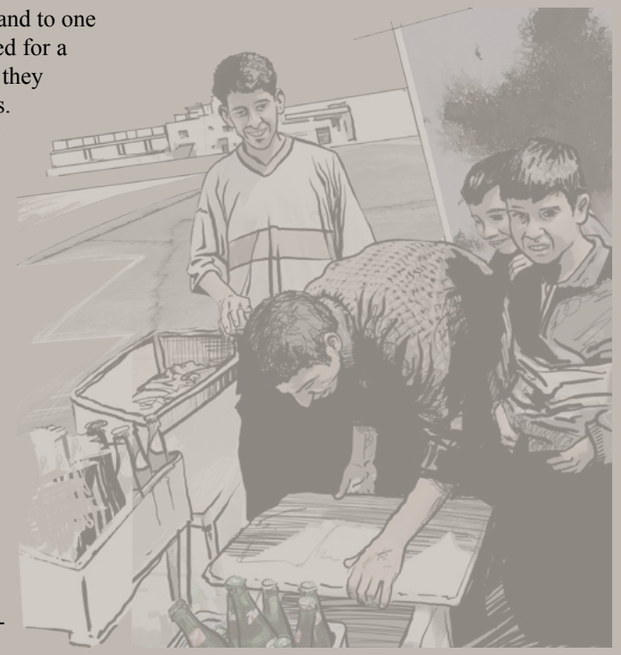
"Which one you like?" he asks me.

"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.

Baghdad

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."

Whitehouse 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. But as George W. Bush, the fourty-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

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/). 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

or two as of this writing — and when I meet him I was able 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 Saddaam'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 Maruaders" 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 as well as one that is military.

America had 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 pocket, hedging bets. 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 "Coup" 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. Peope 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 thing. 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 guy grins back and lowers the barrel.

Manal is Mr. Talal's niece and Hussam's cousin. She talks to the big guy with the gun then walks up to me under everyone's watchful eye. 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, Manal and her husband will be a safe bet.

In war you expect everything and nothing at the same time because that is what happens.

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 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. We sit around the little table and start to eat.

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 19th 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.

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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 interessin … 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 immmm-pressed!" 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 for long.

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. Taximan Ali is drunk. Booze, fear, and hate are a volatile mix. The car is doing 160km. I'm not all that happy to be in his taxi, in front, gripping the handle, seatbelt snug, the smell of beer in the air. but I figure it's a temporary situation. We break most of the laws of physics that apply to cars, roads, or human reaction time.

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 BABA!"

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. 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 into the copper sky. This means that only 25% of the city has electrical power right now.

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." 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 is an almost 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 cough, 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 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.

Hypnotized, I struggle to reply to his question, and manage to mutter, "How much?"

"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.

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. 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? 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 unpractical, and I find myself admiring him, and horrified. 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 manage a sincere smile.

"I know a guy that can sell you Qusay Hussein's Mercedes for $5,000."

powerplant and turret panoram

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 28th birthday.

Eight days before my own 28th 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 28th 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.

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, almos 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 o 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 Suhan 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 o the back yard (never having seen two women gathering mud and twigs in their own backyard I'm baffled and figured I need some coffe 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 ver 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 — 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 airflo 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 stov 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, Qadisyiyah, 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 'Mercan 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 psychopathological. 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 ? 75% of the city doesn't have electricity. 60% 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 to 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.

"…annnnd.. 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 likeThe 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 discrimi

nation."

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 form 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. It looks like Tattoine, without the robots. 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 moreso 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.